Transfixed: The Radical Feminist Body

Churnjeet Mahn

Last month the Feminist and Women’s Studies Association (UK & Ireland) listserv spilled into a public debate about the exclusion of women not biologically assigned female at birth, from the forthcoming Radfem conference in July. The FWSA listserv, primarily used to circulate information on academic notices and cultural events of interest to academics, suddenly found itself implicated in the discussions of biological essentialism, censorship, social conscience and gender politics that invariably expose the fault lines in the history of feminist thought and action. Radfem 2012, taking place in July in London, is explicit in setting the agenda for what it defines as radical feminism, namely a uniformly antagonistic rejection of practices and structures that can be identified as discriminatory against biologically born women living as women. The ‘radical’ in Radfem is a strategic blinking that excludes or dismisses the prevailing trends at the intersection of feminist and gender studies in order to recover an uncomplicated female body that anchors or reinvigorates the critique of patriarchy. In some sense, Radfem could position itself as a distant cousin to Occupy movement: another grassroots and critically informed reaction to the diffuse systems of power that condition and demand the inequalities and injustices of everyday life.

Reactions from subscribers to the FWSA list were immediate. A key criticism was levelled at the exclusionary criteria for admission to the conference: it seemed implicit that a conference call that excluded ethnic minorities or lesbians would be unacceptable, but this call was explicitly transphobic. While some respondents pointed out that a predominantly academic list should not be censored, others questioned why academic practice was not being brought to bear on this real life issue of discrimination. The reaction of one the subscribers evolved into a blog post, and The Guardian published a comment piece on allegations of transphobia by Radfem. Sheila Jeffreys, one of the speakers at Radfem 2012 offered her own rebuttle, challenging what she perceives to be the new orthodoxy in uncritically accepting transgender subjects in an extension of a post-feminist and gender matrix that disavows or has looked past the essential body of feminist criticism and practice. Part of the argument is that biologically assigned men who become women have a degree of volition in their gender destiny. This instance crystallises the way in which a brand of feminist activism, academia, discussions of feminism in the media and the real lived experiences of trans bodies come together.
As a site for critical commentary, this example demands an exploration of how theoretical developments in the study of gender and sexuality are informed by, or have influenced, medical categorisation of gender, and how this maps onto our daily experience of gender. Judith Butler, in her chapter, ‘Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality’ addresses some of these concerns through disassembling the conditions of gender as prerequisite for being ‘intelligible’ as a human subject through the specific case of David Reimer (what came to known as the Joan/Joan case). The David Reimer case involved Reimer’s gender reassignment surgery from male to female after irrevocable damage to his penis during a circumcision. He was then raised a girl, but underwent gender reassignment surgery from female to male as an adult. Although social scientists and psychiatrists studying David’s early development used his experience as evidence that gender is entirely a social construct, his later surgical ‘correction’ would superficially appear to point to the essential links between biological reality and gender destiny. Judith Butler, (in)famous for her work on how our experience of gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original or anchoring prototype,[i] has become a target for feminists who argue that it overlooks how the material body is a vital dimension for describing situated experience.[ii] However Butler (2004), perhaps quintessentially, deals with this critique obliquely through her analysis of discursive processes used to identify, categorise and describe, David Reimer.
The very criterion by which we judge a person to be a gendered being, a criterion that posits coherent gender as a presupposition of humanness, is not only one that, justly or unjustly, governs the recognizability of the human but one that informs the ways we do or do not recognize ourselves, at the level of feeling, desire, and the body, in the moments before the mirror, in the moments before the window, in the times that one turns to psychologists, to psychiatrists, to medical and legal professionals to negotiate what may well feel like the unrecognizability of one’s gender and, hence, of one’s personhood (58).

In Butler’s argument, matrices of intelligibility are key defining practices for identification, an identification which is entirely contingent on the way discursive practices operate to legitimise or delegitimise the viability or credibility of a given subject. In this powerful argument that questions how gender norms and norming condition the existence of the individual as human, rather than their gendered existence being an extension of their humanity, the question of how David Reimer felt his body and gender to be essentially misaligned, is, of course, dealt with implicitly as by-product or associated side-effect of ideological structures. His anger, disillusion and trauma are subsumed into questions of discursive intelligibility. Rather than the experience of one’s body becoming the locus for the function of identity, the relationship between the body and lived experience become inseparable. The issues that Butler raises, and the problems surrounding the reception of her work, delineate some of the discomforting tension that has played out in the fallout from Radfem. While this kind of theorised gender criticism can offer a sophisticated lens through which to unpick the ways in which gender norming and fixing determine the limits of viable existence through critiques of medical and cultural practices around identification, the attempts to dismiss it with the evidence of real lived experience (for example, the very real and immediately feelings of ‘wrongness’ that David Reimer experienced as a woman) seems an obvious reaction to a theorisation which entirely loses the sense of urgency and trauma experienced by an individual. In Butler’s piece, part of ‘doing justice’ is the attempt to unpick the processes by which someone begins to experience or utter the breakdown in gender, and the consequences of this for identification.
Jeffrey Eugenides’ second novel, *Middlesex*, an epic transsexual and transnational bildungsroman, tells the story of Callie, the intersexed protagonist who is assigned and who lives through a series of gendered and biological realities:

To the extent that fetal hormones effect brain chemistry and histology, I’ve got a male brain. But I was raised as a girl. If you were going to devise an experiment to measure the relative influences of nature versus nurture, you couldn’t come up with anything better than my life. […] All I know is this: despite my androgenized brain, there’s an innate feminine circularity in the story I have to tell. I’m the final clause in a periodic sentence, and that sentence begins a long time ago, in another language, and you have to read it from the beginning to get to the end, which is my arrival (20-21).

*Middlesex* itself is a playful novel, defying its reader and linear narratives to travel explore some of the difficulties and contradictions in making gender and bodies work. The circularity that Callie refers to is reflected in the narrative structure of the novel which uses figures and themes that are constantly returned to in a state of transformation, the most significant recurrence being the protagonist, whose gender and body alter throughout the novel. Callie’s explication of this change works its way through stories of her grandparents’ immigration to the US from Greece, the rise and fall of the car industry in Michigan, and the Detroit race riots of 1967. A story of migration, industrialisation, capitalism and racial unrest become the primary vehicle for telling a story about gender reassignment/realignment. Locating the ‘I’ in the novel, locating the protagonist who moves from being Callie to Cal, is subsumed into the story of what it means to a modern subject, displaced in capitalist and socially unstable realities.
Can we resist fixing the radical feminist body? Materials from Carolyn Speranza’s "Gender Balance" exhibition [Image by Carolyn Sperenza under a CC-BY license]

This argument has been circular by necessity: getting from an academic feminist association, to a feminist activist conference, through some gender theory and a 21st century Pulitzer prize-winning novel may not be the winning or most efficient formula. But neither are the knee-jerk and often reactionary responses to questions of gendered realities. There is no question that material oppression of women exists and that this has immediate and hugely detrimental impacts. There is no question that for some individuals, surgical alteration of their bodies will dramatically enhance the quality of their existence, and even allow for the possibility of their existence. However, allowing uncritical or essential discourses of sex and gender to re-emerge to create a cleavage between the authenticity of male and female existence is potentially devastating. In their own ways, the two comment pieces in The Guardian cited above rely on the essential existence of gender and its correlation to biological sex. Reading through Butler and Eugenides forces us to confront another reality: our conditions of ‘intelligible’ human experience is something diffused in a series of ideological practices, stories and histories that we are subjected to. Understanding us means understanding the conditions that have allowed us to name and label ourselves to begin with. Radfem is anachronistic in its understanding of sex and gender, but academics also have a responsibility to make their work not only critically informed, but critically engaged. What this means for how the FWSA should respond is impossible: a feminist’s worse enemy is another feminist and finding a consensus is impossible. But finding productive ways of engaging the theory and practice of gender on a spectrum that can actively combat easy or clear definitions of what it means to be a woman, is imperative, especially in response to medical science and empirical research. Doing justice forces us to carve out the possibility for new
realities, stories and bodies that can only emerge if we critically unpick the ones we have. The critical imperative: the radical feminist body must resist being fixed.


Dr Churnjeet Mahn is Lecturer in English at the University of Surrey. Her monograph, Travels in the Palimpsest: British Women's Travel to Greece 1840-1914, is forthcoming with Ashgate in 2012.

Works Cited:


Notes:


[iii] An example of this is Susan Bordo’s work, who distinguished what she defines as Butler’s postmodern approach to gender from her own: ‘If the body is treated as pure text, subversive, destabilizing elements can be emphasized and freedom and self-determinism celebrated; but one is left wondering: is there a body in this text?’ (38).