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Lucy Nicholas

Queer Post-Gender Ethics: The Shape of Selves to Come

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014 (ISBN 978-1-137-32161-9)

Reviewed by Iris van der Tuin, 2017

I have taught gender studies at a university in the Netherlands for more than twelve years, starting in the early 2000s. And I have seen the student body change. I began to notice that something was changing around 2010, when students in my class "Advanced Introduction to Gender Research" responded differently from previous cohorts to Judith Butler's "Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," published in 1986 in *Yale French Studies*. Students had previously questioned Butler's voluntarism (as the binary opposite of determinism, voluntarism is the position of radical self-constitution), but now they argued that Butler had in fact prefigured their trans identities. This occurred to me as a significant shift. Determinism can be both social (gender) and biological (sex), and the average class discussion with gender studies majors or graduates is a balancing act covering both sides of the sex/gender divide. Before 2010, voluntarism was seen by students in Northern Europe as failing to pay attention to the social/structural/institutional and symbolic dimensions of gender, that is, to the reality and interpretation of sexual difference as binary. From 2010 onwards, however, voluntarism has been seen as a necessary reinterpretation of the individual dimension of gender: no longer does this individual dimension signify m/f as boxes to be ticked for statistical research or masculine/feminine as innate psychological traits, but rather it stands for one's individually constituted self-expression as transgender. Interpreting Butler's feminist philosophy as prefigurative, then, opened up discussion about bodies and the collective imaginary as individually lived, and reduced almost all discussion about gendered power (including gender's power over sex) to an individual level. At the same time, the classroom became an important site of gendered power where trans and cisgender professors and students worked through a newly imagined gender order and a new feminist conceptual toolbox.

Situating my review of Australian sociologist Lucy Nicholas's 2014 monograph *Queer Post-Gender Ethics: The Shape of Selves to Come* in North-European feminist classrooms, I want to start by saying that I was at first surprised to read that, in the author's view, the academic context is lacking in attempts "to present a robust account of the nature of sexual difference and gender, and to consider the implications and possibilities this presents for post-gender ethics" (4). In my view, this is precisely what many contemporary feminist and queer classrooms are trying to get at and how some gender studies students or professors live their transgender lives. Nicholas does, however, agree with my reading of the voluntarism of these trans feminist academics. She notes, in chapter 1, that alternative models offered by/in trans identity politics are often curiously limited by assumptions of gender binarism: "these accounts tend to assume that these models could be implemented on an individual level, downplaying the weight of social and cultural attribution in sex/gender identity, and overemphasizing how voluntaristic this process could be" (25). The models differentiate between sex and gender, and imagine gender as a continuum, says Nicholas. This often implies an assumption of incongruency between a person's sex and a person's gender, making sex into a binary category and predicating gender fluidity between two presupposed extremes (femininity and masculinity). Nicholas questions the implied foundational (dis)connection between sex and gender, the explicit sex binarism and the implied gender binarism, and the apparent amnesia about the reality of forcefully gendered social interactions and cultural imaginaries. Although she actively celebrates the attempts made by trans theorists and activists,^[1] and acknowledges that many alternative models have been developed so as to make trans lives livable (31), Nichols turns to "ontological formulations from new-materialists who propose that our notions of gender and sexual difference are a mischaracterization of 'nature'" (28). The author's parameters for this material turning are, one, the co-constitutive nature of sex, gender, and sexuality, implying that their deconstruction cannot/must not happen in isolation; two, that "*sexual difference* as the mode of thought [is] at the root of sex, gender and sexuality, which renders attempts to multiply or alter

impotent" (29; emphasis in original); and, three, "that the social assumption of oppositional difference *can* and *must* itself be eradicated or transcended in order to undermine the hierarchy at the root of sex, gender and sexuality as currently understood" (29).

Chapter 2 outlines Nicholas's trans ontology based on Moira Gatens's 1994 statement that "the [sex/gender] divide represents 'confused terminology and conceptualizing'" (35). Exemplary for a clear account, says Nicholas, is Myra Hird's reworking of Emily Martin's famous analysis of the sexed, gendered, and heteronormative scenario of the active sperm and the passive egg: "the relationship between 'nature' and 'culture' is *circular* in that the social informs or constructs the natural, which is then used to justify the social" (35; emphasis added). In the chapter, however, more time is spent engaging with the work of-- Nicholas's terms--new- or corpomaterialist feminists such as Claire Colebrook, Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Anne Fausto-Sterling, Myra Hird, and Nina Lykke, given that a circularity thesis may still prioritize the social, whereas Gatens's "imaginary body" immediately invites a nonessentialist take on nature (37-38). Developing a trans ontology while acknowledging heteronormativity implies, for Nicholas, "explain[ing] how sexual difference has become so reified without capitulating to fatalism, and how it could be different and thus how it may be challenged and replaced, without resorting to simplistic voluntarism" (40). This boils down to borrowing from Fausto-Sterling's borrowing from developmental systems theory, and to applying the Foucauldian-Butlerian theory of gender performativity to biology, which leads Nicholas to the following conclusion: "If use shapes the biological, then different use can reshape it. However, the notion of performativity also presents a picture where the use of our bodies in sexually differentiated ways is socially compulsory" (42). Nicholas is keen to acknowledge the need for "a recharacterisation of humyn [sic] bodies that offers the ontological potentiality of a different way of being" (51)^[2] alongside, first, structural and symbolic gendering and, second, a case for a queer post-gender ethics. Implicitly answering critical questions about new materialism's politics and ethics as too implicit or altogether lacking, Nicholas makes her reasoned ethical case by presenting historical evidence for the symbolic violence constituted perpetually by gender binarism. This is also where Nicholas's dutiful positioning vis-à-vis past feminists comes to the fore most explicitly.

Following careful evaluations of feminist philosophies in chapters 1 and 2, and, in chapter 3, a map of liberal ethico-political paradigms in androcentric, feminist, and queer philosophies alike, all rejected for their dualist (hence sexually differentiated) assumptions, it is chapter 4 that provides the original philosophical foundations for Nicholas's queer post-gender ethics. These foundations are based in a diffractive reading of the philosophies of Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler.^[3] Beauvoir's philosophy, when read diffractively and alongside her literary work, can be celebrated for an intersubjective ethics of ambiguity, a project of reciprocity that she took on and completed in response to the solipsistic existentialist ethics of Self and Other with which she was surrounded in post-World War II Paris. Nicholas claims: "Reciprocity is a principle for existence that is compatible with the post-identity, or non-foundational, ontology and politics of queer theory, but also extends this such that it underpins positive, reconstructive ethics and does not leave this positive with the negativity--or even value free relativism--with which it has been charged" (88). I wish to explicitly endorse the author's next argumentative step given a similar move I made in the chapter "Sexual Differing" in *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, the 2012 book I co-authored with Rick Dolphijn. In the argumentative step, Nicholas provides a new-materialist interpretation of "becoming" in Beauvoir's famous "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman." This interpretation, which affects sex, gender, and sexual difference (87), is, in Nicholas's case, informed by Beauvoir's self-other-situation triad and "accounts for the extent to which sexual difference is a collective cultural resource that both allows and delimits purposive, self-willed subjectivity, and that these capacities are differently distributed" (94). Importantly, the sex/gender divide, for Nicholas, represents a collective cultural resource that is nothing but delimiting. As a resource that prevents the maximization of freedom, the sex/gender divide must be eliminated. Becoming entails the constant striving for overcoming immanence: "Meaningful existence, then, is a continual becoming. . . . Beauvoir's existentialist notion of freedom is . . . a freedom without ends or absolutes, freedom in the *ability* for continual transcendence through projects without ends, in and of themselves . . . Existence is fulfilled by creating, by undertaking projects" (96-97; emphasis in original). Nicholas's conclusion in the light of a queer post-gender ethics is that "[g]iven this

moral position, subjectivity should then be a 'freely chosen project' (Beauvoir . . .) without end, so the most free subjectivity is that which is undertaken as purposively as possible. According to this definition, by its very nature as a pre-existing and compulsory precondition for intelligibility, sexual difference is not such a 'freely chosen project'" (98). Binary gender does not repress (preventing freedom itself) but it prevents the capacity for transcendence and consigns people to immanence. Sexual difference prevents people from "maximising freedom of identity" (100). Here, I want to pause, because the diffractive reading of Beauvoir, Butler, and Foucault, in my close reading of it, does not justify this jump from strictly Beauvoirian "maximizing freedom" to a more or less Butlerian "maximizing freedom of (an) identity." But then again, Nicholas moves on by pleading not only for an analysis of binary gender, but also of its assumption of oppositional sexual difference, and furthermore by pleading not only for analyzing oppositional sexual difference, but also of its assumption of, in Rosi Braidotti's well-known formulation, being-different-from as being-worth-less-than. The question is to what extent becoming can be understood and lived outside such oppositional logics.

Continuing successfully with Beauvoir's intersubjective ethics of reciprocity, Nicholas defines freedom--together with several other feminist commentators on Beauvoir and Butler--as "consist[ing] of collective reconstitution on non-subordinating terms of the cultural resources within which we become and behave" (104). This leads her to collective (gender)queer social movements that recognize the symbolic violence experienced by those who feel misrecognized, that is, to identity speak, but the movements are also said not to continue the essentializing line of identity politics for their ontology, politics, and ethics of becoming. The point of queer post-gender ethics, then, is, "[g]iven the ontological premise, [that] it would be necessary to ensure that 'the totality of . . . a person's engagement in the world' (Beauvoir . . .) is enabling and reciprocal" (109). Hence, the ethics is informed by, per the self-other-situation triad, "the co-dependence of 'autonomy,' intersubjective reciprocity and social contexts of freedom" (109). Chapter 5 considers an androgynous politics, based in androgyny as a nonandrocentric, nonteleological cultural resource, as exemplary, and Nicholas finds such a politics not in established queer theory, not in most feminist and queer activisms, not in most science fiction, but in the definition of "positionality" (not identity) in early formulations of queer theory. Nicholas argues that the initial impetus of queer theory has gradually gotten lost, which is a pity in the light of the tripartite requirements of a queer post-gender ethics: "It seems a shame that the non-foundational positionality and 'analysis interminable' ([Diana] Fuss . . .) that was a key companion to the early formulations of queer theory must be lost because of the recapitulation of the moniker" (131).^[4] Present in the queer-utopian work of José Esteban Muñoz in particular, and in the work of Dean Spade finding "a capacity for a more pluralistic co-existence of narratives of the self" (150) in trans contexts, and in radical queer communities and gatherings (discussed in actual detail in chapter 8), "[i]t is this future-oriented and undefined, critical positionality or impulse that is worth holding on to, the principles of universalised multiplicity, along with inexhaustibility as modes of being, modes of 'reading' one another and relating to replace foundational and immutable identity" (132). The androgynous aspect of all this must be located in the openness of the careful balancing act that is the implied dual project of the deconstruction of (the assumptions of) gender binarism and the reconstruction of a queer ontology, politics, and ethics of reciprocal subjectivity. In a theoretical realm, Nicholas provides as examples the Derridean practice of placing terms under erasure (like *identity*) and Spivakian strategic essentialism (154-55). In terms of praxis, chapters 7 and 8 discuss queer pedagogy and teaching androgyny, gender-neutral child-rearing and pronouns, safe sexual spaces, intersex rights, and so on.

The closing chapters of *Queer Post-Gender Ethics* discuss the issue of "prefiguration" with which I opened my review. Nicholas discusses this prefigurative element of trans theoretical and practical work when she says that part of queer pedagogy and teaching androgyny is in fact "a purposive creation of culture that attempts to foster critical engagement with dominant norms" (168). Acknowledging that, as Nicholas formulates it, "[p]refiguration has unsurprisingly been dismissed as individualistic 'lifestyle' anarchism by critics who restrict their understanding of 'power' to the state" (195), the argument brought to the fore is "that the prefiguration noted as a historically continuous, but contemporaneously expanding aspect of anarchism can be understood as an ideal *reconstructive* supplement to oppositional critique: 'breaking rules for the sake of breaking rules is merely transgressive. Breaking rules to produce new realities is prefigurative' ([Jamie]

Heckert . . .)" (196; emphasis in original). All of this allows for queer post-gender subjects in the making (they are always in the making, that is, becoming) to try, err, and grow in their reciprocal, nonexhaustive openness. As Nicholas concludes the monograph: "why don't we try? We haven't tried it, so we don't know how we might feel, and be able to behave, without the determinations of oppositional sex and gender" (207). Importantly, what happens in this conclusion is precisely what I saw happening in the classrooms of "Advanced Introduction to Gender Research" at my university in the Netherlands in the early 2010s. What happens with prefiguration is that--against Nicholas's own explicit philosophical, political, and ethical stance--the structural and symbolic levels of gender disappear, and we revert back into a Sartrean solipsism, in spite of the "we" in Nicholas's conclusion. Is this individualism an effect of being in academia, inside the four walls of the classroom, safer than on the streets, or between the two covers of a philosophy monograph, safer (less multilinear and self-contradictory) than a novel? Given Nicholas's mirroring of my introductory class, the book did not provide me with answers to my specific question. What it did make me see is, apart from a wealth of feminist philosophy and queer theory, an unexpected recuperation of Simone de Beauvoir for a trans new materialism.

[1] Similarly, Nicholas positions herself dutifully vis-à-vis past feminist philosophers like Simone de Beauvoir and sociologists like Ann Oakley.

[2] Nicholas uses gender-neutral pronouns throughout her monograph "replacing human with 'humyn,' s/he with 'ze' and her/him with 'per'" (208, n. 1).

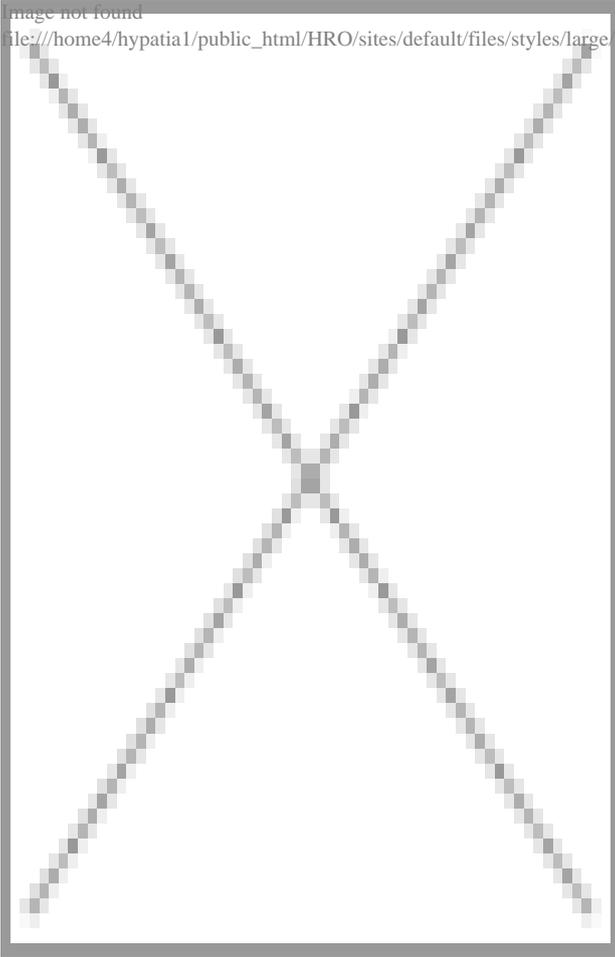
[3] For the methodology of "diffractive reading," see work by Karen Barad and Donna Haraway.

[4] In this light, I have a hard time getting my head around the omission of the work of American trans theorist Susan Stryker from the bibliography of *Queer Post-Gender Ethics*. I read Stryker's work precisely as providing such a positionality and analysis.

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"Nicholas questions the implied foundational (dis)connection between sex and gender, the explicit sex binarism and the implied gender binarism, and the apparent amnesia about the reality of forcefully gendered social interactions and cultural imaginaries."

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