

A Tomboy's Nested Ifs

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*SEXING THE BODY: GENDER POLITICS
AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY*

Anne Fausto-Sterling

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Portrait of the Woman as a Young Boy, *c.* 1970:

Runs faster, jumps higher, swims farther, cusses louder than anyone. Father: athlete. Mother: athlete. Genetically predestined to be the white FloJo—minus the fingernails. Taught to keep her eye on the ball, she and her brother join Mom in A Catch. Mom has long, scarlet nails, as does—genetically, natch—Girl. But Mom throws like “a girl,” claws scraping the balloon at the let-go, catching the follow-through. Girl gnaws her nails to the bone. Pleads with Dad to have A Catch, races a pop fly, nabs the fucker smack in the pocket, hears her father yell: “Atta boy, Girl!” But she hears it punctuated differently: “Atta Boy-girl!”

Mom says, “You’ll stop biting your nails when you discover boys.”

Boy-girl runs, jumps, swims, etc.

So why’s she riding the bench at 14?

Asthma. Due to her father’s genes (nature)—and her mother’s frets (nurture). “My mother died of asthma at age 40,” her father says. “Don’t run!” her mother says. “You’re wheezing!”

Albuterol’s been invented. Boy-girl carries a canister for “emergencies”—which never occur, because she’s not allowed to run/wheeze—or, by the way, to cuss.

So why the fuck isn’t she using albuterol to let her run-swim-jump??

Because the goddamn (male) doctor never mentions that it can be used that way.

Her mother never asks. (Nurture.)

Girl stops gnawing her nails. She’s been reading right along (nature?), but now she reads like crazy, from Mom’s ceiling-high bookshelves of trashy paperbacks. She learns a lot about heaving bosoms, throbbing loins, and other crucial elements of life.

Meanwhile, her brother becomes a Long Distance Runner (nature and nurture both, right?).

1, 2

Anne Fausto-Sterling’s necessary work, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, begins with the story of Spanish Olympic hurdler Maria Patiño. In 1988, Patiño flunked the Olympic Committee’s sex test.

Olympic sex-testing? Our twentieth-century reincarnation of the Olympic games initially prohibited the participation of women, calling female competition “against the law of nature.” Later committees surrendered—on the condition that women competitors prove their woman-ness. *I.e.*, a female competitor had to qualify as...weaker...while male hurdlers were paled having to prove they were...stronger. The Committee’s concerns were political as well as gendered: Fausto-Sterling reports that the only known man to masquerade as an Olympian woman was Hermann Ratjen, a Nazi Youth who hoped to glorify the Reich. “Dora” came in fourth—*i.e.*, *behind three women*—in the high jump. The Reich fell.

By 1968, Patiño’s predecessors were sick of appearing naked before Olympic examiners to prove possession of T&A; their protests resulted in the Committee’s switch to genetic testing. In 1988, Patiño and her peers had to produce a doctor’s note saying they *lacked Y-chromosomes*, or provide a cheek scrape to the “femininity control head office.” Patiño

was called in without explanation, and subjected to a physical. Then she was disqualified. ¿Por qué? Her cheek had revealed the presence of a Y chromosome; her labia, when pulled back, exposed the presence of hidden testes; and she could boast neither uterus nor ovaries.

Clearly, she was inadequately weak.

Fausto-Sterling uses the Patiño case as an example of what happens when we insist upon dualities like male/female and heterosexual/homosexual. Intersexuals like Patiño, if their “condition” is caught at birth, are often subjected to surgery and hormone “treatment” to make them one or another—but not themselves. Fausto-Sterling reaches beyond the now-common notion that *gender* is a social construction, to assert that *sex*—the thing we’d thought was a physical given—is equally constructed, since gender constructs affect labia-labeling, and vice versa.

Maria Patiño, diagnosed as “androgen insensitive” because her body did not detect testosterone and thus did not build male attributes, won her lawsuit and competed—as a woman—in the 1992 Olympics. Fausto-Sterling suggests that when we insist upon calling her either male, or female, we engage in a fundamental “incorrigible proposition”: that we must choose one or the other. No matter which one we choose, we erase her experience as neither/both. Which erasure is a social choice, with social consequences. And most academic fields of inquiry contain multitudes of incorrigible propositions, stubbornly resisting critique.

The history of sex and gender constructs goes (loosely) like this: A patriarchal scientific community sought physical reasons for the behaviors of “males” and “females,” “homosexuals” and “heterosexuals,” thus enforcing those roles. A feminist movement separated the notion of the sexed “female” from the gendered “woman,” insisting that sex may be what you’re born with (nature), but gender is your prescribed role (nurture). A backlash insisted that nature has *something* to

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do with how you behave; which left lashed feminists insisting that nurture has the greater role in role-making. But this nature-nurture dispute ignored the non-dualities: the intersexuals, the transgendered, the male-identified. Meanwhile, the scientific hegemony found a “gay gene,” a relief to gay activists who hated being thought sinfully aberrant, or sick and needing cure, or indulgent of a non-conformist life “phase.” Said “scientific development” divided feminist and gay activists. But a “gay gene” also ignored those who began adult life with one sexual “preference,” only to “discover” another.

Fausto-Sterling, a feminist biologist who reports that she enjoys a lesbian relationship, is well placed to examine the wrong questions scientists—and constructionists—have been asking. She tells us that, recently, science has begun to address the slippage in the nature/nurture “debate” by positing that the two “interact.” Interactionism was my own position before reading *Sexing the Body*: I thought that nature/nurture was an unnecessary binary; that a person is affected by both; and that little is served by disputing how much to attribute to each. But my (former) position is unsatisfactory to Fausto-Sterling, because its foundational dualism perpetuates the assumptions that 1) nurture alone is culturally constructed, while 2) nature, or science, is uninfluenced by social hegemonies; and 3) anatomy—the gene, the cell, the neuron—is unchanging, unaffected by social experience.

$$1 + 1 = 3$$

“WHO do you LO-OVE??”

Girl gets a summer job cleaning house on the other side of tracks for Pig-woman, who shrieks and gripes about the grain of soil here, the wrinkled negligée there. Two bucks/hour.

At night, Girl calls her Best Girlfriend to report Pig-woman’s latest tyranny. Girlfriend

laughs at Girl's retelling of it, each time funnier, because Girl lives to make Best Girlfriend laugh. Girlfriend is beautiful, limbs free in ways Girl's aren't, since she has to not-wheeze. Girl loves Girlfriend profoundly.

One day Girl finds, buried under the crap on Pig-woman's nightstand, a book called, *How to Make Love to a Man*. By "J," or some such shit.

What a pig this woman is.

But hey: Girlfriend will laugh her ass off at this one!

Girl, like Girlfriend, has half-heartedly Discovered Boys, and this is the first interesting thing she's found in this pig-sty mansion. She shoves dirty pajamas off the sheets, switches on the vacuum, and reads.

Her face flushes, but a few years later, she works some of the information there.

Done, she reburies the book, and makes the bed. On the opposite side of the room she finds *How to Make Love to a Woman*.

She doesn't even bother. Despite her love for Girlfriend, she knows there's no information in there she'll ever use. Sex is for men and women, for babies, just say no, etc.

1, 2, 3

Fausto-Sterling's alternative to the duality of interactionism hails from "connectionist theory," which posits that "function emerges from the complexity and strength of many neural connections acting at once"; that these connections comprise a system whose "responses are often non-linear"; that "networks can be 'trained' to respond in particular ways"; that "the nature of the response is not easily predictable"; and that "information is not located anywhere—rather it is the net result of the many different connections and their differing strengths."

Fausto-Sterling builds on connectionism and related models to propose her new understanding of human behavior and anatomy: developmental systems theory (DST). She appoints as DST's pioneer philosopher Susan Oyama, who argued in 1985 that human behavior couldn't be described by a model

that says humans are the result of two processes, one genetic/anatomical and one environmental/phenotypical. But, she warned, many will duck a systems approach because "it gives less...guidance on fundamental truth" and "fewer conclusions about what is inherently desirable, healthy, natural or inevitable."

Nonetheless, *Sexing the Body* cites Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994), taking the Möbius strip as its primary analogy, asserting that nature/nurture, inside/outside, points between/surrounding—all progress and turn in on themselves in a weave of continuous interdependency/counter-effect.

So why do we desire what/whom we desire?

Reports of children raised without human contact indicate that, when found, said children possessed "neither language nor sexual drive."

Like Grosz, Fausto-Sterling asserts that our supposedly innate sexual drives and instincts would not exist if we did not also inherit "a set of meanings, 'a network of desires,' that organize the meanings and consciousness of the child's bodily functions." A "social setting" molds the "clay" that is instinct into "recognizable psychic form." Thus, "without human sociality, human sexuality cannot develop."

Presumably, most of us submit to the gender roles we're assigned, performing sociably acceptable sexual practices, to avoid ostracism. But why do some of us nonetheless engage in these unaccepted behaviors? Were we "born that way"? If so, why do our desires, acceptable or not, often change over time? And what of people who've been assigned physically ambiguous attributes?

Recent research on the structure and activities of the human brain suggest that the brain is always changing—dramatically, in a child's early years; but some neuro-systems still develop into late adolescence; and some continue through adulthood. We also know that some processes cease when not stimu-

lated by environment or society, and that some expand when hyper-stimulated—such as when a blind person’s visual cortex is “re-cruited” to process Braille. Our bodies change all the time, depending on our health status and the stimuli we encounter. These variants are affected by class status, race, luck in avoiding accidents, etc.

Fausto-Sterling extrapolates from research on brain development to argue that most of us are told by society what to desire; and so we present ourselves for that acceptable stimulation; and so alter the particular set of neuro-processes and structures that process that stimulation; and so we desire that stimulation. Sexual desire may shift over a lifetime as experience alters physiology and vice versa. Thus, our “knowledge” of sexuality—ours and others’—emerges as the result of a vast developmental system of the physical, the environmental, the social, the linguistic.... Physiology, and desire, is thus mutable.

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This Girl is a Girl-woman now—age 40, and not yet dead of asthma (though FloJo, sadly, is). But still not quite developed.

She knows she’s not developed because she’s *supposed* to be having her (hetero)-sexual peak, *right now*, and she isn’t. (Plus, it would seem she’s “infertile.” *I.e.*, her ovaries are acting as if they’re 40. The nerve.) She grew up to become a Language Worker (nature? nurture?). So when she wonders why she seems to have missed her (fertile) peak, she concludes that she is sick to death of the

way her culture talks about heterosexuality.

Constructs, describes, enforces heterosexual practice.

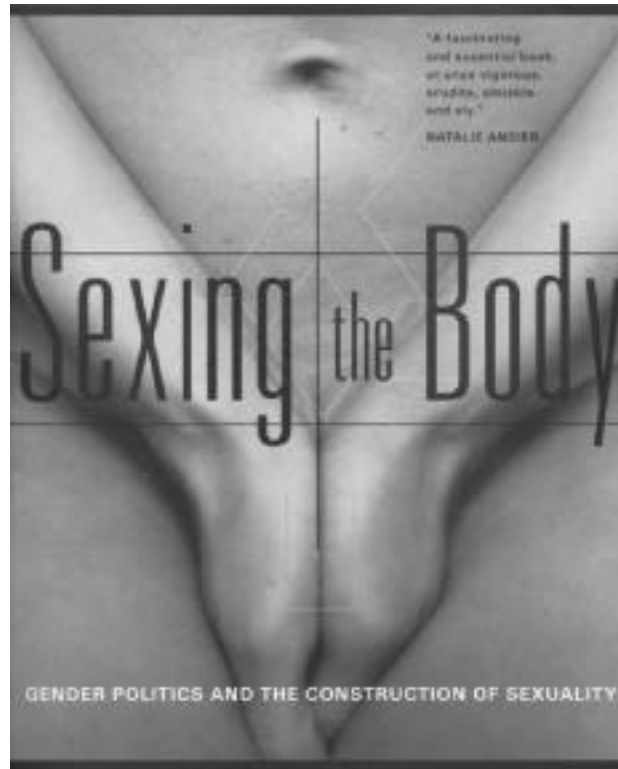
Girl-woman’s not a big reader of pornography, thinks pornography makes it hard for women to be women (?), but she knows she’s absorbed the conventional rhetoric of porn, like it or not. She discovered this when she read a fiction by Ronald Sukenick, in a 1995 University of Iowa collection titled *Transgressions*. The piece was comprised of conventional porn rhetoric, but was full of tantalizing ellipses. As in, “She pressed her heaving...to his throbbing....” When she filled in most of the blanks with little trouble, she realized she had internalized a masculinist rhetoric of heterosexuality—all

penetration and penile, with never a *mention* of the presence of a *clitoris*.

Oh, yeah. *That* thing.

As a creative writing instructor, Girl-woman finds that young people, too, have absorbed this vocabulary, this standardization of act-ualde-/pre-scription. A young man turns in a fiction detailing the rape of a girl by her father. The author *intended* (pretended) to stimulate the reader’s sympathy for the pathetic (powerless) girlchild. The author achieved the stimulation of...something else.

Worse, Girl-woman reads the work of young women who want to push the edge of the gendered-language envelope by writing fictions containing the word “cunt.” While their male peers express awe at the “courage” reflected in such departures from norm, Girl-woman scribbles in the margins that the



(hetero)sexual desires of their characters are masculinist—penile, penetrative—and asks for a syntax that would express a female (?) desire. The writers turn in unrevised revisions.

Also, the sex is invariably heterosexual—although Girl-woman heard a student recently complain that her (male) instructor announced, in workshop, that they had all got the point that the student was gay already, and could she please write about something else.

Which could explain why the sex is invariably heterosexual.

In her women's literature class, Girl-woman takes her academic career (adjunct, natch) in her hands, assigns Kathy Acker, and closes the classroom door so her students might practice saying the word "cunt" aloud. Tittering follows, but *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978), with its complex interactions between hetero/homo-sex, white/black, male/female, imperializing/colonized social systems, freaks out her students completely. Girl-woman's students, impaled by the new (?) sexual vocabulary, miss the imperialism. "This chick is really fucked up," one sighs. "She's having way too many orgasms."

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Fausto-Sterling does not address specifically the contemporary language practices that aid science and social institutions in their enforcement of the compulsive heterosexuality and gender roles she seeks to subvert; but I affirm her suggestion that the way we talk about sex ends up being the way we do sex which ends up being the way we talk about sex. We are told—literally—how to make love to the *opposite* sex; which descriptors for sexual behavior are acceptable; thus which sexual behaviors are acceptable; and thus which sexual behaviors are desirable. We're also told not to talk about sex, but to titter about it; to drive sexual information into underground channels like porn shops and fisting meets; and so it doesn't surprise me that children found in the wild possess neither a sex drive nor a language drive. Both are

highly socialized.

Fausto-Sterling points out that competitive athletes alter their bodies both naturally and artificially—naturally, because changing diet and exercise changes a body; but artificially, because "cultural practices help us decide what look to aim for and how best to achieve it." As a feminist, I have long wondered which among my own menu of sexual preferences are "natural"—alterable by some non-aculturated me (?)—and which are "artificial"—implanted by cultural practice. This is the sort of unpleasantly unanswerable question Susan Oyama warned us would come of connectionism and DST. Once, I might have organized that problem on a continuum (am I more or less "natural" right now?). But Fausto-Sterling applies more complex models.

She closes with an analogy to Russian nesting dolls, "useful for envisioning the various layers of human sexuality, from the cellular to the social and historical." Fausto-Sterling labels the important layers (from inside to outside) thusly: cell, organism, psyche, person-to-person relationships, culture, and history. If you open the outer doll, to take out the next, smaller doll inside, the first individual doll—history—may fascinate, and spark inquiry. But by itself that one layer of doll is "hollow." It is only by displaying "the assembled structure" that "the complexity of the nesting," the real source of fascination, is appreciated. A human is even more complex than a nesting doll, since "the human nesting doll changes shape with time. Change can happen in any of the layers, but since the entire assembly has to fit together, altering one of the component dolls requires the interlinked system—from the cellular to the institutional—to change."

No one field of academic inquiry, no one question, can fully unpack the complexity of human desire and sexuality; and privileging certain disciplines—biology, say, or political science—often results in specious duality. As Fausto-Sterling avers, "Only nonhierarchical,

multidisciplinary teams can devise more complete (or what Sandra Harding calls 'less false') knowledge about human sexuality." Debates about the biologies of disputed bodies, such as Maria Patiño, or Boy-girl, Girl, and Girl-woman, "are always simultaneously moral, ethical, and political debates about social and political equality and the possibilities for change.

"Nothing less," Fausto-Sterling concludes, "is at stake."

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