

Frida Beckman

Between Desire and Pleasure: A Deleuzian Theory of Sexuality

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Reviewed by Emilie Dionne, 2015

Narrated by Theodra Bane

Between Desire and Pleasure proposes to develop a Deleuzian theory of sexuality. Beckman establishes her contribution by arguing that, although Gilles Deleuze's philosophy, and his work with Félix Guattari, lays the groundwork for a project, it is a project that remains undeveloped. Beckman considers that sexual pleasure can be deployed in productive and positive ways to disorient the molar politics of identification and representation that stratifies bodies and subjectivities, and hinders their potential for expression.[1] Sexual pleasure constitutes a potential whereby *openings* can be created and assembled for purposes of disorientation and deterritorialization, as positive components of a Body-without-Organs (BwO).

Beckman argues that Deleuze understands sexual pleasure and the orgasm as operating through statements that lock subjectivity to a subject. The orgasm organizes desire into the linear-causal narrative in which desire is captured as lack, and circulates in the mode of discharges in the hope to attain transcendence (*jouissance*). For Deleuze, this mode of capture of desire is bound to fail because the all-too-physical sexual pleasure hinders movement rather than expands it; it is thus an insufficient venue for desire, for it only returns to confirm the subject. Like the organism, this orgasm striates, codes, and fixes subjectivity to the subject, all while solidifying the illusion of a transcendent, unitary system of reference. Deleuze rejects the figure of the orgasm in favor of Gregory Bateson's notion of *plateau*. The *plateau* is a force that expands tension, which he sees as apt to allow desire to emerge as its own differential potentiality. The plateau provides an escape from determination, and frees desire from representation (and reproduction) by activating the rhizomatic processes of immanent connectivity.

Beckman agrees with Deleuze that sexual pleasure framed as such is unproductive, for it disables desire (3). She maintains that this conception is, however, incomplete, and considers it far from being the *only* possible expression of sexual pleasure. She argues that Deleuze's apprehension toward sexual pleasure arises because he sees it only in the mode of a discharge of the body's energy. Deleuze's views are the result of a paranoid tendency equatable to those of the capitalist machine. His apprehension produces two shortcomings in regard to sexual pleasure. First, Deleuze consequently pays little attention to the materiality, that is, the variation, of bodies. Second, in splitting desire from pleasure, he reinstates unreflective universal presumptions about the individual. With attention to these two tensions, Beckman locates his conception of sexual pleasure as a period-specific (heteronormative), male model largely configured by Freudian psychoanalysis. From there she develops a Deleuzian theory of sexual pleasure, which, to be effective, requires attention to the manifold modes of expression of sexual pleasure.

The book is divided into two main sections. The introduction and first two chapters cover Deleuze's understanding of the orgasm and diagnoses it as period-specific and tainted with heteronormative, gendered, humanist, and anthropocentric biases. Chapter 3 lays down the

theoretical foundation for a Deleuzian theory of sexual pleasure by showing the manifold expressions of sexual pleasure in light of recent scientific and technological developments. The chapter reveals a sexual pleasure that allows bodies to exceed themselves, create intensities, and shape new worlds. Beckman then proceeds to develop her theory in the subsequent chapters in the form of a twofold analysis that provides first a molar and then a molecular reading of the woman/becoming-woman (chapter 5), the disabled/becoming-disabled (chapter 6), the animal/becoming-animal (chapter 7) of the orgasm. Chapter 8 explores how the hyper-faciality of sexual pleasure in the pornographic movie industry partakes in the deterritorialization of sexual pleasure, revealing an *orgasm-without-organism*. Beckman suggests that it is only by attending to the two shortcomings of Deleuze's philosophy mentioned above that an effective Deleuzian theory of sexual pleasure can be developed. These many expressions can trigger the differential potentiality of sexual pleasure, for "political, cultural and conceptual significance" (vi).

Her first two chapters situate Deleuze within the conversations from which his views on sexuality emerge. Chapter 1 presents a dialogue between Foucault and Deleuze to establish how each of their understandings and usages of sexuality, and its mechanisms, is period-specific. She criticizes them, for example, for failing to consider what a female-informed sexuality would look like, that is, how it could provide a much different configuration of sexuality, desire, and pleasure, and its expression.

Chapter 2 argues that Deleuze's conversations with psychoanalysis have informed his views on sexuality and conceptualization in the Western context. Although Deleuze hopes to save Lacan's psychoanalysis from "Lacan's disciples" (31), Beckman points out key differences in their respective projects. First, Lacan retains transcendence, in which he situates *jouissance*, and considers sexual pleasure (its *physicality*) a mere hindrance to *jouissance*. Deleuze also deplores the physicality of pleasure, but signals it is the emphasis on geniality and reproduction that hinders desire, for it configures a functional organism that means only one thing. Second, whereas sexual pleasure (and desire) is about language for Lacan, Deleuze conceives of sexuality as prelinguistic and preindividual, meaning that it can playfully move between sense and nonsense (39). For Lacan, the physicality of pleasure makes it all too knowable and thus inadequate to access transcendent *jouissance*, outside of language.[2] Although his rejection of sexual pleasure makes more sense to Beckman, it remains obscure in Deleuze's case. Why is it, she asks, that, if the sign produces the desire, and sexuality is prelinguistic, that sexual pleasure cannot be apprehended as *polyvocal signs*, and aligned with the "immanent process of desire" (38)?

Chapter 2 also engages in dialogue with Melanie Klein and Wilhelm Reich. Deleuze and Guattari dissociate Klein's concept of *partial object* from its transcendent referent and generate the rhizomatic connectiveness of *partiaux*. Beckman maintains that Klein's apparatus could enable an orgasm as a tool of disorientation by embracing the orgasm as *partiaux*, a "traversal of the Body-without-Organs" that would "exceed and resist any temporally continuous structure" (40). Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari praise Reich for splitting (and freeing) sexuality from reproduction, but they deplore his commitment to the orgasm. Yet Reich's notion of orgasm disrupts the linear-causal sequence of Freudian psychoanalysis: once a climatic moment is reached, the orgasm actively furthers excitation, thus "keep[ing] the energy flowing rather than filling it" with a lack (41).

Beckman concludes this first section by stating that, if the body proves hard to locate in Deleuze's philosophy, given the volatile production of bodies, his conception of sexual pleasure reinstates the individual into a universal as he fails to consider the variation of actual

bodies. To correct this, chapter 3 proposes a Deleuzian theory of the body and pleasure by coupling recent studies in the sciences, specifically biology, science and technology studies, and theories of communication to Gottfried Leibniz's notions of the *fold* and Gilbert Simondon's concept of *individuation*. Like Deleuze, Beckman argues that technology does not determine life, but generates assemblages that configure bodies, thereby enabling life to emerge as a potential of expression. Her reading of the intersection of sexuality with new technologies of information and communication (NTIC) disrupts the axiomatic spatial and temporal configuration of desire and sexual pleasure as a linear causation that grounds Deleuze's issues with sexual pleasure. Taking the example of porn-surfing, Beckman shows that new modalities of sexual pleasure do not return to confirm the subject, as Deleuze maintains. The "spatialisation and multiplication of possible pleasures through the Web keep the act of deferral . . . multidirectional and open-ended" (50), hence echoing studies in biology that point to matter as ontologically resilient (54). The assemblages generated with NTIC bring about the hyper-nature of which bodies are capable, as bodies of "communication that fold and are folded" (57), hence celebrating immanent connectiveness.

Inspired by "Artaud's mumbles and cries and rhythms," chapter 3 proposes an *orgasm-without-organism/subject* (58) that "destroy[s] language and rationality" to "open up for new forms of thinking" (62). This schizophrenic orgasm generates larval selves that multiply and expand "as the body from which the orgasm emanates breaks down" (62). Coupling this figure to Leibniz's *fold* and Simondon's *individuation*, the orgasm becomes an event from which new worlds, assemblages, and affinities could emerge. The schizophrenic orgasm aligns itself with individuation as sex materializes as a practice that webs manifold bodies (65). This orgasm temporally constructs individuals, all the while resisting their ontological delineation and determination, to generate bodies as modes of vibrations rather than blocks. This sexual pleasure eludes mere survival in celebrating its own uselessness.

Working with Deleuze's notions of molar identity/molecular becomings, the next four chapters each provide a case study of sexual pleasure and its expressivity to illustrate Beckman's Deleuzian theory of sexual pleasure and the body. Echoing Deleuze's philosophical usage of molar/molecular, Beckman explains that molar concepts are created to circumscribe identity and the (hu)man able body; in contrast, Deleuzian *becomings* deterritorialize these striae to multiply trajectories of expression for desire--and sexual pleasure. Chapter 4 examines the Woman/becoming-woman of sexual pleasure; chapter 5, the Disabled/becoming-disabled of pleasure; chapter 6, the Animal/becoming-animal of the orgasm and, finally, chapter 7 deterritorializes sexual pleasure through the hyper-facialization of the *money shot* in pornographic movies.

Chapter 4 argues that Deleuze failed to negotiate the gendered politics of the orgasm and sexual difference. *Contra* the male orgasm, studies points to a female orgasm apt to excite energy beyond itself. The history of the female orgasm also triggers its political significance by showing the manifold usages to which it has been put, and the material-discursive effects of these usages in shaping women's embodiment. Beckman maintains that the female orgasm never complies with reciprocity; it remains elusive to full knowability and can offer new ways of negotiating "stratified concepts and systems of the body" (80). A becoming-woman of the orgasm undermines a linear and causal temporality axiomatic to sexual pleasure for Deleuze; from it the "body" emerges as a mode of expression that can generate more connections in and to the world.

The becoming-disabled of the orgasm in chapter 5 ruptures the ties between sexual pleasure and reproduction, thus with functionality, to produce a *polyvocal* sexual body from which "a

people who are missing" can be invented. "A people who are missing" is a conceptual figure deployed to celebrate an *amor fati* of all becomings as singularities (101). For Beckman, "disabled bodies" remain irrevocably unproductive in regard to reproductive sexuality because they are facialized as nonorgasmic (nonsexual). She reveals, however, that it is the knowledge generated out of a desire for functional sexuality that *disables* human sexual pleasure and its differential potential for manifold expressivity. Opting out of utility may elude faciality, whereby one becomes a "stranger within [one's] own sexuality" (113). So doing constitutes a form of minor literature at once political, linguistic, and of collective significance that opens up a space for different communities to emerge.

Chapter 6 explores a becoming-animal of the orgasm, and how the concept of the animal has been used for purposes of faciality for sexuality. Through an analysis of two novels, Beckman illustrates how interspecies encounter matters differently in circulating either through the Animal or a *becoming-animal*. Interspecies encounters fail with the former because they instate a model to represent--in vain; in *Bear*, there was never any *desire* to encounter the animal itself, but only desire to encounter knowledge about bears. There is no such expectation or anticipation in *What the Crow Says*; a *becoming-animal* of the orgasm is open-ended, an immanent potential for expression in connectiveness, an un/becoming-with. Relations here are key to the spatial and temporal coordinates from which stems an orgasm as event, in generating new motifs, rhythms, and connections.

Chapter 7 considers the effects on capitalism of a Deleuzian theory of sexual pleasure. Using the example of the money shot in pornographic movies, Beckman explains how the conflation of the face with faciality through the cinematic close-up can deterritorialize sexual pleasure from a system of unitary significance. The close-up tries to capture capital flow, and identify the spatial and temporal coordinates of the orgasm. The money shot's all-too-zealous will-to-knowledge and desire to appropriate expression is disoriented by hyper-expressivity, a moving orgasm-without-organism/subject.

Lastly, Beckman's epilogue tackles her geo-cultural location, exploring the history of Sweden's engagement with sexuality. She concludes that what matters is how these objects of study emerge out of curiosity; philosophy is about enticing curiosity, an affect that Deleuze was lacking.

Beckman provides a thoroughly circumscribed and well-documented argument for a robust Deleuzian theory of sexuality. She provides many examples about various modalities of sexual pleasure, and the roles sexual pleasure plays, can play, or has played in constructing categories of health, gender, body, and human. She brings Deleuze's corpus onto new terrains and revitalizes the materiality of bodies as dynamic and resilient. Although Beckman stipulates that her project is *Deleuzian*, some issues arise in regard to her reiterated concern, and disappointment, about how the object of her book--that is, sexual pleasure and, in light of the variation of bodies, its manifold expressions--has failed to interest Deleuze. She devotes much energy to what appears an unattainable desire to receive his approval in regard to the failure in his philosophy to which she points. This energy would have been better spent in further developing a Deleuzian becoming of sexual pleasure, by giving texture to how this project has emerged from Beckman's own singularity--something to be celebrated as a vivid exemplar of *difference*, without referent or approval. These concerns reinstate a master-disciple relationship upon which Deleuze would have frowned, for it makes the reader feel Beckman needed "to be told how to do" a Deleuzian theorization, "or how to do it right" (107).

In addition, her articulations of the becoming-woman and the becoming-animal of the orgasm

raise some questions: the former, for it seems to encourage at times faciality in celebrating a period-specific female orgasm that can act as a moment of capture and delineate bodies as either productive/able or sterile/disabled; the latter, for Beckman's potential presumptions as to what the *orgasm is*. In particular, why such a commitment to the notion of the *orgasm*? A term, a concept, is always more than just a word," as Karen Barad would argue (Barad 2007), but a *discursive-material entanglement*, an "object" that populates configurations of the world not quite fluid and flexible (or not alterable without material consequences); what does it mean, thus, to hope to salvage a term? The female orgasm may also encourage faciality by making *pleasure* rather than reproduction, or *desiring*, into *the end goal*. Beckman insists that a female orgasm resists full knowability, that it remains elusive, and can thus inspire a *becoming-woman* of the orgasm. Yet if pleasure is what is searched for, how is the orgasm then cultivated? Knowledge organizes a female orgasm, gives it a function and inscribes it into *this particular mattering* (Barad 2007) trajectory.[3] Hence, *because* the "essence" of a female orgasm resists full knowability in the actual, the actualized *embodied* experience of pleasure would thereby be re-inscribed in a linear, causal narrative bound to failure. The female orgasm, as Beckman brings to the reader's attention, would itself gain from a practice of *becoming-woman*, but I fear *becoming-woman* is here thwarted, domesticated by the faciality of this female orgasm.

Beckman's commitment to establishing a failure in Deleuze's corpus[4] has the effect of generating her incapacity to embody a minor literature. She offers at times ungenerous readings of her conversational *persona*--these *partiaux* she assembles into a BwO. Beckman criticizes Deleuze and others for doing selective readings and for constructing *bizarre* reading assemblages in order to substantiate their theories. She illustrates this critique by creating her own reading assemblages, thereby showing how reading the same authors as Deleuze can bring out entirely different objects. Yet she reveals a certain lack of generosity toward others in failing to see their own reading practices as likewise differential projects. For example, in chapter 6, she claims that Donna Haraway's repudiation of Deleuze and Guattari results from a *selective* reading that led Haraway to "not recognize any potential in Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the animal" (128). Beckman adds that Haraway "*ignores all* of their other writing, together and apart" (128; my emphasis). This passage, however, reveals that, perhaps equally so, Beckman herself *ignores* much about what a reading practice *does*, that is, how one's choices and decisions in receiving a text do not automatically stem from a lack of critical engagement, but perhaps *because* of such (singular) critical engagement: a reading practice that, regardless of the overall writings of Deleuze and Guattari, simply could not provide a sufficient avenue of reconciliation for Haraway (or others) with care for the singularity of their project. My point is that the objects that Beckman makes visible in light of *her* reading assemblages are *her* objects of interest, that is, they emerge out of *her* affective capacity, *her* curiosity. And it is as such that her theory must be celebrated for the *difference* it is and enacts. This affective capacity is endowed to *her* singularity, not another's, and thus should not be forced onto another. This singularity is *her* gift to the world in its ongoing configuring (Barad 2007), a celebration of *difference* as pure immanence, and thereby a true embracing of Deleuzian becoming. Beckman hints at this potential of philosophy in her epilogue, a spectral companion who, as it is my project to suggest here, could *matter* differently--as a singular configuring with its own life and potential to carry further desire by multiplying the affinities, and threading more conversations.

Let us thus take seriously the task of philosophy, of tackling the paranoid perspective that makes us, knowers, search for the reasons explicating one's particular reading, misreading, lack of interest, and/or lack of curiosity. Instead, why not celebrate how it is in being tickled,

provoked, and affected by a theory that each singularity, for its potential of expression, can affect into matter objects of *their* curiosity, affective capacities, from *their* capacity of desiring, that expands and touches bodies and subjectivities, making them vibrate anew and create . . . more.

[1] Beckman uses the notions of *sexual pleasure* and *orgasm* interchangeably. In this review, I follow her practice, albeit considering this *interchangeable* usage as creating much confusion that is left unaddressed and that runs the risk of foregrounding an important inconsistency at the heart of her theory.

[2] This is why he situates female sexuality closer to *jouissance*, for it eludes chains of signification, and remains unknowable.

[3] I use the concept of *mattering* to convey at once that it is a process of making the female orgasm *matter* as an object of interest and of concern, and also as a *real material enactment* that affects the process of materialization of actual bodies, and their mode of embodiment in specific contexts.

[4] There might be a lingering politics taking place in between the silences here, with feminist and critical race and ethnic studies, a spectral force that haunts her text. Indeed, Deleuze's disregard for actualized differences, which he (over)looks insofar as they are locked into molar politics and thus facialized, has upset more than one.

References

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