



The politics of becoming bodies: Sex, gender and intersubjectivity in motion



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents readers with one (research) story about (sexed and gendered) bodies not as objects with inherent boundaries and properties but as material-discursive phenomena. In telling such a story I examine the role that the screendance, *Becoming Bodies*, has played in knowledge production and argue for a less ontologically 'old fashioned' view of what counts as 'evidence'. Throughout the paper I draw from a range of feminisms: biological, phenomenological, poststructural, psychoanalytical, and post humanist and performative scholarship of sex and gender. These discourses contest nature/nurture, male/female, body/mind dualisms, and take the political and ethical view that bodies are not neutral; that sex and gender, being a woman or a man are both socially *and* biologically constructed forms of identity (similar to class and race) that are acquired and learned through socio-cultural regimes of discipline and intersubjective bodily practices. Building on this dynamic and developmental bio-psycho-social view I discuss selected aspects of interview data: (1) the material-discursive tensions and contradictions of sexing and gendering bodies and (2) troubling the intersubjective implications of this for clinical practices.

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As a hybrid practitioner-researcher,¹ my work explores the relationship between dance, science, philosophy and psychotherapy, through practice-based research, dance, and film works that focus on the aesthetics and politics of human bodies in interaction (Allegranti, 2009, 2011, 2012). I pay specific attention to the relationship between sex, gender, power, and human health, and view health as a prolonged capacity to cope physically, emotionally, mentally and socially with our environment (Borgeault, 2003). I locate my praxis within a feminist tradition of actively contesting the grand binary narratives of nature/culture, male/female, and body/mind (Butler, 2004; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Grosz, 2004), including a more recent turn to the biological as a dynamic developmental system (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Oyama, 2000). Feminism problematizes the various intersecting ways that the body is a social marker of identities: sex, gender, race, class, age, religion, sexuality, and ability, and how these markers impact the therapeutic relationship (Allegranti, 2011, 2012; Brown and Ballou, 2001). Although

I acknowledge and actively work with these intersecting aspects, this paper focuses specifically on the relationship (in)between sex and gender in order to highlight some areas of biomedical and psychological (mis)understanding.

Building on this feminist commitment and previous research (Allegranti, 2011), I set out to explore how we construct ourselves as women and men, not just through discursive (language and cultural meaning making practices) but by "incorporating experience into our very flesh" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 20). The resulting artistic and practice-based research project, *Becoming Bodies*, explores how bodies *become* sexed and gendered through a mutually influencing process of biological and social construction that evolves over time. One of the project outcomes was a screendance² that served as a first step in capturing and probing an interdisciplinary dialogue between evolutionary biology and the politics of bodies in motion. Moreover, this research intention was borne out of my dissatisfaction with mistaken biologically-deterministic popular scientific views of sex and gender that consider biology as destiny, my concern being with the pernicious implications of these hegemonic discourses for the way we 'do' our lives in the developmental (bio-psycho-social) process of becoming human.

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¹ I realize that most, if not all, arts therapists are a combination and my own involves working professionally as a dancer, choreographer, filmmaker, dance movement psychotherapist, clinical supervisor, educator and researcher. I also use the term hybridity to refer to my deliberately interdisciplinary discursive engagement.

² I use the term screendance in order to align with current discourses that identify this emerging hybrid genre wherein the combination of dance and film create a third form (Rosenberg, 2012).

This paper presents readers with one (research) story about (sexed and gendered) bodies not as “objects with inherent boundaries and properties; [but as] material-discursive phenomena” (Barad, 2003, p. 823). In telling such a story I examine how the making of a screendance has contributed to knowledge production and argue for a less ontologically ‘old fashioned’ view of what counts as ‘evidence’. I then go on to discuss selected aspects of interview data highlighting bidirectional themes using a developmental systems lens (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Oyama, 2000): (1) the material-discursive tensions and contradictions of sexing and gendering bodies; and (2) troubling the intersubjective implications of this for clinical practices. The photographs³ throughout this paper serve as a reminder of the in/visibility of (sexed and gendered) moving bodies in the discursive process.

Where’s the body?

To transgress I must move past boundaries, I must push against to go forward. Nothing changes in the world if no one is willing to make this movement . . . to transgress we must return to the body (hooks, 1995, p. 133).



Image from *becoming bodies*

By investigating the politics of how we become bodies, I engage with the relation between material and discursive phenomena in an attempt to privilege neither bodies nor language in oppositional hierarchy (Barad, 2003). Specifically, I turn to feminist poststructural (Butler, 2004), phenomenological (Grosz, 2004), biological (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Oyama, 2000; Wilson, 2004), psychoanalytical (Benjamin, 1998), posthumanist (Barad, 2003, 2007), embodied

and performative understandings (Allegranti, 2011, 2012) of sex, gender and bodies. In so doing, I am afforded a political and ethical perspective of the inseparability of nature and culture and the crucial view that language and bodies are not neutral: We are not blank slates awaiting socio-cultural inscription. Sex and gender, being a woman or a man are both socially and biologically constructed forms of identity similar to class and race, that are acquired and learned through socio-cultural regimes of discipline and inter-subjective bodily practices. Bodily disciplines and routines, the established ways of moving, capture this unity and integration of society and biology. In a mutual articulation of matter and meaning, sex and gender, becoming a woman or man shapes our psychological and physical selves, impregnating our ethical and cultural values with potentially deleterious consequences for our health. *Becoming* can be described in Karen Barad’s terms as an “intra-active” process (2003). Barad created the neologism of intra-action to denote the mutually constitutive process of being within and as part of the world rather than the more familiar use of inter-action of separate entities. Therefore, in the process of becoming bodies biology and culture are dynamically intra-active, neither is a distinct agency that precedes and both are political processes. This then begs the question: What are our twenty first century understandings of the politics of matter?

The biological is political

... [O]ur debates about the body’s biology are always simultaneously moral, ethical and political debates about social and political equality and the possibility for change (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 255)

At this point in our technologically and politically turbulent century, two complimentary views of biology are still embedded in both expert and popular discourses. The first sees evolution on a micro level as a long sequence of genomes stretching into the distant past. Small changes in the genome produce adaptive change in the organism, which then gradually spreads to the population. On a macro level, evolution is the amassing of these small genetic changes over lengthy periods of time (Dupré, 2010; Oyama, 2000). The second view is that of genetic determinism or seeing genes as “wise little homunculi” (Oyama, 2000, p. 31). Together, these views lead to the conclusion that “understanding the evolutionary process that led to the particular genome of a particular organism, it will be possible to understand the essential nature of that organism” (Dupré, 2010, p. 540).

Necessarily, there has been renewed feminist investment in the relationship between biology and politics. Feminism has always vociferously confronted biologized theories of patriarchy and of human nature including the persistent “... superior belief in the power of biology to name and therefore own phenomena” (Rose & Rose, 2001, p. 7). Telling the ‘biology as destiny’ story as a ‘fact of life’ propounds a biological determinism where the view of the behaviour and relational capacities of women and men are understood in terms of biologically based differences. This reinforces a nature/nurture dichotomy which has “historically been associated with attempts to define some human Other as a lesser life and therefore to be stigmatized, excluded, or worse. . .” (Rose & Rose, 2001, p. 11). In fact, early feminism recognized how ‘woman’ has come to stand for ‘nature and ‘Other’, as object and never as subject (De Beauvoir, 1949/1988), rendering *her* body invisible.

Despite evidence of how the human body integrates perception, action and cognition (Fausto-Sterling, 2000), matter is still rendered immutable in the psychological and developmental hegemony (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Piaget, 1976). Bodies are split (into mind-body parts) and reduced to the level of

³ All photography is by Jackie King and Nick Du Plessis and was taken during the filming of *Becoming Bodies*. The film is also accompanied by a photographic exhibition. View trailer at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zv8auvMvb5c>.

gene or molecule where cortical circuitry is considered as the executive function. This is exemplified in discourses where we are either 'hard wired' to be 'empathic' or 'competitive' or for example, there is a 'gene for' depression, schizophrenia or cancer. Moreover, bodies are abstracted into a process of finding similar elements across diverse phenomena while ignoring differences. The implication of these body snatching perspectives where the body is rendered as 'it' as object (Scholnick & Miller, 2008) – as a kind of machine regulated by technoscientific practices – has serious implications not only for how we discursively conceptualize bodies but also for how we approach the relationship between sex, gender, human physiology and health in our praxis, especially when the machine doesn't work as it 'should'.

The dynamic politics of bodies

Arts therapists⁴ in particular, and healthcare practitioners and researchers in general, demand urgent attention to the relationship between body's biology and the ethics and politics of our embodiments or, as I prefer to say, "body politics". The term body politics emerged during the second wave of feminism as a way of addressing and reclaiming women's health issues within society (Boston Women's Health Collective, 1984; Orbach, 1981/2006) and locating the personal as political (Hanisch, 1970). I have specifically developed it to include attention to the corporeal markers of our social flesh and categorization of difference: gender, sex, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, dis/ability. This is not unlike systemic psychotherapist, John Burnham's (2012) mnemonic of "Social Graces".⁵ As a way of making sense of the differences (in)between these social markers, Burnham (2012) develops a practical exercise for therapists to explore their experiences of a "social grace" on the continuum from visible to invisible and voiced to unvoiced. I suggest that this same idea can be applied to an understanding of body politics that encompasses both the biological and the social within in a developmental systems perspective (Oyama, 2000). Such a perspective moves beyond nature/nurture dualisms and offers a dynamic understanding of evolution as a succession of life cycles in which we can consider our bodies changing over time within a network of developmental resources (e.g., genes, parents, environment).

For example, the (human) body simultaneously comprises in/visible aspects: brain, genes, cells, muscles, sex/organs, hormones (and more) and cultural inscription and experience. Feminist phenomenologist Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) invoke the image of the Möbius strip as a metaphor for the body: A surface with only one side and only one boundary component. I have adapted this to include a developmental focus (see Fig. 1) and as can be seen, the inside and outside of this strip are continuous and in/visible thereby highlighting how "... the social produces the biological in a system of constant feedback between body and social experience" (Fausto-Sterling, 2008, p. 657). The in/visible biological (genetic) markers are in constant motion by virtue of inevitable change and development over an individual's lifespan and, in my own clinical and artistic practice, I am acutely aware of how bodies are categorized by these



Fig. 1. Developmental Möbius strip.

socio-political markers – the visibility of these markers on the surface of the body, in our language and in our intersubjective engagements.

Such embodied intersubjectivity is lived with others in a diversity of ways contingent on the intersecting differences of our anatomies and body politics at different points in time. While it is widely understood that experience shapes embodiment, (Thelen, 2008), our movement (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011), and development (Schore, 2003; Trevarthen, 2009), what is less visible in these discourses are the non-neutral and autobiographical aspects of an individual's experience. In fact, feminists have critiqued the phenomenological stance of Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) for a disregard of sexed and gendered experience (Grosz, 2004; Weiss, 1999; Young, 1990). Our sexed and gendered experiences are adaptive and shape our flesh constructing our anatomy over time. This merging of biology and culture has implications for how we understand our (cognitive and physical) health, how we 'do' our lives and how we become changing bodies over time. As Scholnick and Miller (2008) point out, "there is no such thing as a view from a genderless, raceless, classless developing body" (p. 270).

Mattering research

How did language come to be more trustworthy than matter? Why are language and culture granted their own agency and historicity while matter is figured passively and immutable, or at best inherits a potential for change derivatively from language and culture. (Barad, 2003, p. 801)

Feminist thinking about research methodology highlights that a focus on *how* and *why* we justify our claims to knowledge has political and ethical implications. Part of my ongoing methodological intention as a feminist researcher is to engage with questions of reality (ontology) and knowledge production (epistemology) because I seek to remain accountable for the role I play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming (Barad, 2003). Also, engaging with the intertwining of nature and culture, mind and matter, necessitates exploring the philosophical status or ontology of being human since the task of feminist politics is to "raise new questions about

⁴ I refer to Arts Therapists as this term reflects my own geographical locale and specifically captures the European collective of separate therapies and professional bodies (art, dance, drama, music, play).

⁵ Burnham (2012) has developed to an encompassing mnemonic 'Social GGR-RAAACEEEESSS': Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, Spirituality'.

materiality, cosmology, the natural order” (Grosz, 2005, p. 129).

Rather than assuming an inherent metaphysical difference between being and knowing as well as between human and non-human, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse, I find Barad’s (2003) recommendation of “*Onto-epistemology*” useful as “the study of practices of knowing in being [as] a better way to think about the kind of understandings that are needed to come to terms with how specific intra-actions matter” (p. 829). This is an important premise for arts therapists to envision the experience and intra-actions between the moving body and language in both research and practice.

Re-visioning evidence

We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because “we” are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming (Barad, 2003, p.829).

We need a Copernican counter-revolution (Latour, 1993) to conceptualize what counts as evidence. A challenge to subject-object dualistic thinking raises onto-epistem-ological issues of *what* we know and *how* we know, which in turn, affects ways in which we can conceptualize, understand and transform notions of sex, gender, intersubjectivity, power and bodies. Therefore, the implications of seeing and doing ‘otherwise’ (Butler, 1990; Butler, 2004), in terms of evidence necessitates an ontological shift away from dualisms and towards a complex process of *being* and *encountering* that incorporates a material specificity (Allegranti, 2011). Bringing the intersubjective moving body into what we conceptualize as evidence calls into question the Cartesian belief in the inherent distinction between subject and object, body and mind, knower and known and allows for a material-discursive engagement with/in the research process.

Thinking through dance and film

My modus operandi is to “think in movement” (Sheets-Johnstone, 2009; Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). For me, thinking through emotional processes or even theoretical concepts necessitates felt-sense (Gendlin, 1996) and improvised movement responses. Often, this manifests in a choreographic and/or filmic “embodied performance” that incorporates autobiographical, relational and political layers (Allegranti, 2011). I use the term performance in two different ways: The first is in relation to the performance of identity and the social self, the second is the telling of a story as performance; this story can of course be a dance, a film, a psychotherapeutic conversation, or in written form (Allegranti, 2011). As a methodology, I have argued that an embodied performance lens allows for a process of re-visioning (Allegranti, 2011; de Lauretis, 1994; Haraway, 1997; Rich, 1980) practice and research in a way that is ontologically grounded in the material discursive body (Allegranti, 2009, 2011, 2012). Building on previous research, I continue to investigate the effect of movement as corporeal meaning-making process that, in Barad’s terms, intra-acts with language, especially in relation to our body politics. Moreover, telling stories about sex and gender (outside of the academy or the therapeutic relationship) though dance and film offers an accessible and worthwhile way to challenge dominant understandings of reality and imagine otherwise (Butler, 1990; Butler, 2004).

In collaboration with the hYbrid project⁶ and the Grieg Academy of Music,⁷ I developed *Becoming Bodies*, an artistic and practice-based research project that interrogated the intersections between dance movement psychotherapy, choreography and scientific knowledge. The research process for *Becoming Bodies* demonstrated a material-discursive engagement where I encompassed a recursive loop between felt-sense movement improvisation and language.

Phases of mattering research

Building on previous research that investigated the role of felt-sense movement improvisation and language in the (re)construction of sexual and gendered selves (Allegranti, 2007, 2009, 2011), the phases and onto-epistemological implications of this research are explicated as follows. I emphasize the relevance of not only focusing on how bodies are experienced (though language), but *actually* including moving bodies in the recursive production and analysis of data. In this way, as researcher I am not separate from the data, but I am in Barad’s terms, *becoming with* the data.

Interviews

I sought a relational engagement with the interviewees: an internationally recognised group of seven scientists and philosophers in the fields of evolutionary biology, soil science, and genomics. My rationale for interviewing both practitioners of science (evolutionary biologists and soil scientists) and philosophers of science (genomics in particular) was grounded in the desire for a balanced engagement between those who practiced the production of scientific knowledge on the one hand and those who studied the detailed dynamics of the practice of science with a view to move beyond representationalism⁸ on the other. In this way, I was mindful of maintaining an affirmative relation between science and philosophy (Barad, 2003), an important premise when it came to locating bodies at the heart of my inquiry. My intention in interviewing this group of professionals in person and on film was to reveal individuals who birth ideas and unveil the frameworks in which they operate: in this way the knower and known are interlinked.⁹ My line of inquiry for the interviews was the developmental process of the ontogeny¹⁰ of the sexed and gendered body: how we *become* bodies (from fertilized egg to adulthood) within a (phylogenetic¹¹) bio-psycho-social context.

Diffraction analysis

Building on previous research (Allegranti, 2007, 2011) I diffractively folded movement improvisation, felt sense, verbal responses

⁶ From 2009 to 2011, I collaborated with hYbrid: Conversations between Science and Art at the Institute for Molecular and Cell Biology (IBMC), University of Porto: <http://www.ibmc.up.pt/science-in-society/science-and-art/hybrid> and <http://www.ibmc.up.pt/hybrid/content.php?menu=6&submenu=66>.

⁷ Grieg Academy of Music, University of Bergen.

⁸ The philosophical view-point of representationalism is the belief that there are two separate and distinct entities: representations (knowledge) and the entities to be represented (the known). Theorized as a tripartite arrangement including the existence of a ‘knower’ (i.e. someone who does the representing). See Barad, 2003 for a fuller explanation.

⁹ Full consent was given by all interviewees to be represented visually and with audio.

¹⁰ Ontogeny: the origin and development of an organism (for example from fertilized egg to mature form). It covers the study of an organisms lifespan – i.e., it’s own life span.

¹¹ Phylogeny: the evolutionary ‘life span’ or history of a species. Evolutionary relatedness amongst a species. From Greek – ‘tribe’ or ‘race’.

and the audio data (i.e., interviews) through one another. As first proposed by Harraway (1997) and developed by Barad (2007), diffraction moves beyond reflexivity – a process that invites the illusion of mirroring or essential fixed positions – to a place of processing ongoing differences. This dancing of differences with/in the data took place first in the studio alone and then with a male dancer.¹² Together with a hYbrid collaborator,¹³ I then transcribed the data. Following my vertical thematic analysis, a further layer of embodied horizontal analysis took place in collaboration with the film's (feminist) composer¹⁴ in which we responded in movement and musically in order to produce a selection of discursive themes. The final aspect took place with seven¹⁵ dancers where I somatized the space into specific discursive themes arising from the transcribed data and invited dancers to experiment with their felt-sense and improvised movement and verbal responses. Consequently, I selected aspects of interview data to appear as narrative in the film's soundtrack. This methodological innovation of using interview data to work with choreographically and to produce the film is based on previous practice-based and artistic methodologies (Allegranti, 2007, 2009, 2011). The implications of this methodology for Arts Therapies research builds on the notion of a choreographic epistemology (Pakes, 2009) by suggesting a corporeal onto-epistem-ology (Allegranti, 2009, 2011; Barad, 2003) offering practice-based evidence through dance and filmmaking by addressing the diffractions (rather than engaging reflexively) between 1st person (subjective, phenomenological, embodied), 2nd person (relational, intersubjective) and 3rd person theoretical accounts.

Screenance

The (kin)aesthetic focus on creating choreography for camera included a development of six final scenes. *Becoming Bodies*¹⁶ culminated with a 37-min film including a combination of dance movement and excerpts of audio interview data interwoven with the musical score. Since there is “power in looking” (hooks, 1996), the screenance as a (kin)aesthetic intervention aims to provide counter hegemonic imagery of the meshing of biology and body politics. The next stage in the recursive loop involved discursive feedback on the screening of *Becoming Bodies* from the dancers and scientists involved in the project as well as an external expert arts-science group.¹⁷

Sex is confusing and gender is in motion

The next two sections focus on selected interview data vignettes. The selected vignettes below are amongst those that can be heard in the film's soundtrack. Each vignette is discussed diffractively, that is by reading a range of feminist (bio-psycho-social) discourses through one another in ways that may illuminate how differences of sex and gender emerge and get made, what gets excluded and how these exclusions matter (Barad, 2007). Within

¹² Dancer and dance movement psychotherapist, Geoffery Unkovich who also contributes to and appears in the final film.

¹³ Dr Sonia Martins, hYbrid coordinator, scientist and science communicator, IMCB Porto.

¹⁴ The film has a specially commissioned sound score by Jill Halstead (Grieg Academy of Music, University of Bergen, Norway) and this feminist choreographer-composer collaboration will be discussed elsewhere.

¹⁵ Five of the seven professional dancers were also registered and licensed dance movement psychotherapists in the UK.

¹⁶ International and UK screenings will commence from January 2013. For details: www.becomingbodies.blogspot.co.uk and www.embodiedpractice.co.uk/news.

¹⁷ Allegranti (2013) and Burgundy & Allegranti (submitted).

each of the following two sections bidirectional themes are highlighted: The material-discursive tensions of sexing and gendering bodies; and troubling the intersubjective implications of this for clinical practises. By way of acknowledging my own becoming with this conversation, I attempt to shift (in)between the non-gender neutral authorial ‘I’ and the wider socio-political context.

Darwin's weak point

I would say that gender is a pretty under-theorised component of evolution and maybe you could even say one of Darwin's weak points and I would say that we have a relatively shallow and a relatively confused understanding of what gender means. (Sarah Franklin, 2010, Interviewee, Scene 2: Work in Progress)

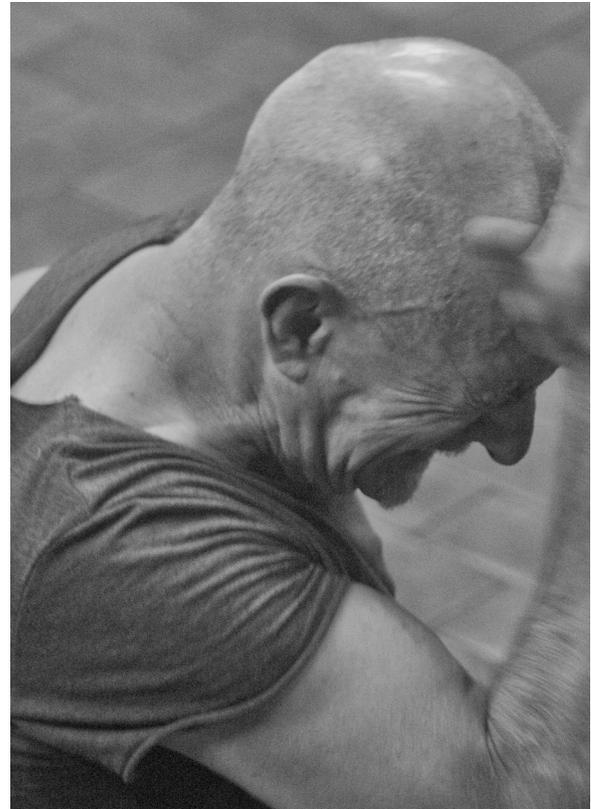


Image from *Becoming Bodies*, Scene 2: *Work in Progress*

The idea that the theory of evolution might elucidate human behaviour has persisted ever since Darwin's significant reformulation of biology and the theoretical development of evolution by natural selection (Darwin, 1831/1998). Identifying the powerful appeal of scientific Darwinian narratives many contemporary feminist biologists caution that evolutionary writing has an androcentric¹⁸ history (Fausto-Sterling, 2001; Rose & Rose, 2001) emerging from “Darwin's weak point”, in other words, his failure to consider women at all. Doubtless this was an appropriate response within 19th century religious and political ideology where sex and gender identity were considered biological givens. Despite this historical and thereby, partial understanding of gender, Darwin's Theory of Evolution represents a processual rather than goal-oriented view of change which offers a useful way of conceptualizing the relation between biology and culture outside of the

¹⁸ Androcentricism is the practice of placing the male point of view at the center of one's world view. Gynocentrism is placing the female point of view at the center.

current dichotomies within which they are emeshed (Grosz, 2004).

Nevertheless, the “shallow and confused understanding of what gender means” pervades twenty first century scientific, psychological, and popular discourses in what feminist sociolinguist, Deborah Cameron terms as “the rise of the new biologism” (Cameron, 2010, p. 527). This popular discursive shift revives the view that gender is mistakenly considered to be inscribed in our genes and to bring about any change in gender roles (including behaviour and verbal articulacy) is either difficult or apparently impossible (see Baron-Cohen, 2003; Dawkins, 1976; Pinker, 2002 for proponents of this position). This does not bode well for cultural shaping nor for understanding the contingencies of gendered behaviour, linguistics and relations within the gendered therapeutic relationship as a place of psychophysical change.

There is a moment in the film where a (male) dancer's repeated and frenzied stutterings and gestures show him to be on the verge of recognizing the dancing woman before him and yet render him (unchangingly) disarticulate. How can I reach a deeper understanding of “what gender means” in the therapeutic relationship if I do not recognize that becoming gendered is an intra-action (Barad, 2003); a co-implication of matter (biological and social) with vast varieties across cultures and species.

Arts therapists are well placed to understand that the human communication and (autobiographical) languaging process is not an individually fixed mental (biologically derived) capacity but, as socio-linguists have shown, is a collective social practice influenced by socio-demographic factors (Cameron, 2010). This position reminds us of the possibility of (re)framing gender both verbally and non-verbally for ourselves and for our clients, in our clinical improvisations (Allegranti, 2011).

Sex is a confusing. . .

Sex is a confusing term because it commonly refers to the idea of there being two types of people, it also commonly refers to sex for pleasure, sexual love... but is also used to describe reproduction and as an adjective it's used in all of those ways.

(Sarah Franklin, 2010, Interviewee, Scene 5: *Sex is Confusing*).

Beyond being a “term”, the solely discursive aspect that Franklin suggests, “sex” is a material ‘doing’ of selves in the world; it is a fully intra-corporeal process that involves overlapping and mutually shaping bio-psycho-social contexts of “sex for pleasure, sexual love. . .reproduction”. The in/visible construction of sexed bodies starts in utero and often pervades throughout a person's lifespan where the expectations are that an XX chromosomal combination causes a “feminine” phenotype¹⁹ and corresponding ‘feminine’ personality traits and an XY combination leads to a ‘masculine’ phenotype and personality traits that are traditionally considered to be masculine - the result being a troubling conflation of sex with gender. Moreover, bodies becoming sexed into “two types of people” suggests binary sex difference when in fact bodies that have XX or XY chromosomal make-up can have a variety of external genitalia and secondary sex characteristics as in the case of intersexed individuals (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 2010).

¹⁹ Phenotype: an organisms observable characteristics or traits (morphology; behaviour). Phenotypes result from the interaction between genes and the environment.



Image from *Becoming Bodies*, Scene 5: *Sex is Confusing*

Herein lies the difference conundrum that proved to be an ambiguous matter in the dance studio as, together with the dancers, I became confused about sex difference and began to be curious about the affordances and constraints of making distinctions between and conflating sex and gender within the therapeutic relationship. Second wave feminism of the mid 1970s called for sex-gender distinction: Sex signifies biological (reproductive) differences and the gender represents cultural differences. An important starting point however, hauling the body back and forth across the nature-nurture border (Oyama, 2000) does not increase our understanding of how we exist in everyday life, not as ‘naturally’ determined objects outside of culture or politics but as wonderfully complex processual beings that physically absorb culture. A further complexity is the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality since the possibilities for sexuality are not constrained by gender (Allegranti, 2011). In other words, one's gender does not presuppose a given sexual practice. Also, the notion of sex as describing “Reproduction” raises issues of reproductive variability among women: Not all women reproduce, some cannot and some are no longer able to (Butler, 1993).

In a therapeutic (and everyday) context, I am particularly interested in my own and others' iterative ‘doing’ of sex, sexuality and gender to the point that it becomes ‘natural’ (Butler, 2004). Rather than a pre-given designation at birth as is assumed in positivist accounts, gender is something that we accomplish in Butler's (2004) terms through a stylized repetition of acts. In order to excavate deeper relational layers in the therapeutic process that attend more fully to the material aspects of embodied ‘stylised repetition’, I continually remind myself that these psychosocial performances of sex, sexuality, and gender are deeply embodied in our physiology, and in the responses and actions of the body and its molecular mechanisms. Therefore, an unambiguous causality of the phenotypes of embodied sex as cultural or biological cannot be disentangled in many of these processes. Biology and culture are continually mutually influencing and co-implicated in an ongoing historicity.

Apes in skyscrapers

... the kind of summary of how crazy to my mind evolutionary psychology is to say basically... we haven't evolved at all, we're ... apes in skyscrapers and, this seems to me just self-evidently false, we live completely different lives, we have all kinds of capabilities, arts, science... that nobody had in the Stone Age ... (John Dupré, 2009, Interviewee, Scene 2: Work in Progress)



Image from *Becoming Bodies*, Scene 2: *Work in Progress*

The Anglo-American phenomenon of “*Evolutionary Psychology*” [EP] has leaked into our “cultural drinking water” (Rose & Rose, 2001, p. 3) and propounds a contemporary intellectual myth claiming that since the Pleistocene age there is little change in the structure of the human mind (Rose & Rose, 2001, p. 1). As Fausto-Sterling (2001) points out “Evolutionary psychologists ... obtain data about contemporary humans and try to reason backwards from what they find” (p. 180). This means that all aspects of human behaviour (and therefore culture and society) is explained by universal features of human nature that found their final evolutionary form in our early species development millions of years ago (Rose & Rose, 2001). Expounding this deterministic view of human behaviour where the central response to (gender) variability is to deny it suggests that our genes become our destiny (Dupré, 2001).

Notwithstanding the pernicious cultural implications of such a view,²⁰ that contemporary humans are “*apes in skyscrapers*” suggests that we are hard-wired, inflexible creatures and denies evidence of the plasticity of brains and behaviour. Moreover, 21st century understandings of biology and specifically genomics suggest that the relationship between sex and gender in human beings is highly flexible and adaptable:

It is precisely the plasticity of the ways in which genetic mechanisms can respond to environmental differences – the so-called norm of reaction – that this hard wired (EP) approach ignores ... both physical phenotypes and behavioural phenotypes are plastic ... Evolutionary explanations of human sex differences usually ignore an entire literature of norms of reaction and phenotypic plasticity. (Fausto-Sterling, 2001, p. 185)

This sophisticated understanding of biology suggests a focus on human “development as a cascade in interactions between biological nature and cultural context with psychological outcomes that cannot be predicted merely by reflection on imaginative recreations of Stone Age life” (Dupré, 2001, p. 1).

²⁰ There are all sorts mistaken and pernicious universalizing and legitimizing claims such as the loaded notions of men's ‘philandering’ and women's ‘coyness’ as biological adaptations and even rape an ‘adaptive’ strategy. These seep into our public consciousness and inform legal, medical and psychological frameworks.

I recall early studio improvisations where I and another (male) dancer became hominids in what I later described as a frantic running forward into the past. Later still, I understood the relevance of this reflection: Our bodily self-perception is formed on the basis of past information, which is always out of date with our current physical body (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). In therapy this becomes an ethical issue of engaging with and deconstructing anachronistic ideas of what sexed and gendered body images are/can be (in the present and autobiographically), both verbally and non verbally (for example, in movement, symbolically, metaphorically). This is particularly, but not exclusively, relevant in the case of eating disorders or acute psychosis where body image distortion and its relation to self-perceptions of sex, sexuality, and gender can be a central feature. In order to develop a progressive health paradigm in which arts therapists (especially those with sophisticated training and experience of moving bodies) can play a part, we need to echo the call in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities to move beyond fixed and ‘natural’ categories and articulate different kinds of stories about sex-gender systems (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 2010) lest we work anachronistically and with/in our intersubjective bodies.

Becoming intersubjective bodies

Building on a dynamic developmental view of embodiment that includes the bio-psycho-social (Oyama, 2000; Schildrick, 2005), the focus of my argument here is that the process of becoming embodied selves is an intersubjective process that unfolds intractively over time, through our moving bodies.

We Never Really Inhabit Ourselves, By Our Selves

...Western ideas of the body have been very bound up with notions of individuality and propriety so when we think of the body, we think of ‘my’ body, ‘me’, ‘my’ body, like when we think about embodiment we think of the ‘I’ of the embodiment. Which is a little bit of a fiction because we never really inhabit ourselves, by our selves ... everything we do with our bodies is learned ... a huge amount of our embodiment is imitation. ... And of course, there are other ways of imagining embodiment where the fact of one's own embodiment being very implicated in the others embodiment. ... (Sarah Franklin, 2010, Interviewee, Scene 4: Where's The Body?).



Image from *Becoming Bodies*, Scene 3: *Ancient When We're Born*

The notion of “*Never Really Inhabit[ing]Ourselves, By Our Selves*” can be captured in Benjamin's intersubjective perspective which breaks down the familiar (Cartesian) polarities of subject/object, active/passive which predominate in Western philosophy and science. Benjamin (1998, p. xiv) describes a “third position” which holds the underlying tension of these dichotomies where relation to the Other replaces relation to the object. Benjamin (1995) explains

that “Intersubjective theory postulates that the other must be recognized as another subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in the other’s presence (p. 30). This means that we have a need for *recognition* and that we have a capacity to recognize others in return, thus making mutual recognition possible” (my emphasis). Benjamin’s use of the word *recognition* is key, since it denotes a complex developmental concept forming the basis for intersubjectivity. I suggest that movement improvisation takes Benjamin’s intersubjective process a step further as it allows for an incisive and amplified way to engage with and extend the capacity for intersubjective relating (Allegranti, 2011; Sheets-Johnstone, 2011) by highlighting intra-activity; how we can dynamically shift between me and not me and how we are both within and part of the world in our improvised becomings. Therefore, when working with sexed and gendered bodies-in-relation, extending Benjamin’s notion of intersubjectivity as an intra-active process is an apt conceptual, linguistic and political reframing particularly in light of countering accounts of “*me my body [and] individuality and propriety*”.

Of additional and specific concern to me is how as clinicians we can hold the corporeal tension between “*never really inhabit[ing] ourselves, by our selves*” and “*individuality and propriety*”. If I shift my focus in a biological systems direction, the question of how we become “*implicated*” in each other’s embodiments comes to light. I can see that anatomies and physiologies are not fixed traits; we emerge across a lifespan where we *become* bodies in response to specifically and contingently lived intersubjective lives. Our brain mechanisms evidence plasticity (Fausto-Sterling, 2000) and in Gallese’s (2009) terms, we have “we-centric” brain connections however, these neuronal mechanisms do not live an independent and self-contained existence they are in Barad’s (2007) terms, mutually entangled with our intra-active experiences. Moreover, this entanglement of nature and culture may or may not support a potential capacity for kinaesthetic empathy (Jola, Ejremberg, & Reynolds, 2011; Jola, Amir, Pollick, & Grosbras, 2012), and, it is only through further interdisciplinary (experimental and phenomenological) research that will we know more about how embodiment is a co-implicated (bio-psycho-social) process. Bodies are dynamic, processual and change over time rendering deterministic views of ‘natural’ differences of sex and gender obsolete (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

Thinking the therapy relationship in terms of developmental systems (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Oyama, 2000) helps me to recognize that boundaries between bodies are dynamic, they are on the move and for me, body counter/transference is a clear example of this: We are co-implicated in our intra-actions in a way that gives rise to questions of therapists’ bodies as filters. If I re-invoke the image of the Möbius strip as one interconnected boundary (in)between bodies (of all species) I can consider how, we, as humans “*inhabit*” ourselves and each other and can be claimed by our historical bodies and stories. This also shores up the ethics and politics of therapeutic engagement, specifically at the level of sex and gender. How is it possible to allow for both our own and our clients’ bodies becoming in/visible and un/voiced over time? If we are not actively attending to a corporeal or kinaesthetic process in our intra-actions then we may be disallowing our power to intervene, and as hooks warns “to be seen and not known is the ultimate abandonment [and]... It is easy to dominate that which you see and never know” (1996, p. 134). Notwithstanding that knowing is always a partial affair, knowing is, nevertheless, a process that demands confronting the fiction that we “*inhabit ourselves by ourselves*”.

Do we own our bodies?

... [I]t’s an interesting question as to whether in our culture our bodies were ever our own, I doubt it... you find very different

discourses that keep them in check and keep them under control... Do we own our bodies? I don’t know... I think there are many ways in which experiences of owning one’s body are possible and we seek them; there is a strong desire to have ownership of one’s body. But I don’t think that most people for most of the time are in their bodies in such a way that they could claim that they had a form of ownership... (Christine Hauskeller, 2009, Interviewee, Scene 4: Where’s The Body?)

The question of “*ownership of one’s body*” shores up a dialectical notion: Embodied intersubjectivity and that ownership necessarily implicate issues of power relations in society and, by default, within psychotherapeutic practice as a social system. As Butler (2004) astutely observes “my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own” (p. 21). The (developmentally) intersubjective process is one where we arguably strive for body ownership and in a therapy context it may be a body counter/transference attempt to mitigate the inevitable vulnerability that we experience from the moment of birth. During clinical movement improvisation (and in the choreographic process), I could say that my movement “is and is not mine” since I actively work with this personal-social tension and encourage a constant shift of intercorporeal attention, between my movement and linguistic meaning making and that of the other(s). In this way, there is an ongoing (never ending) reconfiguration of boundaries between myself and another that emerges from a material process of *being* in relationship and exchanging movement phrasing over time. Perhaps this suggests a more distributive notion of power in human relationships where I aim to constitute a material-dynamic relation with other bodies in a social context of power, gender and knowledge (Barad, 2003; Foucault, 1984). However, I am also acutely aware of the complex and “*strong desire to have ownership of one’s body*”, as highlighted in the film through the dancers sometimes intimate and at other times violent engagements with (re)claiming a resuscitation dummy.



Image from *Becoming Bodies*,
Scene 4: *Where’s The Body?*

As a woman and clinician, I cannot escape the “*different discourses that keep [bodies] in check and keep them under control*”. Bodies of women, men, and children are “governed” in biomedical

(psychiatric) research and practice (Reed & Saukko, 2010) in ways that foreclose human agency and can have a deleterious impact on our health. Perhaps the “*strong desire to have ownership of one’s body*” is enacted through cultivating agency and this is something that we can attend to in the therapy relationship. As Barad reminds us agency is about “the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring in the material-discursive practice” (2003, p. 827) and, I would add, by considering the therapeutic relationship as a potentially material discursive practice open to reconfiguring. For example, we can facilitate a client’s ability to retain embodied agency or selfhood when there is cognitive impairment as in the case of dementia through sensorial and kinaesthetic interventions. However, in Wilson’s (2004) terms we still haven’t grasped the (biological) capacities and limitations of bodies and a focus on a material-discursive engagement may allow us to challenge our and clients’ perceptions of “*body ownership*” lest we collude with a severe Cartesian split.

Conclusion

If the screendance *Becoming Bodies* addresses my desire to extend the expressive registers through which the experience of lived, biological, sexed, and gendered bodies can be captured and communicated, then this paper is a call to arms: We need to interrogate the ontological status of our disciplines and how we conceptualize bodies. I have attempted to traverse (in)between understandings of sex, gender, bodies and intersubjective processes, highlighting the complements and contradictions that exist across bio-psycho-social understandings how sexed and gendered bodies come into being and how this has potential to re-vision politically progressive engagements in clinical practices. Although not an exhaustive feminist analysis, I have begun to trouble how the sex-gender binary creates in/distinctions between the materiality of the body and cultural interpretation and inscription.

Understanding and clearly negotiating the ontological foundations of embodiment, in this case how we position sex, gender, and bodies, is a crucial aspect to be considered for arts therapies potential experimental engagement with biological and cognitive sciences lest we re-iterate the stifling politics of the status quo. As researchers, how can we to ask better research questions that do not fall into nature/nurture divides in order to improve the quality of life? Moreover, if we consider the therapeutic relationship within a developmental systems perspective, both client and therapist can learn to manage in/visible and un/voiced body politics in a process of material discursive motion. This may contribute to increasing both therapists’ and clients’ capacities for understanding what the living of an ethical life might mean.

The mutual entanglements that places artists, scientists, and therapists into a larger conversation, one where material discursive ways of knowing challenge a traditional onto-epistem-ological position, suggests that embodied and performative practice is a legitimate source of being and knowing, beyond the confines of our field. In such a conversation there is potential to influence thinking and modes of practice and processes not only in the arts therapies but also across science and culture. As feminist discourses exemplify, an embodied thinking and practice needs to simultaneously interrogate the biological, the social, and the political. Doing so may have long lasting progressive impact on how we ‘do’ our lives and how we view health not as a stable state, but as a tension between a precarious equilibrium and its constant re-establishment within a developmental system; a worthwhile ethical challenge in this fast-moving techno-scientific age.

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Further reading (Screendance)

Becoming Bodies (2013) (37 min) Direction & Choreography: B. Allegranti. Funded by: Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT), hYbrid Conversations between science and art: Institute for Cell and Molecular Biology (IBMC) with the National Museum of Porto, University of Roehampton (Department of Psychology), Grieg Academy of Music (University of Bergen).