Testo junkie: sex, drugs, and biopolitics in the pharmacopornographic era

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Beatriz Preciado critically revises and reanimates the social constructionist consensus of feminist theories of gender in Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era. By approaching the genealogy of gender not just as a psychic identification or an embodied performance, but as a technical capacity, Preciado maps gender as a hormonal and surgical artifact produced by mid-twentieth-century Cold War sciences and medicine. The term “gender,” after all, was not coined for feminist analysis, but by a sexologist and psychoendocrinologist at Johns Hopkins University, John Money, who explained his new choice of words in a 1955 article reviewing his clinical work with “hermaphroditic” patients:

The term gender role is used to signify all those things that a person says or does to disclose himself or herself as having the status of a boy or man, girl or woman, respectively. It includes, but is not restricted to, sexuality in the sense of eroticism. (Money, Hampson, and Hampson 1955, 285, emphasis in original)

For Money, gender offered a missing social vocabulary for medicine that he insisted was positioned neither in opposition to the biology of the body, nor parallel to sex; rather, four decades before Judith Butler’s (1990) Gender Trouble, Money was already popularizing the view that “a gender role is established in much the same way as a native language” (Money, Hampson, and Hampson 1955, 285): a processual enflishment of culture in the body constituted by a natural capacity to learn language, or gender, in infancy.

Preciado’s keen and playful volume makes the most of this simultaneously natural and cultural, medical and linguistic, psychological and hormonal genesis of the concept of gender among Money and his colleagues to argue powerfully that the contemporary biopolitical landscape of sex and gender has become “pharmacopornographic”: an accelerationist, late-capitalist mode of technological and chemical prostheticism that arranges labor, pleasure, and subjectification. “Contemporary society,” Preciado explains, “is inhabited by toxic-pornographic subjectivities: subjectivities defined by the substance (or substances) that supply their metabolism, by the cybernetic prostheses and various types of pharmacopornographic desires that feed the subject’s actions and through which they turn into agents” (35). In one and the same gesture over the course of the book’s 13 chapters, Preciado recasts heterosexuality as “a politically assisted procreation technology,” (47) with the birth control pill as “the edible panopticon” (173) representing the mutation from Michel Foucault’s disciplinary society to Gilles Deleuze’s (1992) “control society;” dismantles, in a genealogical attention to feminism’s debt to Donna Haraway (1997), the distinction between cis- and trans-gender by contending that “in ontopolitical terms, there are only technogenders” (128); and produces a speculative theory of “the pornification of
work” (287) through a feminist merging of scholars of affective labor and Italian autonomism. Viagra, dildos, and sex hormones: such are the common constituents of the global pharmacopornographic regime that populate this book.

For all of its synthetic and transdisciplinary work across and between philosophy, Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and science and technology studies, Testo Junkie also obviates the exhausted rehearsal of the theory–praxis divide through an intertwined autobiographical narrative, part “self-intoxication” (Sloterdijk 1999), part Nietzschean gay science (Ronell 2013), part political homeopathy. Interspersed through the book’s techno-hormonal genealogy of sex and gender are dizzying first-person vignettes from Preciado’s experimental, illegal self-medication with the testosterone gel from which the book receives its title. Preciado’s “testogel” narrative of “Becoming T,” as one of the chapter titles puts it, is conceptually disarming and affectively challenging in its excess and eroticism, in its reflection on the vulnerable tenure of queer politics in Europe, and in the pleasure and pain of self-estrangement in the masculine becoming that Preciado infuses into a seductive writerly confidence.

The sometimes-disorienting intensity of European critical theory for Anglo-American academic audiences and the challenges of its translation aside, there is no naïveté in Testo Junkie’s frankly obscene mimesis of the toxic, pornographic biopolitical field it diagnoses. Preciado’s is not a work of “subversive representation” through conceptual drag. Rather, it dares, in the face of contemporary theory’s arguably reactionary seriousness – even in the ostensibly relaxed precincts of feminist, queer, and performance studies, which can also be saturated by paranoid critique and hostile negation – not to take itself seriously. The results are enjoyable to read and yet almost unsettlingly precocious. Preciado’s coining of the term “potentia gaudendi,” for instance, the orgasmic force that designates “the (real or virtual) strength of a body’s (total) excitation” (41), is an unambiguous re-baptizing of a long-extant Deleuzian, Nietzschean, and Spinozist perspective on affect as ontological force. Other than a new name, potentia gaudendi as concept offers little new in its sexualized version other than a potentially problematic anthropomorphization of vitality as always already (human-) orgasmic. Nevertheless, Preciado’s nominal motivation here is less to claim authorship of this ontology than to pay homage to those philosophers’ own joyful intellectual perversion. Preciado does so via the narration of her alienating classical schooling in Latin as a child growing up in Fascist Spain – a foray within the book that demonstrates that her pedagogy has as much to do with form and affect as with content and idea.

Whether or not the suturing of pharmacology to pornography is ultimately a simplistic gloss on the contemporary biopolitics of sex and gender remains a difficult question, but one that makes Testo Junkie more than worth reading in order to judge for oneself. What the book succeeds in doing in its assemblage of analysis, speculation, and obscenity is to frame the importance of “French theory” to critical feminist and queer formations in the United States by in turn reading “American gender theory” from within continental Europe and suggesting important directions for the future of scholarship on both sides of the Atlantic. Through the invention of a dissident protocol from within an embodied feminist theory and through the experiment with alternate techniques for the production of subjectivity, Preciado works simultaneously within, against, and without dominant understandings of gender to offer not yet one more account of “the (metaphysical) body”
inhabited by the false consciousness of gender, but instead what, borrowing from Susan Stryker and Nikki Sullivan (2009), Preciado styles as a philosophical practice of the “somathèque,” where the thèque functions much as it does in the French bibliothèque, the term for a library, the arche-repository of power-knowledge.

“We are no longer pleading, like our predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s” writes Preciado towards the end of Testo Junkie, “for an understanding of life and history as effects of different discursive regimes. We are pleading to use discursive productions as stakeholders in a wide process of the technical materialization of life that is occurring on the planet” (350). While this performative description is perhaps more a gesture than a declaration of fact in Anglo-American gender studies, it is for this very reason that Testo Junkie offers so much to feminist theory in affirming the techno-potential of gender for a future whose arrival is not quite as pre-programmed as it might feel.

References

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In Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America, Colin R. Johnson draws from the early twentieth century to amass the impressive archive of country queerness that challenges both the political Right’s and the mainstream gay and lesbian community’s image of American rurality. Diverging from more localized regional approaches, Johnson imagines rurality broadly, which enables him to read boys at a small town Ohio swimming hole alongside the hobos, tramps, and bums that dotted the western landscape, waiting for the