

Against Biology, Against the Sexed Body

Gender, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and the Molecular

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The specter of biology is near omnipresent. This omnipresence is nowhere more evident than in the way in which sex, and thus consequentially Gender, is understood. The left has long forwarded the understanding of systems of power as that which constitutes political, and thus social, life. That said, what is surprising is that this semiotic imperialism of biology over the field of sex has planted itself within ‘radical spaces’ as well, and in most cases, expresses itself in ways that would seem contradictory to the held beliefs of those expressing them. For example, how can one resolve that biologization is a primary force of Western colonialism, but also forward an article that ascribes penises and sperm as “Male reproductive physiology” and vagina’s and eggs as “female reproductive system(s)” as “one of my favorite articles” (Martin 10–11; Spira)? It would seem that the praising of such a blatantly transphobic, and thus biologizing, article as positive merely reproduces the same colonial force of Western biologization, thus formulating these two positions as necessarily mutually exclusive. That said, the very fact that these two positions are mutually exclusive and thus contradictory to hold at the same time reveals the way in which biology has penetrated the molecular realm to such a degree that we have been circuited to desire a folding of all life (specifically understandings of sex and gender) under the taxonomy of biology; even when it seems inherently contradictory to other ideologically held beliefs. Following Oyèrónke Oyewùmi, we ought not understand biology as an independent vector of violence, but rather as one that is necessarily situated within the production of Western modernity; anti-blackness, settler colonialism, and by consequence compulsory heterosexuality (9). In that sense, I hope to indicate that the taxonomization of molecular life under the signifier of biology necessarily sexes the body, and in doing so, deploys the structures for which compulsory heterosexuality is able to gain coherence. This essay will hopefully not only impel the necessity of gender abolitionism in revolutionary struggles against compulsory heterosexuality, but also a re-articulation of life that “instead of denoting a possible reality” understands life as fundamentally virtual (Parisi 14).

Biology and the Molecular

Despite what biology would lead you to believe life is not determinate, i.e. life is not transcendently knowable or “determined genetically, predominantly by parts of the genes called chromosomes” but rather fundamentally indeterminate; always already in flux (Stryker 8). The reason for which this is the case is due to the fact that the very quantum materiality’s that make up life, for example protons and electrons, exist within a constant state of flux (Barad 394). As briefly mentioned earlier, one of the primary ways in which the biologization of life operates is through the creation of a singular meaning for which life can express itself. For example, there is a unitary classification system that is imparted onto particular species to such a degree that all of the difference that exists between those that might be considered a species is reduced down to a singular set of unifying traits. In this sense an ontology is created, attached, and reproduced as the de-facto way in which life should be understood; as having a constitutive being. It could be said that this ontologization of life is the *raison d’être* for Western science in that “difference is expressed as degeneration” and thus must be smoothed over through the signification of an ontology, or being (Oyewùmi 3). Biology serves as one of the fundamental vectors of this collapsing of difference because of its ability to justify its logics as determinate of how the world operates, which through its omnipresence at the heart of any scientific development, has spilled out onto an understanding of quantum physics as well (Oyewùmi 9). As an instance of this, tra-

ditional quantum physics has generally explained quantum properties (waves, particles, etc) as necessarily determinate, and thus because of that developed the determinate principle as the overarching structure for which life expresses itself (Sheldon 4). This generally takes the form of constructing waves and particles as having universal principles that always already determine their expression, and because of that, have a definite expression (Sheldon 4).

There is a multitude of reasons as to why this understanding of life is problematic, but first and foremost it just misunderstands the basis for which it justifies its claim to determinacy; particles and waves. Rather than having determinate characteristics that a-priori dictate the way in which particles and waves express themselves, they are rather indeterminate in the sense that the way in which they express themselves is always dependent on the realities for which they are expressed within; they are virtual. Virtual in the sense that their trajectory is not teleological but rather open to the infinite possibilities made possible by particular material realities, or in other words, “the virtual is reality in terms of strength or potential that tends towards actualization or emergence” (Parisi 14). To elaborate, the classic way in which particles and waves are recorded is through shooting them through an apparatus that is comprised of a screen or, “slit,” that once passed through records the pattern for which the particles/waves were composed (Sheldon 4). Traditional quantum physics would say that particles passing through a double slit would produce a scattershot pattern due to the fact that once a stream of particles bounces off of the first slit it should radiate out like buckshot. That said, when particles do pass through such an apparatus they do not actually express themselves as theorized, instead they tend to represent the formation of what a wave is typically understood to be; an interference pattern (Sheldon 4). Compounded with this, if a detector is added after the fact to determine which of the two slits the particles actually passed through their formation reverts back to a scattershot (Sheldon 5). This indicates that the foundational principle for the very building blocks of life is not determinacy, but rather indeterminacy, virtual particles that are constantly opening themselves towards the possibilities constituted by the material relations they both create and are situated within (Barad 395–396). In this sense, life should not be understood as a stabilized biologic force, but rather an interplay between molecular relations that constantly produce mutations within all fields at which life is able to express itself (Parisi 53–54). To reiterate the old Deleuzoguattarian adage, life is about becoming and not being; any attempt to compress becoming into being (as biology does) is a reactive force of violence (Deleuze and Guattari 106).

Sexing the Body and the Project of Gender

Biology engages in this sort of violence in that it seeks to create a determinate principle, or being, for which life is organized. An example of this being the way in which biology categorizes bodies as constitutive wholes, or organisms, instead of machines that necessarily interplay and are contaminated by their ecologies. Summarizing Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler articulates that one of the primary ways in which biology engages in this process is through not only the invention of the body as a naturalized product, but specifically the sexed body (463). I want to stress the importance of this argument, Butler’s claim is not merely that taxonomies of biology create a specific conception of the body that is sexed, but rather the structuring logic for which the body catalyzes into existence through a biologic frame is one that is necessarily sexed. To be clear, this is not to say that the impact for which these conceptions of the body are not ‘real’

in their impact/violence, because they certainly are, but rather serves to indicate that the claim to naturalism that they deploy is part in parcel to that violence, and in many cases is the operational logic for said violence (Butler 464). This specific biological project, the compression of the body to be strictly organized around sex, is a process of collapsing the virtual potentialities of the molecular to an ontology and thus a violent attack on life itself. Describing this process, Luciana Parisi brilliantly says this “model of representation does not entail the exact reflection of reality or truth, but is more crucially used to refer to a system of organization of signs where structures of meaning arrange ... through the hierarchies of the signifier. The model of representation reduces all differences ... to the universal order of linguistic signification constituted by binary oppositions where on term negates the existence of the other” (9). In this sense, it’s clear that the process for which biology embarks upon, the inducing of the body into the semiotic realm vis a vis a sexing, is one that is fundamentally violent, the question then becomes what this conception of sex looks like.

While Susan Stryker’s seminal “Transgender History” is incredibly important for a variety of reasons, it does reinvest within the biologization of sex and in doing so inadvertently is able to reveal the particular conception of sex biology deploys. This reinvestment on the part of Stryker’s when talking about the division between gender and sex, which as Parisi reminds us, are not two distinct entities but rather co-constitutive forces utilized to forward a signified (and thus violent) conception of the body (50). Stryker says “Sex is not the same as gender ... the words ‘male’ and ‘female’ refer to sex. Sex refers to reproductive capacity or potential ... Sperm producers are said to be that of the male sex, and egg producers are said to be of the female sex” (8). This reveals pretty plainly the specific conception of sex biology deploys as constitutive of the body, one at which is predicated on the idea of static genital expression (penis and vagina), sexual dimorphism, and reproduction. In short, this construction of sex seeks to justify its reduction of genital life to the signifiers of penis and vagina, and the consequential construction of those two signifiers as dimorphic under the banner that sex has solely do to with ‘species’ reproduction. This a-priori association between sex and reproduction is independently violent in of itself in that not only does it constitute the body as a stabilized organism, thereby creating the subject to be disciplined by biopower, but explicitly works towards the overkill of intersex folks (Parisi 35). To elaborate, given the way in which intersex bodies are ones that exist outside of the signifiers of penis and vagina, and the association between sex and reproduction seeks to elevate said signifiers as the only way in which bodies can materialize, it means that intersex people are literally eradicated from existence. To return to the earlier Parisi quote, this semiotic refrain seeks to negate the existence of the other by creating a regime of meaning (in this case what genitals ‘are’) that always already frames them out (9). This is a violence that can once again be seen in Stryker in that she positions sex as the two dialectical positions of male and female ‘sex organs’ that “cannot be changed” (8).

The sexing of the body, through a process of life’s capture within the referent of biology, is not only violent in this sense, but also due to the fact that it is the priming logics used to gender bodies. Logics that gender bodies in such a way that necessitate colonialist, transphobic, and through its production of compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormative violence. Briefly stepping away from the question of biological sexing, it’s important to understand just what Gender is and thus how said sexing paves the way for it to deploy itself. To be clear, when I say that Gender is inherently a violent structure I do not mean to say that gender identity in the abstract is bad. Rather, I mean to articulate the way in which a dominant conception of Gender has been created,

deployed, and enforced in such a way that it forces people into specific gender identities that they did not determine. Thus when we critique and call for the abolishment of capital G Gender, that does not mean the eradication of gender identities that exist outside of said paradigm like the Hijra, Two-Spirit, Fa'afafine, etc but rather for the destruction of the system that makes said identities unintelligible. In this sense then, Gender refers to the structure of gender that has been semiotized as the end all be all of what gender could mean, and because of that, the a-priori script for which bodies can exist (nokizaru 6).

This specific structure of Gender was one that was explicitly deployed, and still is, as a tool of the settler colonial project of the land mass we know as the 'Americas' and 'Canada' (nokizaru 4). To elaborate, not only was this conception of gender one that was almost exclusively a European, and specifically Christian, understanding of how gender operates but it was purposefully forcefully deployed onto indigenous nations in now settler colonial states as a way to engage in the settler colonial project of indigenous eradication (nokizaru 5). This was done due to the fact that a vast majority of indigenous nations not only structured their socialites in non-patriarchal makeups, but specifically had conceptions of gender that did not at all correlate to the European model (Lugones 25). Thus, Gender functions through the production of two gendered subjectivities (man and women), the hegemonic correlation of those subjectivities to particular genitalia, and in doing so, constituting the ontology of those who possess said genitalia. In this sense, Gender could be thought of as operating through what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call the 'faciality machine.' The faciality machine refers to a particular construction of how subjectivity comes about, or subjectification, in which subjectivity becomes exclusively defined by static characteristics (168). In this sense then, "faciality ... ends up excavating a binarist figure-ground referent as the support of the universal ... statements. All flows and objects must be related to a subjective totalization" and thus works in service as a weapon of reactionary violence (Guattari 76). In the context of Gender, the faciality machine works in service of signifying penises as men, vaginas as woman, thereby injecting said gendered subjectivities into said genitalia and then making that subjectivity constitutive of the body who its signifying. In this sense, Gender will always already be not only transphobic, because of its coercively assigning bodies at birth and obliteration of non-binary trans folks, but also exclusively utilized to eradicate indigenous populations all over the globe.

The sexing of the body becomes the precursor to this process of Gender because it constitutes the stage, i.e. the compression of genital life into a static expression, for which the subjectification of Gender necessitates. To elaborate, the idea that bodies are born with either male or female sex organs is the necessary first step for gendered subjectification, on the part of Gender, to even happen in the first place. Due to the fact that this subjectification is premised off of the injection of a gendered subjectivity (man or woman) into specific genitals, and then facializing that as a bodies white wall, that becomes incoherent if there is not first a static construction of what genitals are (i.e. either penises or vaginas) for which the sexing of the body is able to provide. In this sense then, the sexing of the body provides the necessary first step for the internal logics of Gender to deploy themselves. A logic that forms the basis for all transphobic violence to dispense itself; coercively assigning bodies genders at birth. What I mean by this is that due to the fact that Gender reproduces itself through a claim that it operates as the a-priori, or 'natural,' screen for which all bodies pass through it means that it needs to deploy some sort of constitutive claim onto every single body that passes through its systems. The way in which Gender does this, through a multitude of different apparatuses but most chiefly the medical industrial complex

and the police, is through retroactively gendering fetuses in the womb and then once they are born. This process is necessarily coercive because bodies have no choice in whether they are gendered or not, they simply are forcibly shoved into a subjectivity of man or woman by virtue of existing and/or not existing with a particular genital makeup. This process is not only violent in the abstract because, as nila nokizaru articulates “Gender benefits those who want to control, socialize, and manage us and offers us nothing in return. Every time a person is scrutinized and gendered, society has attacked them, waged war on them,” but also because it forms the basis for which all transphobic violence is able to justify itself (4). This project is what is able to frame trans folks as abominations in the face of Gender, because they refuse said process of coercive assignment, and thus are justified in violence being taken against them to sustain the internal logics of Gender’s expression. As previously mentioned the way in which this gendering operates is through the faciality machine, you are born with a penis and thus you are a man and will always be a man. This process becomes incoherent if there is no sexing of the body that stabilizes the genital signifiers that Gender requires to inject its subjectivity into.

Compulsory Heterosexuality

I ultimately contend that not only is this process of biologizing life violent, and just frankly incorrect, for all of the reasons listed above but also that through its justification for Gender, creates the conditions for what Adrienne Rich calls ‘compulsory heterosexuality.’ It does this because, if Rich is right that compulsory heterosexuality is a regime that is first and foremost structured through the gendered relations of man and women, which I think she is, then the creation of the system of Gender that provides coherence for said gendered relations is necessary (633). To elaborate, if we understand ‘sexuality’ to describe a specific taxonomy of desire that orients bodies towards politically constructed forms of relations, then sexuality requires an object for which it is oriented towards (Puar 30). It requires such a complete object because, like Rich articulates, the primary way in which sexuality comes to be understood is through the psychoanalytic frame of Oedipalization (especially compulsory heterosexuality) (638). It requires this because the Oedipal understanding of desire articulates that the direction of desire is always attached to a complete, or determinate, object, which in the context of desire being trapped within the sexuality referent of compulsory heterosexuality looks like desire being oriented towards gendered bodies (Nigianni 170).

If compulsory heterosexuality functions as not only a force of heteronormativity, but more specifically as both a re-justification of male dominance over those who have been disciplined into womanhood it means that Gender is an integral part of compulsory heterosexuality’s formation (Rich 640). This means that absent the biologization of life that paves the way for which the project of Gender is able to gain coherence compulsory heterosexuality is not able to dispense its violence because it does not have any desiring orientation for its sexual taxonomy, and more importantly, does not have a class for which its violence is directed at (womanhood). Additionally, compulsory heterosexuality is first and foremost concerned about reproduction, i.e. due to the fact that women are semiotized as only ever having vagina’s, the fact that lesbian sex under this paradigm cannot ‘give birth’ is one of the justifications used to forward cis lesbian’s marginalization (Rich 637). In this sense compulsory heterosexuality should not only be thought of as a system that dispenses solely heteronormative, misogynistic, or lesbophobic violence but

transphobic violence as well. Compulsory heterosexuality, in its predication on the project of Gender, forwards the sex-reproduction association and thus the constitution of womanhood and manhood based on imagined dimorphic genitalia. This is important not only because it reveals a dimension of compulsory heterosexual's violence that is oft ignored, but also because it reveals the necessity of the sexed body in the figuration and production of the multitude of structures that dispense compulsory heterosexuality. Not only does compulsory heterosexuality require some figuration of gender, to become the object of its structured desiring orientation, but it specifically requires the Gender that is produced by the sexed body because of its interpolation of bodies as having an intrinsic sex-reproduction connection.

Conclusion

"Gender is a war against all of us, and for those who desire freedom, nothing short of the total eradication of gender will suffice" (nokizaru 7). We must turn against Gender not only because of its foundational violence(s), but also because in a time in which Rich's theories are once again gaining prominence. To be clear I think this recovery is important, Rich was right to identify compulsory heterosexuality (among a multitude of other things) as a central vector of violence, but we can never dismantle said violence if we do not recognize that Gender is part in parcel to said vector. If we do not orient our revolutionary politics against compulsory heterosexuality to also be Gender abolitionist it means we will always fail to truly deconstruct the violence of compulsory heterosexuality, and specifically, a re-deployment of violence against trans people (specifically trans women) under the guise of feminism. This move is not only reactionarily violent in the sense that it is rabidly transmisogynistic but is also a reinvestment within the logics of compulsory heterosexuality through a reformation of Gender, and thus the sexed body. Moves like this are dangerous because they are wear the veneer of revolutionary action as aesthetic while still forwarding the violent material conditions of the status quo, merely allowing for despotic assemblages to rearrange themselves. This could look like Rich forwarding the necessity of deconstructing compulsory heterosexuality while still supporting transmisogynists like Mary Daly, or properly identifying the violence of biologization yet still doubling down on there existing male or female reproductive systems (644). To avoid this, yet still necessarily combating the violence of compulsory heterosexuality, our politics must aim to abolish the structure of Gender entirely. A Gender abolitionism that seeks not only to destroy all of the systems, apparatuses, and enforcers that make Gender a reality, but also a release of life from its domination from biology. This requires not only an affirmation of life as becoming, but a material freeing of life from its fascist constraints under biology and thus an endorsement of life as "the material wanderings/wanderings of nothingness ... the ongoing thought experiment that the world performs with itself ... an endless exploration of all possible couplings of virtual particles, a 'scene of wild activities'" (Barad 396).

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