Feminist Corporal Punishment: The Beating of Bodies Out Of Existence

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Abstract
This paper aims to serve as a broad review of feminism’s prior and contemporary attempts to engage with anti-queer positions based in natural-corporeal discourse, and to identify useful feminist responses to these oppositions to homosexuality. This general survey of feminist theory purporting to confront the body contends that current feminist theory is incapable of responding to an opposition to homosexuality based in natural-corporeal discourse.

Well the plumbing does not fit so quit.¹ - Raga
Straights are natural lovers, we don’t need gadgets! Sicko’s² - awsmtchr 2

As most recently evinced by the success of Proposition 8, an initiative to restrict the civil definition of marriage to heterosexual couples in the American state of California, heterosexist discrimination remains a justifiable personal and political decision with tremendous consequences for people of queer orientation. Scouring internet “blogs,” readers’ responses and message boards reveals that one justification of proponents of anti-queer legislation is that homosexuality³ is simply “unnatural,” and that the design of the human body is the most profound evidence for this. These views are culturally ubiquitous, and feminists must contend with them in order to unseat the most insidious reproduction of heterosexism that underlies heterosexist claims to withhold legitimacy, civil rights, and impinge on the existential liberalities of people who perform homosexual sex. The collective discomfort, however, clearly does not merely lie with the “sicko’s” [sic] who perform queer acts; homosexuality is in itself perceived as unnatural and (therefore) perverse, a violative appearance on a social sphere containing (political) institutions that strive to institutionalize that which they describe as natural.⁴ Institutions presume that they reaffirm and

¹ User ‘Raga,’ “Ellen Degeneres Donates 100k to Fight California’s Proposition 8.” <http://omg.yahoo.com/news/ellen-degeneres-donates-100k-to-fight-californias-proposition-8/14329#comments>
² User Awsmtchr2.’ “Ellen Degeneres Donates 100k to Fight California’s Proposition 8.” <http://omg.yahoo.com/news/ellen-degeneres-donates-100k-to-fight-californias-proposition-8/14329#comments>
³ And, presumably, the homosexual behaviours and desires of bisexuality. Queer is used to be as inclusive as positive, but “homosexuality” may also be referred to draw attention to the starkness of same-sex sexualities, or same-sex bodies performative.
⁴ In writing to displace a “hierarchical normative organization” of the world through Spinozistic lens, Gatens describes 19th century philosopher as “belonging to a tradition of anti-juridical thought...[which] posits a dual ontology consisting of two distinct planes: first, a plane of immanence (nature itself); second, a transcendent plane that organizes the first plane. The (classically Hobbesian) ‘juridical’ view thus assumes the separation of
implement the natural order. But, this presumption is full of contradictions and presents opportunities to cry out in the name of social constructionism. The importance of taking this presumption and, even more generally, anti-queer positions based in natural-corporeal discourse seriously is that this argument is difficult to displace. For if male and female bodies – specifically, their genitals- are biologically designed as opposite and complementary uncontested sites, they are well-suited for revealing “nature’s” intent. That is, sexual difference is employed as a tool of legitimating discriminatory attitudes and policies aimed at reinforcing heterosexuality as enjoying “natural,” preferable, and exclusive cultural hegemony over queerness, which is instead represented as an unfavourable deviation from nature’s course. Nature “comes complete” with all of the possible options available for kinship and social organization; there is no adding to nature – only, perhaps, detracting, when its limitations threaten to encumber human progression in the course of their teleological advancement towards omniscience. There is perhaps no greater way to legitimize a phenomena than to describe its accordance with nature. It is on this basis that feminist research must be seriously grapple with understandings of nature and the body.

This paper aims to serve as a broad review of feminism’s prior and contemporary attempts to engage with this issue, and to identify useful feminist responses to an opposition to homosexuality based in natural corporeal discourse. An exploration into feminist theory dealing with sex and/or corporeality with the intent of rebutting this objection to variations on normative heterosexuality requires first a defining of the problem for which a solution is required. Next, it requires a set of criteria for determining when a useful solution has been discovered or, in the case of its absence, determining what that criteria would it look like. “Useful” is defined as relevant, non-evasive, and “portable” – that is, a rebuttal’s capacity to be carried beyond academia and the realm of theory into political practice that agitates for an end to discrimination against queer persons. After defining the problem that wait for feminist response, and establishing a criteria for identifying when that problem has been located, a review of streams of feminist thought relating to the question can be scrutinized for their relevance and portability. Can feminism answer an opposition to queerness based in natural corporeal discourse on its own terms? What are the prospects for finding or applying feminist solutions to these problems, and what ground must we forfeit, theoretically, in order to speak intelligibly and convincingly to this issue? This general survey of feminist theory purporting to confront the body contends that current feminist theory is incapable of responding to an opposition to homosexuality based in natural-corporeal discourse.

nature and the norms which impinge on it to produce 'culture' or 'civilization.' Political organization is conceived as a transcendent power which institutes, and regulates, properly human nature.” Moira Gatens, “Feminism as ‘Password’: Re-thinking the ‘Possible’ with Spinoza and Deleuze,” Hypatia | 5, 2 (Spring 2000): 60.
"If the plumbing doesn't fit": Deconstructing "Reproductions" of Nature in Oppositions to Homosexuality Based in Natural Corporeal Discourse

In its crudest form, the stance that this paper seeks to explore can be articulated in this way: "A man is made for a woman, and a woman for a man. There are two sexes that are opposites; in form, complementary; and importantly, they can produce life. Heterosexuality is thus natural." The most important observation to take away from this phrasing of the problem is that nature, in terms of its opposition to homosexuality, is based on two observations: sexual mechanics and function. Mechanics refers to the apparent complementariness of the penis and vagina, whereas sexual function refers to the fact that heterosexual sex has the potential to produce life, which homosexual sex lacks. Both aspects, mechanical and functional, are important; however, the functional objection is more likely to have the fortitude to stand alone.

The underlying logic of the mechanical argument is very transparent: the design of the penis allows it to fit into the vagina. Their pre-ordained forms signify that male and female genitals are not the same, moreover, they are opposites; therefore they are complementary. The logic is self (heterosexually) referencing; it ignores the fact that a multiplicity of objects and extremities can "fit" into the genitals, including the types of combinations practiced in queer sex, and ignores the forcible tearing of intact hymens by penetration. This logic creates an artificial link between opposition and complementariness in order to give the appearance of coherence and reason: because the penis and the vagina are not the same, they must be opposites. By shrewdly rooting its argument in a dualist framework, the mechanics of male and female genitals appear to insinuate they are complementary. Acceptance of the premise that difference does not possess an inherent logic of relativity and, moreover, of the claim that male/female sexual difference signifies complementariness informed only by itself, necessarily displaces the rationality of the mechanical objection to homosexuality based in natural corporeal discourse.

The argument concerning the function of sex is even more problematic and encompasses a range of questions that the scope of this paper can only begin to contend with. This argument works to designate homosexuality as carnal indulgence and even perversity on the basis that homosexual sex is incapable of producing life. Heterosexuality is evidently (observed via the biological processes of reproduction) superior to homosexuality, because of its mere potential, whether actualized or not, to bring forth new human beings. First, the assertion that the reproduction of the species is the primary function of human sexuality is a judgment claim and must be recognized as such. It includes as a premise that the continuation of the human species is in jeopardy to homosexuality, which is shown to be an absurd misrepresentation of the contemporary or likely future statistical prevalence of homosexuality that in no way indicates a discontinuation of species. Furthermore,
this argument bears uncomfortable similarities to the twentieth-century eugenics claims that less powerful social groups, such as poor people or "morons" were threatening a "race." Third, the temptation cannot be resisted to show that the functional aspect, too, is bogged down self-referential, inherently discriminatory logic that emphasizes the reproductive capacity of heterosexual pairings. If the central issue was truly that all sexual activity is intended solely for reproduction, all (heterosexual) sexual acts would have to be directed towards the creation of life, non-reproduction-orientated sex would fall into the category of perversion (as it is in some religious doctrines), and the argument would be launched from a position of general and accurate statements about the actual difference between the social roles of heterosexuals and homosexuals. Nonetheless, the refusal to sanction the existence of homosexuality must be taken seriously and analysed to uncover its mechanisms and the basis for its persistence.

The argument concerning the function of sex also posits that male and female reproductive systems require each other for their own completion, perfection, or actualization, itself underscored by a valuation of reproduction as the ultimate and only purpose of sexuality (even as it contains the contradiction previously outlined). However, if the idea of function is the cultural expression of a biological imperative to ensure the continuation of the human species, why do homosexuals not share this concern for human survival? Are social explanations, such as the Judaeo-Christian command to "be fruitful and multiply" of Genesis 9:1, responsible for establishing a hegemonic grasp on psycho-social sanctioning of legitimate uses of sex and sexuality?

There are a number of possible rebuttals to this argument. One may wish to argue that there are more than two sexes or that sex should not restrain non-traditional forms of sexuality or kinship. One may deny, as I have suggested, that the sexes are opposites and/or deny that opposites signify complementariness. Finally, it may be put forward that homosexuality is as "natural" as heterosexuality, the strongest example of which may be, as Bruce Bahemihl has done, to demonstrate instances of homosexuality in animals.7

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6 This essay does not presume to encompass the myriad of ways in which corporeality is used to legitimize objects to homosexuality. For instance, one internet user replied to a news report about Proposition 8 arguing that "If someone doesn't know the difference between two consenting adults performing the sexual act that creates life and two consenting adults performing an act (homosexual anal sex) that is both unhealthy and cannot produce life — are they even smart enough to vote?"

Overcoming Phobias: Criteria for Identifying a Feminist Solution

The deconstruction of the question or problem presented reveals criteria for testing a feminist response for relevance and portability. A formidable response to this issue must, at least, engage with and not evade corporeality, must address the question of sexual function, must be general (rather than individualized) in scope, and prove itself practical for political use.

In “Unintended Consequences of the Feminist Sex/Gender Distinction,” Asia Friedman supports the conviction that an articulation of a set of criteria is necessary to test potential feminist responses. Historically, biology has been used to “explain” women’s inferiority, and to “demonstrate” that women’s subordinate place in society is dictated by nature and therefore inevitable. In challenging their oppression, many feminists have avoided acknowledging or analyzing the body in order to avoid drawing attention to sexual difference as difference has traditionally meant inferiority.8 Thus, Friedman employs the term “mechanical anti-essentialism” to critique feminist theory’s “track record” thus far pertaining to issues of corporeality. Anne Fausto-Sterling, whose own work Sexing the Body is one of the best of the limited body of works daring to address the body and sexuality, apologizes for feminists’ reluctance to deal head-on with biological realities. Assessing the central inquiry of Judith Butler’s discussion of the body as “why has the idea of materiality come to signify the irreducible?” Fausto-Sterling prompts perhaps the more fundamental question, “What do we fear at the level of irreducibility?” Anti-essentialist feminist fear of confronting the biological was only half-expressed when they balked at the reduction of women’s characters to stereotyped traits that explained women’s natures and why they were subjugated; underlining this repulsion of essentialism was a fear of difference. This was not paranoia but experience, for as Thomas Lacquer describes in Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, Galen and Aristotle conceived that women’s “inward male genitalia” were caused by their lack of vital heat, which surely meant that women are imperfect men lacking metaphysical perfection.9 In sum, for these two influential male figures, to be different was to be inferior. It is thus not incomprehensible that feminists would want to avoid difference to further their political and social projects.

The “biophobia” implicit and explicit in feminist theoretical accounts of women’s historical devaluation has allied with the post-modern movement and appropriated its methods for avoiding bodily aspects of sexual difference. Evident in

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Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* and employed by (but by no means only by) Lacquer, a tactic of the post-modern project is to trace the evolution of an idea or force, such as sexuality, historically, endowing it with Foucaultian-sense genealogy. Giving phenomena "without history" a genealogy is, or enables, a fundamental reappraisal of their truth, which is emboldened and constituted by claims to historical omnipresence, immutability, and therefore naturalness. While it useful—even necessary—to bring phenomena into the realm of history, or to even offer them up for scrutiny and contestation, a feminist response to the question of sexual difference can not presume a resolute ending in this beginning. Sex is a "moving target" that when shown to be social, malleable or non-dualist "is evacuated from sex itself" always presenting itself as possessing an essence beyond the social and renders social constructionist accounts enervated.\(^{11}\) Furthermore, as Bernice Hausmann rightly warns, "the differences between vagina and penis are not merely ideological...these physiological signifiers have functions in the real."\(^{12}\) Feminists must engage with the corporeal in order to produce an effective response to objections to homosexuality based in natural corporeal discourse.

Another tactic that feminists have appropriated, misconstrued, and misapplied as a self-sufficient solution to the question of corporeality, is to disrupt the idea of sexual binaries using exceptionality as a point of departure. This argument suggests the infertile heterosexual sexually-active woman as a fissure in an ideology that entitles heterosexuality exclusive legitimacy by promoting the reproductive capacities of heterosexual sex. An even more radical (and thus authoritative) argument asserts that intersexuality reveals the construction of sexuality, and may propose the conceptualization of sex as a biological continuum. While this argument will be addressed specifically in the next section of the paper, the main idea to be addressed in discussing criteria for a feminist response is that argumentation based on exceptionality is crucial yet insufficient; not only does it not necessarily address function but—more importantly—it fails to address the fact that opposition to homosexuality is phrased in the general terms of natural laws and imperatives, including that of the propagation of a species. Feminist responses must respond *in* (as opposed to merely *to*) the terms in which the argument presents itself. As dictated by the scientific regimen of studying aggregate patterns and formulating generalizations,\(^{13}\) appeals to individual cases and/or "exceptions" will not dislodge the authoritative breadth and scope of generality—especially those which can be argued to be "malfunctions." Thus, in working towards useful criteria for a feminist response, it is imperative that such response engage with corporeality, address the question of function, be general in scope, and prove itself practical for political use.

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\(^{11}\) Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 40.


\(^{13}\) Friedman, "Unintended Consequences of the Feminist Sex/Gender Distinction," 50.
Friedman identifies four contemporary strains or strategies in feminist discourse that engage with sex. The first strand says that sex is gender. The second says that there are exceptions to the male/female duality; ‘sex’ distorts a continuum into a binary system. The third argument is based on transsexuals’ experiences with their gender as fixed and their sex as malleable, which shows sex can be experienced as malleable. Finally, the fourth contention is that gender norms influence the science on sex differences. The difference between the first and fourth strands of contestation is that whilst the first explanation asserts that the sex/gender distinction is false because what we know to be “sex” is merely another manifestation of gender, the fourth posits that there is a sexual distinction between females and males, but that we cannot identify it because of “gender-warp,” a gendered prejudice that scientists can not escape when approaching data.

In order to test the appropriateness of feminist theoretical works to the task set forth by heterosexist thinkers, three feminist works were selected that discuss the four strategies outlined previously: Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Anne Fausto-Sterling’s Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality, and Thomas Lacquer’s Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, respectively. Lacquer’s mapping of the production of sex, as well as Friedman’s contributions, contain the essences of the transgender contention. After evaluating each of the four strategies for the strength of its engagement with corporeality, its success in dealing with the function, its generality and portability, current feminist theory appears incapable of responding to opposition to homosexuality based in natural-corporeal discourse.

Butler describes “gender” as the self-concealing cultural mechanism which not only produces sex but gives it the appearance of being “prediscursive” or natural, thus troubling the stable (natural) category of sex. By positioning gender, not sex, at the crux of resistance, Butler fails to engage with corporeality in a means fully relevant to and compatible with the “fleshiness” of the fully-corporeal argument. I test it as a strategy to oppose. Fausto-Sterling engages much more directly with the body when she critiques masculinity and femininity as “cultural conceits” considering the fact of multiple sexual arrangements (as inter-sex bodies

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14 Friedman, “Unintended Consequences of the Feminist Sex/Gender Distinction,” 44.
16 Friedman also takes the position that while “Butler’s attempts to theorize the social construction of sex are commendable for their complexity and attention to social norms and the psychological mechanisms by which they operate...unfortunately, as she herself confesses (Butler 2004, 198; see also Butler 1993, ix), her analysis rarely actually takes the physical body as its explicit focus, generally slipping past the physical into other realms. The way she accounts for sex as “gender all along” accordingly ends up feeling more like a description of mind than body.” Friedman, 47.
demonstrate\textsuperscript{17}. The elimination of these bodies by scientific method and by mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century technology collectively referred to by Fausto-Sterling as “tools of obliteration,” facilitated the false construction of two opposite and exclusive sexes.\textsuperscript{18} The downfall of this approach is its dependence on dismissible exceptionality. Albeit radical to function from a futuristic vision of society in which modernity has already been deconstructed, deconstruction is a project unfinished and far from hegemonic. If the rights of queer people are to be defended, responses must be historically and culturally relevant as “the burden of proof” lay not with the prosecutors of homosexuality, but with the defence. Thus, the definition of queer bodies as exceptions—as pathological, abnormal, and in need of correction—attenuates this valuable position. Finally, Lacquer’s thesis that “however sex is understood already has a claim in it about gender” \textsuperscript{19} foreshadows the fated application of post-structuralism. The tactic is inadequate on two accounts: first, the Western delusional obsession with a teleological view of history, which imagines “Man” on a linear path from ignorance to civilization and enlightenment, retorts that prior, more malleable imaginings of sexed bodies which allowed for, for instance, pictures of young Jesus with breasts, are representative of a state of ignorance and reinforce the modern state of heightened knowledge. Historical accounts are not hard science, it retorts, and in fact, their historicity constitutes their ineptitude.

All of these strategies contain invaluable insights into the understanding of sex; however, the limited scope of this paper does not permit me to address the successes which each of these strains of feminist theory have had in confronting natural-corporeal based opposition to homosexuality. Rather, drawing attention to their limitations reiterates the need for a feminist response that fulfills all, and just most or many, of the criteria for a useful feminist rebuttal.

Looking Forward, Out, and Even Above: Building on Current Feminist History

Looking Forward

An important element of building and recognizing a useful feminist theory capable of confronting heterosexist readings of the body must pay attention to its “portability.” Can the theory be taken beyond academia? Is it responsive, in addition to reconstructive? Internet message boards and other interactive public forums provide opportunities for feminist theoreticians to test responses in a popular setting.

\textsuperscript{17} Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body, 31.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 37 and 39.
\textsuperscript{19} Lacquer, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud, 11. See also 12.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 7.
Looking Out and Above

Recognizing functionality as the most challenging aspect of the anti-homosexuality argument, I believe, challenges feminist theory to incorporate into their responses themes far beyond the scope of homosexuality, the body, or science. The persistence and belligerence of the self-referential logic of the function argument hints that it must be taken very seriously. If the rationality of the function argument is in its irrationality, then perhaps a re-evaluation of “homophobia” with its original emphasis on “fear” may be legitimate. As was alluded to during the discussion of the need for a “general” theory, homophobia or heterosexism as grand, social ideologies do not represent hatred or fear of the individual or even the act but represent a buried and unutterable lashing out against an opposing ideology or vision of human behaviour and purpose. Homosexuality may very well represent the disavowal of law, a welcome challenge to a nexus of order, restraint, and “purpose” (procreation). The repulsion inspired by queerness may reveal it as a metaphor crafted by hegemonic culture meaning “pleasure without purpose,” or acceptance of complete responsibility for our existence ungoverned by higher laws. “Looking above” refers to the desirability of the application of a feminist analysis on the reproductive imperative of Judaeo-Christian hegemony and its implications for sex and homosexuality in the specific context of this argument.
Works Cited


