

Tongue Untied, Tongue with Tongue. Mining the Binary Matrix

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Abstract:

Although language allows boundless freedom, we are at the same time confined within a linguistic structure that first demands that we are assigned a sex and a gender and consequently restricts us to two existing categories; that is, to the categories of male or female. Gender in language therefore forces every individual to mark in its speech to which gender category it belongs. If we are neither women nor men, then how can we understand our existence through language? What is the relation between the binary system of gender (man/woman) and language? How is the relationship between body, language, subjectivity and politics articulated nowadays? In addition, how can we be constituted as political subjects in spite of our non-defining identity? This article considers the questions of deconstruction of the binary man/woman system in relation to the further, possible and common struggle against global capitalism, coloniality and heteropatriarchy.

Key words: language, gender, sexuality, transfeminism, protests

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“I am not a woman and I am not a man. I would like the European Community to take out the ‘F’ sign on my ID. I think that it is a discrimination sign and everyone of us should go to the European Community and say: ‘I do not want to be identified by my genitals!’”¹

– *Beatriz Preciado*

This introductory quote is taken from the video recording of the debate, entitled *Il ritorno delle bambole* (The Return of Dolls), between Michela Marzano, Italian philosopher, writer and author of the book *Volevo essere una farfalla* (I Wanted To Be a Butterfly), Beatriz Preciado, Spanish philosopher, writer and author of the book *Pornotopia* and Natasha Walters, British writer and author of the book *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*. The debate took place at “Teatro Comunale” in Ferrara (Italy), in autumn 2011, and its aim was to tackle the question of deconstruction of the binary man/woman system. What is the role of language as means of expression? How is the relationship between body, language, subjectivity and politics articulated nowadays? In addition, how can we be constituted as political subjects in spite of our non-defining identity?

The theory of the 1980s and 1990s introduced the distinction between sex and gender. In this period of the history of ideas, we also learned that “sex” and “gender” are not some natural states but a representation of an individual in the sense of a particular social relation, which is established onto the rigid conceptual opposition of two complementary yet exclusive categories. This conceptual system still remains a firm and stable framework resisting change and

¹ Cf. Beatriz Preciado in a debate entitled “The Return of Dolls” at MEDIUM? (date of release) available on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_XEwFOR2Zg

transformation. More, we have recently witnessed the return of naturalization of the binary regime of gender: woman (femininity) and man (masculinity). According to Beatriz Preciado, especially sex persists as the last remnant of nature; even after technology has completed its task of constructing the body.

In 1947, the sexologist John Money, who conducted research and experiments to enable the technical reconstruction of intersex children, came up with the term “gender.” As Preciado writes, “gender” assumes that the configuration of a subject’s sex can be influenced by means of various interventions such as surgery, hormonal and psychological therapy. With the term “gender” the medical discourse unravels the arbitrary basis of sex and its constructivist character. At the same time, it opens up the path to new forms of resistance and political action. According to Preciado this term has been taken later on by feminism. But while preserving the metaphysical binarism (sex, gender) that was in a crisis at that point, “gender” faced the dead-end of the modern presupposition that the body is a given biological matter – gene code, sexual organs, reproductive functions. The same presupposition is shared by two opposed feminisms: essentialism and constructivism. If until that point sex was natural, definitive and nontransferable, we now got gender as synthetic, changeable, transferable, imitative, technically produced and reproduced.

Preciado therefore indicates that understanding sex and gender in the sense of technological intervention (technologies of gender) resolves the contradiction of essentialism and constructivism. Thus we can replace, as she points out, sex and gender with the word “technogender” because the bodies can no longer be isolated from the social forces of sexual difference. It can easily be claimed that it is impossible to determine where the boundary lies between natural bodies and those fabricated by the interventions of artificial technologies such as cyber implants, electronic prostheses, hormones, tablets and organ transplantation. The new biotechnology simultaneously acts on both the body and social structures through which it regulates and controls cultural differences. This new stage of modern societies whose goal is the production and control of life itself was named by Michel Foucault biopolitics. It can also be called the society of control (Deleuze and Guattari) or the pharmacopornographic society (Preciado).

In the 1990’s a new differentiation between man and woman took place. One began to speak of “bio” (those who keep the sex that “determines” them from birth on) and “trans or techno” the men and women (those who want to change their sex using technical, prosthetic, performative and legal procedures). Despite this difference, we can state following Preciado that both (bio and trans), regardless of the difference, are now technologically produced since they both depend on methods of visual recognition, the performative and morphological procedures of control. The difference between the two, as has been noted by Preciado, depends on resistance to the norms, on conscience and by the degree of awareness that production of masculinity and femininity are basically techno-social processes of recognition in the public space.

Nowadays it is possible to understand sex, gender and sexuality as discursive constructions which, through linguistic performativity (drag king, drag queen, cross-dressing, hormonal experimentation...), can receive new meanings or by means of surgery. It has become clear that man and woman exist as a social norm that is maintained by means of the technology of body control: pharmacological and audio-visual techniques that constantly distort the reality that surrounds us. Preciado names this psycho-political technology of the formation of subjectivity with fixed gender and sexual identity (I am a man, I am a woman, I am heterosexual, I am homosexual...) – “gender programming.” The current possibility for the different construction of gender and sexuality at the margins of the hegemonic discourse of the heteronormative regime allows us to take an eccentric position towards the binary system. that we are caught in, through the deactivation of this “gender programming,” that is, through de-identification and de-naturalization.

If we are neither women nor men, then how can we understand our existence through language? What is the relation between the binary system of gender (man/woman) and language? Does language encode power relations and in which way? Although language allows boundless freedom, we are at the same time confined within a linguistic structure that first demands that we are assigned a sex and a gender and consequently restricts us to two existing categories; that is, to the categories of male or female. Gender in language therefore forces every individual to mark in its speech to which gender category it belongs. In the same way as it is done with the inscription in the civil register. The only exceptions until now are Nepal (2007), India (2009), Australia and New Zealand (2011) that officially include a third option within the gender categories that citizens can select on passport or ID cards applications, that is, the designation “third gender” (Nepal) “E” (“eunuch”, India) or “X” (“indeterminate, unspecified or intersex”, Australia and New Zealand).

When filling in the form, most women probably enter “F” instead of “M” confirming, each and every time, the entry in social relations as a woman. This does not only mean that others then perceive us as women but that we represent

ourselves as women. “While we are thinking that we were the ones who mark the square with an ‘F,’ it is, as argued by Teresa de Lauretis, “quite the opposite, it is this ‘F’ that marks us.”² But if our sex is neither female nor male, which language should we use to express ourselves outside the language matrix which is conditioned by the sexual binary? And if our gender is neither female nor male, how can we use personal pronouns, verb conjugations in a mode that would not be defined by gender in the framework of two existing options?

As it has been noted by Monique Wittig, the right to use language in this way does not represent freedom of choice but an obligation to register oneself within the binary heteronormative system. It is about political categories in the heteronormative society that has, as claimed by Wittig, its own inquisitors, a number of laws, courts, terror and forms of mutilations of body parts so that they can control our existence. Nobody is allowed to be a subject without a gender and while the male gender still means a universal position appropriated by males, we, meaning all others, are limited to a particularity from birth. New names are inscribed in the already existing system and bind themselves to its basic principles, although it is nowadays more than evident that these categories are discordant. Shifting from the binary gender matrix, we can see how also language forcefully gives us a form and operates in reality. If language can maintain the body, then it can also threaten its existence.

It is oppression that creates gender and not the other way around, This means that it is gender that creates the oppression and thus represents the cause and origin of one of the most basic types of oppression in the very notion of gender. Namely, it lies in the assumed “natural” division between male and female that has existed long before society. This is why categories of sex should be disqualified in politics and philosophy, as well as gender in language. Or at least, as argued by Monique Wittig, we should modify their use.

Monique Wittig tried with her works (*L’Opoponax* (1964), *Les Guérillères* (1969) and *Le Corps Lesbien* (1973)) to transform the language of “minorities” (women, lesbians). As she argued, with the transformation of gender defined persons in language nothing remains untouched. The words in their order and mutual relationships shift and activate the entire language constellation, which starts to fold and redirect in numerous directions. A structural change in language enables them to acquire a different aspect. Their tone and color have changed.

We are constituted and interpellated as subjects in language through a selective process that regulates intelligible and unintelligible subjectivities, as it has been argued by Judith Butler. Language thus conditions social relations, simultaneously representing a restriction and an option. According to Butler, when Frantz Fanon claimed that “The black is not a man,” he introduced a critique of humanism that showed that the human in its contemporary articulation is fully racialized (founded on racial differentiation) and that no black man could therefore qualify as human. Fanon also formulated a critique of masculinity, implying that the black man is effeminized and at the same time, as Butler writes, he showed that masculinity is a racial privilege related to the notion of human. In this way, discrimination is not only articulated in gender terms, as has been written by Barbara Smith, but also in racial terms. Women of color are exposed to sexism and racism and experience racism as women of color. In this sense, the racial scope has been called into question, in which, through the intensive exclusion of all “minority” groups, the category of human is articulated. Therefore, the rearticulation of the human category starts right at the point when the excluded starts to talk to this category and from this category. Butler asks: “If Fanon writes that ‘the black is not a man,’ who writes then when Fanon writes?” She continues that when we can ask “who” means that the human has exceeded its categorical definition, and that he is in and through the utterance opening up a path toward a different future.³

If there are norms of recognition by which the “human” is constituted, then these norms are codes by power operations. Therefore, it follows that the struggle for the future of humanity works in and through such norms. Those of us who are illegible, unrecognizable or “inexistent” nevertheless speak in terms of the “human,” opening a new space that is not yet fully constrained by the existing power relations. Linguistic resignification therefore allows opening up new contexts and forms of speech that have not yet been legitimized. It becomes a struggle for new and future forms of legitimization to ensure equal space for everyone. But if we do not work simultaneously in the fields of philosophy, politics and economics, as Wittig argued, it would be impossible to change language, because just as we are marked in it by gender, we are marked by sex in society. If our existence is conditioned by language, can we imagine subjects on the margins of such a linguistic legitimacy?

In her book *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe*), Simone de Beauvoir claimed already in 1949 that “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.” In this way, de Beauvoir indicated the social construction of sexual difference,

² Cf. Teresa de Lauretis, “Diferencias. Etapas de un camino a través del Feminismo,” *Cuadernos inacabados*, no. 35 (Madrid: Horas y horas, 2000).

³ Cf. Judith Butler, *Deshacer el género* (Barcelona: Editorial Paidós, 2006).

the product of which is a woman. Monique Wittig has written that we should ask ourselves about the meaning of the term feminism, which itself contains the word “femina” (woman) and means somebody who fights for the rights of women. She warned that a careful distinction had to be made between “woman” as a myth and “women” as a class. “Because ‘woman’ does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while ‘women’ are the product of a social relationship.”⁴ As part of her radical emancipation strategy, Wittig’s statement that “Lesbians are not women” opened up new possibilities for political action. She claimed that only the abolition of all existing categories can bring about real change. Therefore, it is not a question of replacing the category “woman” with the category “lesbian,” but rather to use it as a strategic position to abolish the heterosexual regime. The lesbian as defined by Wittig falls beyond the categories of gender (male-female), because s/he is neither economically, neither politically nor ideologically a woman. “Not only are we not women,” says Marie Hélène Bourcier, “we also do not need to become one.”⁵

In a radio program “Lezbomanija” (September 2011) which is hosted by Nataša Sukič on Radio Študent, Ljubljana, Marina Gržinić stated “Before being feminists, we were lesbians.” With such a statement Gržinić proposed a redefinition of the very point of struggle for the abolition of discrimination in Slovenia. Gržinić pointed as well toward a redefinition of the political subject and its history, which has become a strategic weapon in the concrete social space.⁶ In this way she indicated on the necessity for the persistent rearticulation of the political subject of the feminist movement, which in the 1980s in Slovenia expressed itself first as a political lesbian stance. Lesbians that took the position through language and performativity and articulated it in connection with the gay and punk scene, as well as in connection with transsexual and theoretical political positions, thus have taken the stand for the political emancipation of history, politics and gender already in times of socialism. For several decades the most important radical critique concerning capitalist Slovenia and the EU has been and still is authored by the radical section ŠKUC-LL (in the form of texts, books, performances, etc. by Tatjana Greif, Nataša Sukič, Suzana Tratnik, Nataša Velikonja, Urška Sterle, Kristina Hočevar, Petra Hrovatin and others).

Within this relations, the disidentification with the category of “woman,” and later on as well the deconstructive analysis of masculinity and male gender (“One is not born man but rather becomes one,” or “Gay are not men”), along with political struggles articulated by lesbians, gays, transgender, intersex, transsexuals, black women and women of color, black queer and queer of color, brought about the decentralization and deconstruction of “the woman” as the subject of the historical feminist struggle, and the formation of identities that are not fixed but change through the constant process of becoming.

The reconfiguration of feminism through confrontation with the postcolonial and decolonial thinking, lesbian feminism as well as with queer theory and activism—which is nowadays exposed to the accelerated process of mercantilisation and recodification by dominant discourses and is, therefore, losing its political potential—brings about a new political possibility – transfeminism. Transfeminism is seen in the sense of the plurality of feminisms and as a political philosophy of multiplicity that arises after the queer critique and as Preciado puts it, it spreads through fragile but still widespread networks, through strategic alliances and synthetic bonds, through the same channels within which global capital circulates.⁷

Nowadays we talk about the eccentric (Teresa de Lauretis), nomadic (Rosi Braidotti), fragmented subjects (Gayatri Spivak), hybrids, cyborgs (Dona Haraway), non-natural, non-ontological, postnational, postgender and political postidentities, in other words, about a multiplicity of feminist subject that shows the simultaneity and transversality of discrimination and oppression, as well as the complex power relations that efface the existence of any “privileged” point of struggle. Taking a look back at *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa,⁸ we can say that mestizos, mulattoes, the perverse, problematic, inert and – in addition to all this, following the traces of Virginie Despentes – prostitutes, raped, biomale dissidents, lesbians, gays, transsexuals, transgender, intersex—or in a word, everyone who crosses the borders of the “normal”—are nowadays residing here. Transfeminism occupies the border space, which becomes the position of those for whom the binary categories man/woman are too tight and at the same time stresses the fact that our common basis of oppression remains capitalism, coloniality and heteropatriarchy. The

⁴ Cf. Monique Wittig, *El pensamiento heterosexual y otros ensayos* (Barcelona: Egales, Barcelona, 1992).

⁵ Cf. Antonella Corsani, *Beyond the Myth of Woman: The Becoming-Transfeminist of (Post)Marxism, A Review of Theory & Literary Criticism*, Vol. 36, no. 1, 2007.

⁶ Cf. Marina Gržinić, “Biopolitics, necropolitics and de-coloniality,” *Pavilion*, 14 (Bucarest: Artphoto Asc., 2010).

⁷ Cf. Beatriz Preciado, *Manifiesto contra-sexual. Prácticas subversivas de identidad sexual* (Madrid: Opera Prima, 2002). Cf. Beatriz Preciado, *Multitudes Queer. Notas para una política de los ‘anormales’*, *Multitudes*, no.12, Paris, 2003. Cf. Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Yonqui* (Madrid: Espasa, Madrid, 2008).

⁸ Cf. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).

biological principle and ontological difference are called into question through positions that deconstruct the concept of “woman” and “man” in favor of the political thought of differential differences, undisciplined sexual, ethnic and racial multiplicity, which according to Antonella Corsani go beyond the binary system as the epistemological and political core and cause new shifts of categories, discourses, political forms and borders.⁹

As Judith Butler says: “They call us by our name but we are simultaneously and to the same extent dependent on the names by which we have never been called. And if we would want to merge all names by which we had been called, would not that multiplicity present a dilemma for our identity?”¹⁰ Therefore, political postidentities are not politics of closing or group identity, but rather ones formulated from a critical position with respect to the processes of normalization and discipline, as well as to the control of identity formation establishing compromise with the constant process of becoming. If differences are the product of oppression, or rather if oppression is something that creates differences, then disidentification or detachment from the identities that we have been assigned by techno-semiotic systems of control and the proliferation of postidentity positions is nowadays a political strategy that, through the merging of singularities, whose result is “we” and the politicization of life, allows us to open new and common worlds. This is possible not only from the theoretical-political aspect enabled by the feminist deconstruction of the subject “woman” but also by virtue of the need to understand each individual as a multiplicity.

Here and now in the context of the deepening of the financial and political crisis, it is urgent to connect transversally, on the line of impossible alliances (for the ruling class impossible), “all Marxist classes” in the further, possible and common struggle against global capitalism, coloniality and heteropatriarchy. At the same time, the first thing to do in Slovenia, in the case of the referendum call related to the new Family Code (proposed by the Civil initiative homophobic “majority” in order to serve the Church and capital which persist on biological sex and control of the private property of heterosexual family), is to circle YES! to the not yet modified proposal of the new Family Code and make a next step towards the emancipation of the Slovenian social and political space.

The Family Code was rejected in the referendum held on 25 March 2012.

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