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Secret(e) Sex: Secretions that Supplant Shame

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Panel: Session II Chair: Ricardo Rato Rodrigues

Beginning with the question that I smear back and forth across this body of work: who or what becomes aroused in the feeling of sex? ‘The beast and the sovereign,’ Derrida confides, the feminine ‘la’ and the masculine ‘le.’ What and who? Who or what? ‘Go figure’, Derrida tells us.

I should be clear from the outset, ‘Secret(e) Sex: Secretions that Supplant Shame’ is not a paper that intends to unveil some hidden memory, genealogy, origin, or end that can be used to resolve any latent theory in the never-ending quest to define sex once and for all. Instead, the ambiguity surrounding the question of ‘who or what’ introduces the idea of an immutable secret held close to the body by embodiment itself, of how the body always already foregrounds a sexual politics *of and for* the living itself based on the innate feeling of what Luce Irigaray might call ‘experiences from within.’

The uncertainty around ‘who or what becomes aroused’ in this paper introduces a sense of indeterminacy, mystery, or an element of *secrecy* to the notion of sex itself. As we all know, secrecy and sex have long endured what is largely recognised as a pervasive and troubling cultural history of shame, whereby folk who befall colonial-patriarchal frameworks shirk public visibility for fear of deathly reprisals. Derrida himself knows this shame all too well, when standing naked and afraid before the eyes of his little cat companion in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Caught in a state of undress, Derrida faces not only the observant eyes of his feline friend but also an insurmountable humiliation that could cause him to die of shame, or pleasure apparently. It is a feeling for Derrida that is also accompanied by a question: who or what am I following when I encounter this sense of shame. Who or what indeed.

Thinking about this conflation of sex and shame that perseveres across space and time, this paper proposes to reframe our understanding of secrecy and sex as something which is considered disempowering. As such, I mean to test the dual meaning behind the notion of *sexes that secrete*; as sexes which can “produce”, “discharge” “ooze” and “omit” substances from cells, glands, organs and orifices, but sexes which at the same time can also “conceal”, “hide”, “withdraw”, “separate”, and “distinguish” themselves from others. Thinking sexes as secretive or secretable also gives a renewed emphasis to the role of secretions, mucus, fluids, and acids as bodily substances which always already foster multiple, specific differences that overflow the limits of embodiment itself.

Suggesting that sex is a secretive 'who or what' means that it does not exclusively have to begin or end in shame and ridicule. Instead, it can equally indicate a motivation or power by those consigned to the realm of 'Nature' to not only conceal and protect the multiplicity of sexual living in the here and now, but also the future of sexual liberties in times to-come. I will think about this notion of sexes that secrete by attending to Derrida's primal reverie in "A Silkworm of One's Own," where he shamelessly observes the marvellous work of a little silkworm caught up in the process of weaving a cocoon, a shroud which will later serve in the cultivation of a new silken sex that is secret even to the silkworm itself.

Before I consider Derrida's memory of silky secretions omitted by his tiny friend, I turn to the more general issue of sex and subjectivity, to examine the imposed differences between the categories of who and what, and how sex continues to be excluded from the realm of just ontological consideration in the Western metaphysical tradition.

In "Geschlecht I: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference", Derrida observes a noticeable silence from Heidegger on the question of sexual difference itself. While *Being and Time* is arguably one of the most prominent texts in existential thought, thematised by Heidegger as a revival of 'the question of Being' left by the proverbial wayside since Plato and Aristotle, Derrida points out that Heidegger remains resolutely tight-lipped on the subject of sex throughout his *magnus opus*. '[I]t is as if, according to Heidegger, there were no sexual difference, and nothing of this aspect in man, which is to say in woman, to interrogate or suspect, nothing worthy of questioning.'

Rather than signalling a secret yet to be uncovered, Heidegger's silence in *Being and Time* reads more as a refusal to grant 'sex' with the same investment in ontological meaning as his extensive formulation of Dasein. For Heidegger, Dasein is the being of the human being, the 'being-there' (*da-sein*) or locus of existence where entities reveal themselves for who or what they are in the world through their ontic relations with others. Dasein, as Heidegger writes, is fundamentally a being towards its being (Sein) in the world, a 'being-in-the-world' that instantiates its presence and relationality 'in' space and time. It is the 'there' of intelligibility, a horizon that stretches between possible futures and past moods, dispositions, and habits unique to the historical situation from which we are 'thrown' or projected.

It could read from the outset that Heidegger's selective mutism on sexual difference suggests that 'being' as such bears no sexual mark. Sex does not exist in *Being and Time*, nor does it achieve the lofty height of ontological relevance, presumably, for Heidegger, due to its proximity with the ontic. Instead, any discourse on sexuality is 'abandoned to the sciences or philosophies of life, to anthropology, sociology, biology, or perhaps even to religion or morality,' where it becomes externalised, spatialised and thingified as a discourse of the natural world.

In "Eating Well, Calculation of the Subject," Derrida emphasises the need in asking who or what comes before the ontological subject, as a means of not only foregrounding the subject's

irreducible relation to the other, but also to bring the question of being into proximity with the threshold of who is considered living and what is considered non-living. As such, the 'who or what' is a grammatical couple that solicits the imposed difference between who takes the place of the subject before law, history, morality and politics and what is considered proper to man and denied of those considered his sexual opposites: queer folk, animals, women and racialised bodies.

While searching for a word – any word – on the issue of sex in Heidegger's work, Derrida alights on the appearance of "*Geschlecht*" in his 1928 Marburg lecture series, published in book format as *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* in 1978. During one of the lectures, presumably in response to the mounting pressure from students for clarification on the apparent sexlessness of Dasein, Heidegger stated that 'Dasein is neither of the two sexes', but rather its 'sexlessness' is 'the original positivity and potency of the essence.'

While Heidegger intended to use "*Geschlecht*" to assert Dasein's fundamental neutrality with respect to a familiar metaphysical binary, Derrida reads Heidegger's clarification in the Marburg lectures as an admission what suggests the possibility of 'a sexuality without number'. As Derrida notes in "Heidegger's Hand", "*Geschlecht*" is a word, or mark, of polysemic richness, untranslatable outside of its German imprint as: "sex", "race", "species", "genus", "gender", "stock", "family", "generation", "genealogy", "community". Within its diverse etymological markings, "*Geschlecht*" harbours several 'sexually marked voices' that speak in unison to Derrida as a kind of pre-differential, pre-dual sexuality.

Throughout his work, Heidegger is careful to avoid language that would engage the question of Being with the material conditions of sex, presumably owing to his belief that the anatomical or material body, the 'what-ness' of the human figure, fails to sufficiently support the ontological priority of human existence in the world. However, by focusing on Heidegger's use of "*Geschlecht*" to characterise Dasein as neutrally 'neither of the two sexes', Derrida suggests there is a certain legitimacy for thinking of Dasein as a pre-differential multiplicity of sexual living, which awaits the arrival of '[p]erhaps another "sex" or rather another "*Geschlecht*" [that] will come to inscribe itself in ipseity, or will come to disturb the order of all derivations.'

Rather than waiting for the arrival of another "sex" or "*Geschlecht*" to-be-named, the 'who or what' I chose to focus on here and now – a 'who or what' that 'becomes aroused in the feeling of sex – is a "sex" that 'secretes,' a sex which is always already a multiply defined 'sex' or 'sexes' that simultaneously operate on a physical and metaphysical level, acting as one of the foundational axes for the experience and enfleshment of world at large. As mentioned already, sexes that secrete are sexes that can "produce", "discharge" "ooze" and "omit" substances from cells, glands, organs and orifices, but sexes that can also "conceal", "hide", "withdraw", "separate", and "distinguish" itself from others.

The two separate meanings of this word secrete as a fluid substance and the physical or linguistic hiding of a thing seem to merge in more ways than previously thought. Secretions as bodily fluids make physical and metaphysical borders murky, stirring up considerable trouble for Western and humanist understandings of embodiment, which have traditionally figured the human body as a hyper individualised, stable, and coherent unit since the Enlightenment. Fluids literally exude the body *before* subjectivity, leak the limits placed *upon* the body, and ooze the irreducible specificity *of* individual bodies *out* into the wider world. They enact a veritable ‘feeling of difference’ on the threshold of being itself, an intimacy between self and others where viscoelastic secretions introduces a certain slippage or promiscuity to notions of power, mastery, subordination, and the presuppositions of binary logic. Thinking, or indeed feeling, sex as mutually ‘secretive’ and ‘porous’ opens and loosens the rendering of sex and the body into Cartesian categories in Western contexts.

However, the ability to secrete, as in to hide or conceal, suggests a power of protection or a deliberate decision to withhold information, to refuse a direct engagement with the inquisitive mind as it probes for information. Being secretive is a practice of refusing certain individuals or group who demand for an apparent truth or knowledge, of depriving a who or what that does not need to know. Secrecy and sex do not explicitly have to begin or end in shame, in fact, the ability to withhold information about the experience of certain sexual lives is more important now than ever. At a time when we are forcing queer and trans people into identifiable categories which result in innumerable forms of public persecution, secrecy is paramount to the protection of selves and others. While some may choose to think of secrets alongside sex as a depreciation of truth, I think secrets in sexual living as a place of power for queer and trans folk to withhold and defy colonial-patriarchal fantasies of domination and control. Thus, sexes that secrete arouse a feeling of self rather than shame, a pleasure in knowing oneself while others can only guess. The question of who or what becomes aroused in the feeling of sex is a secret worth keeping, as it is a power in keeping guessing.

A secret I would like for us to take the time to marvel at is one recorded by Derrida in a text which does not receive as much attention as it should, “A Silkworm of One’s Own.” Originally published in a co-authored book with Helene Cixous in 1998, “A Silkworm of One’s Own” is a text about veiling and unveiling, the vulnerability of vision, the myopia of truth and the weaving of secrets. At the end of an extensive examination on the issue of veiling and unveiling, conducted in his signature non-frontal approach, Derrida ends the text with a remarkable reflection, where he revisits a memory of cultivating silkworms in a shoebox as a teenager in Algiers. As Derrida tells us in his own words: ‘before I was thirteen, before ever having worn a tallith and having even dreamed of possessing my own, I cultivated silkworms, the caterpillars or larvae of the bombyx...In the four corners of a shoebox, then, I’d been shown how, I kept and fed silkworms. Every day, but I would have liked to make myself the indefatigable officiant of this service.’ Derrida goes on to tell us as the readers of his journeys back and forth to the mulberry tree in his garden, bringing leaves back to feed his little companions in the shoebox they called home.

Soon after, Derrida became a witness to a marvellously secretable or secretive “sex” of the silkworm while gazing down upon his little grey ‘members’ in the box before him. Observing from a distance, he became privy to an unusual primal scene, where the silkworm started to prolong its body by nourishing its secretions. In fact, what Derrida was observing was the beginning stages of a cocooning process, where the little worms worked tirelessly to create their soft vessel which will lead to an eventual metamorphosis.

However, what Derrida ultimately observes is a powerful and deeply sexual embodied process of becoming for the silkworm, a process which is rich with secrets and secretions that only the silkworm itself could ever possibly feel. Fascinated by what was unfolding, Derrida states that it was impossible to discern a sex when gazing at the little being in the box. However, what was apparent was something that looked like a little brown mouth that secreted a silk which was intimately tied to the silkworm’s sexual being.

As Derrida tells us in true poetic fashion, this ‘milk became a thread’, or an ‘extruded saliva of a very fine sperm shiny, gleaming, the miracle of a feminine ejaculation’ which Derrida would then drink in with his eyes. The silk producing glands of the caterpillar, he confides, can be labial or salivary, but also rectal. And very soon, it became impossible for Derrida to be able to distinguish between several states or movements as the silkworm finally started to wrap itself in its silken shroud. What fascinated Derrida, and what is relevant to this paper, is that in the process of cocooning itself, the silkworm produced a sex that was entirely secreted, in both sense of the word. This secretion was something so intimate, so tied to its being, that it remained a secret even to itself. As Derrida tells us, the silkworm does not know what it will become.

Instead, all he can do is watch, entranced, as the silkworm cocoons itself, fell to the bottom of itself, becoming other to itself in the process of a weaving. This culture of the silkworm is not a veil that hides a truth that it would rather not show. Rather it is the preparation of a sex-to-come which the silkworm spits out, possesses, inhabits, hides, buries and finally blooms. The symbolism behind the silkworm becoming a moth, for Derrida, is a freedom from thinking sex or gender as a definite constitution. The silkworm is involved in the process of writing as weaving, a cocoon of filaments and lines that represent the illusion of a definitive self. Self becomes silk, which becomes self again when the moth finally appears in a proud and arresting display that refuses to be shamed. The autoeroticism of the silkworm is an intimacy that is both multiple and diffuse. ‘This little member’, Derrida remarks fondly, is beyond any duality, that ‘was and was not a sex.’ What is clear is that the sex of the silkworm remained a secret for Derrida, for the moth and now for us. While the potency of its *Geschlecht* is translated, ‘who or what’ this translation actually ‘is’ remains indiscernible, the truth of which, we will never know. Thank you.