‘Sexing Up’ Bodily Aesthetics: Notes towards Theorizing Trans Sexuality

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Introduction

In this chapter we suggest that the organizing medical concept of ‘transsexuality’ either overtly represses and denies sexuality as a factor in trans experience, or explicitly understands transitioning as originating in a hypersexuality. We track this representation of trans embodiment as a form of excessive sexuality in the pornographic imagination, particularly with regard to the mythic figure of the ‘she-male’ that overshadows the ‘he-female’. Raven Kaldera and Hanne Blank suggest that the damaging impact of medical representations of hypersexuality on the cultural representation of transfolk, results in them being ‘painted as cardboard cut-outs with improbable anatomy who will fuck and be fucked by anyone, anything, anytime, in any way’ (Blank and Kaldera, 2002: 7). Yet, until recently, erotic material featuring FtMs was non-existent, suggesting an apparent lack of sexual interest. At issue is the dearth of adequate erotic role models in sexually explicit representations as well as the lack of theoretical responsibility towards incorporating analyses of trans sexuality that begin from the transitioning body itself.

We argue that pornography provides a social space to explore and produce one’s sexual body that allows transfolk to move beyond what is commonly known as heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality and the mainstay of theorizations within both cultural and psychomedical research on trans sexualities. The emergent sub-genre of ‘trans porn’ may be considered exemplary in the ways in which it produces a multiplicity of sexual bodies whilst challenging the medical interpretations and terms of transsexuality in relation to trans sexuality. For instance, in the video Out of the Woods, directed by Barbara DeGenevieve, transman JJ Bitch and transwoman Tenney have a sexual encounter for the site ssspread.com, which features ‘hot femmes, studly butches and lots of genderfuck’ (2006). During the scene, JJ and Tenney become the transfer points between the prior private experience of having sex and the public disclosure in the video’s display.

The movement from private dwelling to the public stage is typically referred to as ‘coming out of the closet’, a notion often applied to acknowledging one’s sexual identity as homosexual. ‘Coming out’ indicates one is leaving a life of isolation and joining public and collective life. The spatial reference of ‘the closet’ and the phraseology of someone being ‘closeted’ suggest that one might be able to shut away knowledge of oneself, one’s truth, also in reference to one’s gender identity. Any declaration that renders someone visible, as a sexual transsexual, takes on a political significance in addition to, and perhaps because of, its epistemological weight. Knowing oneself, as well as becoming knowable, involves becoming sexually intelligible (Foucault, 1977). Through both its production and its public circulation, Out of the Woods suggests that trans desire is ‘out’ from the determining factors of psychiatric diagnosis: ‘out’ from the ‘woods’ that renders trans, in particular trans on trans, desire impossible and at the same time invisible. We propose that the emphatic ‘outness’ in Out of the Woods and the trans porn films we analyse here signals the significance of eroticism to trans experience, which furthermore demands to be addressed as more than a deviant complication of male or female and heterosexual or homosexual subject positions. To this end we will open up the ‘spectra of desire’ (Stone, 2006 [1991]) that transexuals experience and represent in trans pornography and seek to contribute to an enhanced understanding of trans sexualities.

The analytical approach

We attempt to adhere to Sandy Stone’s (2006 [1991]) call for rendering a wider ‘spectra of desire’ through theorization that seeks to illuminate trans desire. Inspired by Stone’s manifesto, our method is to foreground transsexual and transgendering practices as invocations of sexual dissonance from the disciplines of psychiatry and sexology (psychosexology from now on). In analysing the dissonances emerging from the sexual practices within the genre of trans pornography, we wish to undermine monological accounts and contribute to transgender studies’ heteroglossic accounts of desire, eroticism and sexuality. Our aim is to access the effects of aesthetic experiences of transexuals and their intimate partners. We privilege affects of transitioning over feeling because, as Bonta and Protevi note, affect involves ‘the capacity to become’ (2004: 50), whereas feeling consists in the coding and stabilizing of being (Crawford, 2008). Hence, following Crawford we argue that trans bodily aesthetics may operate in such a way that the affects of transitioning do not have to add up to a ‘fully formed and settled subject’ (Crawford, 2008: 141).

Crawford’s (2008) article, ‘Transgender without Organs? Mobilizing a Geo-Affective Theory of Gender Modification’ enters affect into the debate on
transgender embodiment in terms of examining what it ‘feels like’ to be transgender. Analysing the narratives of transsexual transitions that often involve moving from one place to another, Crawford argues that transitions involve an orientation to place as much as to the body. Countering the ‘right’ trans affect of coming home to the self, he suggests considering affects that involves deterritorialization, that is, ‘the process of leaving home, of altering your habits, of learning new tricks’ (2008: 133). Echoing Halberstam’s (1998) postmodern critique of home, which focuses on FTM trans narratives, he too cautions against an assumption that there are distinct correlations between gender variance and dysphoria, and sexual variance. That is, similar kinds of gender identities embody different bodies and at the same time the need/desire for certain bodily aesthetics can be found in different genders. For Halberstam the problem lies in the masculine continuum model that assumes that the more masculine a female-bodied person is, or want to become, the more gender dysphoric you are. Undermining a static notion of settling back home into a ‘right’ body, with a correct expression of masculinity (or femininity) and sexuality, are those ‘contaminating’ voices that live at the borders or those who have migrated from the home never to return (Halberstam, 1998). The impetus in the movement of a transgender transition might be directed towards those composing forces that undermine ‘our best attempts at deciding, conclusively, on identities and selves’ (Crawford, 2008: 133).

The notion of Deleuzian deterritorialization, in which affect and bodily locatability are co-constituted, might be extended to the affect of (trans) sexual desire and its potentially deterritorializing effects on embodiment. The altering of sexual habits and learning new sexual tricks with (your) trans bodily aesthetics, we suggest, might also, reorientate sexuality from the male/female, hetero/homo binary (Ahmed, 2006). As Braidotti (1994) reminds us, ‘becoming’ only occurs from a desire for the new, not from a desire to reproduce oneself based on an existing model. Therefore, in our discussion of trans sexuality, we seek to articulate an ontology of desire as an aesthetic force that is endless and rhizomatic rather than adhering to an ontology of ‘being’ in any static sense.

To help us account for the composing forces, the affects that orientate and redirect bodies (Ahmed, 2006), particularly in erotic encounters, we employ the notion of ‘bodily aesthetics’. Housed in the term ‘aesthetics’ is both the expression of the formal qualities of sentence, like the visual, aural, tactile and so on, which transmit aesthetic affects, and the perception of such; simply stated, the experience of affects. The aesthetic experience – as a cognitive mode – is achieved through the activation of nerve sensors starting at the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin, which are ‘out front’ of the mind (Buck-Morss, 1992: 6). A human’s physical-cognitive apparatus therefore encounters the world pre-linguistically. The acculturation of the senses, in part carried out by making sense of affects as feelings, facilitates the ability to communicate this experience: by speaking in the discursive terms of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch (Buck-Morss, 1992: 6). Our concept of bodily aesthetics refers to those composing forces, or affects that the transitioning and transitioned body engenders through the first-hand or represented experience of sexual practices. We will locate these aesthetic forces and affects through the mediums of trans pornography and erotica where we will investigate questions of embodied diversity.

In our discussion of trans affects we follow Stryker’s distinction between the approaches of the relatively recent field of ‘transgender studies’ and ‘the study of transgender phenomena’ (Stryker, 2006a: 12), studies which have created an immense body of psychosexual literature dating back to the nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. As Prosser and Storr (1998) explain, the early sexological literature on sexual inversion provided the framework for the mid-twentieth century: ‘The profound degree to which sexual inversion was a cross-gendered category’ indicates from the start a ‘transgendered paradigm of sexual inversion’ (1998: 75). Hence, sexual inversion was a required conceptual vehicle for diagnoses of gender identity disorders, demonstrating the early confusion of gender and sexual identity that continues in the literature on transsexual transitions today (e.g., Chivers and Bailey, 2000). Hence, our first section utilizes Canadian artist Mirah-Soliel Ross’s film Dysfunctional (1997) in a critique of the saliency of sexuality in the diagnostic categories for transsexuality. We take particular issue with the ways in which the scholarship that speaks on behalf of transpeople assumes transsexualism as a category within which sexuality is either wholly central and in excess of the heterosexual and gender normative benchmarks, or wholly excluded and thus non-existent.

Though the study of transgender phenomenon may have originated in psychosexual literature, as trans scholars Stryker (2006a, 2008), Stone (2006 [1991]), and Namaste (2000) make clear, the attitude of speaking on behalf of trans peoples can be identified in disciplines across the academy. A change in speaker, as well as a change in the object of analysis, distinguishes transgender studies scholarship from sexological, philosophical and some cultural studies frameworks. Our approach seeks to legitimate experiential knowledge presented in transgender accounts and representations, knowledge that Stryker (2006a) classifies as ‘subjugated’, borrowing from Foucault (2002) who uses the term for buried and discounted local knowledge. Therefore, in the second section we open again with Ross’s film by analyzing an erotic staging of trans sexuality in terms of ‘talking back’ to medical formulations of trans eroticism. Borrowing Stryker’s characterization of transgender studies, our method is to be ‘as concerned with material conditions as it is with representational practices’ (Stryker, 2006a: 3) and to pay close attention to the interface between the two. We argue that such works and texts address, and seek to redress, the dominant psychosexual paradigms of trans sexuality.
Yet, in developing a politics of trans sexuality, transgender studies occasionally relies sexual identities within identity politics, by situating sexualities within mainstream identitarian markers of hetero/homo or bisexuality (Bornstein, 1994) and therefore miss the mark on exploring sexuality as an aesthetic experience. Consequently, our final section offers a short discussion of relevant concepts that may prove useful in analysing sexuality in terms of aesthetic experience as well as a bodily style. As our starting point for foregrounding the corporeal in sexual disclosure and presentation of sexual bodies, we take Morty Diamond's hit film *The Nasty Love of Papi and Will* (2007) and its evocative term 'entity'. This and other trans-erotic material invites an understanding of the sexualized body at stake in terms of the ways in which sex and its affects may function as a gender technology (Hale, 1997), not for building up identity, but for the continual composition of the self through sexual poiesis (Stryker, 2008).

**Transgender (de)sexualization in psychosexology**

In the short video *Dysfunctional* (Ross, 1997), director and star Mirah Soleil Ross explains that she wants to share the most uncomfortable truths about her sexuality in a public space. Ross offers the following statement: ‘I made *Dysfunctional* because a lot of people think transsexual’s bodies and sexualities are freaky, freaky, and dysfunctional. So, I wanted to show that there is nothing freaky or weird about my body or my sexuality’ (Ross, 1997). The video’s documentary footage shows her sitting on stage playing the accordion next to a screen that shows a video within a video that graphically displays the so-called ‘dysfunctional’ sexuality; the medically and morally unacceptable body classified as a ‘chick with a dick’. In close-up one sees Ross reclining while her lover performs fellatio, her manicured hand tenderly resting on his cheek. In contrast to the potentially negative cues to dysfunctionality, the blue-sepia and black and white adjusted tint of the video material, as well as the full of the accordion music, conjures old world, even traditional, romanticism. Ross transforms the passive connotations of being looked at: her image on display tells the audience to ‘Look!’, while her presence on stage forces viewers to look twice, not only at the graphic image, but also at her instructing them to look again; not with a pathologizing gaze, but now with the eyes of potential sexual partners.

The video serves to introduce the influence of a still potent, and now commonly held notion of transsexualism, as a dysfunctional expression of sexuality, or inversely, sexual expression of any kind by a transsexual as a dysfunctional mode of proper trans embodiment. What constitutes a ‘true transsexual’ in terms of body and sexuality has a history in seolgy dating from the 1960s. Benjamin’s (1966) influential *The Transsexual Phenomenon* described ‘true transsexualism’ (of the male to female variety) in this way:

> True transsexuals feel that they belong to the other sex, they want to be and function as members of the opposite sex, not only to appear as such. For them, their sex organs, the primary (testes) as well as the secondary (penis and others) are *disgusting deformities* that must be changed by the surgeon’s knife.

(Benjamin, 1966: 11; emphasis added)

Psychosexual claims that the (sexual) organs of people are the overriding key to correct gender and sexual development and its concomitant heterosexuality continues to be widespread. This mode of thinking results in the classification of people who function within these parameters as normal whilst others are considered dysfunctional.

In *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*, Stone (2006 [1991]) assesses the regulatory means for the embodiment and sexuality of what the medical practitioners described as a ‘true transsexual’. Crucial is the ritual of diagnosis performed through a series of questions. The only non-negotiable aspect of the scripted confession concerns the genitalia. As a response to the typical question: ‘Suppose that you could be a man [or woman] in every way except for your genitals; would you be content?’, Stone writes, ‘there are several possible answers, but only one is clinically correct’ (2006 [1991]: 231). The transsexual diagnosis excludes those transsexuals for whom gender identity ‘is something different from and perhaps irrelevant to physical genitalia’ (2006 [1991]: 232). Additionally, true transsexuals were expected to signal a lack of sexual desire, primarily by expressing disgust for their genitals. The clinical understanding of transsexual desire as directed solely at the object of the transition (changing the form of the genitals) meant that desire for others as well as for oneself was foreclosed. For example, Benjamin’s continuum that differentiates the true (male to female) transsexual from transvestism and homosexuality relies on the rejection of ‘male’ (penile) sexuality prior to surgery, whereas post-surgery, she may safely embrace a ‘female’ (vaginal) heterosexual orientation. Moreover, surgeons often determine the success of a vaginoplasty according to the neovagina’s depth, width and ability to accommodate a penis, revealing a strong heterosexual and penetrative prioritization (Foucault, 1971). More recently, the measured sensitivity of the genitals has figured in post-surgical assessments (Goddard et al., 2007), but, nevertheless, these studies continue to infer heterosexuality.

As Ross’s video dares to show, the gender role inappropriateness of enjoying one’s (non or pre-surgical) penis alone or with another, while claiming a feminine gender identity, is considered ‘dysfunctional’. To do so could lead to disqualification from any form of treatment, the ultimate punishment of medical authorities to those seeking hormones and/or surgical procedures. In defiance, like Ross’s public showing of her sexuality, Stone’s (2006 [1991]) manifesto provocatively exposes a covert form of auto-erotic
sexuality. Blowing the cover off pre-transitioned trans sexuality, the act is euphemistically called, ‘wringing the turkey’s neck’, the ritual of penile masturbation just before surgery, which she claims is the most ‘secret of secret traditions’ (2006 [1991]: 228). One may consider that for (potential) FMs, such covert sexuality may include enjoyment of vaginal penetration, which they must forgo and vocally despise, lest they reveal themselves to be too womanly and hence ineligible for medical interventions.

The stated ‘correct’ intention to psychiatrists of one’s wish for normative sexual morphology, orientations and gender congruence, are the significant factors in the markers between transsexualism and other diagnoses of gender and sexual deviancy, such as Autogynephilia (Blanchard, 1991; Lawrence, 2004) or Transvestism. For Dreger (2008), the de-eroticization of transsexuals’ life narratives by psychosexualists has been simultaneously promoted in the autobiographies of transwomen (Dreger, 2008; see also Meyerowitz, 2002). In a UK study Davy (2011) also suggests that the denial or hiding of a sexualized transvestite career was more acutely evident when the transwoman desired full transition. In order for the trajectory to be recognized as legitimate, and because cross-dressing was an undeniable part of transwomen’s trajectory into womanhood, they often emphasized the difference between others’ cross-dressing as part of a sexual act and their cross-dressing as an intermittent expression of their true femininity.

At the other extreme from the suppression of trans sexuality, in a recent controversial development in trans-focused sexology known as the ‘Bailey Affair’ (Burns, 2004), trans sexuality is once again purported to be a pathological expression of hypersexuality. In The Man who would be Queen, Bailey (2003), stresses the hypersexualization of two sub-types of male to female transsexuals, Autogynephiliacs and Homosexual transsexuals (Blanchard, 1989, 1991). Bailey argues that Autogynephiliacs usually have a ‘transvestite career’ prior to transitioning. Therefore, he concludes, their eroticism is directed towards themselves as women; in other words, since they fantasize and become aroused when they think of themselves having sex as women, these feelings motivate them to physically embody the woman they love through a gender transition. According to this research, ‘Homosexual transsexuals’ are transwomen who have a ‘homosexual career’ prior to transitioning (Bailey, 2003; Blanchard, 1991; Lawrence, 2004), and only transition to make themselves sexually attractive to heterosexual men.

In summary, Bailey proposes that transwomen’s transposed gender identity is stimulated by a perverse erotic drive and that all transsexuals can be accounted for in this bi-polar typology. Perhaps helpfully, some proponents of these propositions have argued that the typology assists clinicians in a better understanding of male to female transsexual clients who report a strong sexual component to their gender dysphoria (Lawrence, 2004). However, we argue that this reductionist explanation of Autogynephilia, or indeed of the ‘Homosexual transsexual’, cannot, for instance, account for those transpeople who have sexual desires for other transpeople of varying body morphology, for S&M practices, for androgyne and bisexuality. Even sexologists who support the typology in principle (as one type among many) suggest that this simple classification does not represent the diversity of trans sexuality (Veale, Clarke and Lomax, 2008).

Less has been said of the sex lives of transmen and their partners’ desires in this sexological and psychiatric literature. According to Chivers and Bailey (2000), the analogous interpretation of FtM trans sexuality within this perspective is termed ‘Autoandrophilia’ and defined as a non-homosexual gender identity disorder, that is, not being attracted to the same natal sex. However, as with most of the psychosexualological accounts of FtM trans sexuality, the literature merely dichotomizes the MtF position within a binary gender and heteronormative model. Starting from a position that foregrounds binary gender identities, Bailey overlooks the specificity of the body and thus, leaves bodily aesthetics neutral or absent in the formation of experiences of embodied desire. Thus, previous research into what we see as a valuable framework of trans sexuality offers a distorted version of transsexuality.

Allegations of unethical (research and sexual) conduct were made against Bailey shortly after the book’s release. Transwoman, Lynn Conway, a professor from the University of Michigan, along with many other activists worldwide, initiated a campaign against Bailey’s work by distributing critiques on her website of his representations of transwomen. This response might be understood as a concerted effort to determinatize those fixed categories for transpeople’s sex lives propagated by psychosexualists. The global protest against his research and the circulation of transpeople’s narratives that contradict his theories were dismissed by Bailey as mere identity politics, self-justifications or just plain lies. Bailey scoffs that they [transsexuals] are often silent about their true motivation and instead tell stories about themselves that are misleading and, in important respects, false (cited in Bockting, 2005: 268). However, a view that assumes transpeople to be duped by their own pathologies and one which denies any insight or agency is both ethically and politically suspect.

Psychosexualology’s teleological manner of asserting what is normal and what is dysfunctional, grossly misconstrues the erotic and sensuous immediacy, the bodily aesthetic, of both normative and non-normative transgender bodies. These psychosexualological perspectives appear more concerned with upholding social norms than with adequate psychological descriptions. By these accounts, transpeople are (sexual) anomalies who fail to make the proper gestures, the correct gender and sexual performatives. Sarah Ahmed (2006) argues that for a life to count as a ‘good life’ its intentionality and orientations must reach certain points along its life course; hence, the queer life is one that perhaps fails to fulfill such intentions. The heteronormative background in these accounts of trans sexuality ‘shapes which bodies one “can” legitimately approach as would be lovers and which one cannot’
(Ahmed, 2006: 91). It may also influence the style of a transperson’s sexual gesture insofar as if one does not approach the body of the ‘opposite’ sex to that which you are assigned, you will fail the(ir) ‘test’. We suggest that this psychosexology does not reveal psychiatric disturbances but indicates a field of disorientations from the gender and heteronormative model. In particular, the ‘tests’, which they purport measures the ‘severity’ of transsexualism, measure the veracity of such disorientations. As Jacqueline Rose (1986) asserts, norms are cultural and not natural and hence, should not function as baseline indicators of pathology. According to Rose, there is “no continuity of psychic life... no stability of sexual identity, no position for women (or for men) which is ever simply achieved” (Rose, 1986: 90).

Counter to Bailey’s perspective from outside the clinic, those working in clinical settings with transpeople have called for trans sexuality to be situated within biopsychosocial perspectives that might more accurately reflect the visible diversity in gender and sexual orientations amongst transpeople (Bockting, 2005; Bockting, Benner and Coleman, 2009; Pfafflin, 2006). As Bockting, Benner and Coleman (2009) recently argued, there are signals to suggest the emergence of a transgender sexuality, in which transpeople insist on the erotic appeal of their transgender specific identity, anatomy, sexual behaviour and experience. Whilst these clinicians seem to be widening their theoretical lens, they continue to work within the overarching perspective of sexual pathologies. To help illustrate this detrimental trend, a group of mainly US psychiatrists, collectively known as gideform group (2010), have mobilized to counter the forthcoming DSM V criteria (see Zucker, 2010) in which a range of gender identity and sexual disorders are being redrawn. The gideform group focuses on a number of diagnoses particular to transpeople, for instance, they point out that the ‘Transvestic Disorder remains classified as a “paraphilic” sexual disorder’ (gideform, 2010). In the DSM, the theory of Transvestic Disorder is similar to the theory of Autogynephilia. Ambiguous language in the newly proposed diagnostic criteria links sexual expression to cross-dressing, when, in fact, there may be no causal relationship between dressing and erotic arousal. The gideform group state: ‘it is unclear to us why wearing clothing of any kind would qualify as a psychiatric disorder’ (gideform, 2010), and why ‘behaviors that are far removed from those that deliberately harm others’ (gideform, 2010), such as paedophilia and exhibitionism, are placed in the same group of disorders. This, the group argues, maintains bogus stereotypes of sexual deviance that are used to stigmatise transpeople and by association their erotic partners. We suggest that this redrawing of the boundaries of sexual pathologies also keeps the universality of transgender pathology current. Furthermore, it once again seems to elevate conservative social norms rather than offer criteria for understanding psychopathologies.

As we have shown above, certain camps in psychiatry have started to address the sexualization of transgender in less prescriptive ways, but they are constrained by their own maintenance of the hetero/homo and male/female models. Whilst this small group of pioneers who either practise or assert the critique of ‘queer psychiatry’ question heterosexist practices in health care research, and in particular in mental health research (Clarke and Peel, 2007), their notion of queer only expands the research of sexuality to ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘bisexual’. Hence, they miss the opportunity to mobilize queer’s post-identity meaning in which genders or sexualities are not demarcated according to binaries. Despite the intention to carefully circumcribe its categories, the literature of psychosexology that either de-eroticizes transsexuals’ sexuality or emphasizes their excesses, opens up discursive and material possibilities. Perhaps unwittingly, then, it aids in generating the unruly arrival of that which was expelled from within the logic of psychosexology’s heterosexual symbolic (Butler, 1993). The universality of trans sexuality in psychosexological accounts produces performative contradictions (Butler, 1997), insofar as transpeople are always in excess of its sexual and psychiatric sign, or can be read as so, through their excessive ‘bodily aesthetic’ and ‘unwieldy’ sexual encounters and desires.

**Embracing transgender sex: the debate in the 1990s**

Stone proposed that transsexuals are a genre, ‘a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire’ has not yet been explored (Stone, 2006 [1991]: 231). Hence, she prescribed a move away from medical terms with a view ‘to be consciously “read”, to read oneself aloud – and by this troubling and productive reading, to begin to write oneself in the discourses by which one has been written – in effect, then, to become a...posttranssexual’ (2006 [1991]: 232). The discourse of binary gender and the mandate of undissruptive transsexual expression become rewritten by those bodies that refuse to, or simply cannot, ‘fit in’ in the order of signs that fix gendered meaning. Stone’s manifesto called for making use of embodied agency, for becoming a walking, talking sign of desiring spectra, showing off an authentic, (post)-transsexual embodiment. Transpeople, who have dared to be consciously read, and thus enter the discourse on sexuality, disturb the supposed universality of the non-erotic and/or hyper-erotic discourses. This disruption of psychosexological spectra of desire (Bockting, Benner and Coleman, 2009) can be traced in the polyvocal outpouring of trans sexual desire in pornographic representations and transgender studies texts. Both trans academics and other community members model a powerful self-regard that fosters the courage to speak against the territorialization of trans sexuality by much of the psychosexological fraternity (see Stryker and Whittle, 2006).

The wave of works constituting the field of transgender studies in the 1980s–90s involved many transgender theorists coming out in a similar fashion as Ross. The writings of Virginia Prince (1980), Kate Bornstein (1994),
Riki Ann Wilchins and colleagues (Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins, 2002; Wilchins, 1997) and Susan Stryker (1998, 2006a, 2006b, 2008), amongst others, addressed the importance of sexuality for transwomen. Moving against the prurient gaze of clinical staff, a curiosity that could be damning should too much be revealed, their approach to trans embodiment sought to include ‘secret’ traditions and desires that defined the clinical focus of genital on genital sex acts. Similarly, transmen writing from a sociological or anthropological perspective (Califa, 1997, 2001; Cromwell, 1999; Devor, 1997; Rubin, 2003), gathered interview data and used anecdotal experience to combat the pervasive idea that transmen were simply unhappy lesbians who wanted to attract straight women as partners. In doing so, both groups engendered a mass coming-out of transpeople and their intimate partners (Sanger, 2008), whose counter-narratives undermine the medical monopoly on forms of trans bodily aesthetics and sexualities.

Against a superficial and oversimplified inclusionary politics, trans theorists suggested that transgender studies must attend to the wider community narratives in order to illustrate the diversity of trans sexualities. Studies began to emerge that depicted trans sex workers (Kulick and Klein, 2003; Namaste, 2000), gay identified transmen (Cromwell, 1999) lesbian and bisexual transwomen (Bolin, 1988; Bornstein, 1994) and trans people of colour (Munoz, 1999; Valentine, 2003). The new configurations of sex, gender and sexuality made manifest through trans sexual discourses and styles became a means to create a sexual ‘home’ for marginalized transpeople. However, this theorizing yielded to sexual identity formulations, which, in the tone of Foucault, stands in for the truth of who they are (Foucault, 1977), in relation to established categories of sexuality. Valentine (2003, 2007) argues that most of these marginalized identities fall back into a ‘body politic’ that forces them to situate themselves vis-à-vis all other sexual identities, such as gay, lesbian and bisexual, in order to make themselves intelligible and readable. Thus, they leave intact the assumptions about trans sexuality that constituted restrictive categorization against them in the first place.

Though these polyvocal trans sexual narratives expand the spectra of desire in excess of those traditionally depicted by the clinicians, they often simply replace a transsexual identity with transgender identity. Either because transgender signifies something often slippery or because it is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of gender variances,³ scholars such as Prosser (1998) argue it will ultimately undermine the specific desires of the transsexual. Prosser’s argument is based on the notion that transsexuality often serves a strong psychological desire for (gender) stability, which requires intentionality towards an eventual permanence and gendered home. Whilst a gendered home is desired by some transpeople, it does not follow that we must assume that said transsexuals always articulate sexual orientations as a desire for recognized positions within the traditional spectra of desire consisting of straight, gay or bisexual. Embodiment is multiple unto itself and like desire, it can change over time as one ages, as one transitions and as one explores; in its multiplicity one’s embodiment produces complex gendered and sexual subjectivities.⁴

Complex gender and sexual subjectivities have been associated with and sometimes subsumed under the label bisexuality in transgender studies (see Alexander and Yescavage, 2003, for a critique; Bornstein, 1994) as grounds for political, personal and communal commonality. Kate Bornstein (1994) links transgender and radical bisexual viewpoints to forward a practical agenda for release from the limits of the bi-polar gender order. As evidence of radical border crossing, this perspective amplifies the promise that bisexuality can offer an alternative understanding of sexual experiences and desire beyond the binary system of man/woman and hetero/homosexual. But the expression of this ‘third’ sexuality continues to focus on male and female genitals, even if these appear on one body and thus still points to the system that they are trying to overcome. In this respect, Clare Hemmings suggests that it is entirely myopic to imagine that bisexuality has no role in the dominant structures of sexuality (Hemmings, 2002: 6). Hence, rather than opening up the possibilities of desire, bisexuality may only succeed in accomplishing a position for transpeople that we wish to avoid; a form of sexual deviancy tied to the binary system. We are not rejecting bisexuality, homo- and heterosexuality as such, and one may of course see oneself as any of these, but, because as a conceptual framework circumscribed by a bi-gender model, bisexuality is unsatisfactory for describing many trans sexualities. Bisexuality as a term that tries to encompass the transitioned and transitioning body cannot account for the experiences and desires that the trans bodily aesthetic and transition produce that surface within trans pornography. New terms and idiosyncratic language constructions beyond bisexuality are dialectically composed to form new aesthetics, such as ‘dickclit’, ‘boyhole’ and ‘trannychaser’.

Klein, Sepeckoff and Wolf (1985) complicate sexual desire further than most in relation to bisexuality, by introducing a number of other factors that are involved in erotic life. Eroticism becomes phenomenologically located where lifestyle, emotional preference, social preference and self-identification alongside special preferences in attraction, behaviour, fantasy and bodily aesthetics intersect. These factors fluctuate in intensity over time and space and may not be what is commonly understood as sexual. Ho argues that this can often be observed in ‘bisexual professionals’, which tell of experiences about going through ‘erotic twists and turns in life, of falling in and out of love and falling in love again with people of varied gender/sex affiliations, of affirming one sexual identity only to find other erotic impulses at variance with that chosen identity’ (Ho, 2003: 9). However, we argue that these aesthetics of existence are important for all desires and not solely bisexual. Therefore, we must look towards new conceptions
that neither simplify trans sexual experiences nor construe it as deviant (see Christian, 2006). We propose to do this through our notion of bodily aesthetics.

What is paramount for trans sexuality, we argue, are the connections and continuities between the aesthetic body, style and desire in which the notion of the aesthetic cannot be set apart from the rest of (sexual) life. Eagleton (1990) asserts that the body operates as the site of aesthetics; hence, the phenomenological features of aesthetic experience and judgment are central to such sexual experiences. Although Bornstein's (1994) reliance on radical bisexuality is problematic because of its reliance on bi-gendered assumptions, she does imply something radically new in her claim that ‘Gender Outlaws’ indicate an ‘irreverence for the established order’ through the ‘often dizzying use of paradox’ expressed through their bodies. The bodies that Bornstein is representing are those bodies that follow non-conventional paths that are foreclosed by the medical fraternity. Following from Bornstein, one's bodily aesthetic is fundamental to both experiencing and perceiving sensuousness and sexuality in forms that when taken beyond the restrictiveness of radical bisexuality might revolutionize the dominant understandings of (trans)people's erotic desires. In the next section, we take pornography as both an aesthetic production and as a reflection on current sexual stories. Trans porn draws attention to trans bodily aesthetics, and hence, can be seen as a productive object for analysis in trans sexualities research. We argue that trans porn may also refuse psychosexual attempts to territorialize trans sexualities, transpeople and their lovers.

Towards conceptualizing trans sexuality

Consisting of four parts interview-driven discussions on sex and identity, three parts steamy, intimate, creative sex, Diamond's (2007) ‘docu-porn’ presents two primary partners who embody and articulate themselves as ‘trans entities’. The first line of the film comes from Wil, who states; ‘I identify as a trans entity. I feel very much in touch with both my male and female side… I just, you know, found a word for it.’ Tristan Taormino's review of 'the new wave of trans cinema' singles out Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papi and Wil for its depiction of explicit sexuality, in which the deeper the scene goes, ‘their genders become malleable and less significant than their connection to one another’ (Taormino, 2008). Straddling porn and portraiture, the film’s doubled iconography broadens the aim of telling sexual stories from simple arousal. Its mobilization of trans eroticism actively addresses the viewer’s sexual interest; however, their trans identities also constitute a sexual identity. Together, Papi and Wil become trans entities, a term that signifies the ‘shifting’ (Wil's term) nature of their gender and sexual expression. Papi's closing affirmation of what they feel is the strength of the relationship is explained as Wil’s capacity to understand ‘who I am as a sexual being, intellectual being… [who] can just flow with me’ (Diamond, 2007). The constitution of their being, that is, the entity that flows, involves not only a felt-sense of their bodily aesthetic, but also, and crucially, their perceived bodily aesthetic. Similarly, Wil affirms that with Papi/she loves the way that they ‘grow together’, suggesting an intrinsic relationship between flowing and growing.

The self-conception of trans entity provides the partners with a term to describe themselves, a solution perhaps applicable to others who may struggle with defining an adequate lexicon for their sexuality. Further, Diamond's (2007) presentation of their trans entities flowing and growing offers an illustration of this 'word', a trans sexuality in which the erotic affects don’t have to ‘add up to a fully formed and settled subject’ (Crawford, 2008). Importantly for Wil, entity signifies a particular and separate unit, a definition which side-steps the thorny issues of identity which would involve the signification of sameness and/or difference. Hence, these entities do not have to conform to those which existed before, but through growing and flowing seek out new ways of becoming particular to both themselves and each other. The couple's emphasis on becoming trans entities precisely because of their focus on theirs and each others' bodily aesthetics is a crucial factor in their experience of sexuality. In fact, sexuality experienced in relation to spirituality and sexual performance appears in the film as one of the key composing forces for becoming trans. Hence, we argue that Trans Entities, the film and the emphatic portrayal of themselves, articulates trans sexuality that is less an identity based on gender, than an experiential process of transformative bodily aesthetics.

In the essay Gosh, Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity, Sedgwick (1995) examines the problem negotiated in Trans Entities and other trans porn, that of the of polarizing conceptual tools for gender with a corollary effect for sexuality. She offers a different model in which instead of gender posed as polar opposites, it registers multi-dimensionally, ‘along independent n-axis of femininity, masculinity, effeminacy, butchness, etc. in a series of nonce taxonomies (Sedgwick, 1995). For themselves, Papi and Wil describe a growing together in which between them, and as separate entities, the crossing of one threshold can qualitatively affect another. For instance, when Papi’s masculinity becomes more pronounced they are perceived as ‘faggotry’ rather than ‘femme’ on the arm of Wil. This kind of crossing of a sexualized gender threshold produces a new visibility, or perception of bodily style, which Sedgwick describes as ‘a “click” into the grid of a certain optic’ and which engenders new affective experiences of their body (Sedgwick, 1995: 15-16). The body perceived and expressed, registered as a particular territory or deterritorialized in the affective field, functions like a diagram of the intersubjective sense of self. Sedgwick models this visual and bodily dynamic of ‘transformations’ as a feedback mechanism
occuring between essentialism and free play; the guiding question for this co-constitution is 'Will I be able to recognize myself if I...?' (Sedgwick, 1995: 18). We suggest that what is undergoing transformations in crossing such thresholds is the body itself or, to borrow a phrase, the 'very stuff of subjectivity' (Grosz, 1994: ix).

C. Jacob Hale's (1997) groundbreaking essay on sexuality's transformative quality for transfolks, Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex without Women or Men, offers more specifically sexual terms to Sedgwick's model of a body transformed through inter- and intra-feedback mechanisms. Similar to Sedgwick's discussion of gender thresholds reached and broached through the optics of perceiving others, Hale describes sexuality not in terms of identity, but in terms of relationality. Taking the exemplary experiences of leatherdykes who explore power dynamics in gendered roles, Hale's analysis ascribes transformative power to sexual experiences. He singles out Daddy-boy role play that 'sometimes functions as a means of gender exploration, solidification, resistance, destabilization, and reconfiguration' (Hale, 1997: 226). Like Papí and Wil's use of sexual play to grow themselves, Hale's interview subject, Spencer Bergstedt, describes SM as 'a resource or means of learning more about myself and growing', and elsewhere states that sex is a 'tool' (Hale, 1997: 227; our emphasis). Used as a 'gender technology', SM enables the phenomenon Hale calls 'retooling' and 'recoding' of bodies, affecting a kind of transition, or departure from the expected sexual mapping (Hale, 1997: 230). Through these reconfigurative sexual practices of 'sexualized zones', Hale says that the body undergoes 'deterritorialization and reterritorialization' in which genital sexuality becomes decoupled from bodily pleasures and the phenomenological experience of erogenous body parts can become transferred to other parts and even inanimate objects (Hale, 1997: 230).

The usefulness of sex for transfolk is that regardless of the surgical or hormonal transformations the body has undergone, sexual practices are an available means to resignify, perhaps otherwise 'off-limits' body parts (Hale, 1997: 230). 'To change our embodiments without changing our bodies' (1997: 233) is how Hale describes the potential in sexuality for growing multiple, context-specific and purpose-specific sex/gender statuses. Hale emphasizes that SM practices can function as a gender technology to reorientate oneself to the space/place of one's body, to oneself as an entity; after all, what can be more local than your own body? In sum, just as the new configurations of sex, gender and sexuality made manifest through sexual discourses and styles may be a means to create a sexual 'home', the composing forces of sexuality may also undermine one's attempt at deciding on a 'settled' sexual identity. Thus, those sexual practices that express, transmit and invoke affects forcing one to leave home, also enacts what Stryker (2008) calls the poetics of transsexual sadomasochism, an act of artistic creation within and through which the body materializes in relation to its location.

Hence, the embodied self deterritorialized by sexual practices, that 'learns new tricks', not only becomes in relation to other entities, but in relation to the entity of place.

Quoting from Gaston Bachelard's (1994) study of home experiences in The Poetics of Space, Stryker understands that the effects of sexual poesis on the body as home blurs the duality of subject and object to the effect that such duality becomes 'iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions' (Stryker, 2008: 39). The shimmering between embodied self and material environment, an uncanny activity of subjectivity in movement, crossing thresholds, shifting in and out of recognizable optics and felt senses, she deliberalizes as 'a technology for the production of (trans)gendered embodiment' (Stryker, 2008: 43). The feedback mechanism of (SM) sexuality dismembers and disarticulates 'received patterns of identification, affect, sensation, and appearance', and serves as well for 'reconfiguring, coordinating, and remapping them in bodily space' (2008: 43). In the place of sexual poesis, the body of a trans entity, of a Daddy or a boy, of Stryker's transwoman bitch top, becomes 'a meeting point, a node, where external lines of force and social determination thicken into meat and circulate as movement back into the world' (2008: 42). Intensive and extensive, the affection of bodily aesthetics transforms the localized, context-specific space of self, rendering the subject a shimmering wave caught in a spiral of sexual recognition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we seek to locate the iridescence of trans sexuality, the wider spectra of desire expressed and perceived when trans sexuality is not considered as an established identity, but viewed as a phenomenological and aesthetic form of bodily experience. Central to generating this shimmering iridescence is the subject's encounter with composing forces of affect that prevents settlement into a static being. In our discussion of transsexual and transgender erotic disclosure and display through pornography, we have illuminated those trans entities who, as creators of sexual spaces/bodies, demonstrate the potential for becoming through deterritorializing practices. Finally, it is clear that for some transpeople, diverse bodily aesthetics may enhance and even motivate participation in sexual play and display, which signals to us that there is a necessity for a new conceptual horizon in future theorizations of trans spectra of desire.

Notes

1. For a full-length discussion of the theoretical import of trans porn for both porn (film) studies and transgender studies, see Steinbock (2011).

2. The site existed from January 2001 to February 2004 in the early heyday of queer porn. Some scenes were released by Fatale Media productions in the compilation Rough Stuff.
3. St. Jacques (2007) tries to reinsert the political thrust of the ‘Post-Transsexual’, a term that referred originally to transsexuals who ‘undid’ the transition, but who in his analysis go through one transition to enter into another one – suggesting that no undergirding may be possible, as there is no way of returning to an original position. While we support St. Jacques’s analysis, here we understand this term with Stone’s attribution that a transsexual who willfully acknowledges their ‘transness’ can no longer be considered transsexual (hence, become ‘post-transsexual’) since they have refused to fulfill the psychosexual definition of that term.

4. For a contemporary view of transmen’s partners’ views about sex with their trans lowers, see Brown (2010).

5. Bailey was cleared of any wrong doing by the ethics committee investigation at his academic institution.

6. Including identities like transsexuals, intersex people, cross-dressers, drag queens and drag kings, genderfuckers, trans. The list keeps growing as new taxonomies are invented.

7. For instance, in Davy’s (2011) research participants recounted reconfigurations of the ‘sexual body’ through language, with terms like ‘dickclit’, and the erotic deployment of prosthetics. They also described how fantasies and sexual horizons broadened through time intersubjectively and intercorporeally, not only with oneself and significant others but with random sexual partners.

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