Irreducibility and (Trans) Sexual Difference

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This article illuminates a tension internal to Elizabeth Grosz's provocative theory of the irreducibility of sexual difference: while it establishes sexual difference as an ontological force of differentiation, it simultaneously delimits the forms sexual difference can take as fixed and uncrossable. This model thus privileges cissexual difference while invalidating trans modes of embodiment and identification, a move that perpetuates antitrans logic and practices while impoverishing feminist conceptions of the generativity of sexual difference. This article examines the uses of transsexuality throughout Grosz's work on sexual difference, evaluating her claim that sexual difference is irreducible alongside her insistence that transsexuality is an impossible attempt to assume a bodily sex other than that assigned at birth. Illustrating how Grosz's account narrows the generativity of sexual difference down to unchangeable dimorphic sex, this article argues that fixed dimorphic sex is not simply irreducibly given but is the effect of normative schemas. If the power of sexual difference lies in its capacity to generate difference, it need not be constrained to an immobile binary of sexually specific bodies whose morphological possibilities are fixed. This article thus argues for the capacity of sexual difference itself to become otherwise than solely cisgender.

I. Sexual Difference: Generative Yet Fixed?

Feminist thought discloses sexual difference as a potent site of divergence and becoming. In her foundational *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray names sexual difference as the epochal question of our era, articulating "the work of sexual difference" (Irigaray 1984, 6) as the task of transforming sexual difference from a hierarchical, quantitative binary opposition into a truly qualitative, positive alterity. Taking up Irigaray's analysis, Elizabeth Grosz has more recently argued for understanding sexual difference not simply as an empirical property of human bodies but rather as an ontological principle that produces sexually differentiated morphologies and modes of being (Grosz 2011, 102). This account sees sexual difference as the condition for life's

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reproduction in difference rather than resemblance. As such, it is a generative source of differentiation and newness, coding life toward evolutionary departure and divergence. "Sexual difference is the very machinery, the engine, of living difference," Grosz writes, "the mechanism of variation, the generator of the new" (101). Alongside this claim for the ontological, generative status of sexual difference is an apparently correlative claim for its irreducibility. Grosz speaks of sexual difference as "irreducible, necessary, unavoidable" (101); she repeatedly insists that it cannot be superseded or overcome (102, 111).

On Grosz's account, sexual difference is irreducible as an ontological interval that inscribes differentiation at the heart of life itself. But it is also irreducible in a second sense, at the level of purportedly irrefutable and fixed bodily difference. Grosz's analysis takes the difference between discretely sexed bodies to be irreducible. Here, the sexually specific body itself is an irreducible given, always specified as one of "at least two" (Grosz 2011, 104)[1] different genres of sexed bodies: male and female.

These two senses in which sexual difference is irreducible—(1) as an insuperable ontological force and (2) as indelible morphological difference yoked to a given anatomical sex—come together to curious effect in Grosz's account.[2] For while Grosz affirms sexual difference as a generative ontological force of differentiation, she simultaneously insists that this generativity engenders only fixed and dimorphic categories of sex. Endorsing the Irigarayan definition of sexual difference in terms of "the incapacity of one sex to step into the body, role, and position of the other sex" (Grosz 2011, 145), Grosz stakes a claim for the ultimate unchangeability of the body's sexed specificity, while insisting simultaneously that sexual difference itself has no fixed, static, or predetermined vectors of manifestation. She sees sexual difference as open to "potentially infinite" (111) expressions, but argues that its intractability means that the sexually specific body will always be specified as male or female in accordance with its interpellation at birth. Indeed, rather than an effect of interpellation, sex is on Grosz's view more properly understood as a simple biological given.[3]

The peculiarity of Grosz's position emerges in her periodic references to transsexuality as an attempt to dislodge or contest an ultimately irreducible sexual difference. Although Grosz, following Irigaray, understands sexual difference as morphological in that it concerns how biology is lived and comes to have meaning (Grosz 2011, 227, n. 3), she apparently rejects the possibility that biology can be lived and come to have meaning in excess of or differently from one's assigned sex.[4] Thus transsexual forms of identification and embodiment appear in her work as vain efforts to appropriate the other's body, or misguided attempts to be a sex other than the one diagnosed and assigned at birth. Transsexuality is invoked to illustrate the impossibility of becoming other than one's assigned sex.[5]

Accordingly, this essay considers Grosz's treatment of transsexuality as a kind of limit case that reveals sexual difference as intractable at the level of dichotomous, sexed specificity. Inquiring into the productive tension at the heart of her innovative exposition of sexual difference—between (1) the elaboration of sexual difference as a creative force of differentiation that allows for untold divergence and (2) an insistence that sexually specific bodies are given in particular, intractable forms that align

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with conventional understandings of continuity between bodily sex and gender—I indicate why transsexuality functions rhetorically in Grosz's work to secure a view of sexual difference as ineluctably nontrans. My aim in this essay will be to argue that affirming the generative force of sexual difference does not necessitate delimiting the forms that difference can take as always and only cissexual.[6]

At stake in this problematic is the very status of sexed bodies. Is "sex" to be understood as a given property of human bodies, a factual feature of their emergence in and through sexual difference? Or is sex itself materialized through the productive imperatives of *regimes* of sexual difference, where sexual difference is understood as a discursively mediated and mediating system by which bodies emerge as intelligibly sexed? By claiming both bodily sex and sexual difference itself as irreducible, Grosz seeks to contest this second formulation, articulated most strongly by Judith Butler. Grosz addresses this point directly when she writes that "sexual difference is universal, an ontological condition of life on earth rather than a performatively produced artifact as Butler's work claims" (Grosz 2011, 107).

I want to inquire more deeply into this putatively universal status as it relates to Grosz's insistence that transsexuality marks an ultimately impossible attempt to assume a bodily sex other than that assigned at birth. What is universal about sexual difference? If it is its force as a tendency of differentiation, then does it necessarily follow that there is nothing artifactual about the forms by which humans embody sex? If we grant that there is something ontological about sexual difference as a principle of differentiation, in other words, is it possible to see the ways in which this difference is captured by identity as indeed performatively produced? We find ourselves back at the crux of the matter: to what extent is the supposedly infinite generativity of sexual difference nailed down to "irreducible," unchangeable dimorphic sex? Can sexual difference become otherwise? Following Gayle Salamon, we may ask: "Is it possible to think sexual difference as something that need not be located at the level of sex at all?" (Salamon 2010, 168).

This essay will begin by exploring Grosz's view that trans forms of identification and embodiment constitute a "category mistake" (Grosz and Wolfe 2014, 120) whereby trans subjects attempt an impossible passage across an interval of sexual difference anchored by cissexual positions. Next, I analyze the theory of bodily sex that underwrites this position, arguing that it corrals sex into the realm of the given in ways that obscure both its normative and transformative operations. Finally, I offer an experimental conception of sexual difference as both ontologically generative, as Grosz claims, *and* discursively shaped—arguing that this view attends better to the differentiating power of sexual difference and yields preferable ethical implications. On this model, sexual difference obtains not only between a cisgender pair, but is actualized in the manifold ways that sexuate corporeality and subjectivity are taken up and lived by and between subjects. Rather than a category mistake that reveals the impossibility of suspending or crossing an irreducible sexual difference, on this view trans embodiment emerges simply as another enactment of sexual difference's generative force.

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II. Specifying the Limits: Sexual Difference as Only Cissexual Difference

Grosz's intermittent invocations of transsexuality deploy trans modes of identification and embodiment as symptoms of an impossible, ill-fated desire to transcend the sexed specificity of one's own body. In 1994's *Volatile Bodies*, for example, she depicts transsexual women as men entranced by a fantasy of female embodiment. "Men, contrary to the fantasy of the transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is to be, to live, as women," she asserts: "At best the transsexual can live out his [sic] fantasy of femininity—a fantasy that in itself is usually disappointed by the rather crude transformations effected by surgical and hormonal intervention. The transsexual may look like a woman but can never feel like or be a woman" (Grosz 1994, 207).

This passage is remarkable for several reasons. First is its own rather crude and unsubstantiated insistence that transsexuals are only ever "really" the gender that corresponds to their birth sex. Next is its location of transsexual identification in the realm of failed fantasy, as though trans people's negotiations of femininity and masculinity are somehow *more* or more *perversely* wrapped up in phantasmatic identifications than are cis people's. Additionally, it circumscribes a realm of legitimate "women's experience," where "what it is to be, to live, as women" is available only to subjects assigned female at birth. This raises questions about what constitutes a necessary or sufficient set of conditions to qualify for being, living as, or feeling like a woman. It implicitly constitutes womanhood as a zone whose borders are secured by the supposed homogeneity of its members' bodies. Finally, this passage invokes a curiously Platonic distinction between appearance and reality: although "the transsexual" (here constituted as a pathetically delusional figure) can *look* like a woman, apparently she can never *be* a woman.[7]

Why does Grosz take this to be true? Her next sentence provides some clarification. "The one sex, whether male or female or some other term," she writes, "can only experience, live, according to (and hopefully in excess of) the cultural significations of the sexually specific body" (Grosz 1994, 207). The limits of one's gendered experiences and identifications, here, are circumscribed by the limits of one's "sexually specific" body.

Grosz's parenthetical hope that subjects might live in excess of the cultural significations of this sexually specific body does not, apparently, extend to transsexual and transgender practices of resignification or reinhabitation. Such practices could include the surgical or hormonal techniques Grosz dismisses as "crude," as well as linguistic and sexual processes by which bodily zones are transformed through language or touch (so that, for instance, a bodily zone might be physically unaltered but come to signify differently through its phenomenological, intersubjective reinscription). For some reason, "the sexually specific body" figures here as a given, a bedrock grounding in advance the forms of embodied experience that will emerge as legitimate or true —for Grosz's formulation rests quite heavily on an opposition between *real* sex and delusional or deceptive *appearance*.

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This deeply problematic understanding of transsexuality could, perhaps, be dismissed as an aberration, a relic of a time when feminist thought could get away with theorizing about transsexuality without reference to transsexual people's own theorizations on the matter, a moment when it could seem proper to speak of "the transsexual" as a figurative foil to a vision of sexual difference privileging cisgender embodiment. However, Grosz deploys similar claims nearly two decades later in 2011's *Becoming Undone*, suggesting that her figuration of transsexuality is not an aberrant, ill-informed aside in her otherwise provocative thinking on sexual difference, but a central place where these claims get worked out. In the course of considering Irigaray's dismissal of transsexuality as an impossible attempt to collapse or override sexual difference, Grosz again provides a picture of transsexuality as a "disavowal of one's own morphological specificity" (Grosz 2011, 109).

For Irigaray, cross-gender identification constitutes an attempt to annihilate the alterity secured by sexual difference. In the passage Grosz cites from *I Love to You,* Irigaray posits the "biological, morphological, relational" difference between men and women as "the ultimate anchorage of real alterity," and charges transsexuals with a privileged and naïve attempt to dissolve this difference (Irigaray 1996, 60). Grosz, apparently, does not see these claims as problematic, but instead takes them up in her own rhetorical deployment of transsexuality.

As with her earlier disparaging use of transsexuality, here Grosz makes a set of claims about transsexuality in order to secure the ostensible irreducibility of both bodily sex and sexual difference itself. Rather than see transsexual embodiment as a means by which sexual difference proliferates across and exceeds congealed categorizations of bodily sex—in other words, the ways in which transsexuality mobilizes sexual difference as a force or field with no necessary relation to alleged correspondence among chromosomes, genitals, and gender identification—Grosz depicts it as an impossible attempt to negate sexual difference itself. She invokes transsexuality to instantiate a limit. The limit she wants to draw yokes "sexual difference" to culturally assigned categories of sex, so that although one can change the body's sexed characteristics or *appearance*, one cannot change its ultimately intractable status as male or female. This move establishes "sexual difference" as a binary structure with two terms, whose range of bodily manifestation is prefigured in advance.

As in her treatment of transsexuality in *Volatile Bodies*, in *Becoming Undone* Grosz seeks to establish the irreducibility of sexual difference through a series of claims about the fixity and givenness of bodily sex. "[O]ne is assigned only as male, or as female, or in the mode of some identification with male or female," she writes. "However queer, transgendered, and ethnically identified one might be, *one comes from a man and a woman, and one remains a man or a woman*, even in the case of gender-reassignment or the chemical and surgical alteration of one sex into the *appearance* of another." She continues: "Sexual difference is still in play even to the extent that one identifies with or actively seeks the sexual organs and apparatus of the 'opposite' sex; at most one can change the appearance and social meaning of the body, but the sexually specific body that is altered remains a sexually specific, if altered, body" (Grosz 2011, 110; emphasis added).

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It is worth spelling out the cluster of claims bundled here. First, Grosz asserts that one is assigned a sex with reference to the categories "male" or "female." No matter how one identifies, one cannot disavow one's status as either a man (presumably correlated with one's status as male) or woman (here implicitly linked to one's female sex assignment at birth). Following Irigaray, Grosz insists that one comes from a heterosexually complementary pair, here identified as "a man and a woman," and (accordingly?) one can only be a man or a woman, depending on which possibility was assigned to you at birth with the declaration of its correlating sex. Again, there is the insidious opposition between being and appearance, material truth and superficial play: no matter how one changes the manifestation and meaning of one's body, one remains what one *really is*. Technologies of gender transformation effect only superficial alterations, changing one sexually specific body into the *appearance* of another kind of sexually specific body. "The sexually specific body" itself remains untouched, unaltered, a stubborn reminder of a recalcitrant sexed materiality lacking any tendency or capacity for plasticity or transformation.

Grosz's claim that "sexual difference is still in play even to the extent that one identifies with or actively seeks the sexual organs and apparatus of the 'opposite' sex" amounts to an assertion about the intractable nature of sexual difference. Here, sexual difference is not something enacted *through* gender-variant identifications or bodily alterations; rather, it is something that persists *in spite of* such transformations. Sexual specificity is not extended to transgender or transsexual modes of embodiment, such that one's body could be "sexually specific" precisely in its elaboration of different cartographies of sex. Instead, "the sexually specific body" names a body that can signify in only one of two ways. It "specifies" sex in accordance with normative correlations between bodily markers of sex and gender identification; it does not "specify" sex as it is constituted through a range of other investments, as it is embodied or transfigured in excess of these injunctions. Hence, even as Grosz repeatedly insists that sexual difference "has no one location, no one organ or condition" (Grosz 2011, 111), that "it cannot be tied simply to its biological form (which is itself inherently open to all uses and to all possible futures) or ascertained in advance" (103), she nevertheless delimits sexual difference as the proper and ineluctable correspondence between assigned sex and congruent gender identification.

III. Schemas of Sexual Specificity

If the biological form of sexual difference is, as Grosz argues, inherently open to all kinds of transformations and potential futures, then what are we to make of her simultaneous claim for the intractability of the sexually specific body? If sexual difference is not located in or determined by one particular bodily feature, then how can Grosz insist on a body's inescapable position within one or the other "side" of sexual difference, where this difference is understood as a dichotomy of either male/man or female/woman? Put differently: what is this unalterable, irreducible "sexually specific

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body," where "sexual specificity" comes to name the very resistance to transformation ostensibly opened up by sexual difference itself?

For Grosz, the sexually specific body seems to be the body that emerges as an indivisible unity through its organization as either "male" or "female." This organization is not to be understood as discursively mediated or produced, however; remember Grosz's direct refutation of any such conception of sex as performatively constituted. Instead, "sex" is taken fairly unproblematically as a factual feature of the body. Consider Grosz's claim that sexual difference cannot be localized in any one site. "Sexual difference has no one location, no one organ or condition," she writes. "This is why surgical or hormonal alterations do not actually give one the body of the other sex, instead providing an alteration of only some of the key social markers of gender" (Grosz 2011, 110).[8]

Sexual difference here seems to name less an ontological concept than a kind of comparative difference between internally coherent, discrete entities: one sex and another. So sexual difference as the difference *between* sexes cannot be located in any one place or condition; it would be insufficient, for instance, to reduce it to the presence or absence of a particular genital configuration or secondary-sex characteristic. Rather—and this is where the alleged irreducibility of the sexually specific body comes in—sexual difference names the difference between two kinds of bodies, differentiated not by one particular property or another but by a whole complex of differences that come bundled together.

The sexually specific body, then, is a body with an innate, ultimately unalterable sex. That is why Grosz asserts that surgical or hormonal interventions do not actually change one's sex, since on her account sex is a factual feature of the body as a whole. The body has a sex, male or female: this sex cannot be changed by changing any of its component parts. Instead, Grosz claims, altering one's body through surgical or hormonal technologies changes "only some of the key social markers of gender." This sudden invocation of gender aligns it with the social, a realm of mutable meaning. Sex, by contrast, is implicitly aligned with the immutable. "The key social markers of gender" are somehow distinct from, or do not come to constitute, bodily sex. Sex seems immunized from the contingencies besetting gender. Gender becomes a figure for superficial, shifting appearance; sex is figured as an irrefutable, natural ground. Accordingly, Grosz's "sexually specific body" is predicated on an understanding of both sex and materiality as given.

Hence her claim that "one can change the appearance and social meaning of the body, but the sexually specific body that is altered remains a sexually specific, if altered, body." Sexual specificity is precisely that which cannot change, because it is given as fixed. It is a configuration of bodily matter that exceeds or resists any plastic transformation. It is irreducible in that it exceeds "the appearance and social meaning of the body"; it is what *remains*, to use Grosz's language, somehow intact and primary despite any alterations it undergoes.

As Salamon argues, this conception of the relation between sexual difference and materiality "hinges on invocations of the categories of naturalness and purity and the functional equation of bodily materiality with both" (Salamon 2010, 156). Grosz's

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depiction of transsexuality as a botched attempt to overcome or displace the body's intractable sexed specificity rests on an understanding of sexuate materiality in these terms. Sexual specificity is purportedly natural in the sense that it does not emerge from or depend on cultural schemas of intelligibility, but instead arises from the more-than-human forces of sexual difference, understood as "the engine of life, of nature, of all that lives" (Grosz 2011, 103). The version of sexual specificity Grosz defends rests on metaphors of purity in that each of the two categories of sexed bodies has its own proper traits, uncontaminated by any qualities not contained by its respective genre. Following Irigaray, sexual difference for Grosz is the condition for ontological differentiation, that is, the production of distinct forms of being, embodiment, sexuality, activity, and even thinking (Grosz 2011, 104).

These distinct forms of being and embodiment, as we have seen, are for Grosz ineluctably yoked to an invariably sexed body. Think, for instance, of her earlier insistence that although a transsexual woman may move through the world as a woman, she will never truly be able to *be* or *feel like* a woman. Tying bodily being and feeling to a sexually specific body understood as natural (that is, given above and beyond any systems of human meaning), Grosz grounds sexed materiality in a logic of purity, where the body's sex is ultimately hermetically sealed and any attempts to alter its fleshy form constitutes a violation.[9] As Salamon points out, this categorical purity can be established only by making each "sex" a basically homogeneous zone. The gulf allegedly spanning male and female bodies, in other words, works only when "male" and "female" are themselves taken as discrete, internally coherent terms, different from each other but not different within their own bounds. When sexual specificity is understood in terms of an indissoluble bond between femaleness/womanhood and maleness/manhood, Salamon suggests, "the singularity or unsubstitutability said to characterize bodies across sexual difference is secured by ascribing an interchangeability to bodies *within* sexual difference" (Salamon 2010, 137). In this way, bodily sex comes to be both symptom and cause of a binary model of sexual difference, where the difference *between* two sexually specific kinds of bodies stands as evidence of the irreducible status of dichotomous sex itself.

On Grosz's account, then, sexual difference is the productive and ineradicable interval of difference between two materially irreducible terms: (1) male/man and (2) female/woman. Sexual difference is for her an ontological or perhaps preontological force that gives rise to modes of being differentiated along this dual axis; it is "the immeasurable and unrepresentable difference between the sexes, difference that is not calculable or representable in any fixed form" (Grosz 2011, 112) that is nevertheless secured by or passed between sexes that are themselves taken as fixed forms. Hence Grosz's insistence that although sexual difference may come to matter in culturally mediated ways, sexual difference itself and the sexually specific bodies it engenders are not discursively produced. Bodily sex is materially irreducible, and this materiality itself is inoculated against mediation. This is demonstrated by Grosz's use of transsexuality as a limit case, where she claims that although the superficial "social markers of gender" can be manipulated, the very materiality of the sexually specific body is ultimately fixed. Sexuate materiality is given; it is precisely what exceeds discursivity.

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Materiality is identified with irreducibility and fixity, and sex is identified in turn as blunt material factuality. Sexual difference thus names both the ontological force that gives rise to these dispositions of material life, and the systemic elaboration of their divergent tendencies.

This account leaves no room for a consideration of how cultural norms of gender may in fact circumscribe what comes to count as a sexually specific body, and how. Taking sexed materiality as given, it does not inquire into the conditions of its materialization. Indeed, Grosz's own text repudiates any such approach, identifying sexual difference with an ontological universality that precludes any consideration of the ways in which it may be discursively constituted. Taking the boundaries delimiting the sexes as self-evident, it fails to see this very declaration as a discursive means by which these borders are established and maintained. When Grosz insists that sexual difference is ontological and not performative, she means that it is a prehuman force that is the condition for all forms of human becoming, where that becoming is understood to proceed according to the creative possibilities opened up by sexual bifurcation. "Nature itself takes on the form of the two," she writes:

> of beings radically incommensurable with each other (each requiring their own bodily forms, reproductive organs, and modes of knowledge and forms of action) which nevertheless are capable of coming together, not only for sexual and reproductive purposes but perhaps precisely because of the appeal that difference or otherness holds in its proximity to the living being. (Grosz 2011, 105)

Although Grosz does not see this account as inscribing heterosexual relations with a metaphysically privileged status, this passage does raise questions about the effects of understanding sexual difference as ultimately concerning the alleged radical incommensurability of "the two." For one, does such an account simply transpose a biological tendency for divergence and differentiation into an ontological claim about sexed human bodily being? When sexual difference is understood as a (pre)ontological force that gives rise to particular modes of being, are these modes of being then recursively or retroactively posited as prior, fundamental, or fixed? How does this formulation of the irreducibility of sexual difference as a generative force, in other words, delimit in advance the "irreducible" forms sexually differentiated bodies will be able to assume?

These are the sorts of questions Butler's account of sexual difference as performative helps us to address. For Butler, sex is not an irreducible material given—that is, an intractable, incontrovertible, blunt truth of the body—but rather a performative norm that constitutes the very bodily zones, boundaries, and standards of intelligibility it purports merely to describe (Butler 1993, 2). I want to offer a sketch of Butler's refutation of "sex" as an irreducible given, not in order to dislodge Grosz's claim as to the ontological force of sexual difference but to unsettle the ways in which its correlative claim to irreducibility circumscribes a very narrow range of possible sexual embodiment. Can we have a conception of sexual difference that does not simply retroactively posit dimorphic sex as an irreducible given? Can the generativity of sexual difference generate multiple modes of living a multiplicity of sexually specific

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bodies, or does it merely reference the endless reproduction of an internally congruent, externally incommensurable "pair" of male/man and female/woman?

Butler's conception of sex as performative is meant to contest the alliance of bodily sex with a foundational, prediscursive materiality. She situates materiality as fundamentally bound up in schemas of intelligibility. Matter's organization as recognizable stuff, she argues, is part and parcel of its materiality. Her argument hinges on a brief but bright reading of a passage from Aristotle's *De Anima*, where Aristotle argues for the indissolubility of "the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp."[10] "The shape given to it by the stamp" translates the Greek *schema*, which Butler explains in terms of "form, shape, figure, appearance, dress, gesture, figure of a syllogism, and grammatical form" (Butler 1993, 33). So *hyle* (matter) for Aristotle is both the proverbial wax and its *schema*, meaning that matter is simultaneously the material stuff itself and its co-present shape or form. "If matter never appears without its *schema*," Butler insists, "that means that it only appears under a certain grammatical form and that the principle of its recognizability, its characteristic gesture or usual dress, is indissoluble from what constitutes its matter" (33). Hence Butler historicizes the Aristotelian *schema* by foregrounding the specific ways in which bodies come to matter (materialize, count, or signify). As Butler writes, "to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what 'matters' about that body, its very intelligibility." In this sense, she continues, "to know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where 'to matter' means at once 'to materialize' and 'to mean'" (32).

This has clear implications for bodily sex. Particularizing the concept of *schema*, Butler situates sex as a regulatory principle by which bodies come to matter. Rather than the immanent truth of bodily matter, sex appears as a schema by which bodies emerge as intelligible. This means that the materiality of human bodies does not preexist discursive constraints, but is in some sense *materialized* in and by these norms. If a *schema* marks not an external grid laid over an indistinct mass of matter, but indeed the very means by which that matter is formed, then the sexual schematization of bodies produces them as sexed. In other words, "sex" on Butler's account is not a prediscursive property of bodies, but a deeply discursive schematization by which they emerge as intelligible. Sex is not something that bodies simply have, but something they come to bear in order to count as recognizably human at all. In this sense "sex" is not merely descriptive of various bodily properties; instead, it functions as a normative ideal. Think of Grosz's depiction of transsexual embodiment: even if transsexual morphology is indistinguishable from nontrans morphology ("the transsexual may look like a woman" [Grosz 1994, 207]), it somehow fails to count as a real instance of that sex.

In order for the sexed body to become accessible as such, for its very spatial borders, sensations, and gestures to form, norms of sexed embodiment must already be at play. "What constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect," Butler suggests. "Once 'sex' itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization

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of the regulatory norm" (Butler 1993, 32). Sex, on this account, is not a factual property of one's body or even an identity one occupies on the basis of one's bodily arrangement; rather, it is a norm by which bodies come to matter as recognizably human or not. When "sex" is taken to be an irreducible material given—that is, an intractable, incontrovertible, blunt truth of the body—this normative function is completely elided. Butler's account shows that sex is not simply the raw material that regimes of gender and sexuality work upon, but is indeed a productive and regulatory ideal by which bodies accede or fail to accede to these normative injunctions. Sexed embodiment, on this account, is not simply given but must materialize.[11]

IV. Sexual Difference, Becoming Otherwise

This understanding of sexuate materiality complicates Grosz's account of the irreducibility of the sexually specific body. Grosz sees the sexually specific body as given by the force of sexual difference as it materializes bodily matter. Although Grosz's own work resists such a reading, I argue that the ways in which sexual difference materializes is shaped and constrained by discourses of bodily intelligibility. In other words, I am willing to hold a speculative space for an understanding of sexual difference as an ontological force that generates sexually differentiated bodies in its drive to maximize difference—in no small part because this invites us to think sexual difference in terms of the becomings it engenders. What I want to contest is the sundering of this force from its materialization within discursive and symbolic orders inflected by norms of gender and sexuality.

Affirming the ontological irreducibility of sexual difference as a force of differentiation, or even as a spacing of sexuate differences between bodies, does not necessitate a correlative claim that trans identifications and modes of embodiment are failed and yet threatening attempts to depart one fixed pole of that difference for another. To make such a claim is to choose to ascribe metaphysical priority to cisgender modes of existence. To claim that sexual difference will only ever yield cisgender men and cisgender women, and that other forms of embodiment and identification are illegitimate metaphysical border-crossings—that "*one remains a man or a woman*, even in the case of gender-reassignment or the chemical and surgical alteration of one sex into the *appearance* of another"—is to establish an ontology that invalidates trans embodiment and subjectivities. As Grosz herself has consistently and eloquently argued, the ontologies we formulate scaffold and sustain ethical and political worlds.[12]

Furthermore, the claim that sexual difference is given immutable bodily sex impoverishes feminist concepts of the generativity of sexual difference itself. We fail to think the question of sexual difference adequately, I argue, if we conceive its becoming as transpiring solely within cisgender expressions. If the power of sexual difference lies in its capacity to generate morphological, erotic, and epistemic fields along a logic of proliferating difference, rather than replication or resemblance, it is not evident to me that this generativity will always and only be constrained to an

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immobile binary of sexually specific bodies whose morphological possibilities are fixed. What if part of the creative force of sexual difference is to be found in the elaboration of different forms of sexed embodiment, different ways of materializing sexual specificity? This is not meant to privilege trans modes of embodiment as somehow more exemplary of this creativity, but simply to contest Grosz's understanding of transsexuality as a doomed attempt to undo an indefeasible, dichotomous sexual difference.

Grosz's account seeks to defend the irreducible status of congruent sex/gender positions by positing "the sexually specific body" as somehow immune to transformation. Although Grosz affirms that corporeal sexual difference cannot be reduced to specific anatomical differences, she nevertheless insists that bodily sex itself is anatomically fixed and unchangeable. This delimits the generative potential of sexual difference within a very narrow frame. Yet Grosz also insists that sexual difference has "potentially infinite" (Grosz 2011, 111) forms of expression, that it operates in the future anterior and "is a difference that is always in the process of differentiating itself" (146). Although Grosz's own account effectively constrains this multiplicity within the limits of a cisgender male/man, female/woman schema, there is no reason to elevate this framework to the level of ontological irreducibility.

I have argued that Grosz's emphasis on the generative nature of sexual difference is undermined by her circumscription of human sex as given in the unalterable form of a cisgender pair. Instead, I've aimed to extend her conception of sexual difference as ontologically generative by attending to how categories of sex are also normative and regulatory. This opens up the possibility of thinking sexual difference not only between a cisgender pair, but expressed in the myriad ways that sexuate corporeality and subjectivity are embodied, shared, and lived. Hence, the sexuate differences that "sexual difference" denotes are not reducible only to a matched set of biological processes or features corresponding to one's assigned sex. If sexual difference indeed concerns the generation of difference at multiple levels of embodied subjectivity (including ways of existing, thinking, and finding intersubjective traction[13]), it pertains just as much to trans as cis forms of becoming. As a generative force of differentiation, sexual difference is ultimately irreducible to an immobile dimorphism. More than just comparative difference between two fixed and internally homogeneous terms, sexual difference proliferates within and between the categories of its capture.

Notes

1. Grosz here invokes the "at least two," but it is unclear to me how the rest of her work on sexual difference opens up or affirms the potential multiplicity denoted by this formulation.

2. Identifying "the Grosz paradox," Jami Weinstein notes that "[Grosz's] claim to an enduring binary of sexual difference stands in conflict with her own assertions regarding the infinite possibility of matter for unpredictable change and self-overcoming" (Weinstein 2010, 171).

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3. A concise if informal presentation of this view is available in a dialogue between Elizabeth Grosz and Esther Wolfe (Grosz and Wolfe 2014, 120–21). I thank Phillip Opsasnick for directing my attention to this interview.

4. By "assigned sex," I mean the sex a person is designated via medical diagnosis and legal categorization; compare Fausto-Sterling 2000. Grosz herself does not use this terminology, which opens up a possible disjunction between sex as it is ascribed and sex as it is lived, since in her view sex is given and unalterable. I retain it here as a mark of the disjuncture between our analyses.

5. In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed notes that assigned sex functions as a command. "We are more than these assignments right from the beginning," she notes. "We can feel at home in an assignment; or not; more or less. An assignment also means a task; like homework. To be assigned a sex in this binary system is a way of being directed toward a future" (Ahmed 2017, 26).

6. The neologisms "cissexual" or "cisgender" refer to the alignment between one's gender identity and assigned sex. For a critical account of the prefix "cis," see Enke 2013.

7. The notion that trans people only approximate the appearance of their gender but do not have any legitimate claim to *be* that gender (a claim that a cisgender person is presumably entitled to make) is particularly pernicious and harmful, especially in light of the fact that violence and death are regularly visited upon trans people—especially trans women and girls—by cis people, with the justification that the trans person's gender identity is dishonest or otherwise illegitimate (compare Currah, Juang, and Minter 2006). For more on the disjuncture between the use of transsexual, transgender, and other gender-variant lives in feminist theory and the use of theory in improving these lives, see Namaste 2009 and Connell 2012.

8. Grosz's periodic insistence that transsexual identifications and bodily practices are attempts to take on "the body of the other sex" (Grosz 2011, 110; see also Grosz 1994, and Grosz and Wolfe 2014) is curious for its failure to consider that these may equally be understood as ways of taking up and living one's sexuate embodiment differently. It is trivially true that, as Grosz notes, "You can alter things, but it's still the same body you're altering" (Grosz and Wolfe 2014, 121), but it is unclear that this is the same claim that one has (or is) only or always one's assigned sex.

9. On this point, I am indebted to Salamon's incisive analysis. "The importance of the conjoined categories of purity and nature for thinking sexual difference is emphasized," Salamon writes, "when considering that one of Grosz's primary critiques of transsexuality is that it is a bodily *violation* and a hopeless attempt to alter or augment bodily materiality as it is *naturally* given" (Salamon 2010, 156).

10. Butler is citing Aristotle's *De Anima*, II:1, 412b7–8 (in Aristotle 2001).

11. Grosz herself comes close to arguing this as early as *Volatile Bodies* (Grosz 1994, xi).

12. In *The Incorporeal*, Grosz insists that ontology concerns not only what is but what might be, writing that "ontology entails a consideration of the future, not only of what we can guarantee or be certain of but above all what virtualities in the present may enable in the future.... Such considerations of the future are the concerns of precisely ethics and politics and are the implications—open to heated and frequent dispute, no doubt—of whatever one commits to as an ontology" (Grosz 2017, 2).

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13. The terminology of "traction" as a way to describe orientations within and between identities comes from Kate Bornstein, who attributes this usage to Caitlin Sullivan (Bornstein 1997, 93).

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