

Reading Duval

After Trans

Dr Fabián Coitinho



For Elizabeth Duval, who asked for a reply, and deserves one.

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Abstract

Six essays on Elizabeth Duval's *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario* (*After Trans: Sex and Gender Between the Left and the Identitarian*, La Caja Books, 2021), written as I read the book chapter by chapter. Each stands on its own and may be read without the others; together they cover the whole book, from the prologue to the epilogue. A Spanish version also exists; these essays are not translations of it but English rewritings.

A note on the edition

Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021, ebook (ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0). The book has not been published in English, and all translations from it are my own. As the ebook has no fixed pagination, references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. Each essay's notes follow it, numbered afresh.

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I

Finding Is Not Being

A reading of Elizabeth Duval's After Trans *(I): the prologue and the first chapter*

Dr Fabián Coitinho

1. An author weary of her label

Elizabeth Duval opens *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario* (*After Trans: Sex and Gender Between the Left and the Identitarian*) with a sentence no publisher of queer theory would print on the back cover: "Estoy hasta el coño de lo trans", which loses some of its force in English but amounts to "I am fed up to the cunt with trans".[1] The book came out in Spain in 2021; by the author's own account it was largely finished in August 2020, in the thick of the Spanish debate over a draft trans law.[2] Duval was very young, and the press had been calling her a "trans activist" for years. She disowns the title with considerable fury and some wit: if anything, she says, she is a trans "passivist", since she does nothing to deserve the other word, and she wonders whether Ana Botín, the banker, counts as a militant feminist for being a woman who occasionally appears in the news. Behind the joke lies a clue the book promises to follow up. Duval is not at all sure that "trans people" exist as a coherent category.[3]

This is the first instalment of a chapter-by-chapter reading, and it deals with the prologue and the first chapter, "Acquisition and Self-Determination of Gender: Having Versus Being". The book repays close attention for a reason that is rare in the field. Duval does not indulge in the nonsense of "I am a woman because I say I am a woman". She argues the opposite: that the subject does not invent itself by sovereign decree, that it arrives late to its own making, that identity is imposed before anything can be chosen. Her tools are Lacanian psychoanalysis and Judith Butler's theory of subjection, and with them she builds a critique of gender self-determination rather more serious than most of what is written by the feminists who reject it.

I accept a good deal of that critique. But it throws the will out of the window and leaves interiority comfortably seated in the same armchair. And the historicism with which Duval explains the multiplication of trans identities requires an invariant she never names, for the only one on offer is the sexed body. One further thing emerges by the end: the mechanisms she presents as universal describe incongruence with considerable precision, and they describe nothing else.

2. A language learnt without being chosen

The chapter begins with history. Following the historian Joanne Meyerowitz, Duval reconstructs an early twentieth-century quarrel between a European science of human bisexuality, which held that masculine and feminine traits were mixed in varying proportions in everyone, and an American psychology that insisted on two separate sexes and treated trans people as mentally ill.[4] From the 1940s onwards, the study of intersex conditions lent weight to the idea of a "psychological sex" more deeply rooted than the body, and from it came the logic that still governs: if the soul cannot be cured, correct the flesh. Duval calls this "gender neoplatonism",[5] and makes a genuinely sharp observation. The story of the wrong body, the woman's brain trapped in a man's frame, descends directly from that medicine, and in degraded form, having lost the notion of proportion and grown more binary than its ancestor. The *Born This Way* activist and the physician of 1940 are close relations, and neither of them knows it.

To define gender, Duval borrows the sociologist Judith Lorber's inventory, which breaks it down into institutions and individual traits, but she declines Lorber's thoroughgoing constructivism and accepts uncertainty about the weight of biology, in the words of the biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling:

"more or less, perhaps, possibly".[6] On that footing she raises her model. Gender is acquired as a language is acquired, through models and repetition, and nobody chooses their mother tongue. Languages change with history. Women's entry into paid work and the separation of sex from reproduction loosened the codes of gender, which, she says, have become "banalised",[7] and a looser language produces different speakers. That is why there are more trans people than twenty years ago: not because they always existed and we have only now noticed, a thesis Duval explicitly rejects, nor because someone made them up on a whim.

The analogy is good, and it proves something important: that an identity can be acquired without being willed. It does not prove everything Duval asks of it. I did not choose to speak Spanish, but Spanish exists independently of me; it has speakers who preceded me, public rules, and criteria for deciding whether I actually speak it. What is the equivalent for being a woman? Duval writes, as though the two were synonyms, "acquisition of gender or acquisition of sexual difference",[8] and the whole chapter slips through that little "or". Learning the codes of femininity, which is what Lorber and Fausto-Sterling describe, is acquiring fluency in a register. Sexual difference is not a register, not even for the Lacanians on whom she leans. Stretch the analogy and it turns on her. One can learn a language late and learn it very well, yet the native speaker hears the accent, and nobody becomes Uruguayan by mastering the River Plate idiom. Speaking a language and belonging to a class defined by something else are two separate facts, and the analogy, properly used, exhibits precisely that gap.

If the public criterion turns out to be the subject's imaginary identification, then the inner feeling the chapter showed out of the front door has come back in through the side entrance, rather better dressed. Duval never expelled interiority; she expelled the will. Where others said "I am a woman because I decide to be", she says "I am a woman because I came to identify as one without deciding", and the place where the question is settled remains exactly where it was: inside. Her own testimony confirms it. "I would be unable to get out of bed if I had to live the rest of my days as though I were a man"[9] is about as pure a report of interiority as one could wish for, and it is the argument she puts to work.

3. The body comes in by the back door

The theoretical heart of the chapter comes from the psychoanalyst Patricia Gherovici, for whom being trans "is not an experience of having but a strategy of being".[10] Duval adopts her definition: sexual identity "is determined neither by biology nor by any innate factor", it is learnt through language and identifications, and it "is built around a loss, a loss given at the inaugural moment in which a sex is assigned to us". Duval parts company with Gherovici on one point only: she allows a biological component in our receptivity to these messages, in how disposed someone is to learn certain elements of gender's idiom.

Two things are being run together here. Biology can mean chromosomes, hormones and brain development, that is, biology as the cause of an identity. It can also mean the materiality of the body, biology as the material on which a meaning is inscribed. Psychoanalysis can do without the first, and is right to. It cannot do without the second, and Gherovici's own sentence gives the game away, however much her vocabulary tries to hide it. She speaks of a sex that "is assigned to us", and I reject the expression. A newborn's sex is observed and recorded; the verb "assign" turns an observation into an act of authority, as though the midwife were handing out destinies rather than looking at a body. Yet

even on Gherovici's own terms, what she calls assignment is carried out by looking at genitals, and the loss around which identity is built is the loss of a position read off a body somebody saw. The phallus is not the penis, granted, and one may profitably distinguish the subject who carries a penis from the subject who carries the phallus. But the distinction needs the penis in order to mean anything, and the phallic signifier draws its imaginary support from the organ for reasons that are far from arbitrary: it is visible, it rises and falls, it can be lost. Castration presupposes something to castrate.

The Lacanian has a reply, and it is the one Gherovici makes: in the formulas of sexuation of Seminar XX,[11] the masculine or feminine position does not depend on anatomy, and a male body may be inscribed on the feminine side. Yet those formulas are written in relation to a function that bears the name of an organ, and not by accident. Duval, at any rate, never reaches that discussion. Her concession to biology falls entirely on the side of hormones and receptivity, on the side of cause. The body as material never appears in her chapter, though it slips in by the back door of every quotation she chooses.

4. Finding is not being

The best sentence in the chapter is this one: "finding is not choosing".[12] Duval writes it against those who hold, like the Spanish commentator Rosa María García, that gender is always self-determined, in trans people and in everybody else. She grounds it in a historicism taken from David Halperin against John Boswell: identities are historical, and an ancient Greek whom we would call heterosexual would not necessarily be one were he born today.[13] That someone finds their identity in the repertoire their age provides does not make the finding a decision. A footnote condenses the point into a phrase that might serve as a motto for the whole book: "the subject is never what it wants to be, but what it can be".[14]

Finding, however, is not being either. I may come upon a description in which I recognise myself to the marrow, which organises my experience and which I never chose, having picked it up from books, from a song, from my family, from the temper of the times. I may discover, say, that I am a revolutionary. I live in Pocitos, the leafier end of Montevideo, I wear a Cartier on my wrist, and I believe every word of it: I am Che Guevara. The identification is sincere, involuntary and constitutive of how I live myself, and it does not make me a revolutionary in the least. Duval dismantled, with great sophistication, the idea that one is whatever one decides to be, only to arrive somewhere an unchosen identity possesses, mysteriously, the power to constitute.

She seems half aware of it. In a footnote to a later chapter she writes that "all identities, not only strategic ones, are shared fictions (and therefore conventions)".[15] If identification is a shared fiction, it has no ontological weight and there is nothing to argue about. But another note in this chapter says that calling oneself a man or a woman "is an effect of being one, for causes external to the subsequent assertion", and that "nobody is anything by saying they are, or by will".[16] There is a being here that precedes the saying. What does it consist of? The chapter offers a single explicit answer, borrowed from the sociologist Eva Illouz: being a woman means "occupying a given position in the sexual market", being valued as an object in parts, by arse, tits and legs.[17] Duval's ontology is positional, and the position is conferred by others.

5. Constructed, but by whom?

The decisive sentence of the chapter says that the individual "is a woman because her imaginary identification has developed in such a way, even in spite of the individual; and she is one, too, because externally, and on the basis of relationality, she has been constructed as such".[18] There are two ways to read this. It can be a description of how women in general are made, and that is how Duval presents it at the close: "what I have set out here can be applied to anyone".[19] Read that way, it is Beauvoir, and it can be accepted. Or it can be a condition the trans woman must meet in order to be a woman, and then a dilemma opens. If relational construction is necessary, the trans woman whom the world goes on treating as a man is not a woman. If it is not necessary, imaginary identification is left on its own, and we are back with the interiority of the second section.

Duval does not choose, but the text gives her away. In the section on virtuality she concedes that the acquisition of gender may be "corrupted, altered or glitched", and that in such cases it "does not necessarily correspond to the sex assigned at birth, nor does it coincide with the gender one is read as in everyday relations".[20] The phrase "sex assigned at birth" is hers, and I have said why I do not accept it; what matters here is the second half of the sentence. She admits that identification may go one way and social construction another. And at the one point where relational construction would compromise her, her own childhood, she declares a convenient amnesia: "I have forgotten everything that made up my socialisation into gender".[21] The argument fails her in precisely the stretch of her life she claims not to remember.

There is something deeper still. Every social construction of someone as a man or a woman rests on what appears. Before any judgement, the other's body presents itself to us as sexed. We see one side of an object and co-intend the sides we cannot see, what Husserl called appresentation,[22] and in a human body what is co-intended includes its sex. A predicate can be imposed: a pronoun, a document, a courtesy. What appears before the predicate cannot be legislated. When what appears is a man's body, constructing it as a woman means laying a predicate on top, out of good manners or by statute. When what appears is a body that passes, I concede what must be conceded: perception delivers a woman, and nobody has forced anything. But what has then been achieved is an appearance, and the appearance of a thing is not the thing. The sexed body remains what it is, whether it shows itself or not. In a note to another chapter Duval mentions, as evidence of her privilege, that in France she is addressed as *madame* or *mademoiselle*. In her own scheme, that is what constructs her as a woman.[23] An ontology that depends on the courtesy of the waiter must be renewed at every table.

6. The butch, the queen and the travesti

Fairness first. Duval does not claim that the butch lesbian of another age was really a trans man who lacked the concept to realise it. She says the opposite. She rejects the thesis that trans people always existed, insists that "it will not do to establish a strict equivalence between being a trans woman today and being a *travesti* in those times", and calls the habit of turning Joan of Arc into a trans person a mythological construction. Her historicism spares her the crudest retroactive projection.

It does not spare her a subtler one. Duval writes that existences "which we would once have called, for example, butch lesbians" today "find another perfectly acceptable way of existing as trans men",[24] and that the same may hold between "a queer male existence and an existence as a trans woman". In

her note on the *travestis* of the mid-twentieth century she adds that they "would probably have been what today they would be offered the chance to be".[25] The butch, the effeminate homosexual and the *travesti* are thereby reduced to drafts of a single existence that our age has finally brought to completion. Were I fluent in the idiom of the activists, I should say this renders them invisible. It is enough to say that it annexes them.

The anthropologist Don Kulick spent months living among *travestis* in Salvador da Bahia in the mid-1990s, and what he recorded does not fit the scheme. Those *travestis* did not call themselves women. They understood themselves as homosexual men pursuing femininity in body and presentation; they did not disown their past as men, and they viewed genital surgery with distrust: the penis was part of their sexual lives rather than an error awaiting correction.[26] To read them as unfinished trans women, who would have arrived had history only let them, is to ride roughshod over their own self-understanding, with all the authority of a theory that professes to honour experience.

And the historicism carries a cost Duval never settles. If yesterday's butch and today's trans man are two forms of one existence, something persists beneath the change of name. What? Not identification, which on her account is historical. Not the category, which on her account is convention. Subtract both and what remains is a female body whose presentation and desire do not match what was expected of that body. Duval's historicism presupposes sex as its constant, and presupposes it in the very passage where she needs it to explain change. In passing she hands the feminists she will take on in the next chapter their favourite empirical premise, the absorption of butch women into the trans category. She describes it in her opponents' very terms and alters only the adjective: where they see a loss, she sees a "perfectly acceptable" form.

7. From pink brains to Tumblr

The most original part of the chapter concerns the virtual. After an initial sedimentation in childhood and at home, Duval says, the transmission of gender passes to the media, and increasingly to life online. In forums, on social networks and in massive role-playing games, one can alter how others treat one by a mere declaration or an avatar, and that second context of relations reshapes the first. Hence the glitched acquisition, and hence too, she suggests, the affinity between young trans women and computing, which would be no accident of stereotype.[27] She includes herself: she very nearly became the trans hacker girl of *Sense8*.

That the internet opened new possibilities of identification is hardly disputable. That it causally explains the rise in trans identities is another matter, and Duval offers not a single figure. She deserves credit for not making it the sole cause; the loosening of codes remains, for her, the deeper explanation. She deserves credit for nerve as well, since in 2020 a trans author was arguing that the multiplication of trans identifications is partly transmitted socially, through screens, a hypothesis very close to the one the physician Lisa Littman had published in 2018,[28] and which at the time rendered anyone who mentioned it suspect. But a hypothesis delivered in the tone of an explanation is still a hypothesis. Without care, one simply makes the *Born This Way* journey in reverse: it used to be all in the brain, and now it was all on Tumblr. One causal muddle is traded for a more fashionable one.

What the virtual does explain, and Duval very nearly says it, is why it makes such fertile ground. She speaks of negative liberty: there are fewer obstacles online than in the street. The missing obstacle has a name. On a screen, image and voice arrive separately, cropped, carrying far less sensory informa-

tion than a body in the same room. Appresentation is impoverished, and the predicate one assigns oneself never collides with the flesh that would contradict it. The virtual does not uncover a hidden identity; it removes the body that gainsays it.

8. The body in silence

The chapter ends with a sentence of universal ambition: the mechanisms of gender acquisition "are, fundamentally, the same" for everyone.[29] Here lies its most important mistake. For those who live no incongruence between their body and what they are, sex and gender are not experienced as two things. They form a continuum, a single experience that admits no partition. The only things that can be separated from it and studied as acquired are roles and stereotypes: how one dresses, how one speaks, what work one is expected to do, what desire one is presumed to have. The butch and the effeminate homosexual live a real distance between their bodies and the stereotype, but never between their bodies and what they are, which is why neither concludes that they belong to the other sex. The feminism that preceded the trans question, and the old gay movement, understood this perfectly well, and fought against roles without positing a separate identity. Beauvoir, so often invoked, wrote that one is not born a woman, and the sentence presupposes that one is born female: what she describes is the destiny imposed on a female body, not an identity floating free of it.[30]

Hence I do not use the term "cis", and I say so plainly. It adds no precision whatever about people who are not trans, and it presupposes the very thing denied here. "Cis" names a coincidence between an identity and a sex, and for two things to coincide there must be two of them. Where there is only one, the prefix describes a relation that does not exist. It presents itself as a neutral label and smuggles in an ontology. I prefer to speak of people without incongruence.

The surgeon René Leriche defined health as life lived in the silence of the organs.[31] One notices an organ when it hurts, and the sexed body, in those without incongruence, keeps quiet. For the trans person it is never quiet, because in every situation it is what gives them away. Gender identity, as a concept, is born of that failure and then generalised to everyone, as though each of us had a liver with feelings. That is why the concept strikes those who live no dysphoria as alien, very nearly unintelligible: they are asked to recognise in themselves something they have never come across.

The most serious objection is proprioception. Nobody feels it; it is the perfect instance of an organ in silence; and yet we all have it. It reveals itself when it fails, as in the case of Ian Waterman, who lost his sense of proprioception to an infection at nineteen and had to learn to move by watching his own body.[32] Gender identity, it will be said, is just the same: mute in those for whom it works, visible only in incongruence. But proprioception can be demonstrated in those who do not feel it, because it has a measurable function independent of failure: one can close one's eyes and touch one's nose, and one can measure how the body adjusts its tone and posture. What is the equivalent function of gender identity in a person without incongruence? What does it do that the lived sexed body and learnt roles do not already do? If the only evidence that we all possess it is that in some people it fails, the argument goes round in a circle: the absence of failure counts as proof of a silent function, and nothing could ever count against it. That resembles proprioception rather less than it resembles positing an organ to account for a pain.

Nor is it an accident where trans people direct their energy. They direct it at what, for everyone else, are roles and stereotypes, and at the body too, through hormones, surgery and work on the voice. But those modifications aim at what is presented to others, at the visible face of the body, and so they leave the argument untouched. One works on appearance because appearance is all that can be worked on.

What Duval builds in this chapter, then, is an ontology of incongruence, and as such it has real merit: it explains without pathologising and without celebrating, it distrusts both voluntarism and heroic biography, and it has the candour to call one's own life story "fictional writing".[33] Its error is to present itself as a theory of everyone's gender. For the rest of us there is nothing to acquire between the body and what we are, because there is no between. Duval showed, with great talent, that finding is not choosing. She left out the second half: finding is not being either.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), "Prolegómenos". The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Duval, note [m] to ch. 3, "Contra la tolerancia y la estadística": the bulk of the book was finished in August 2020, except the chapter on La Veneno, added at the end of October.
3. Duval, "Prolegómenos".
4. Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002, ch. 3, "From Sex to Gender"; followed by Duval, ch. 1, "Breve historia de lo trans".
5. Duval, ch. 1, "Breve historia de lo trans", where she discusses Miquel Missé, *A la conquista del cuerpo equivocado*, Madrid, Egales, 2018.
6. Duval, ch. 1, "Esbozar una definición del género", drawing on Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994, and Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World*, New York, Routledge, 2012.
7. Duval, ch. 1, "Esbozar una definición del género".
8. Ibid.
9. Duval, ch. 1, "Un primer programa político: devenir sujeto".
10. Patricia Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis: A Lacanian Perspective on Sexual Difference*, New York, Routledge, 2017; quoted in Duval, ch. 1, "La imposibilidad conceptual de la autodeterminación".
11. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore. On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink, New York, Norton, 1998, ch. VII.
12. Duval, ch. 1, "La imposibilidad conceptual de la autodeterminación", where she discusses Rosa María García.
13. David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, New York, Routledge, 1990; John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980. Duval sides with Halperin in ch. 1, "La imposibilidad conceptual de la autodeterminación".
14. Duval, note [a] to ch. 1.
15. Duval, note [n] to ch. 3.
16. Duval, note [d] to ch. 1.
17. Duval, ch. 1, "Un primer programa político: devenir sujeto", quoting Eva Illouz.
18. Duval, ch. 1, "El sujeto, su imagen y la virtualidad".
19. Duval, ch. 1, "Un primer programa político: devenir sujeto".
20. Duval, ch. 1, "El sujeto, su imagen y la virtualidad".
21. Duval, ch. 1, "Breve historia de lo trans".
22. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* (1931), trans. Dorion Cairns, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, Fifth Meditation, §50.

23. Duval, note [g] to ch. 2.
24. Duval, ch. 1, “La imposibilidad conceptual de la autodeterminación”.
25. Duval, note [a] to ch. 1, where she also rejects any strict equivalence between the trans woman of today and the *travesti* of another age, and the appropriation of Joan of Arc.
26. Don Kulick, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998.
27. Duval, ch. 1, “El sujeto, su imagen y la virtualidad”.
28. Lisa Littman, “Rapid-onset gender dysphoria in adolescents and young adults: A study of parental reports”, *PLOS ONE*, 13 (8), 2018, e0202330 (corrected version, 2019).
29. Duval, ch. 1, “Un primer programa político: devenir sujeto”.
30. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, London, Jonathan Cape, 2009, vol. II, part one, ch. 1.
31. René Leriche (1936), quoted by Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological* (1966), trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett, New York, Zone Books, 1989.
32. Jonathan Cole, *Pride and a Daily Marathon*, London, Duckworth, 1991.
33. Duval, ch. 1, “Un primer programa político: devenir sujeto”.



II

Being Seen Is Not Being

A reading of Elizabeth Duval's After Trans *(II): "Identity Politics, the Left and Trans"*

Dr Fabián Coitinho

1. A chapter that compels concession

In *Después de lo trans* (*After Trans*, 2021), the Spanish writer Elizabeth Duval attempts something rare in trans theory: she argues about the foundations of the trans category instead of fortifying them. In the first chapter she went after gender self-determination with respectable weapons and reached a conclusion worth keeping: nobody chooses their identity; one comes upon it. The first instalment of this reading replied that coming upon it is not enough either, since identifying as something, however involuntarily, does not suffice to make one that thing. The second chapter, "Identity Politics, the Left and Trans", tries the opposite route. It no longer looks for the woman within, in identification, but without, in the gaze of others.

It is a hard chapter to criticise, for a reason best confessed at the outset. Duval nearly always begins from something true. One listens, nods, concedes, and by the time one looks up she has arrived somewhere else entirely, and there is no retreating without unsaying oneself. This essay will therefore do the reverse of what is customary: concede everything that ought to be conceded, all at once and in writing, and then isolate the single inference that does the dirty work.

A great deal is conceded. Duval is right to resist the new rule that "about what does not define one's own subjectivity, one must keep silent",[1] and right that the rule condemns trans people to speak of nothing but their difference. She is right to tell Janice Raymond, the feminist who wrote *The Transsexual Empire* in 1979, that transgression should be abandoned as the ground of trans legitimacy, since plenty of trans lives are thoroughly conservative.[2] She is right to turn the charge of colonialism back on those who press Zapotec *muxes* or North American two-spirit people into the trans category, which is a medical and Anglophone invention of the twentieth century.[3] And she is right, above all, in her best argument. Social violence operates through perceptual schemas. Nobody checks a woman's chromosomes before groping her on the bus.[4] A trans woman perceived as a woman may suffer exactly the same harassment as any other woman; granted, at least for those who have been thoroughly refurbished, bodywork, respray and facelift included. All of that is conceded.

What is not conceded is the next step. From "X receives the treatment reserved for category C because X is perceived as C", Duval moves to "X belongs to C". That leap is what she must be made to justify.

2. Wingardium perceptatus

If someone mistakes a doctor for a nurse, that perception may govern entirely how he is treated: what he is asked, what is expected of him, what authority he is granted, whether he is allowed to speak or told to go and fetch the doctor. The perception explains the whole of the treatment causally. It does not change his profession. There is no *wingardium perceptatus* by which the wand of someone else's gaze turns a doctor into a nurse.

The same holds for sex, and the most useful example sits within Duval's own taxonomy. Take a flamboyantly effeminate gay man, all feathers and generous hips, whom some fellow perceives from behind as a woman and harasses. The perception explains the harassment; it does not make him a woman. Now consider how Duval would classify the episode. She distinguishes two kinds of violence. Structural violence is that of men against women, aimed at whoever is perceived through the female schema. Corrective violence punishes those who stray from the script, and among its victims she

names, explicitly, "excessively feminine men".[5] By Duval's own criterion, the harassment of our gay man counts as structural violence against women, since he was perceived through the schema of a woman. Her categories place him on the women's side, and nobody, Duval included, would conclude that he is one. If the inference fails for him, she owes us an account of why it holds for anyone else.

The leap is in the text, not in my reading of it. Duval starts from the postulate that "being a trans woman implies being a woman",[6] though she offers it as provisional, and a few pages later establishes that "the reality of the category woman would lie, then, on the side of gender",[7] on the side of the system that reads us. First she places the trans woman inside the category; then she places the category in the system of reading; and between the two there is no argument at all. What we have is a very good theory of how someone is socially recognised, presented as though it were a theory of what someone is.

3. The "social being" escape route

Duval has an exit prepared, and it is best sealed before she reaches for it. On entering the discussion she warns: "Here I am not interested in identities or identifications", and says she will concentrate "exclusively on social being".[8] She might say, then, that she never spoke of membership in any ontological sense, and merely described how the category functions in society.

The exit is expensive. If she describes social being and nothing more, she has a theory of recognition, which is precisely the theory I conceded in full. But then she cannot use it for what she uses it for. The chapter is not content to describe; it means to refute. Duval announces that she will answer the thesis that women's oppression is grounded in the biological and visible reality of sex, and that her answer "will have to take the form of a refutation".[9] A refutation concerning the ground of oppression is a thesis about what is oppressed, not about how it is recognised. Duval must choose. Either she stays with social being and forfeits the refutation, or she keeps the refutation and owes us a justification of the leap. She cannot have both.

4. The body she concedes and the sex she banishes

Three questions that Duval runs together are best kept apart. Genealogy asks why the category woman arose. Mechanism asks how we socially recognise a woman. Reference asks what kind of entities the category woman classifies. Duval distinguishes the first two very well. With the third she does something more interesting than forget it: she renames it.

"I prefer to speak of the objective as body rather than as sex," she writes; "the body is what is objective." The body exists, she says, as a given, pre-existing fact; sex, on the other hand, would operate "through a construction of social associations and conventions" laid over variable bodies.[10] She concedes the invariant under the name of body and banishes it under the name of sex. Anything one says to her about the body she will accept; anything one says about sex she will declare convention.

Her own genealogy will not let her pull it off. To explain where gender came from, Duval invokes the sexual division of labour and the capacity to gestate, and writes that "the origin of patriarchy can hardly be explained unless we attend to its connection with a primary division between the sexes".[11] Labour cannot be divided by a convention that does not yet exist; one needs a real class of bodies that

gestate and another that does not. In the genealogy, sex functions as a fact. In the reference, it abruptly becomes a convention. Duval uses one word in two registers as the argument of the moment requires: "the origin of gender is material, but gender itself is not".[12]

Hence the argument from indicators. That a category operates through perceptual indicators does not mean those indicators have replaced what they indicate. When someone perceives a woman by her face, voice, silhouette and secondary sexual characteristics, those features did not enter history by a roll of the dice. They are indicators ordinarily correlated with sex, which is why they serve to recognise it. That they sometimes come apart, now that medicine and make-up have learnt to manufacture them, does not show that the schema has ceased to refer to sex. It shows that the schema can be fooled, which is another matter altogether.

5. The surprise package

Duval supplies the counterexample herself, and no phenomenological smuggling is required. In one of the most candid passages of the chapter, she asks whether a lesbian is transphobic for rejecting a trans woman who at first attracted her, and answers that she is not. She finds it "absolutely logical" that the lesbian should have presupposed in the trans woman "an underlying sexual schema incorporating all the characteristics society identifies with the female sex, including the presence of a vulva", and that rejection should follow "on discovering that the genitals do not match". She adds that it is futile to demand that lesbians deconstruct their rejection of penises.[13] Thus far, an intellectual honesty few allow themselves.

But hold on. What happened there? Was our lesbian seized by a sudden attack of phallophobia? What happened is simpler, and graver for Duval's theory: new information about the body arrived and corrected the earlier perceptual schema, and corrected it on precisely a point that matters sexually. The surprise package, if you will forgive the expression, demonstrates that the initial perception had not abolished reference to the body. It had drawn a tacit inference about the body, and the inference turned out false.

Duval might reply that the correction happens within the schema, which held an imaginary vulva and lost it. And what corrected it? A schema is not corrected by another schema; it is corrected by the body. A schema the body can contradict is a schema that refers to the body. Were the schema autonomous, as Duval's theory of violence requires, the discovery would be irrelevant and the lesbian would have no reason to lose her desire. Duval grants the lesbian that right, and in doing so grants the body an authority over the schema that the rest of the chapter denies it. Her best concession is the best evidence against her.

Phenomenology, only now, helps us see why. There is no need to call perception "mere appearance". One may grant Merleau-Ponty, whom Duval quotes,[14] that we perceive a woman immediately, and not a collection of features from which something is afterwards deduced. But immediacy is not infallibility, nor immunity to correction. We see a smooth red ball; we turn it over and find the other side green and dented; perception corrects itself without passing through any reasoning. Perception is not a conscious judgement, and nor is it the oracle at Delphi. That the perceptual mechanism can err about the referent does not abolish the referent. Quite the reverse: the very possibility of error presupposes a difference between what seems to be and what is.

6. "Just as I see her"

In the most combative part of the chapter, Duval turns on a left she calls "neo-materialist", the one that blames identity politics for the left's misfortunes and takes refuge in "material conditions". She mocks its supposed "materialist analysis", which in her account holds that things are "just as I touch and see them", and delivers what she takes to be the coup de grâce: this would be, "curiously, the supreme expression of subjectivism",[15] a position that admits no criticism of perception.

It is a good line, and I should like to return it, gift-wrapped. What is the category woman in Duval's theory? It is the category to which belongs whoever is read through the female schema. A woman is whoever is seen as a woman: just as I see her. The theory that makes perception a criterion of being is hers. The position defended here is the opposite one: perception is immediate but corrigible, and what corrects it is the body. The subjectivism Duval charges her opponents with is exactly what sustains her own ontology.

7. What the aggressor punishes

The typology of violence, the most carefully worked part of the chapter, has the same crack running through it. Duval writes that "a woman is not assaulted in the street for having a vulva" but "for the imagination, the gaze projected onto her",[16] and applies this to trans women. If a rapist attacks a trans woman because he perceives her as a woman, the violence is structural, even if the victim's genitals do not match those his schema supposed. And if he also feels "deceived", because the body "should have been" male, corrective violence is added.[17]

Very well. But then perception no longer suffices to classify the violence. To know which kind is present, or whether both are, one must reconstruct what property the aggressor believes himself to be punishing at the moment he strikes. The victim is the same from beginning to end, and so is the harm; what changes along the way is the object of the aggressor's intent, which began by targeting a woman and ended by targeting someone who, in his eyes, had deceived him about her body. A theory of violence that needs to know that can no longer claim that everything happens in the gaze.

There is something deeper, and it is circular. Duval defines the category woman by perception, and defines structural violence as violence against the category woman. "She is assaulted as a woman" therefore cannot serve as evidence that someone belongs to the category, since it was built into the definition. That the line about the vulva may be true of a particular episode does not make it sufficient as an account of the system. The aggressor need not know that particular woman's vulva in order to act within a system whose class of targets was historically organised around having one. Duval says as much herself every time she mentions the capacity to gestate.

8. What remains

The first chapter explored the inward route: identifying as a woman, even involuntarily, does not suffice to be one. The second explores the outward route: being perceived as a woman, with all the consequences that brings, does not suffice either. Duval has travelled, with real talent, the two great non-bodily routes by which membership of a sex might be defined, and on both one must grant her a great

deal. Identifications exist, perceptions exist, and both are causally powerful and socially decisive. Conceding this does not blunt the critique. It sharpens it, because it leaves a single question standing: what is missing, when neither route will do?

And there the body returns. Not as the cudgel of the Vox voter, or of the Opus Dei matron who repeats "it's basic biology" as one might tell a rosary. It returns as the measure of the other two routes, the only thing that explains why identification and perception can be right, diverge or go wrong. One may squeeze the proverbial fat lady until she stops singing, and the invariant is still there. Duval saw it, called it the body, declared it objective, and sent it into exile under another name, because had she let it in as sex her chapter would have collapsed.

The ending writes itself. An essayist who spends twenty pages mocking the fetish of the "material" deserves to be seen off with "Material Girl". With the video, preferably, which is better than the song: Madonna in a pink gown, long gloves and pearls, surrounded by suitors in dinner jackets, imitating Marilyn Monroe's number in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. It is a copy of a copy of femininity, the very chain of imitations Duval learnt from Butler.[18] All that cited, rehearsed and reproduced femininity fails to erase the material girl underneath, and the song, in its own way, knew it.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), ch. 2, "Política identitaria, la izquierda y lo trans", section "La posición identitaria del discurso". The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1979 (Duval quotes the introduction to the 1994 edition); Duval, ch. 2, "Introducción al feminismo transexcluyente".
3. Duval, ch. 2, "Historicidad y contexto de lo trans".
4. Duval, ch. 2, "La percepción en la violencia y el deseo".
5. Ibid.
6. Duval, ch. 2, "El género como sistema y el género como proceso".
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Duval, ch. 2, "La percepción en la violencia y el deseo".
10. Duval, ch. 2, "El género como sistema y el género como proceso".
11. Ibid.
12. Duval, ch. 2, "La percepción en la violencia y el deseo".
13. Ibid.
14. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. Donald A. Landes, London, Routledge, 2012, part one, ch. V, "The Body as a Sexed Being"; quoted in Duval, ch. 2, "La percepción en la violencia y el deseo".
15. Duval, ch. 2, "Realidades materiales y neomaterialismos".
16. Duval, ch. 2, "La percepción en la violencia y el deseo".
17. Ibid.
18. Madonna, "Material Girl" (1984), video directed by Mary Lambert (1985), restaging the number "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990.



III

A Concept That Does Not Exist

A reading of Elizabeth Duval's After Trans *(III): "Against Tolerance and Statistics" and "Trans Theology: The Gospel of La Veneno"*

Dr Fabián Coitinho

1. Eight out of ten

In *Después de lo trans* (*After Trans*, 2021), the Spanish writer Elizabeth Duval argues about the foundations of the trans category instead of fortifying them, which makes her a rare and valuable interlocutor. The two previous instalments of this reading reached a twofold conclusion. In her first chapter, Duval showed that nobody chooses their identity, that one comes upon it in the repertoire of one's age; yet identifying as a woman, however involuntarily, does not suffice to be one. In her second, she showed that social violence operates through perceptual schemas; yet being perceived as a woman does not suffice either. The third and fourth chapters change the ground. They no longer ask what a trans woman is, but what sort of group trans people form, and Duval's answer is the boldest in the book: none at all.

The third chapter, "Against Tolerance and Statistics", opens with Pasolini.[1] To tolerate someone is a refined way of condemning them, since the majority grants the different person the right to be different without ever ceasing to see them as such; it releases them from the physical ghetto only to confine them in a mental one. Duval lives that sentence with considerable lucidity. Trans people are invited to speak during Pride week, and only about what sets them apart. Then comes the heart of the chapter, a figure that ministers, news agencies and commentators were all repeating in the Spain of 2020: "more than 80 per cent of trans people are condemned to unemployment".[2] Duval argues that the figure "comes out of nowhere as a rhetorical instrument for manufacturing victims", and she proves it.[3] The European survey of trans people found that, across the Union, half were employed, one in four was studying and one in eight was out of work.[4] In a footnote, Duval traces the 80 per cent to its source: a participatory assessment carried out with 33 trans women in Barcelona. The Spanish study with the larger sample put the figure, for 2009, at a little over 35 per cent.[5]

All of this must be conceded, and gladly. The criticism is sound: one cannot take a sample of 33 vulnerable women and extend the result to a far broader category. So is the conclusion Duval draws from it. Trans, she says, "cannot describe a demographically or sociologically coherent group", and to put a middle-class student who passes unnoticed in the same statistic as a sixty-year-old trans woman who worked the streets is "a self-serving conceptual steamroller".[6] Duval is here at her best: rigorous, left-wing in the good sense, suspicious of cheap compassion. What follows does not dispute her numbers. It disputes that the principle she turns on other people's numbers ceases to apply when the arguments are her own.

2. A concept that does not exist

If a group is too heterogeneous to sustain a common unemployment rate, there is no reason whatever for it to be more homogeneous when it comes to sustaining a common explanation. Whoever demands stratification by age, class, era and passing before speaking of unemployment must demand it too before speaking of how an identity is formed. It may very well be that what we now call "trans" gathers psychological, social and biographical phenomena that are causally distinct and share nothing but a recent label. A category can be politically useful and scientifically dreadful. "People with disabilities" works admirably in legislation while grouping mechanisms that have nothing to do with one another; nobody would think of seeking a common cause for blindness, paraplegia and deafness because they share a clause in a statute.

What is remarkable is that Duval needs no one to tell her this. She says it herself, in this very chapter, in so many words. The steamroller, she writes, feigns "a supposed equality among all the people presumably grouped together by a single concept that does not exist".[7] A concept that does not exist. And in a note to the same chapter she goes further: "conceptually, trans is not a valid framework", and what has "obvious political utility" is the use of "a strategic trans identity to build a coalition without head or tail (at the theoretical level)".[8] It is the disability analogy, very nearly word for word. For Duval, trans is a political umbrella with no theoretical coherence, and she says so without equivocation.

The difficulty begins when one returns to the earlier chapters with that sentence in hand.

3. The proliferation of an umbrella

In her first chapter, Duval set out to explain a phenomenon: "the proliferation of trans people in our Western framework".[9] Her explanation was single and elegant. The codes of gender loosened as women entered paid work and sex came apart from reproduction, and a looser language produces more speakers who do not fit. In the second chapter she restated it as a formal proposition: "the proliferation of trans subjectivities" must be read as "a loosening or blurring of codes", such that a male body which ought to have received a masculine socialisation may acquire a "feminine" one through the influence of media, school, law or family.[10]

But if trans is a coalition without head or tail, "the proliferation of trans people" is not a phenomenon. It is the sum of several, each of which may grow for different reasons, at different rates and in different populations. The man who transitions at fifty and the adolescent girl who declares herself a boy at fourteen share a label and a form; nothing guarantees that they share a cause. Before Duval wrote her book, the clinical literature had already recorded that adolescent referrals to gender identity clinics in several countries had become predominantly female; Aitken and colleagues documented the shift in 2015.[11] A change of that kind in the composition of a population obliges one to ask whether one is facing a single phenomenon on the rise or several distinct phenomena counted together. To explain by a single mechanism the growth of a label that gathers such disparate trajectories is precisely what Duval reproaches in the 80 per cent: taking a real heterogeneity and converting it into a unity by means of a word. The steamroller she denounces in the statistics, she drove herself through the theory two chapters earlier.

Duval has a defence, and it deserves its best form. In the first chapter she said that the mechanisms of gender acquisition "can be applied to anyone", and in a note she made clear that studying why someone arrives at a discordant identity "lies well beyond" her essay; she even suggested that psychoanalysis might explain "some cases" of trans women through foreclosure, which is to admit that there are different cases.[12] She might say, then, that she never offered a trans aetiology, only a general theory of how gender is acquired, valid for everyone. But the defence exacts its price. If her theory explains nothing specifically trans, it does not explain the proliferation, and the proliferation was what the first chapter claimed to explain. Duval must choose. Either the first chapter explains a unitary trans phenomenon, and collides head-on with the non-existent concept of the third, or it explains nothing in particular, and her thesis about the rise in trans people is left floating in mid-air.

4. Rigour with other people's figures

There is, moreover, a double standard worth laying on the table. The same author who goes to the source of the 80 per cent and counts its 33 respondents writes in her first chapter, of the number of trans people in the world, that there is "an exponential statistic", and corrects herself in the very next breath: "perhaps I exaggerate: I am fairly sure it is not an exponential trend, though it is rising".[13] There is no figure, no source, no sample. The same goes for her hypothesis about the virtual: that forums, social networks and role-playing games have multiplied trans identifications is offered as an explanation without a single number in support. Demanding the sample from one's opponent and sparing oneself the trouble when the argument is one's own is also a steamroller, merely driven in the opposite direction.

5. The gospel and its soul

The fourth chapter, added at the end of October 2020, is a critique of *Veneno*, the series by Javier Calvo and Javier Ambrossi about Cristina Ortiz, La Veneno, the Andalusian trans woman whom Spanish television in the nineties turned into a spectacle and who died in 2016.[14] Duval reads it as a gospel. The series does to La Veneno exactly what it accuses the media of having done: it turns her into an image, an idol, a martyr who dies for everyone's sins and redeems the trans women who came after her. The critique has brilliant pages and two precise objections. The first is that the series puts into La Veneno's mouth a dogma nobody contradicts: "if you are one, you will always be one, because this is something you carry inside from the day you are born".[15] The second is that it renders her anachronistic. Duval recalls that La Veneno also said at one time that she was a man, and doubts "very much that she ever used the word trans" the series has her pronounce. "Myths require anachronisms."[16]

One might think Duval is here contradicting her own historicism, since in her first chapter she sanctioned precisely what she now reproaches: reading past existences in the light of present forms. There she wrote that existences "which we would once have called, for example, butch lesbians" today "find another perfectly acceptable way of existing as trans men", and that the *travestis* of the mid-century "would probably have been what today they would be offered the chance to be". Fairness, however, requires a distinction. Her complaint against the series is not continuity as such. The chapter opens with the child Valeria Vegas watching La Veneno on television, and Duval writes that La Veneno is for her "a reference for her imaginary construction, a possibility, a strategy of being".[17] Duval herself reads La Veneno as the repertoire in which another woman found her form, and between "might have found another form today" and "was really trans all along" there is a difference that must be granted her. What she reproaches in the series is the soul: the idea that being trans is carried within from the cradle and passes intact through the ages.

That reproach, however, leaves a question the book never answers. If yesterday's butch and today's trans man are two forms of "the same existence", if the mid-century *travesti* and the present-day trans woman share something that makes the one the forerunner of the other, what is it that they share?

6. Three answers for one existence

There are three possible answers, and the book contains two of them.

The first belongs to the series: an inner essence. Being trans is a soul one carries from birth, which each age clothes in whatever words it has to hand. It is a coherent answer, and Duval rejects it quite rightly, for it is the very "gender neoplatonism" she denounced in her first chapter: the body as prison of a sexed soul. The second answer is Duval's, and it consists in having none. She rejects the soul of the series, and in her second chapter she had rejected sex as well, declaring it a convention. Take away identity, which is historical, the category, which is conventional, and self-description, which changes with the repertoire, and nothing remains that would allow one to speak of "the same existence". The series has a bad answer; Duval has none at all.

The third is what remains once the other two are discarded, and it must be put carefully, because it is easily caricatured. The body alone does not tell us what persists. A butch and a feminine lesbian have the same female body, and the latter becomes a trans man in no era whatsoever. What persists is a sexed body with dispositions that do not match what was expected of that body: a presentation, a desire, sometimes an orientation. The body is not all that persists, but it is the term without which "not matching" means nothing. The butch's masculinity is masculine in relation to a woman's body; without that body it is a deviation from nothing. And so the body returns to the book once again, like those tiresome relations one sees off at the front door who, ten minutes later, are found in the kitchen putting the kettle on.

7. The only firm thing about "us"

The body returns, moreover, from Duval's own lips. In her critique of *Veneno*, her deepest objection is that the series makes sisters of Valeria Vegas, an urban middle-class journalist, and Cristina Ortiz, who grew up in a village, was driven into prostitution, obtained hormones on the black market and was raped by prison officers. "It cannot be said that, wherever we come from, we are somehow all the same."[18] Duval includes herself in the contrast: she too never had to sell herself, and never suffered that violence. And to mark the distance, she lists what she does share with La Veneno: "we will share our inability to gestate, we will share some childhood experiences (and only perhaps), we will share fears, imaginaries, but we cannot be the same".[19]

Note the order. The childhood experiences come with a reservation in brackets. The fears and imaginaries are vague. The first thing to appear, the only thing affirmed without hesitation, is a feature of the body: the inability to gestate. And the inability to gestate does not distinguish a trans woman from any man; what makes it a trait shared among trans women, rather than between them and other women, is a body of male origin. Nor is this an isolated detail. In her prologue Duval tells us that she writes because she will never be a biological mother, and that hormone treatment left her sterile.[20] In the series, the worst insult Valeria suffers, by Duval's own account, is her boyfriend's mother alluding at Christmas dinner to her inability to bear children.[21] Every time the book looks for what unites trans women, or what wounds them, the answer lies in the body the theory had sent into exile.

Duval is right about almost everything she says in these two chapters. Tolerance is a condemnation with good manners, the 80 per cent was smoke, and the series turns a real woman into a holy card and puts words in her mouth that were never hers. But the principle with which she dismantles other people's statistics dismantles her own theory as well, and the question with which she reproaches the

series for its eternal soul leaves her with nothing to put in its place. When at last she must say what holds the "us" together, the only firm thing she finds is a body. It is the concept that, by her account, does not exist, and the one thing the book never quite manages to stop naming.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), ch. 3, "Contra la tolerancia y la estadística", quoting Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Lutheran Letters* (1976), "Gennariello". The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Duval, ch. 3.
3. Ibid.
4. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), *Being Trans in the European Union: Comparative Analysis of EU LGBT Survey Data*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2014; cited in Duval, ch. 3.
5. Duval, note [m] to ch. 3.
6. Duval, ch. 3.
7. Ibid.
8. Duval, note [n] to ch. 3.
9. Duval, ch. 1, "La imposibilidad conceptual de la autodeterminación".
10. Duval, ch. 2, "Cuatro proposiciones sobre lo trans", third proposition.
11. Madison Aitken et al., "Evidence for an altered sex ratio in clinic-referred adolescents with gender dysphoria", *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 12 (3), 2015, pp. 756–763.
12. Duval, ch. 1, "Un primer programa político: devenir sujeto", and note [e] to ch. 1.
13. Duval, ch. 1, "Esbozar una definición del género".
14. Duval, ch. 4, "Teología trans: el evangelio de la Veneno según Valeria Vegas (y los Javis)", on *Veneno*, series created by Javier Calvo and Javier Ambrossi (Atresplayer Premium, 2020).
15. Duval, ch. 4, fragment 1.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Duval, ch. 4, fragments 6 and 7.
19. Duval, ch. 4, fragment 6.
20. Duval, "Prolegómenos".
21. Duval, ch. 4, fragment 6.



IV

Precious Little Argument

A reading of Elizabeth Duval's After Trans *(IV): "Disputations with Paul B. Preciado"*

Dr Fabián Coitinho

1. Suckling at another's breast

This is the fourth instalment of a chapter-by-chapter reading of *Después de lo trans* (*After Trans*, 2021), the book in which the Spanish writer Elizabeth Duval argues about the foundations of the trans category instead of fortifying them. Thus far I have disputed nearly everything she says. In this chapter I shall not: I am going to latch on to Duval's argument without the least embarrassment, because her target is Paul B. Preciado, and between the two of them there is no contest.

Preciado, born in Burgos and settled in Paris, author of the *Countersexual Manifesto*, *Testo Junkie* and *An Apartment on Uranus*, is the most visible figure in Spanish-language queer theory. Duval acquired her reputation as a heretic by remarking in an interview that talk of "the emancipatory potential of the anus" sounded thrillingly revolutionary but furnished no political alternative whatever, and that Preciado belonged to the *gauche caviar*: someone who writes about the Barcelona riots over oysters in Paris.[1] She was right, and then some. Preciado is Che Guevara in a Cartier watch. The *Manifesto* proposes the *in vitro* production of a "cyber-clitoris" for implantation in various parts of the body,[2] recommends philosophising "not with a hammer but with a dildo",[3] and its author ends up proclaiming a "revolution of desire" in an advertisement for Gucci.[4] His actual contribution to the lives of gay and trans people has roughly the impact of installing a tampon dispenser in the men's lavatory and declaring trans men thereby made visible: it makes a noise, it provokes outrage, it gets into the magazines, and the world remains precisely as it was. With an irony Preciado fails to notice: a tampon in the men's lavatory is proof of a body that no amount of disidentification can declare out of existence. An open arse has yet to bring down capitalism, however much French bibliography one arranges around it.

Duval puts it better, in a footnote on the slogan "Open your arse and your mind will follow": that something has been repressed does not make it revolutionary.[5] What follows concedes her demolition in full. And then, when Duval has finished and put down the hammer, it asks why the ruins of Preciado look so much like certain rooms in her own house.

2. The demolition

Duval's arguments against Preciado are good ones, and worth keeping in view. The *Countersexual Manifesto* proposes to replace the order of Nature with a contract in which bodies recognise one another not as men or women but as "speaking bodies", with access to every position history has marked as masculine, feminine or perverse. Duval replies that it is a utopia without a map. The performative word does not build the reality it utters, there is no tool for stepping outside the language of gender, and a subject able to occupy every position at once would no longer be a subject to anyone.[6] Against *Testo Junkie*, which defines subjects by the substance that rules their metabolism, Duval offers a *reductio*: when oestrogen patches ran short in the pharmacies, post-operative trans women were left with no hormones at all, and remained exactly who they were. The substance is a patch.[7] Against Preciado's address to the Lacanian psychoanalysts, in which he announces that sexual difference will give way to something else "probably within the next ten or twenty years", Duval replies that this is faith in the inevitable fall of gender, like faith in the revolution: "Preciado is a theologian."[8]

And her finest thesis: Preciado's transition "is not an exit from the system of sexual difference but precisely a movement within the linguistic codes of gender".[9] Preciado has not escaped gender; he has crossed to the other bank. Which is why Duval can tell him, her own theory in hand, that he is now read as a man and that this has consequences. She quotes Virginie Despentes's preface to *An Apartment on Uranus*: since the transition, women in the street adore him and lavish small attentions on him, and when he protests that she exaggerates, Despentes writes, "that makes me laugh".[10] Duval's verdict: "Preciado, you have a passport now."[11] In the emails she publishes as an appendix, she puts it to him directly: "If I saw you at night with a group of men, do you really think I wouldn't consider crossing the road?" And when Preciado protests that his is not a patriarchal body, she answers that this "does not mean it does not take part in, or benefit from, patriarchal dynamics and structures".[12]

All conceded. Preciado cannot abolish the social effects of sex by declaring himself a speaking body. He cannot leave gender by an act of disidentification. Testosterone does not manufacture masculinity. Transgression is not a politics merely by virtue of transgressing. Duval is right from first to last, and the interesting part begins there, because she is right for reasons her own theory cannot afford.

3. What the gaze hands out

The argument against Preciado applies the thesis of Duval's previous chapter: the gaze constitutes gender, and Preciado is seen as a man. But the argument proves something more modest than she supposes, and it bears recalling before going further. To say that Preciado receives male privilege, it is not enough to show that he receives a certain treatment; one must know why the treatment is called male. And there returns the story Duval herself told in her second chapter, of a division of labour founded on a difference between the sexes, from which flow the position of men, their privileges, and the features by which we recognise those we take to be men. The gaze hands out the social consequences of sex; it does not decide to whom they belong. This was argued in the previous instalment of this reading, and it holds here too. What is new in this chapter lies elsewhere: in Preciado's past, which Duval declares invisible and cannot stop mentioning.

4. Constitutive in the essay, irrelevant in the email

Preciado says he lives "as-if-he-were-a-man" rather than "being-a-man". Duval asks what the difference rests on, and answers that it rests only on "memory and recollection, or trauma" of a different past. And she disposes of it with a single sentence: "In the street there is no recollection."[13] Preciado's body is perceived in a "radical present" that takes him for a man and forgets any prior existence.

Very well. But a couple of pages later Duval herself writes that Preciado treasures the memory of the lesbophobia and misogyny he suffered, and that "all of that has made Preciado, and all of it is constitutive".[14] The past is constitutive. Yet in the emails, when Preciado invokes it in his own defence, Duval tells him: "Past or everyday struggle is not necessarily of use in analysing how the system currently works with respect to the position you occupy."[15] In the essay, memory constitutes Preciado; in the email, it tells us nothing about his position. It depends which corner of the ring Duval happens to be standing in when she writes.

"In the street there is no recollection" is true in a very limited sense: the stranger on the Métro does not know the history of the person opposite. It does not follow that the history forms no part of that person's social reality. The man who passes me in the street has no idea what I do for a living, where I grew up or what happened to me at fifteen, and none of it ceases to exist until somebody finds out. A person who began transitioning at forty-four does not possess the social biography of a man read as a man from the cradle, even if he now receives some of the same treatment. To confuse what the observer knows with what the observed is amounts, once again, to confusing knowledge with being, the error this reading has been pointing out to Duval since its first instalment.

5. Braille on the skin

What is most remarkable is that Duval knows exactly where that past is kept. In the very paragraph explaining that the street forgets, she writes that the past of an individual or a body is known "in intimate relationships", "in sex, in touch, in reading, in the braille we find on another's skin".[16] History is written on the body, and read with the hands.

That sentence does more work than entire chapters of the book. Duval does not say the past vanishes; she says a stranger's gaze cannot reach it, and touch can. What the street fails to see, the bed finds out. It is exactly what happened in her second chapter to the lesbian who discovered a penis where the schema had supposed a vulva: information about the body reorganised what perception had taken for granted. In an image of real beauty, Duval grants the body the memory her theory denies it. The body is not a surface each new gaze rewrites from scratch. It is a text in relief, with a history legible to anyone who comes close enough.

6. The prosecutor's amnesia

And there is something more acid still. Duval reproaches Preciado for clinging to his past. In her first chapter, when it fell to her to speak of her own, she wrote that she could not recount her childhood because she had "forgotten everything that made up my socialisation into gender".[17] The author who erases her own past is the one who demands that Preciado stop remembering his. For him, the radical present; for her, amnesia. Preciado wishes to keep his body of origin as a memory and a trench; Duval wishes to dissolve it, his in the gaze of strangers and hers in oblivion. Both stumble at the same spot, and the stumble takes the same shape: treating the body of origin as something to be managed by narrative, preserved or erased as the occasion requires.

7. "Unless they know"

The best objection to Duval is supplied by Preciado himself, quite unintentionally, in the emails. "It's true that men in the street no longer bother me," he writes, "unless they know I'm trans."[18] The second half of that sentence is worth its weight in gold. There are two scenes. In the first, a man looks at Preciado, believes he sees another man, and leaves him alone. In the second, the same man learns that Preciado has transitioned, and the treatment changes. The visible body is the same in both. What has changed is the information about that body's history.

The radical present does not suffice, then, even in the street. The gaze works with hypotheses about the body and its history, and those hypotheses are revised when new information arrives. What Preciado suffers when they know is what Duval, in her second chapter, called corrective violence, the kind that punishes those who stray from the script. Her own taxonomy describes what happens to Preciado, and that violence needs, in order to be triggered, a fact about the body of origin. The gaze alone is not enough even for the violence Duval herself classified.

8. As vulnerable as anyone

In his first email Preciado writes: "I will always be trans. I will always have the trans body I have, and that makes me as vulnerable as any trans person."[19] After Duval's previous chapter, that sentence ought to have lasted about a second. Duval had shown that trans people do not form a coherent sociological group, and had dismantled the figure then circulating in Spain according to which 80 per cent of trans people were condemned to unemployment, a figure derived from a sample of thirty-three women. "As vulnerable as any trans person" is first cousin to that figure. Cristina Ortiz, La Veneno, who ended up in prostitution and was raped in prison, Duval in her Paris flat, Preciado with his Gucci contract, a non-binary teenager and a trans man whom nobody could tell from any other man do not share a vulnerability because they share a word. Both sentences turn a heterogeneous coalition into a homogeneous class whenever it is convenient.

Duval does not let it pass entirely. In one email she reminds him that their experiences of violence cannot be equated, nor his with those of "a trans woman who transitioned later and ended up in sex work", and Preciado retreats at once: "I am not equating forms of violence. That would be absurd."[20] But Duval's main argument runs elsewhere. What separates her from Preciado, she says, is that the oppression of trans women does not come "exclusively from being a vulnerable body as a trans body" but from "misogyny".[21] To strike at Preciado, Duval sets the trans category aside and reaches for the division between men and women. When she has to explain who oppresses whom, the boundary that serves her purpose is the boundary of sex.

9. The ruins next door

The demolition of Preciado lays bare what this reading has been gathering from the start. In the first instalment, Duval showed that nobody chooses their identity, but not that identifying with a category suffices for belonging to it. In the second, she explained how the gaze distributes social treatment, but mistook being recognised for belonging. In the third, she showed that trans has no theoretical coherence, having previously explained its proliferation as if it were a single phenomenon. In this one, she is right against Preciado: nobody leaves the body by way of a discourse. And if will does not decide gender, if identification does not decide the category, if the gaze does not decide belonging, if the pharmacy does not decide sex and disidentification takes no one out of it, then the body is doing more and more of the work in the book while Duval goes on refusing it the standing that work demands.

Duval shows Preciado that he cannot erase with words the body others see. What she will not admit is that the body others do not see cannot be erased by forgetting either: the one read in braille, the one that surfaces when they know, the one she herself calls constitutive when it suits her. Preciado

keeps it as a relic and Duval throws it in the river, and both discover that it comes back. That is why the ruins of Preciado look so much like the rooms of Duval's house: she brought down her neighbour's with a tool that was also aimed at her own foundations.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), ch. 5, "Nadie sabe lo que puede un ano emancipador: disputaciones con Paul B. Preciado", which reproduces her interview with Víctor Lenore in *Vozpópuli*. The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto* (2000), trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018; quoted in Duval, ch. 5, "Manifiesto contra el *Manifiesto contrasexual*".
3. Ibid.
4. Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
5. Duval, note [p] to ch. 5.
6. Duval, ch. 5, "Manifiesto contra el *Manifiesto contrasexual*".
7. Duval, ch. 5, "Clínica de desintoxicación testosterónica", on Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson, New York, Feminist Press, 2013.
8. Duval, ch. 5, "Diálogo entre monstruos parlantes", on Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, trans. Frank Wynne, London, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021.
9. Ibid.
10. Virginie Despentes, preface to Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, South Pasadena, Semiotext(e), 2020; quoted in Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
11. Ibid.
12. Duval, ch. 5, "Correos con Paul B. Preciado", Duval's emails of 10 November 2019 (02:39 and 02:55).
13. Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
14. Ibid.
15. Duval, ch. 5, "Correos con Paul B. Preciado", Duval's email of 10 November 2019 (03:12).
16. Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
17. Duval, ch. 1, "Breve historia de lo trans".
18. Duval, ch. 5, "Correos con Paul B. Preciado", Preciado's email of 10 November 2019 (02:50).
19. Ibid., Preciado's email (02:29).
20. Ibid., emails from Duval (02:41) and Preciado (02:55).
21. Ibid., Duval's email (02:39).



V

No Seahorse Is a Mare

A reading of Elizabeth Duval's After Trans *(V): "An Aside on the Subject of Feminism"*

Dr Fabián Coitinho

1. Much ado

This is the fifth instalment of a chapter-by-chapter reading of *Después de lo trans* (*After Trans*, 2021), the book in which the Spanish writer Elizabeth Duval argues about the foundations of the trans category instead of fortifying them. Her sixth chapter wades into what she calls "the greatest schism in Spanish feminism":[1] the quarrel that broke out in 2020 between feminists who reject gender self-identification and trans activism, with Lidia Falcón asking whether "it is left-wing to give hormones to a child so that he changes sex", Paula Fraga calling queer theory "the institutionalisation of misogyny", and the Socialist Party circulating a briefing paper against it.[2]

Some things must be conceded, and are conceded gladly. Duval defends "a fascist's right to call me a fucking tranny"[3] on social media, and Lidia Falcón's right to say what she thinks without fines or prosecutions, since censoring them would turn them into martyrs. It is a brave liberal position in a field that usually clamours for punishment. Her political analysis also contains a good deal of truth: the Socialist Party treats feminism as family property, its coalition partner Unidas Podemos had taken the Ministry of Equality from it, and the struggle for hegemony between one left and another accounts for much of the volume of the debate. "This, more than anything else, is about politics."[4]

The trouble lies in what Duval then does with that diagnosis. In the first half of the chapter she takes on the philosophers of Spanish equality feminism (Amelia Valcárcel, Luisa Posada Kubissa, Ana de Miguel) and concludes that their objections contain very little: "so much noise [...] for so few nuts in the end".[5] In the second half she explains the conflict by party warfare. The move from one to the other is a genetic fallacy. That it suited the Socialist deputy prime minister to stir the issue against her Podemos rival explains why the debate reached the headlines; it says nothing about who is right. The history of why someone holds a thesis does not make it false. And there are nuts, plenty of them, in a place Duval declined to look.

2. Strategy and class

Duval believes she has found her opponents' great concession. Posada Kubissa grants that "nobody, women included, is born with a given identity that determines their needs", and proposes a feminist politics organised around a "strategic identity: women".[6] Duval is delighted: if the identity is strategic, it can be debated, and the feminism that excludes trans women would then stand convicted of having made a strategy sacred.

But a strategic identity and membership of a class are two different things, and Posada is speaking of the first. A movement's political identity may well be a strategy, open to debate and revision, while the class to which that strategy refers remains defined by something that is not strategic at all. The labour movement may argue over how to frame its political identity; nobody concludes that the working class is a fiction one joins by declaration. Duval confuses identity with class, just as in her opening chapters she confused identification and perception with belonging.

And when Valcárcel defines feminism as the struggle against "the oldest and most onerous inequality of all, the one justified by sex", against the power of "the generic collective of men over the generic collective of women",[7] she is not muddling her terms, as Duval suggests. She uses "gender" for

the social treatment bodies receive according to their sex, which is the correct usage. What is missing, then, is what Duval never supplies: a definition of woman that depends neither on identification, nor on the gaze, nor on a strategy. Here is one.

3. What the seahorse knows

Biologically, sex is not a free-standing attribute but a position within a relation: sexual reproduction. And within that relation the two positions are defined by the type of gamete. One produces small, mobile gametes; the other, large, immobile ones. This is called anisogamy, and it is what defines males and females throughout nature, from algae to mammals.[8]

The seahorse teaches the point better than any textbook. In that species it is the male who carries the fertilised eggs in a pouch, broods them and gives birth. He does everything common sense associates with motherhood, and he remains male, because he produces small gametes. Gestation does not make him female.[9] His lesson is simple and devastating for a good deal of gender theory: sex depends neither on what one does, nor on what one feels, nor on one's part in rearing the young. It depends on the gamete towards which one's body is organised. No seahorse is a mare, however pregnant he may be.

That is the ground floor of the definition. The first floor explains why, in our species, that difference became destiny.

4. Who gets to leave

In 1972 the biologist Robert Trivers set out the theory of parental investment: everything a parent puts into one offspring to improve its chances of survival, at the expense of what it might put into others in future.[10] What matters, Trivers showed, is not sex in the abstract but who invests more. The sex that invests more becomes the scarce resource; the sex that invests less competes for access to it. Richard Dawkins popularised the idea in *The Selfish Gene* with a blunt image: somebody has to be left holding the baby, and the temptation to leave falls to whoever has least to lose.[11] The theory does not say males desert; it says that whoever is less bound deserts. Which is why, in species where the male broods, the balance shifts.

In our species the balance admits no ambiguity. Fertilisation is internal, gestation takes place in a single body, it lasts nine months, childbirth puts life at risk, and throughout history it was followed by years of breastfeeding. Fathers invest too, and a great deal; at best, raising children is a task for two. But the father's investment is optional and the mother's obligatory. The least a man contributes towards a child is one cell and a couple of minutes; twenty at the very least, if he fancies himself a fine specimen of the male of the species. The least a woman contributes is her body for nine months. One pole can inseminate and leave; the other remains bound. I call this the asymmetry of exit. Even when a woman decides to end a pregnancy, that exit runs through her body: it is a procedure performed on her, not on him.

Human history is the history of how societies managed that asymmetry. The cult of virginity, adultery punished on one side only, the barren wife sent back to her family, and the old Spanish proverb that sums it all up: "My daughters' children are my grandchildren; my sons' children may or may not be."[12] Patriarchy may be described as the system that tied down the pole with no exit and left the

door open for the other. Duval knows this, and wrote it in her second chapter: "the origin of patriarchy can hardly be explained unless we attend to its connection with a primary division between the sexes", and specifically to "the capacity to gestate".[13] What she will not accept is the consequence: if the system arose from that relation, the class it oppresses is the one that occupies that position within it.

5. Wombs on legs

Here comes the usual objection: women are not wombs on legs. Quite so. A woman is a great deal more than her capacity to bear children, just as a worker is a great deal more than his wage. But remove the wage from the theory and exploitation can no longer be explained. Remove the gestating body from the definition of woman, and the oppression feminism was born to fight can no longer be explained either. The definition does not say what a woman is worth; it says what position she occupies in a relation.

This also answers Duval's central objection. In her view, the feminism that defends sex falls into an "identitarianism of sex" which "constructs a single experience of being a woman, tied to bodily experiences such as menstruation or motherhood",[14] and so excludes women who do not live that experience. But the definition proposed here depends on no experience whatever. A woman who has never been a mother, a barren woman, a woman who no longer menstruates, do not share the experience of motherhood, and they occupy the same position in the relation all the same, because their bodies are organised towards the same pole. Infertility, in them, is a privation in the Aristotelian sense: they lack something that belongs to their kind, as the blind man lacks sight.[15] The rare variations of sexual development change none of this: they are exceptions within a two-pole system, and a biological class is not dissolved by the existence of borderline cases, any more than day dissolves into dusk.

6. The other pole

The consequence follows of its own accord. A trans woman, in the overwhelming majority of cases, has a body organised towards the pole that has the exit. That it never so much as crosses her mind to use it is another matter, and not in dispute. What is in dispute is the organisation of her body, and here the argument has two halves. The negative half: she lacks the female organisation, and that lack is not a privation but an absence, like sight in a stone; she never belonged to that kind. The positive half, which is stronger: she has the organisation of the other pole. She does not stand outside the relation, as something neutral would; she stands on the opposite side of the very relation that defines the category. To include her in the category of woman is not to widen its borders but to admit, by nominal decree, the pole with the exit into a category whose entire history is that of the pole that could not leave.

The predictable objection is that hormones sterilise. Duval herself tells us in her prologue that treatment left her sterile.[16] But the answer is the one that holds for the barren woman, and symmetry requires that it hold here too: what counts is the organisation of the body, not its present function. If the barren woman does not cease to belong to the gestating pole, the sterilised trans woman does not

cease to belong to the other. Any other answer would be a double standard. Nor is it an accident that when Duval, in another chapter, looks for what she shares with other trans women, the first thing she names is precisely "our inability to gestate":[17] the trait they share is that of the pole they come from.

The most elegant proof, however, is supplied by trans men. Their bodies are organised towards gestation, and some of them do gestate. But the testosterone they take to masculinise is contraindicated in pregnancy, because it masculinises the foetus.[18] The trans man who wishes to perform the function his body is organised for must suspend, for months, the very thing that makes him look like a man. To gestate, he must stop producing the artifice and let nature get on with it. The seahorse gestates and remains male; the trans man who gestates confirms that he never left the pole that gestates.

7. What a woman's body ought to be

The most remarkable thing is that Duval, in this very chapter, writes three sentences that only make sense if this definition is correct.

The first comes in her analysis of violence against trans women. Punishment, she says, is imposed by way of correction when "the Other's first perception does not match the later perception of what a woman's body ought to be".[19] What a woman's body ought to be. To explain that violence, Duval needs a norm of the female body, the very norm her theory declares a convention.

The second comes in her critique of the trans bill: "the law should not reflect identities or recognise every single feeling of individuals, but social workings and orders".[20] There is no social order older or more persistent than reproduction. By Duval's own criterion, that is what the law should reflect, rather than the identity someone declares.

The third comes in the same critique. If being trans requires no change of appearance, she writes, it becomes "a merely enunciative reality, which comes into being only through a speech act", and what that speech act produces is a "correction", because the sexual schema the observer has already formed "occupies a place prior to the word".[21] What occupies a place prior to the word is the body. Duval wrote all three sentences and walked straight past them, like someone throwing the nuts away with the shells.

8. Stone lions

A question of vocabulary remains, and I shall treat it with all the malice it deserves. I say "trans woman", and I will never say "cis woman". The reason lies in adjectives. Some adjectives specify: "Uruguayan woman" or "pregnant woman" name a woman and add a feature without removing her from the category. Others displace. A former senator is no longer a senator, a president-elect is not yet president, a stone lion is not a lion. The medieval logicians called these *alienating* adjectives: they do not specify the noun, they strip it of the extension it had.[22] There is nothing insulting about being a former senator, who may be an admirable man, or a stone lion, which may be a work of art. They are simply not what the noun names.

If "woman" designates the class of bodies organised to gestate, then "trans" in "trans woman" works in just this way: it names not a kind of woman but someone who has transitioned towards the social form of a woman. That is why I find the expression acceptable, even honest: it names a real journey without asserting a membership the body will not sustain. "Cis" does the opposite. It was coined

so that "woman" would become a genus with two species, like blondes and brunettes, or the slim and the stout. The pair comes from Latin, "on this side" and "on the other side", the same pair chemistry uses for isomers: molecules with the same formula and a different arrangement in space.[23] The image fits exactly what the term presupposes, the same substance in a different configuration, and to accept the word is to concede that thesis without ever having argued it. If the "trans" in "trans woman" is alienating, then "cis woman" is a pleonasm, like saying "a lion of flesh and blood". Nobody needs to specify that a lion is made of flesh and blood until someone starts counting the stone ones as lions.

Duval closed her chapter convinced that her opponents had precious few nuts left. The nuts were in anisogamy, in Trivers, in the proverb about grandchildren, in the testosterone that must be stopped in order to gestate, and in three sentences of her own text. What Duval lacked was a nutcracker. And the seahorse, who carries, gives birth and remains male, could have lent her one.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), ch. 6, "Inciso sobre el sujeto del feminismo". The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Duval, ch. 6, introduction, on the Socialist Party (PSOE) briefing paper signed by Carmen Calvo and José Luis Ábalos in 2020.
3. Duval, ch. 6, introduction.
4. Duval, ch. 6, "Escenas de guerra partidista".
5. Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
6. Luisa Posada Kubissa, *¿Quién hay en el espejo? Lo femenino en la filosofía contemporánea*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2019; quoted in Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
7. Amelia Valcárcel, quoted by Posada Kubissa and, through her, in Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
8. Geoff A. Parker, R. Robin Baker and V. G. F. Smith, "The origin and evolution of gamete dimorphism and the male-female phenomenon", *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 36 (3), 1972, pp. 529–553.
9. Kai N. Stölting and Anthony B. Wilson, "Male pregnancy in seahorses and pipefish: beyond the mammalian model", *BioEssays*, 29 (9), 2007, pp. 884–896.
10. Robert L. Trivers, "Parental investment and sexual selection", in Bernard Campbell (ed.), *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man, 1871–1971*, Chicago, Aldine, 1972, pp. 136–179.
11. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), ch. 9, "Battle of the sexes".
12. Traditional Spanish proverb: "Los hijos de mis hijas, mis nietos son; los de mis hijos, serán o no".
13. Duval, ch. 2, "El género como sistema y el género como proceso".
14. Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
15. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V, 22, 1022b22–1023a7, on privation (*sterēsis*).
16. Duval, "Prolegómenos".
17. Duval, ch. 4, fragment 6.
18. Alexis D. Light et al., "Transgender men who experienced pregnancy after female-to-male gender transitioning", *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 124 (6), 2014, pp. 1120–1127.
19. Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
20. Duval, ch. 6, "Escenas de guerra partidista".
21. Ibid.
22. Peter T. Geach, "Good and Evil", *Analysis*, 17 (2), 1956, pp. 33–42, on attributive adjectives; the notion of the *adiectivum alienans* comes from medieval logic.
23. In organic chemistry, *cis/trans* designates geometric isomerism; the term "cisgender" gained currency in the 1990s.



VI

The Body, After All

(or, Uranian, Just in Case)

A reading of Elizabeth Duval's After Trans *(VI): the final chapter and the epilogue*

Dr Fabián Coitinho

1. A right of reply

Elizabeth Duval closes *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario* (*After Trans: Sex and Gender Between the Left and the Identitarian*, 2021) with a word to her interlocutors. She warns them that she has been harsh, severe even, and reminds them, by way of Hannah Arendt, that to think is to think critically and that to think critically is always to be hostile. Then she asks for something almost nobody in this debate asks for: that they regard her side of the argument as worth answering, and exercise their right of reply.[1] This is the sixth and final instalment of a chapter-by-chapter reading of that book, and it is, among other things, an acceptance of the invitation.

First, what is owed. Duval is a brilliant philosopher. She starts from premises I largely share, such as that nobody chooses their identity and that perception organises violence, and arrives at conclusions diametrically opposed to mine; which is precisely why she is worth reading. When she thinks something has been badly handled she says so, even when it comes from her own side, and she has none of the purism that in activist circles admits nothing at all. It helps, no doubt, that she never accepted the label of activist: "How can I be an activist when I don't do anything?"[2] From a liberal standpoint such as mine, to find someone who writes from within her own conceptual framework and opens the argument rather than closing it is a sign that free thought still has room to breathe. Her epilogue makes the point in political terms: a punitive left will have no defence on the day it is governed by those who always wanted to punish.[3]

Not every author extends that courtesy. Talia Mae Bettcher, another rigorous trans philosopher who must be read carefully if one hopes to answer her, states in *Beyond Personhood* that her work is addressed to trans people, nonbinary people and friends, and that she does not believe in wasting her breath on transphobes.[4] Duval writes for those who will contradict her as well. I regret that she has turned her back on the exposure that once made her the face of a movement (she grew tired, she says, of activist Twitter, and has no wish whatever to repeat that wave of publicity)[5], because one needs interlocutors with whom one can disagree and still go on talking. The same standard applies on the other side. I share many of the conclusions of gender-critical feminism and dissent from the method and tone of a good many of its philosophers. Nobody should be marked for ever by one unfortunate remark, as though carrying an original sin with no baptism to wash it away, and Duval writes like someone who understands this.

A confession before the objections: watching her make mincemeat of Paul B. Preciado in her fifth chapter gave me a pleasure that in another context one would have to call orgasmic.[6] What follows are philosophical disagreements, and none of them is personal.

2. The ebb tide, seen from inside

The final chapter opens with a reckoning. In 2015 trans people enjoyed unprecedented media exposure in Spain, centred on minors and their families, and Duval, then a teenager, was one of its faces. Five years later she observes an ebb and asks why the movement is in retreat when its institutional gains are so tangible. Her answer is organisational. The media figures are gone, solid associations are lacking, and uniting trans women, trans men and nonbinary people across differences of class and

generation strikes her as "practically impossible".[7] She adds that the demonstrations were never mostly led by trans people at all, but by transfeminist assemblies descended from queer theory: "a most entertaining variable geometry".[8] Her conclusion: "the trans collective does not exist".[9]

I share the diagnosis and would add a cause that is easier to see from inside the broader community. The LGBT movement became dogmatic, and when it ceased to be LGBT and began adding letters without end it turned into an open call for anyone who felt oppressed. Something broke, and an attempt was made to mend it with superglue. If a person who in theory belongs to the community no longer feels held by it, something has gone wrong, and when I say a person, I mean myself. The redefinition of what it means to be gay or lesbian leaves many of us with a sense of erasure, and since we are mostly men and mostly white, the complaint is dismissed as yet another patriarchal male whingeing about lost privilege.

Gay used to mean a man sexually attracted to men. Activist usage has slid it from "same sex" to "same gender", and with that slide the word stopped naming my experience. I am not attracted to a female body however much beard and muscle it may sport, and to claim that a gay man may desire someone with a vagina, or a lesbian someone with a penis, contradicts the most elementary sense of what those words used to name. On this point Duval has already conceded my case: in her second chapter she writes that it is futile to ask lesbians to deconstruct their rejection of penises.[10] What she grants them holds for us.

Hence, as a political provocation and in the name of unconditional respect for self-perception, I announce my new identity: I am a Uranian. The term was coined by Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in 1864, and his formula was *anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa*, a woman's soul confined in a man's body.[11] I know perfectly well what it meant, and it is exactly the "gender neoplatonism" Duval denounces in her first chapter and again in this one.[12] Since the queer movement has stripped my category of its meaning, I have helped myself to a relic from its prehistory and intend to keep it. Nobody may dispute it without disputing self-perception, and I shall allow nobody to colonise it. Should anyone ask my sexual orientation, the answer is Uranian.

3. The children swept away by the tide

Duval calls the strategy of centring the movement on minors and their families "short-sighted and sterile".[13] Once the reforms were won the whole thing switched off, leaving without any structure the generations of trans women driven onto the street and into prostitution. She is right. As a physician I would add that the strategy was also mistaken, for a reason she does not mention: the specificity of children with genuine dysphoria was dissolved in a tide of childhood self-identifications.

The DSM-5 criteria for gender dysphoria in children already included stereotyped markers, such as a preference for the clothes, toys or playmates of the other sex. But they required, as an indispensable condition, a strong desire to be of the other sex, or an insistence that one is, sustained for at least six months.[14] Once social transition comes to rest on declaration and on adults' reading of the child, that condition slackens and the stereotypes are left to do the work on their own. The earlier clinical literature recorded, moreover, that a good many dysphoric children whose dysphoria did not persist grew up to be homosexual.[15] The tide carries away the trans children and the future gay men and lesbians with them, children who once were simply the ones who did not fit.

The danger cuts both ways. Children with real dysphoria are submerged in a far larger population, and the backlash against that population threatens to sweep away the specific medical care they need. Duval was writing in 2020. Four years later the independent review of gender identity services for children and young people in England, the Cass Review, set out how weak the evidence was for much of what had been done.[16] The cost of diluting the category will be borne by those who needed it.

4. The codes loosen, and tighten again

The chapter's social thesis is that the proliferation of trans subjectivities expresses a loosening of the codes of gender, which come apart "from certain notions of genitality".[17] What happened to children shows the other half of the story: the codes loosened in one place and tightened in another. Feminism and the old gay movement spent decades dismantling roles and stereotypes so that a boy might play with dolls without its saying anything about what he was. Those same stereotypes now return as a sign that a trans child may be present. The code came untied from the genitals only to be tied again to clothes and toys, and for those of us who fought for gender nonconformity that is a step backwards.

5. Two patients in the waiting room

At the centre of the chapter stands a thought experiment. Two people identical in appearance and in how they are perceived, differing only in their genitals: are they to be told apart by the labels "trans" and "cis"? If so, Duval replies, let us admit the hypocrisy: we are talking about what someone has between their legs and, accordingly, judging them "abnormal, perverse or monstrous".[18] And she presses further: if two bodies are perceived in exactly the same way, what justifies giving them two labels on the basis of genitals or chromosomes the observer can only imagine?[19] The question deserves an answer, and I offer one with every respect.

To begin with, the premise describes perception at a distance, and the book itself shows that perception gets corrected. The lesbian of the second chapter loses her desire on discovering a penis where her schema had supposed a vulva. And Duval writes that a body's past is read in intimacy, "in the braille we find on another's skin".[20] Two bodies identical to the eye are not identical, and the book proves as much on its own account.

Then there is the waiting room. I am a doctor, and two identical patients sitting side by side do not receive the same care: one is due a prostate check, the other a cervical smear. Medicine does not classify by appearance, because it is the body that falls ill. There lies the justification Duval asks for in distinguishing by genitals, and it contains no moral judgement whatever. To distinguish the seahorse from the mare condemns neither of them. The leap from "we distinguish" to "we judge monstrous" is hers, and in making it she moralises the very genitals she accuses everyone else of moralising.

That leaves the label. Her experiment needs two, "trans" and "cis", and I use only one. I do not use the term "cis", and I reject it outright: it adds no precision whatever about people who are not trans and presupposes precisely what is in question here, that there is an identity and a sex which happen to coincide, as though one needed a word for a thing's coincidence with itself. One of the two people in the experiment I call a woman. The other I call a trans woman, knowing that the adjective names a real passage, the very one Duval places at the heart of her thesis.

6. The movement and the political decision

The book's final thesis I accept: trans constitutes neither a category of identification nor a position within the gender system, and functions as "the signifier of a movement within that same system and towards the system".[21] I also accept the reasons for which, on Duval's account, one is trans in the present. One is trans because one is in a transition not yet finished, because the transition cannot be hidden, or by the political decision to claim the label even when one could pass unnoticed. That last reason is the real problem, and it is worth saying why.

The other two are bound to a body, one that is changing or one that cannot disguise the change. The political decision detaches the category from any incongruence and any change, and then anyone may come in. Through that door walks the bearded, hairy-chested fellow who has altered nothing and declares himself a trans woman. I do not accept him, and I find him an insult to the trans women I knew in the days when I spent my nights in the company of *travestis*, women who paid with their bodies for what he spares himself with a sentence. Duval does accept him, but she gives the thing its exact name. In the previous chapter she grants that no change of behaviour or appearance may be required ("and why would we not buy that?") and draws the consequence: trans would then become "a merely enunciative reality, which comes into being only through a speech act".[22] What she describes with perfect composure is precisely what I reject, a category that exists for as long as someone is pronouncing it.

The nonbinary, according to Duval, springs from that same political decision, and she marks its limit with precision. A nonbinary person can be read as such only by saying so, and even then what they obtain is a correction of the first perception, which leaves untouched the sexual schema the observer presupposes.[23] What we have there is a predicate laid over a body that has already been perceived, and the subject deserves an essay of its own.

7. The right to pass

Duval reads the wish to pass unnoticed as a product. Liberal democracies, she says, want citizens who conform to the norms of gender and of beauty. Hence the insistence on transitioning as early as possible, so that the marks of male puberty will not show, and hence the use of nonconforming trans bodies as propaganda, so that everyone else may feel at one with their gender and find no reason to rebel. Many trans people, she observes, want being trans to remain a "having been".[24]

That they want it seems to me reason enough to respect it. If someone wishes to assimilate and to live without their history following them to every counter, nobody has the right to conscript that wish into a cause. And if their standards of beauty are those of their time, they cannot be required to change them single-handed. Those standards belong to the whole mass, the *massa damnata*, as St Augustine of Hippo called fallen humanity, which is all of us together.[25] The mass does change, but on a schedule that is not that of a single life, and what changes slowly cannot be forced.

There is a phenomenological reason as well. What is predicated can be modified, a name or a document. Sometimes it works and sometimes it fails, and it fails because beneath it lies an antepredicative experience that resists: that of the body presenting itself before me before I have said a word about it. That is not dismissed by argument. In her epilogue Duval prefers to think of capitalism as a metabolism rather than an intention,[26] and assimilation can be read with the same instrument. Liberal

democracies are not conspiring to manufacture conforming citizens; people want a quiet life, and the mass is slow to change. Respecting that wish alters nothing I have argued about sex. It is courtesy, defended as the other person's right.

8. What remains

Duval does not wish to invalidate Judith Butler or Preciado, who made the nonbinary into the promise of a future without gender.[27] I do, at every opportunity, and what I invalidate are their theories, not their persons. Preciado, moreover, I do not count as a thinker at all. He is an artist, and Duval herself hands me the key: in her fifth chapter she proposes reading the *Countersexual Manifesto* "as a queer aesthetic work".[28] I accept the proposal and present the bill. If it is an aesthetic work, let art criticism judge it and leave political theory alone. Art and philosophy may share a house, provided neither passes itself off as the other, for disciplines do not transition.

For any workable politics, what remains is to tell one's opponents apart. Religious groups with genuine prejudice, whether Christian or Muslim, are one thing; the far right is another. Gender-critical feminists are a third, and with them a reconciliation is still possible if we stop trying to colonise other people's opinions and their freedom to voice them. Duval files them all under "trans-exclusionary"; I do not. At present each side is the other's straw man, and when you set fire to straw all you get is a blaze, and a bigger one.

It remains to answer the question with which Duval closes her chapter: "And what will be left to us, after trans, who once were it and never wished to be it again?"[29] She writes that we shall see the end of human civilisation before the end of gender, and that gender will never become a dead language.[30] I agree, and I think I know why. Over the course of the book Duval dismissed the will and showed that the gaze can be mistaken, until she concluded that trans is an adjectival modifier and never an entity in itself. But an adjective needs a noun, and the noun was there all along, in the braille of the skin and in the "inability to gestate" she names when she looks for what she shares with other trans women.[31] In her second chapter she wrote that "the body is what is objective";[32] she stopped short of calling it sex. After trans, and after all, the body remains. And I, just in case, am a Uranian.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), "Agradecimientos", where she quotes Hannah Arendt. The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Duval, "Prolegómenos".
3. Duval, "Epílogo: una propuesta político-moral".
4. Talia Mae Bettcher, *Beyond Personhood: An Essay in Trans Philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2025, ch. "Getting 'Real'", p. 12.
5. Duval, "Prolegómenos" and ch. 7, section "Los flujos de lo trans".
6. Duval, ch. 5, "Nadie sabe lo que puede un ano emancipador: disputaciones con Paul B. Preciado".
7. Duval, ch. 7, section "Los flujos de lo trans".
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Duval, ch. 2, "La percepción en la violencia y el deseo".

11. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, *Inclusa* (1864), in *Forschungen über das Räthsel der mannmännlichen Liebe*.
12. Duval, ch. 1, "Breve historia de lo trans", and ch. 7, section "Los flujos de lo trans".
13. Duval, ch. 7, section "Los flujos de lo trans", and note [u] to ch. 7.
14. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (DSM-5), Washington DC, 2013, "Gender Dysphoria in Children".
15. Madeleine S. C. Wallien and Peggy T. Cohen-Kettenis, "Psychosexual outcome of gender-dysphoric children", *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 47 (12), 2008, pp. 1413–1423.
16. Hilary Cass, *Independent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People: Final Report*, London, April 2024.
17. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Duval, ch. 5, "De la legitimidad de las zonas temporalmente autónomas en Urano".
21. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
22. Duval, ch. 6, "Escenas de guerra partidista".
23. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
24. Ibid.
25. St Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, XXI, 12.
26. Duval, "Epílogo: una propuesta político-moral".
27. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
28. Duval, ch. 5, "Manifiesto contra el *Manifiesto contrasexual*".
29. Duval, ch. 7, "Después de lo trans".
30. Ibid.
31. Duval, ch. 4, "Teología trans: el evangelio de la Veneno según Valeria Vegas (y los Javis)", fragment 6.
32. Duval, ch. 2, "El género como sistema y el género como proceso".