

Elizabeth Stephens

The Pharmacopornographic Subject: Beatrice Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sexe, Drogue et Biopolitique*

When Beatriz Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sexe, Drogue et Biopolitique* was released last year, it was immediately recognised as a landmark publication in France. After several decades in which Anglophone gender and queer studies have drawn so productively on French feminism and French post-structuralist theory, Preciado's text was amongst the first to draw on the methodologies and approaches found in Anglophone queer and gender studies to undertake an analysis of issues effecting the feminist and queer communities in France.¹ A key reason for the slowness of the emergence of a French queer theory has been the lag in the translation of Anglophone queer and gender studies texts into French: the French edition of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* was released in 2008 (almost twenty years after its publication in English), a collection of Theresa de Lauretis's work has just been made available in the volume *Théorie queer et cultures populaires : de Foucault à*

¹ Marie-Hélène Bourcier's two volumes, *Queer Zones : Politique des identités sexuelles, des représentations et des savoirs* (Paris : Balland, 2001) and *Queer Zones 2 : Sexpolitiques* (Paris : La Fabrique, 2005), precede Preciado's by some years.

Cronenberg, while Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions* appeared in 2009. But the other, and more important reason, has been a certain resistance amongst French feminists to what is widely seen as an American neo-liberal politics of individualism that is identifiable within Anglophone queer and gender studies.² Indeed, it is significant to note that Preciado's own text was critiqued in France on just this basis. As a semi-autobiographical study of the formation of sexual subjectivities within the context of twenty-first century bio-politics, *Testo Junkie* certainly recognises that both neo-liberalism and individualism are central components of the cultural contexts in and by which contemporary subjectivities are formed. Such a recognition does not constitute an uncritical endorsement, however, and the central purpose of Preciado's text is to examine both conditions of, and constraints on, the formation of sexual experience and subjectivity in the twenty-first century. Thus this paper will approach *Testo Junkie* not as a text territorialised by an Americanised political perspective but as a deterritorialising movement across and between cultural and political contexts, representing a nomadic rethinking of the production of sexual subjectivity in the twenty-first century.

The framing argument of Preciado's text is that, during the middle of the twentieth century, the disciplinary society described by Foucault gave way to a new regime, marked by the transformation of nineteenth-century bureaucratic bio-politics into what she calls a post-industrial "somato-power" [somato-pouvoir]. Preciado describes this new form of power as "pharmacopornographic"; a neologism that, she explains, brings into 'dialogue Burroughs and Bukowski. Here we see the two key currencies of this new sexo-micro-technological control: the hit and the orgasm'

² This is Marie-Hélène Bourcier's main explanation for the resistance to cultural studies as a whole in France, as she argues in the introduction to *Queer Zones 2 : Sexpolitiques*.

(71).³ In examining this new form of power, Preciado's text has three central aims: to examine the historical development and cultural effects of pharmaceuticals and pornography as the dual, and mutually-reinforcing, ordering principles of twenty-first century life; to consider the consequences of this for the production of sexual subjectivities; and, finally, to explore the avenues this may leave open for resistant practices of self-making.

The text of *Testo Junkie* from the outset is made up of two interwoven strands, interleaving chapters on the historical development of twentieth- and twenty-first century somato-pouvoir are interleaved with chapters that provide a first-person account of Preciado's own experiences taking weekly (or biweekly) shots of testosterone over a nine month period. The first-person part of the text, which consists of a phenomenological account of the effects of injecting testosterone, is intended not so much as an autofiction, Preciado qualifies, as an autotheory (11). The effects of testosterone on her body and behaviour are characterised by an increased restlessness rather than aggression, as well as a powerful urge to be outside, to be on the street. Accompanying that new sense of belonging in public spaces is an increasing sense of feeling foreign and strange inside her own body: the smell of her own sweat seems different and unfamiliar, for instance, as do the changes in her sexual responsiveness and desires. This sense of being unsettled within her sexual and gendered identity is exacerbated by the fact that Preciado is beginning a new relationship with Virginie Despentes—author of *King Kong Théorie* and *Baise-Moi*—at the same time, and her smitten accounts of their encounters lives up to her undertaking to describe the sex life of the philosopher at considerable

³ “dialoguer Burroughs et Bukowski. Voilà les deux devises de ce nouveau contrôle sexo-micro-informatique: shoot et ejaculation.”

length. But she also experiences no little anxiety about the way Desportes, who has only just begun to identify as lesbian, will respond to a potential partner transitioning towards masculinity.

In keeping with the dual focus of her book, and her theorisation of *somota-pouvoir*, while Preciado is concerned to describe her personal experiences of using testosterone in detail, she also frames these experiences as part of the wider context of the pharmacopornographic regime that both produces and constrains them. Accordingly, an important focus of the first-person part of the narrative is the way her decision to begin using testosterone culturally repositions her, forcing her into one of two new identities. These identities are, in turn, determined by the two available markets for acquiring testosterone: if she acquires testosterone through an illegal, black market supply, under French law she will be legally classifiable as a drug addict; if she wishes to gain access to a legal supply, she must submit herself to the French mental health system—specifically, she must convince a psychiatrist to identify her, medically, as transsexual: ‘the biopolitical options which offer themselves to me are the following: either I can declare myself transsexual, or I can declare myself drug addicted’ (205).⁴

Preciado, however, is not primarily interested in transitioning into a new gender identity: her aim, she says, is not gender change but rather gender “piracy.” She describes *Testo Junkie* as ‘a manual of gender bioterrorism undertaken on a molecular level’ (12).⁵ In this way, her focus is on experimentation rather than identity, a decision about which she is herself highly ambivalent, and one she is aware is not politically neutral nor without potentially negative consequences for

⁴ “Les options biopolitiques qui s’offrent à moi sont les suivantes, soit je me déclare transsexuel, soit je me déclare droguée.”

⁵ “un manuel de bioterrorisme du genre à l’échelle moléculaire.”

people who do not live in her (reasonably privileged and independent) circumstances, and whose relationship with the pharmaceutical industry she critiques are compellingly different. She worries she is further complicating the precarious legal and cultural position of the trans community in France, by whom she will be judged for 'having taken testosterone outside of medical protocol, without having wanted to become a man, for having made testosterone into a hard drug and giving it bad press at the very moment when the law has begun to integrate transsexuals, guaranteeing reimbursement for medication and surgery through the Social Security system' (52).⁶ Preciado's experiences are thus shaped by a system in which she is presented with a "choice" between accepting a legal classification (as drug addict) or a psychiatric one.⁷ She qualifies: 'I would have to say, rather, that I have to make myself chose between two psychoses: in the one (transsexuality) testosterone appears as a medication, in the other (addiction) testosterone becomes the substance on which I am dependent' (206).⁸ Just as the meaning of testosterone itself is determined by the market in which it circulates, so are Preciado's own choices decisions made within a field of pre-scribed options. This part of Preciado's argument—that our "personal decisions" are made within the context of, and mediated by, a range of political, philosophical and cultural factors, and that our own sexual subjectivities are formed at the point of their convergence—problematizes the critique of her work as endorsing an American neo-liberal individualism. Rather,

⁶ "avoir pris de la testostérone en dehors d'un protocole médicale, sans vouloir devenir un homme, pour avoir fait de la testostérone une drogue dure, comme n'importe quelle autre, pour donner mauvaise presse à la testostérone juste au moment où la loi commençait à intégrer les transsexuels, à garantir le remboursement des doses et des opérations par la Sécurité sociale."

⁷ It should be noted that the legal situation has changed in France since the publication of *Testo Junkie* in 2009. In May of last year, France became the first country to declassify transsexuality as a mental illness. (This occurred during the first trans conference ever held in Paris, and during the public discussion in this forum that followed, it seemed that anyone wanting legal access to testosterone in France is still required to apply through the psychiatric system.)

⁸ "Je devrais plutôt dire qu'il me faut choisir entre deux psychoses : dans l'une (la transsexualité) la testostérone apparaît comme un médicament, dans l'autre (addiction) la testostérone devient la substance dont je suis dépendante."

Preciado argues that we can only ‘find the trace of an political experience’ by recognising this as formed at, and by, ‘the intersections of theories, molecules and affects’ (12).⁹

Preciado’s examination of the historical development and the contemporary cultural effects of the pharmacopornographic regime of post-industrial culture is framed by her analysis of the wider system of somato-pouvoir by which identities and experiences are produced, and which, she argues, govern subjectivities on both a molecular (or pharmaco-) level and a “semiotecnological” (-porno) one (32). As her description of this power as pharmacopornographic indicates, the historico-theoretical part of Preciado’s text focuses on the convergence of sex and drugs as the means of bio-political control. Contemporary life is dominated, she writes, by the dual influence of ‘the pill and *Playboy*’ [‘la pillule et *Playboy*’] (32):

The somatopolitical context after the Second World war seems dominated by an assemblage of new technologies of the body (biotechnology, surgery, endocrinology. . .) and of representation (photography, cinema, television, cybernetics. . .) which infiltrate and penetrate life as never before. . . . If in the disciplinary society the technologies of subjectification controlled the body from the outside, like an ortho-architectonic apparatus, in the pharmacopornographic society these technologies will henceforth be a part of the body, will dilute themselves into the body, will be converted into bodily matter. . . . One of the signs of the transformation of the regime of somatopouvoir, in the middle of the twentieth century, will be the

⁹ “des croisements de théories, molécules et affects, pour laisser trace d’une expérience politique.”

electrification, the digitalisation and the molecularisation of the mechanisms of control and of the production of sexual difference and identity (74).¹⁰

What Preciado is doing here is something more—or rather other—than simply updating Foucauldian biopolitics via a Deleuzian understanding of the molecular (that is, the micro-dynamics that compose both matter and perception in ever-changing configurations of temporary assemblages). Although her theorisation of both somato-pouvoir and pharmacopornography are clearly informed by both Foucault's and Deleuze's work, she engages with neither in a sustained or systematic way. Rather, and like Deleuze, she is primarily interested in mobilising key parts of their conceptual vocabulary in the 'creation of new concepts' (as the tendency towards neologism seen above reflects).

Preciado's theorisation of somato-pouvoir is the most significant and ambitious of these new concepts, providing a new theoretical framework within which to understand the cultural and historical implications of the 'new relations of body-power, pleasure-knowledge, drug-subjectivity' that characterise "pouvoir pharmacopornographique" (132).¹¹ She explains:

The pharmaco-pornographic body is not a passive living material but an techno-organic interface, a techno-living system segmented and territorialised by different political models (textual, computerised, biochemical). There is not a succession of different political models which will be historically succeeded

¹⁰ Le contexte somatopolitique postérieur à la Seconde Guerre mondiale semble dominé par un ensemble de nouvelles technologies du corps (biotechnologie, chirurgie, endocrinologie . . .) et de la représentation (photographie, cinéma, télévision et cybernétique . . .) qui infiltrent et pénètrent la vie comme jamais auparavant. . . . Si dans la société disciplinaire les technologies de subjectivation contrôlaient le corps depuis l'extérieur, comme un appareil ortho-architectonique, dans la société pharmacopornographique les technologies font désormais partie du corps, se diluent dans le corps, se convertissent en corps. . . . Un des signes de la transformation du régime de somatopouvoir, au milieu du XXe siècle, sera l'électrification, la numérisation et la molécularisation des dispositifs de contrôle et de production de la différence sexuelle et des identités.

¹¹ "nouveaux rapports corps-pouvoir, plaisir-connaissance, drogue-subjectivité."

by other, nor ruptures, nor radical discontinuities, but an interconnected simultaneity, transversal action of multiple somatopolitical models which operate and constitute subjectivity, according to various intensities, various degrees of penetration and efficacy (108).¹²

This understanding of somato-pouvoir as constituting those ‘new relations of body-power, pleasure-knowledge, drug-subjectivity’ as a site of ‘an techno-organic interface’ has important implications for both the formation of subjectivities within pharmacopornographic regimes and for the possibilities of making the self otherwise within them. Just as the body is not the docile bio-material on which culture—or the subject—acts, so is the subject produced in and through the different models of power that characterise twenty-first-century culture, in Preciado’s account, not simply the passive product of the collision of various political and economic forces but the point of interaction between the constructed categories of the personal and the public, the individual and collective, the internal and external. Like Judith Butler, who argued that ‘[the] subject is both crafted and crafting, and the line between how it is formed, and how it becomes a kind of forming, is not easily, if ever drawn’ (‘What is Critique?’ 225), Preciado sees the relationship between the system of somato-pouvoir and the individual (or individuated) subject as one of reciprocal influence and mutual (trans)formation. It is for this reason that the point of Preciado’s analysis of the pharmacopornographic regime—critical though it is—is not actually to *denounce* the system of somato-pouvoir it examines; rather, her aim is to explore the

¹² “Le corps pharmaco-pornographique n’est pas matière vivante passive mais interface techno-organique, système techno-vivant segmenté et territorialisé par différents modèles politiques (textuels, informatiques, biochimiques). Il n’y a pas une succession de modèles qui seront supplantés historiquement par d’autres, ni ruptures, ni discontinuités radicales, mais une simultanéité interconnectée, action transversale de modèles somatopolitiques multiples qui opèrent et constituent la subjectivité, selon diverses intensités, divers indices de pénétration et divers degrés d’efficacité.”

conditions and possibilities under which its tools can be appropriated and used in unauthorised ways—as exemplified, of course, by her own decision to use testosterone illegally.

Before we can consider the consequences of this for the experience and construction of the subject in and through a pharmacopornographic economy, it is important to recognise the role of the second part of this equation—the “becoming porno” [“devenir porno”] (228) Preciado argues is one of the two key dynamics of contemporary culture, and which underpins her own resolution to provide a first-person account of ‘the sex life of the philosopher’. For Preciado ‘The modern city is a brothel’ [‘La ville moderne est un bordel’] (230), in which everything is structured in and through a porn economy. This is nowhere more true than in the sphere of work, she argues. In the twenty-first century, ‘Work is sex’ [‘Le travail est sexe’] (221) so that: ‘We work in a porno-factory’ [‘Nous travaillons à la porno-usine’] (221). This would seem a highly debatable point, and one Preciado herself argues largely by assertion. In one of her more detailed accounts of this part of her work, however, she explains:

In every epoch of history, a type of work and of worker defines the form of production proper to a specific economy. Curiously, this work and worker appears retrospectively as one of the most precarious, undertaken in conditions which are the most drastic.... The work and the specific kind of exploitation that today define the pharmacopornographic economy is sex

work, and the paradigmatic body for the model of production is that of the whore, the porno actor (232-33).¹³

This recognition that the things that seem the most culturally marginal are often the most central is one that is hardly unique to Preciado (indeed, from Dollimore and Sedgwick onwards, it is fairly axiomatic to queer theory); nonetheless, the leap from here to generalisations of the sort that ‘all work is sex work’ seem to me deeply problematic, universalising every possible relationship to work as the same as those of sex workers in a way that runs a real risk of undermining the specificity of actual sex work and the experiences of actual sex workers.

It should be noted, however, that Preciado’s theorisation of a “devenir porno” does operate on a second level, in which she positions this as an ordering system and cultural dynamic that extends beyond the commodification of sex and (the production of) representations of sex: for Preciado, the “porno-usine” is not simply a site for the manufacture of commercialised sex (or sexual representations), it is also the site that provides capitalism with the motor of its libidinal economy, and which she describes as operating according to ‘un cycle excitation-frustration-excitation’ (221). The governing force of the pharmacopornographic age, Preciado argues, ‘is not hedonism, the satisfaction of sensual pleasures, but the compulsive reproduction of the cycle of excitation-frustration’ (226).¹⁴ Preciado’s point here is not that this cycle is an expression of naturally-occurring libidinal desires within capitalism; on the contrary, she argues that particular forms of libidinality are constructed in and

¹³ “A chaque époque de l’histoire, un type de travail et de travailleur définit la forme de production propre à une économie spécifique. Curieusement, ce travail et ce travailleur apparaissent rétrospectivement comme les plus précaires, aux conditions de travail les plus drastiques. . . . Le travail et le type d’exploitation spécifique qui définit aujourd’hui l’économie pharmacopornographique est le travail sexuel, et le corps paradigmatique de ce modèle de production est celui de la pute, l’actrice ou l’acteur de porno.”

¹⁴ “n’est pas hédonisme, la satisfaction de plaisirs sensuels, mais . . . de reproduire compulsivement le cycle excitation-frustration .”

through these processes, which in turn provide the conditions for the production of subjective experiences and identities.

Preciado's own libidinality and sexual desire is, of course, no less a product of the cultural context in which she finds herself and the testosterone she takes. More importantly, the importance Preciado attributes to sexuality, her apparently unquestioning acceptance of sex itself as such a constitutive part of subjectivity, is also the product of a very specific history. Preciado's account of her own sexual experiences and experimentation frames her text as an investigation of the historical conditions in which, to cite Foucault: 'an "experience" came to be constituted in Western societies, an experience that caused individuals to recognise themselves as subjects of a "sexuality" which was accessible to very diverse fields of knowledge and linked to a system of rules and constraints' (3).¹⁵ This emphasis on the construction of sexuality as an "experience" (and, indeed, on the construction of this particular idea of "experience" itself) necessitates a new kind of methodology, as Foucault explains, one which takes into account the 'correlation between fields of knowledge, types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity in a particular culture' (4), in and through which 'individuals are able, are obliged, to recognise themselves as subjects of this sexuality' (4).

Preciado, like all of subjects of the twenty-first century, lives in and sometimes against the legacy of this history. Despite her use of the first-person voice throughout her text, however, the autobiographical sections of *Testo Junkie* are hardly an uncritical celebration of personal experience—and much less a celebration of an unqualified individualism. Rather, while recognising the specificity of her own

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*. London: Penguin, 1986.

experiences and cultural positioning, Preciado is also concerned to shift the emphasis of discussion away from experience and towards experimentation: 'I plead here for a politics of corporeal and semiochemical experimentation which . . . must be governed by the principle I am calling "the self-as-guineapig"' (299).¹⁶ Which is not to say that experience and experimentation are not closely inter-related: experimentation might be seen as a mode of experience that prevents it solidifying into a fixed and stable identity. Preciado's own experimentation, making herself the guineapig of her own and very unregulated testosterone experiment, is, on the one hand, a fairly marginal one—however, as she argues, it is often in these marginal cases that one finds most clearly elucidated the dynamics that structure and shape the cultural mainstream. Preciado, then, sees her nine-month period as a "testo junkie" as exemplary of subjective formation under a pharmacopornographic regime, in which her experiences are both hers and not-hers: 'My body,' she concludes 'is the body of the multitude' ['Mon corps est le corps de la multitude'] (197).

Author Bio

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¹⁶ "Je plaide ici pour un ensemble de politiques d'expérimentation corporelle et sémiotique qui . . . soit régi par le principe que j'appellerai . . . 'principe autocobaye.'"