

## Queering the Docile Body

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Increasingly, there is a view that the recent emergence of sexual and gender diversity has helped to move mainstream society towards the eradication of the normative privileging of particular genders and sexualities. However, when we look beneath the surface it is more likely to be a reconfiguration of the heterosexual matrix, a term defined by Judith Butler as that grid of cultural intelligibility through which norms are created and maintained in bodies, genders, and desires and how they appear natural (Butler, 24). Using Judith Butler's heterosexual matrix as my foundation, this paper will demonstrate the ways in which gender and sexuality become naturalized in order to explore the normalization process of both heterosexual desire, or orientation, and the gender binary. It will argue that although we are in the midst of a historic mobilization of diverse and complex (trans)gender movements, the sphere of intelligibility continues to be subject to hegemonic interpretations. These interpretations privilege a binary model of genders and sexual behaviors, thus resulting in a continuation of normative identities and desires. Further, as this essay will explicate, the heterosexual matrix, in accordance with neoliberalism, work as a mechanism of power that designates what is an intelligible life. As such, without first locating these functions of power, the push for a more fluid and open understanding of gender, sexuality<sup>1</sup> and desire will continue to fail, and the space for widespread change will dissolve.

### Introduction

Increasingly, there is a view that the recent emergence of sexual and gender diversity has helped to move mainstream society towards the eradication of the normative privileging of particular genders and sexualities. However, when we look beneath the surface it is more likely to be a reconfiguration of the heterosexual matrix, a term defined by Judith Butler as, that grid of cultural intelligibility through which norms are created and maintained in bodies, genders, and desires and how they appear natural (Butler, 24). This paper will explore how gender and sexuality become naturalized in order to

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, throughout this essay, gender and sex will not be considered separate entities. Both are culturally constructed when considering the body as a situation that has always been interpreted by cultural meanings, consequently sex (male or female) by definition is not a biological quality, but a designation of gender. Both gender and sex require each other to exist.

demonstrate the ways in which both heterosexual desire, or orientation, and gender are performative rather than inherent qualities. It will argue that although we are in the midst of a historic mobilization of diverse and complex (trans)gender movements, the sphere of intelligibility continues to be subject to hegemonic interpretations. These interpretations privilege a binary model of genders and sexual behaviors, thus resulting in a continuation of normative identities and desires. It will further argue that the failure to penetrate the heterosexual matrix has simultaneously, and counter-intuitively, resulted in a widespread assimilation into neoliberal hegemony. As this essay will explicate, the heterosexual matrix, in accordance with neoliberalism, work as a mechanism of power that designates what is an intelligible life. As such, without first locating these functions of power, the push for a more fluid and open understanding of gender, sexuality and desire will continue to fail, and the space for widespread change will dissolve.

### **Genealogy of Sexual Desire**

The ways in which bodies come to inhabit certain spaces rather than others is the preliminary point of analysis. The heterosexual matrix functions as a divide- designating what is culturally intelligible from what is not. Therefore, the naturalization process of gender and sexual desire, functions simultaneously through the reiteration of normative ways of living and the exclusion of other categories. In Foucaultian terms, the restrictive process that imposes specific trajectories on our bodies is the result of bio-power.<sup>2</sup> With the emergence of bio-power came the marginalization of certain values, lives, information and the legitimization of others. Historically, sex was not judged as much as it was administrated as an attempt to enhance the political economy (Foucault, 25). As a result, sex for procreation and bio-politically-oriented population hinge together at the nexus of bio-power (Foucault, 24). Procreative sex has embraced a long history of control: in the eighteenth century sex became a police matter, an ordered maximization of collective and individual forces (Foucault, 25). Governments, instead of acting in regards to subjects, acted in regards to populations: “birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illness, patterns of diet and habitation” were prioritized (Foucault, 25). At the heart of this political and economic project was the state enforcement of heterosexual desire.<sup>3</sup>

This facilitating of sex through control has evolved over one hundred and fifty years, through both the economy of pleasure, and an ordered system of knowledge, into the making of complex machinery for producing true discourses on sex (Foucault, 68). It is this deployment that enables something called ‘sexuality’ to embody the truth of sex and its pleasures (Foucault, 68). Sex, as bio-power, has long operated to secure certain forms of reproductive sexual ties and to prohibit other forms as a way to order and expand societies. Its general function subordinates characters to one another, specifically linking them in terms of function and thus arranging them to fit a specific design. The historicity of heterosexual desire has posited itself as authentic and natural and has simultaneously naturalized and authenticated the sex binary with the gender binary. Subsequently, alongside the state administration of heterosexual desire came the entrenchment of gendered subjects. Gender, as such, has

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<sup>2</sup> Bio-power, a term used interchangeably with bio-politics, is a mechanism developed to administer life. It is a particular technology of power by which human life can be controlled and managed in its natural intermediacy (Kirstensen, 11).

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this essay heterosexual desire, heterosexuality and hetero-normativity will take on Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s definition: “the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (qtd. in Waites, 140).

become “an index of proscribed and prescribed sexual relations by which a subject is socially regulated and produced” (Butler, 48).

### **Sex As Bio-Power**

Throughout history, bio-power has orientated bodies towards specific trajectories and away from others. These specified trajectories initially functioned as overt impositions on people’s bodies until, through repetition, they transformed into self-impositions. No longer did the state have to administrate what people could and could not do with their bodies and consequently, bodies, genders, and desires were naturalized. The process has therefore deeply entrenched heterosexual desire, thus, (re)producing heterosexuality as an institution, and simultaneously, strengthening the heterosexual matrix. This chronicle of increasing repression affects what spaces bodies inhabit, a process that involves “orientation devices; ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space” (Ahmed, 11). The sphere of intelligibility has come to govern what bodies orient towards, in the process of inhabiting space.

Gender is neither what one ‘is’ nor is it explicitly what one ‘has.’ Instead it is more productive to think of it as the apparatus through which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place. Although heteronormativity remains dominant to this day, it has become increasingly evident that its dominant presence is not the result of natural, authentic or inherent human qualities. Norms govern intelligibility, they allow for certain kinds of practices and actions to become recognizable, impose a grid of legibility on the social, and define the parameters of what will and will not appear within its domain (Butler, 42). A norm<sup>4</sup> as such, is established as a direct result of the apparatus of bio-power as it seeks to penetrate the body and its faculties in order to consolidate power over life (Repo, 74). As history demonstrates, this restrictive discourse that insists on the binary of man and woman as an exclusive way to understand the gender field, “performs a regulatory operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption” (Butler, 43). The body becomes both a passive and active agent of its subjectivity. Passive in the sense that the grid limits its comprehension, constraining the body to become an instrument of appropriative and interpretive willing that determines cultural meaning for itself; but active in its perception of itself making decisions as a seemingly autonomous being.

A preliminary analysis, as such, posits this conceptual framework: the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire are formed by power and are formations of power. At the very essence of the gender binary therein lies bio-power, in all its glory, and thus, the capacity to maintain or dismantle the heterosexual matrix. This has grave results, as it produces a field of reality that specifically designates what can and cannot be conceived. Our bodies are regulated by gender norms, and because of this, bodies that exist that do not, or cannot, abide by these gender norms, are forced to exist in inhabitable spaces; spaces not only unintelligible to others but also to themselves. This posits an interesting

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<sup>4</sup> A norm is the measure, which simultaneously individualizes, makes ceaseless individualization possible and creates comparability. It is a principle of comparison, of comparability, a common measure, which is instituted in the pure reference of one group to itself, when the group has no relationship other than to itself, without external reference and without verticality (Butler, 51).

dilemma, if the very notion of a subject is defined by how it can be understood in the world, what results when gender and sexual diversity force themselves into social, political, and cultural life?

### **A Reconfiguration of the Heterosexual Matrix**

Discipline through bio-power not only produces individuals through management and utility, it also actively constitutes them (Butler, 50). This determines, more or less, what we are, and what we can be. Therein lies the problem. When dealing with the conditions of intelligibility by which humans can emerge, become recognized, and loved by others, they are at the same time inextricably bound by the history of norms, and practices that govern bodies and their understanding of each other. Within the heterosexual matrix, gender identity tends to privilege notions of a clear, coherent, and unitary identity over conceptions of blurred, or fluid identification (Waites, 147). Bodies have been repetitively administrated to occupy certain spaces over others and as a result, even with the emergence of gender and sexual diversity, spaces continue to embody similar qualities.

The most tangible example of this can be exposed through an analysis of current transgender rights and politics. As transgender groups move forward towards more inclusive societal and juridical policies, a new kind of conformity has simultaneously emerged. Specifically, when assessing the implications of *Gender Identity Disorder* (GID), it becomes increasingly evident that the current mainstream transgender presence holds problematic connotations. GID is a psychological disorder understood to describe the “phenomena such as unhappiness or unease with one’s sex, distress caused by the social roles associated with one’s birth sex, and subjective experience of incongruity between genital anatomy and gender identity” (Joel et al., np.). It is, therefore, based on the perception of enduring gendered traits of the opposite sex, which perpetuates the assumption that boys’ traits will lead to a desire for women, and girls’ traits will lead to a desire for men (Butler, 79). In both cases, heterosexual desire continues to be presumed.

The concept is problematized further due to the assumptions it carries regarding an unchanging gender dichotomy. GID leans on the dichotomous perception of gender, a norm that explicitly relies on two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories: man and woman (Joel et al., n.p). Such a framework depends on a stable sex expressed through a stable gender and this continues to be hierarchically defined through the practice of heterosexual desire, and as a result, the hegemonic presence of the heterosexual matrix persists. Moreover, this framework perpetuates the normative assumption that the cultural gender is an effect of the natural sex (Butler, 31). Hence, the sexuality and genderedness emerging within this matrix of power relations—although they are not simple replications—swerve from their original purpose and inadvertently mobilize possibilities of ‘subjects’ that no longer exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility but instead effectively expand them (Butler, 39).

The result of this expansion is not a new grid allowing the fluidity of what can constitute an intelligible body, but a repetition of bodies inhabiting pre-given spaces that continue to conceal the ‘givenness’ of their existence. This suggests that the construction of selfhood is not simply a result of what is and is not intelligible; regulations imposed on the body are also influenced by regimes of value, which administrate, employ, and arrange bodies within and across spaces that facilitate or deny certain trajectories. Ultimately, the presumption of heterosexuality creates a society that propagates compulsory

heterosexuality and by doing so maintains a normative gender binary that excludes all others that do not fit within itself, thus making the event a cyclical process; naturally these life stages will reproduce themselves.

The expansion of the heterosexual matrix, though problematic, does attest to the reality that gender and sexual desire are not authentic or natural human qualities. The replication of gender inverted in transgender bodies, or even the reiteration of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames, calls into question the very essence of heterosexuality as an institution (Butler, 41). Bodily feelings of disorientation, feelings that have been explicitly felt by queer subjects, have forcefully dislodged the world and the body from the ground in which it has been historically rooted. By recognizing the fluid reality of personhood, queer individuals have symbolically opened the boundaries that are constrained by bio-power and culture; an initial step that has provided this paper with its very foundation. The most significant result of this disorientation is that it disturbs order; it forces us to question the status quo and this is crucial to any move towards a society that is better able to accommodate sexual and gender diversity. However, the point is not whether we experience disorientation, but how such experiences can have an impact on the orientations of bodies and spaces (Ahmed, 158).

It is clear, however, that current Western environments—environments presumed to be the most sexually progressive in the world—have not rid themselves of heterosexuality as an institution. The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation, an old dream of symmetry that is presupposed, reified, rationalized and reproduced (Butler, 30). This perpetuates a process of differentiation, in which the masculine term is differentiated from the feminine term. This differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire (Butler, 30). Arguably, this means that the very concept of genderedness becomes meaningless in the absence of heterosexuality as an institution, which is compulsory and enforced both through rewards for appropriate gendered and heterosexual behaviors and through punishments for deviations from the conventional or “normal” ways of being either a girl or a boy (Butler, 30). Subsequently, a reconfiguration of the heterosexual matrix, one that continues to subject itself to hegemonic norms, appears. While this modified sphere of intelligibility is a clear and important step, it does not prove to suffice. Bodies continue to be constrained under the binary and dichotomous spaces continue to dominate legibility, thus drawing a line between the intelligible subject and the unintelligible Other.

### **Conclusion: Locating Bio-Power in the Body**

An inquiry into the body is an inquiry into the social, the cultural, and the political. The body is the main site of bio-power, a force that creates and maintains docile bodies and as a result effectively (re)produces normative spaces in order to (re)articulate the status quo. Bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwelling and take shape by dwelling: “spaces are like second skin that unfolds in the folds of our body” (Ahmed, 9). The orientation of bodies towards specific spatial areas over others is influenced by cultural impressions; our bodies are sites for cultural meaning. That being said, the social or cultural also has its skin, a skin that works as a border, a border that is shaped by the impressions left by others. It is affected by the comings and goings of different bodies, creating new lines and textures in the ways in which things are arranged (Ahmed, 9). Just as bodies are malleable, so are the cultural or social spaces they orientate towards. Both work together to form each other, which

means that together they have the capacity to form new spaces with new meanings. The work of inhabiting space, as such, involves a dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, and through this negotiation it is possible to create new impressions on the world, depending on which way we turn (Ahmed, 7). The body provides us with a perspective, it provides us with a point of beginning, of being 'here', and a point from which the world unfolds (Ahmed, 8). Consequently, any interrogation into the naturalization and authentication of gender and sexual desire is simultaneously an interrogation into the ways in which bodies are scientifically, societally, economically and politically rendered pertinent, ordered and governed (Repo, 83). Locating bio-power in the body is, thus, the necessary first step in order to move past an expansion of the heterosexual matrix, reclaim the fight for sexual emancipation and dismantle the status quo. By recognizing the body's docility we can liberate the mind, and as a result, liberate society.

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