

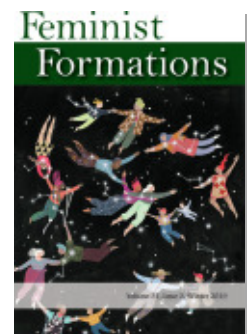


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*Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and
Intersex Experience* by Hilary Malatino (review)

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Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience by Hilary Malatino. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019, 264 pp., \$45.00 hardcover.

Eden Kinkaid

In their recent book, *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*, Hilary Malatino presents a historical and institutional genealogy of “intersex” as a category, demonstrating how intersex bodies have long served as the ground for upholding notions of dimorphic sex and normative gender. Situating intersex embodiment as the “major conceptual center of queerness” (6), Malatino argues that intersexuality is at the root of modern understandings of sexual selfhood. Across the book’s chapters, they trace the deployment, transformation, and contestation of the meaning of intersex from its inception in medico-scientific discourse and modern sexology through to its contemporary instantiation as “disorders of sex development.” Malatino examines this history with two major questions in mind: “How did intersexuality sediment as an anomalous type of bodily composition that needed to be corrected? How can we contest that understanding of intersexuality as we develop ways of thinking and enacting gendered embodiment otherwise?” (7).

Drawing together scholarship within intersex and trans studies, feminist new materialisms, and the philosophies of Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari among others, *Queer Embodiment* approaches intersex embodiment as a means of troubling foundational taxonomies at the heart of modern conceptions of sex and gender and as a way to upend the supposed naturalness of sexed and gendered embodiment. Through a close reading of trans and intersex archives “from below,” alongside critical reflections on their own biography, Malatino provides a compelling historical, institutional, and lived history of intersex as a category. While engaging this history, they are keen on exposing its omissions, ruptures, and alternatives, providing thoughtful strategies for resisting forms of medical and epistemological violence and reimagining the meanings of intersex.

In chapter 1, “Queer Monsters: Michel Foucault and Herculine Barbin,” Malatino engages the story of Herculine Barbin, whose memoirs were published by Michel Foucault in 1978. Barbin’s memoirs provide a personal account of her ambiguous sexed embodiment and queer desires, which led to medical and social interventions and ultimately, her suicide. Through a “reparative reading” of Barbin’s memoir, Malatino argues that it is not Herculine’s sexed ambiguity itself that led to her suicide; rather, it is others’ lack of tolerance for this ambiguity, which Herculine at times seems to have experienced as pleasurable. Here, the medical establishment was complicit in policing sexed ambiguity; Malatino describes how discourses of “hermaphrodisism,” which was a category that tolerated a “two-sexed” condition, gave way during the late nineteenth century to discourses of “false” and “true hermaphrodisism,” which reinforced

the idea that one had a single “true sex” that could be discovered. Situating the memoir in Foucault’s oeuvre, Malatino considers how this emerging concept of “hermaphroditism” intersects with larger concerns of governmentality, biopower, ascesis, and technologies of the self, theoretical terms that are further developed in relation to intersexuality through the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2, “Impossible Existences: Intersex and Disorders of Sex Development,” focuses on the historical and discursive shift from the term “intersex” to the contemporary term “disorders of sex development.” This shift was motivated, in part, by a desire to normalize intersex conditions and locate them within a normative sexed and gendered trajectory of “development.” Malatino makes the implications of this shift clear: “if one is intersex, one *cannot* be a man or a woman; if one *has* a DSD, one *is still* either a man or a woman and has just hit a bump in the road on their way to a finally and firmly sexed designation” (90). Malatino worries that this shift recirculates ideas of “true sex” that have historically led to the pathologization of and medical intervention on intersex bodies. They thus reject the “politics of normalcy” shaping intersex terminologies and protocols, instead arguing for a more affirming and complex intersex politics.

Malatino confronts the limitations of the trans and intersex archive and its omissions in the third chapter, “Gone, Missing: Queering and Racializing Absence in Trans and Intersex Archives.” Here, they are concerned with how the archive only represents the lives of subjects who could access medical institutions and procedures, namely those that conformed with white, middle-class, and heteronormative modes of gender presentation. Given this incompleteness of the archive, Malatino positions “racialized, classed, and queer absences as central to understanding how access to technologies of transition have become intensively compromised for poor folks, trans folks of color and gender nonconforming, nonheterosexual folks” while being coercively applied to intersex bodies (106). This uneven access to transition produces heightened vulnerability for marginalized trans subjects who are denied technologies that might help them pass and avoid violence. Thinking with the concept of “trans necropolitics,” Malatino examines the implications of erasure and non-access for those who cannot approximate the transnormative ideal, an ideal that has been produced through sexology, psychiatry, and other institutional knowledges.

In chapter 4, “Black Bar, Queer Gaze: Medical Photography and the Re-visioning of Queer Corporealities,” Malatino examines the role of medical photography (often of genitals) in rendering intersex conditions knowable. Photographic technologies, they argue, produce a “closed epistemological loop” (135) that makes their representations hard to contest or question. Yet Malatino does find ways to pose questions of these photographs and call into question the ways they represent intersex bodies. Here, they draw attention to the ways that intersex subjects are denied subjectivity and made into objects, for instance, by blurring out their faces or blacking out their eyes. Malatino also examines the presence of doctors in the photographs, who often only appear as a hand

manipulating genitals for the photograph. Following Haraway, they argue that the ghostly presence of doctors produce them as “modest witnesses,” bystanders who merely witness scientific truths but claim to have no role in producing them. Contrasting these representational modes with the work of intersex and trans artists, Malatino calls for new modes for representing intersex and trans bodies, representations that would work against both objectifying and transnormative renderings of queer lives and contribute to the self-fashioning of queer bodies and meanings.

In “State Science: Biopolitics and the Medicalization of Gender Nonperformance,” the fifth chapter of the book, Malatino considers how the science of sex—which produced “intersex” as a category—is necessarily biopolitical. They argue that the sexed body’s “privileged position as the hinge between organism and population (and thus between disciplinary power and biopower) . . . renders sexuality ripe for medicalization” and other forms of regulation (171). Gender itself is biopolitical, Malatino argues, insofar as it is used to monitor, regulate, and control deviant segments of the population (168). With this critical recognition in mind, Malatino wants to shift away from biopolitical modes of knowing sex—what they, borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari, refer to as a “state science” of sex—that sees sex as solid, static, and essential. In its place, Malatino advocates for a “minor science” of sex, that is, one that recognizes sex as fluid, malleable, and metamorphic. For Malatino, a minor science of transition “would focus on the specific, resistant, and creative ways in which trans* and gender nonconforming subjects reinvent and reconstruct themselves in manners irreducible to the medical logic of transition” (186).

Finally, in “Toward Coalition: Becoming, Monstrosity, and Sexed Embodiment” Malatino closes with a reflection on queer becoming, coalition politics, and the figure of monstrosity. Here, they reiterate a call for a thorough disruption of dimorphic categories. Rather than accepting the two-sex model, Malatino offers alternative frames for making sense of queer embodiment. They advocate for a concept of sex that is not a truth provided by or within a body, but an interaction taking form between bodies that remains unfixed. This refusal of neat categorization is part of what Malatino imagines when, in closing, they call for a coalition of monstrosity, a politics that rejects sexed and gendered normativity and seeks ways to make more liberatory spaces and communities for intersex and other queer people. Here, Malatino imagines a coalition of monsters built on the shared trauma of being seen as “monstrous” within the natural order of things, a coalition that would leverage the potential of “monstrosity” to continually unsettle this order and its epistemological underpinnings.

Malatino’s *Queer Embodiment* provides much fodder for thinking about sex and gender through the often overlooked positionality of intersex experience. In terms of its contributions to feminist and queer theory, *Queer Embodiment* offers fresh engagements with the philosophies of Grosz, Butler, Haraway, and Barad, while building on work in queer, trans, and intersex studies by Fausto-Sterling

and Stryker among others. The text would make a notable contribution to courses (undergraduate and graduate) engaging queer and trans theory, feminist theory, bioethics, and/or the intertwined histories of sex, gender, and sexuality. Malatino's queer, feminist approaches to the philosophical canon and the archive also make this text an important resource for graduate level seminars engaging themes of embodiment, biopolitics, bioethics, and the archive. However it is to be engaged, Malatino's deeply personal, historically grounded, and sharply theoretical account makes clear why intersexuality matters for all of us who are concerned with sex and gender, as well as broader issues of biopolitics and medical violence. Crucially, through their close engagement with sexological archives and discourses, Malatino reminds us that there is nothing inherently progressive about social constructivist understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality—these understandings, too, have been used to police intersex bodies—requiring that we carefully work through the implications of our theories and how they are necessarily articulated within a historical and institutional field of biopolitical intervention.

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