

Engendering and Tuning-in: *Sexual Bodies that Matter*

With gratefulness to Gerard Donkers, who tuned-in upon me, reflected on my thoughts and helped me to transform them into words.

In a cultural history that represents woman as objects of Eros and with passive desires, the reformulation of a sexuality towards others and towards the self is crucial. In this paper I will focus on how bodies become to matter within sexuality, but mostly how this can be reformulated without fixed dichotomies.

Gerard Donkers¹ makes the vital claim that in order to generate a self-steering (agent) subject, self-reflectivity is a crucial guideline. The steering of oneself always is embodied, placed within a contextual environment and connected to other subjects. Therefore the self-reflection must imply the tuning in upon ones internal processes, *and* the tuning in of the self within ones environment. Jessica Benjamin discusses some kind of similar process in: *A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective space*² how the representations and identifications of gender, structure sexuality and sexual agency. She claims that for women in order to find the desires of her own, "we are seeking [...] in the freedom to be both with and distinct from the other". Benjamin formulates this within her concept of "intersubjective reality", which refers to "what happens between individuals, and within the individual-with-others". Eros within these frameworks becomes an ontogese of interrelated bodies, which engender their matter *within* erotic practice. To look closer at this concept of engendering, I will refer to *The Politics of Touch* by Erin Manning. She suggests that the normative body-politics can be transcended by touch as a *reaching forward*; an *open ended-exchange* and *potential of becoming*. Therefore she places an emphasis on **trans-morphing** bodies, to resist the strict boundaries of gender and fixed matter.

I will employ the cultural discourse that objectifies women, on the personal objectified representation of *oneself* within an allegory of the mirror. Hereby I want to show how the objectification of oneself (of women, of races, or any other), displaces us as a participating subject of our experiences and actions. According to my judgment this will result in instrumental sexuality. Therefore I want to overcome the dualistic approach of bodies and genders³, by reformulating them as: engendered bodies that are self-regulating and tuned in by inter-subjectivity. I will claim that this tuned-in-inter-subjectivity is crucial for Eroticism, because it acknowledges an interconnectedness where unequivocal 'subject meets subject'⁴.

'The Subject' and 'the denied-subject'

Before the interaction between two sexual subjects can take place, foremost the notion of their own

¹ Gerard Donkers, *Grondslagen van veranderen, naar een methodiek zonder keurslijf*, Uitgeverij H. Nelissen 2009.

² Jessica Benjamin 'A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective space'. *Feminist studies/ Critical Studies*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1986 p. 92

³ That often are based on females as objects and males as subjects

⁴ Jessica Benjamin 1986 p. 98

sexual subjectivity must be acknowledged in its autonomous existence from others. The understanding of the human being as an active subject, derived within the *personaldirected* thinking traditions, such as the hermeneutic school in the 17th century⁵. These traditions refer to the human as a potential actor, which intentionally can construct and change the self and ones environment, by reflective capabilities.⁶ We may not confuse this with the rational tradition, which, according to Joas⁷, implies that an acting person can control oneself and ones surroundings. The Subject within the hermeneutic tradition is a subject that is conscious about the ‘boundaries of the rational steering and self-steering’⁸. Meaning or intentions are generated by ones interrelatedness. We may assume that this tradition did not survive to be applied to everybody. According to Freud, the famous father of psychoanalysis, women are missing an active desire of their own⁹. Jessica Benjamin claims that we are indeed unable to produce images, symbols or representations of women, which imply subjective sexuality in a way that counterbalances those of men as active subjects¹⁰. According to this cultural discourse, women can not be an active, self-steering subject, nor a sexual agent. The discourses of gender-desires are distributed through bodies of knowledge and the politics of representation. These channels reach within individual bodies, and the construction and representations that one makes of oneself. These webs of imaginary representations form body-matter, and the interaction and physical encounters with others.

Objectification and submission

Within our visual culture, eyes are the most developed senses, which we use to receive fragrances of ‘reality’. Seeing is often a way to understand the world outside of us, focused on the *exterior*. We do not *look* within ourselves, in the way we can our exteriority. Only since the 19th century the mirror that shows our whole physical appearance, is a common used object. I assume that the images reflected by the mirror are important for the one who sees oneself. The (imaginary) representations produce meaning and shape the understanding of oneself.

‘Looking at my image in the mirror, I see all that is invisible. The empty space of hidden worlds, that lay behind the drape of my skin. My skin is not just a crust, not solely a covering, or an armored crocodile skin. It is breathing, porous, humans’ the oldest organ and most sensitive receptor.¹¹ Almost unconsciously it soaks, and registers the external world. But while looking at my reflection, I befall aware that I am mummified behind that surface. The mirror awakens ones eyes, to focus on the nakedness of the outer shell that **one** inhabits. This may disrupt ones concentration from the messages we receive from our inner reality Our inner world consist irrational, dreamy, fragments of potential memories that melt within the eternal place of residence. **But the mirror shows** no evidence of these experiences, of ones organs, or the drives that one contains. The mirror is not smelling, not feeling, not hearing ones cravings. The mirror does not know, does not even see. It is one seeing oneself.

When I look at myself, I am the spectator, the mistress of representation. The me that is reflected can become an empty object, without an interior, or thought. She depends on me. I give her meaning. She is moldable and fragile, can be designed and destructed. She becomes my object, and is looking back at me.

Her eyes penetrate my inner-eternalness, and slowly she becomes my own. Materialized as the

⁵ Gerard Donkers. 2009. p. 55

⁶ Gerard Donkers. 2009. p. 55

⁷ Gerard Donkers. 2009. p. 56

⁸ Gerard Donkers. 2009. p. 56

⁹ Jessica Benjamin 1986 p. 84

¹⁰ Jessica Benjamin, 1986 p. 83

¹¹ Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch. Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* University of Minnesota Press, Mineapolis. 2007 p. 84

visual contours of my identity.

I become an object to myself; seeing myself seeing myself.

By first and foremost portraying ones sexuality through object status, aesthetic features, or passivity,¹² the existence of a 'real' body as experiencing, desiring and steering is denied. An object, can not see, only been seen. It does not do, it is the one where something is *done to*, or *done with*. If we apply this representation of women to love, they become empty tools. Instruments that are intransitive, passive objects in the desires of others.

According to Benjamin, women live on the hope for *ideal love*¹³. A love that is directed outwards and where the idealized other¹⁴, will give her the possession of herself. The objectification of the self, -and of love-, makes women submissive to something external. The containment of erotic power is refuted; the recourses are placed beyond ones reach. In my perspective these object-subject relations, imply an obligated: submission –possession, and generally instrumental sexuality.

The Subject back in: towards Intersubjectivity

Of course it is ridiculous, if not insane, to deny a bodies Subjectivity. The representations of women as objects, does not mean they *are* an object, or that their inner world *is* absent. The fact that women's sexuality is displaced upon an idealized other', is a misleading fallacy. Love is not something that can be injected by a nomological¹⁵ law. One must be open and susceptible to allow and accepted the experience of love. One can also shut down, the membrane of these entrances. Even the opening or closing of ones impressionability is an *activity*. Eventually it is not only important that one *is* a subject, because a subject can still be silenced, denied, violated or suppressed. It is of major significance that one can be a self-steering subject, which is acknowledged as such. Benjamin argues that self as Subject needs the acknowledgement of others, in order to develop the self in relation to, and responded by others.¹⁶ To be a subject of desire, (an sexual agent), one must poses the possibility to steer ones destiny, and a freedom to act upon ones own wishes and impulses, that serve as guidelines in that steering.¹⁷ Self-steering implies the desire to change and influence the self and the circumstances in a certain direction¹⁸. To know one's inner desires, that are property of the self, one must be tuned in upon ones own resources, and feel confident about ones impulses and the capability to express them.¹⁹ When ones interior is merely objectified, there can be no recognition of these inner-space, and the self will only be instrumental. A relationship towards ones inner self, and cultural accepted passages to express them, are therefore crucial. Benjamin claims that the awareness of ones intentions and desires, the competence to act upon them, feel the confidence that they are ones own, and may be recognized, ' evolves through the flow of recognition between two [or more] persons'.²⁰ This can be manifested in sexual relationships where one has the freedom to be with oneself in the presence of another.²¹ It assumes a sensitivity and receptiveness of ones innerness and simultaneously the ability to live this with the self, not aimed on the effect it evokes by the other. According to Donkers, transforming-actions²²

¹² Jessica Benjamin, 1986 p. 83

¹³ Jessica Benjamin, 1986 p. 79

¹⁴ mostly the male as symbol of subjectivity, and active desire.

¹⁵ Nomology is the study and discovery of general physical and logical laws

¹⁶ Jessica Benjamin, 1986. p 93

¹⁷ Jessica Benjamin, 1986 p. 84

¹⁸ Gerard Donkers, 2009. p 47

¹⁹ Jessica Benjamin, 1986 p.94

²⁰ Jessica Benjamin, 1986 p. 94

²¹ Jessica Benjamin, 1986 p. 98

²² That implies intentional steering and selfsteering, within the social domain by consciousness and unconsciousness practices, which are aimed upon the realization of certain values. As defined by Gerard Donkers, 2009. p 46

assume the presence of a reflective subject²³. This reflection mostly lapses spontaneously and does not need to be a meta-cognitive practice. By conscious reflection on one's situation, individuals and collectives can transform the current situation, when their actions are involved within the interdependency to the surroundings²⁴. By reflection one can adapt and reposition oneself, in the process of steering aimed at the intentions that one is achieving. So a body always contains a subject, but this subjectivity must be acknowledged. Benjamin approaches this in her definition of intersubjectivity, that 'refers to what happens between individuals, and within the individual with others. The real liberty of a sexual subject is not autonomy in solitude, independent from others. As a substitute, I assume that it entails the possibility to steer oneself, in one's interconnectedness with others, and thereby have the freedom to move beyond fixed norms and conventions. This redefinition is a step towards bodies that can discover their own matter and transcend the fixed patterns of dualistic culture. These bodies can become more than they can imagine, they live beyond dichotomies, are multiple and morphable.

Engendering bodies, morphing matter

Let me zoom in on the interrelatedness of subjects, that is pointed out here above.

The self, one's subjectivity, and the steering of one's actions, is dynamical and deeply interwoven with others and the contextual environment. One's own activity and desires need to be tuned in within one's reciprocal dependence and relatedness to the exterior. This process can be extended with the concept of 'engendering bodies' that Manning approaches in *The Politics of Touch*.²⁵ This approach is based on touch as *reaching forward*, where the responding, and tuning in on the other, does not happen by the other (touching) as such, but by the potentiality that the other, and the other touching, insist within one's body.²⁶ Touch as *reaching forward*, does not imply an ontological 'I' and 'you' that can be touched or are touching. It implicates an ontogenesis, expressed in and through the bodies in contact, that "are hunted by their potentiality to become".²⁷ To illustrate this, I will use an example of Manning's text.

“When I touch you, I re-place both you and myself within the governing system of body-politics, drawing to our attention the limit-space between your skin, my skin, and the world.[...] When I reach to you, I touch not the you who is fixed in space as pre-orchestrated matter/form. I touch the you that you will become in response to my reaching forward.”

This puts an emphasis on the way how bodies transform, and are transforming. The body, sexuality, and gender, are thereby approached as a multiple potentiality within a process of endless engendering. Hereby, objectified individual subjectivity, or fixed gender identities can not exist and the conventional and strict boundaries of gender and sexuality are challenged.

To experience one's own desire we need to recognize that there is an evident sexual subject. This subject is, and can only be, defined by inter-subjectivity, where all the subjects involved, are engendered by their tuning-in upon each other. Sexuality thereby becomes a voyage of discovering within the unknown, without fixed oppositions, and without a final aim. It makes a shift from concrete matter to morphological matter, from result to a becoming process. Thereby the intrinsic value of sexuality is placed within the sexual practice.

Her Subject can meet Subject, without a formal face or residence. One does not need to objectify or displace one's desires, nor disguise to become another, because the resources to crave, to transform, are within the reach of one's own.

²³ Gerard Donkers, 2009. p. 59

²⁴ Gerard Donkers, 2009, p.59

²⁵ Erin Manning, 2007

²⁶ Erin Manning, 2007, p. 88

²⁷ Erin Manning, 2007, p. 89

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In the Mirror:

So I look at **the interface of me and me looking at me.**

My surface, and my outside that is reflected.

Who is *she* and how does *she* represents her desire by her bodily formation? What can her surface, -where she expresses, and interacts- tell me about her longing, her memories and pain?

Only since the 19e century **the mirror** that shows our whole physical appearance is a common used object. If she looks at the image that the mirror reveals, there is no way that she can see herself.

After all, the most what she knows about herself is not visible within this reflection.

Eyes closed:

‘Do you see, on the structure of her skin the room that she inhabits, where she writes about her dreams, her dreams to become a writer?’

Do you see within her eyes, the battleground of conflicts between lust for life and destruction?

Do you hear within her breathing her history, which has brought her to become? Or could you smell her longing to be a woman that guides herself?

That unites the bonding with others, but starts with loving herself.

Her identity is formed within her bodily formation in a continuous and dynamical interaction.

That materiality is her receptor. It is her location, that separates and simultaneously connects her with the surrounding. She becomes, by music, by knowledge, by touch.

She deconstructed the representation of herself to explore its borders and possibilities. She transformed in the form of transformation.

This surface is an unknown sensation. The reflection in the mirror is a stranger. The washed hair, finished with conditioner, brushed and formed in a hairdo. The naked, shaved skin, carefully rubbed with body lotion, deodorant and perfume fragrances. All not familiar. She is dressed up with clothes that reveal her body shapes, a bra that ties her breasts, she smokes brand cigarettes and is followed by the sound of high heels that are walking with her. Suited in a different concept of beauty, of sexuality, of who she seems to desire to be.

This week was a **queer week.**

She could not run, nor jump from the stairs, not rub her eyes or sit on the ground.

She ate 47 chewing gums, and biked threw the rain without a rain suit. Constantly

she was focused on guiding her movements. Cooking, painting and eating with precaution, in order not to filthy herself, recovering her hair and her red lips. She was wondering about what kind of underwear is required to be a neat girl, and how other women use to deal with that?

But inescapable, I am in here.

So much time and so much money that I invested in her appearance.

So much time and so much money.

I was so occupied with her outside that I could barely concentrate on my feelings, *my* desires, and *my* thoughts. I was afraid that I would not have any time to listen to the dreams, longings and struggles of my heart, that are not perceivable on the outside.

In her outer shell I felt exposed, but also more **invisible**. Her smell was the smell of others, her jeans was surrounding others woman's legs.

But I knew that **behind this disguise**, somewhere still were my longings, my dreams, my battles and thoughts. And behind all those tide pants, there are hidden worlds like that. Agency about ones own desires can be hidden and given in every choice of appearance. I need my own way, a queer choice that **slips through discipline** of every kind.

Therefore I need to develop a **sensitive intern organ**, that registers what my body tells me. Because believe me, it speaks. It has an unimaginable language, to narrate about the memories its carries with her. It throbs, craves, and hungers, to tell me what it needs.

I want to compose a **synchronic correlation** between my inner senses and the way that I give them expression. Like a creative activity, based on a never ending self-discovery. Sounding from all the intangible forms and potentials wherein my sexuality can manifest. I need to acknowledge my inner senses, I need to know that I can trust them, and then I gather my guts. So I can be a devoted agent, and react and act effectively upon all that is sensed from within. And intentionally steer myself

Rosa Koenen.

"I was made to wander; if I had wings I would have soared to the highest my wings could propel me, but with my feet, I must now go as far as they can lead me. I have seen this face and it belongs only to me, but I also have seen it elsewhere, for it is the face of a traveler, a seeker; even if he moves not a muscle or a eye, for the mind is what travels farther then the flesh with al its frailty can reach."

F. Sionil José, *Viajero* a Filipino novel. P. 22