



**TRANSGENDERED
CREEKS:
BEYOND IDENTITY,
LIFE, & DESIRE**
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This is of course Michel Foucault speaking in 1983 in wake of the publication of his first three histories of sexuality. In the first volume, *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction*, Foucault proposes that modern sexuality is not defined by the gradual liberation of sexuality from the forces of repression, but by the demand that we express the truth of ourselves through the object of our desire. We are not being liberated into our true sexual selves. We are being forced to link truth to desire. Thus the importance of sex as a political issue was not measured by how free we were to be who we are unencumbered by the state but how

“sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species.” In other words sexuality—and gender—was not of interest to Foucault in and of itself but only in relation to how modern power organized itself around a “technology of life.” At the level of the individual the governance of life encourages us to see our deepest truth in our sexuality (homosexuals, heterosexuals, bisexuals, transgender bestialsexuality, pedophile, et cetera) and at the level of the population it encourages us to see the physical and psychological health and consumption of the population as the beginning and end of governmental purpose. Four quintessential modern figures and strategies of sexuality stood out for him: the hysterical woman (a hysterization of women’s bodies); the masturbating child (a pedagogization of children’s sex); the perverse adult (a psychiatrization of perverse pleasure); and the Malthusian couple (a socialization of procreative behavior).

We should never forget that on the eve of the Supreme Court decision overturning xyz, California Governor Jerry Brown

In the second of his histories, *The Use Of Pleasure*, Foucault famously changes course and asks, what other forms of power might be possible if we move from the problematic of desire to the problematic of pleasure; from the question of how the truth of my desire expresses the truth of myself to the question of what to do with our pleasure, how to have our pleasure; and, in having our pleasure differently what ethical relations are made and disturbed. Whereas the problem of desire makes us search for the truth of ourselves in the itinerary of our desire (homosexual, heterosexual et cetera), the problem of pleasure asks us to how experiments in pleasure illuminate our ethical relationship to the world. For Foucault freedom should not be measured by our ability to express our inner truth/desire outside power but to explore the possibilities of other forms of pleasure and power.

It was in this period Foucault discovered and published *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite* in which Foucault explored “the happy limbo of a noni-identity” and its ethical implications.

Around the same time that Foucault was giving this interview Ruby Yarrowin was recounting to me the history of a local geography. Yarrowin was born around 1920 in the bush in the Northern Territory of Australia and died in 2006. She lived through the worst physical and sexual violence of colonial settlement. In the 1980s she experienced the rise of cultural recognition during which traditional Indigenous practices and narratives were celebrated as constituting part of the rich cultural texture of the nation.

This narrative tells how some of the geography of Anson Bay was formed. what “tjipel” means in Emiyenggal, the Indigenous language of the area that no one speaks any longer as a first language, or even a second. In Emiyenggal, Tjipel means young girl, breasts-up, just post-pubes-

cent; desirable. She lived at Djaremalang, a place down the coast, with her family. One day she dressed up as a man (kredi...menbuk, spear) and went hunting. She speared a wallaby. She kept going. When she got to Tjungameru a bird told her that an old man was coming. So she dug two holes in the sand to hide her breasts and lay belly down. When the man saw her he thought she was a boy. He asked him (her) to get up and cook the wallaby. She said that she had a severe stomach-ache. They argued back and forth until she told him to take the wallaby for himself. But as he was walking away another bird tells him, "Yah know, that was no boy." So he goes back to fuck her. They fight. He wins. He goes off. She goes off. But she's still there. So, Tjipel is young girl who became a creek with various other parts of the encounter scattered around her; and with other beings with their own stories nearby: Mudi (barramundi), Murrurumurru (long yam), Kugan (wild honey), fish traps, throw stick, fighting stick, the lady who gobbled up the children, et cetera.

What does this narrative demand of those of us interested in the histories of sexuality, the uses of pleasure, the truths of desire? For some this story might suggest the universal nature of transgendered subjectivities. Here, far beyond the edge of the West and its occidental expressions of gender and sexuality walks a transgender boy seeking nothing so much as to be who he is beyond what the flesh of his body and the mores of his society demand. No less than Herculine Barbin desire and pleasure intersect in ways that would, I think, have fascinated Foucault. In exploring the pleasures, the uses of his body, this girl who dressed up like a boy creates a new form of being as she-as-he exposes the local formations of power. In wishing to be a young man a young woman finds not freedom and truth of herself as himself but subjugation to an old man. In other words the transformation of the body through the pleasures of the flesh reveals the figuration of given power and authority rather than escaping it.

And indeed Ruby Yarrowin's renditions were always a reflection not on sexuality but on the ethics of desire and pleasure as an expression of power. We did not ask what is the truth of human desire but how social powers are revealed in the ethical practices of pleasure.

But Ruby Yarrowin is not an illustration of Michel Foucault. She is a challenge to him. In other words we do not find Michel Foucault, or any other western theorist relaxing at the edge of a creek. Rather we find a bird, and a creek; a bird and a creek that demand something of us beyond a set of presuppositions sitting behind the theory of governance through life—or, to put another way, we need to open what we commonly understand as life if we are able to understand the challenge of Ruby's geontology—geos-ontology.

Ruby asks us to focus on the living creek, not Tjipel. She asks us to challenge what I have been calling "the carbon imaginary." The carbon imaginary The separation of life from nonlife based on specific metabolic processes—and their key events, namely, birth, growth, and death—rather than any number of other processes or qualities that might separate geology and biology, or plant and animal life, say movement or the presence or absence of mental or sensory organs or the capacity to use them. Vegetative comas or persons in "total locked-in syndrome" may bring human existence into the borderlands of life and death, bios and zoe, but it does not bring it into the borderlands separating geological entities and biological life. The fact that the locked-in person or comatose patient was born and will die separates her from the mineral undead. Even a vegetable can be killed. Metabolism—the drama of birth, growth, death—is that the self-evident difference of metabolic processes cuts across the natural sciences, the human and social sciences, critical theory, state governance, and capital markets.

The implications of metabolism is more clearly felt, I think, from the way it privileges one form of death—something called "finitude" in the philosophical sciences—over all others, namely human death, and human's awareness and care about their own death, both at the level of the individual and population. This is extremely clear in current discussions of the potential apocalyptic result on the human civilization and population from climate change.

What Ruby asks are the political, economic and ethical relationships this imaginary establishes between humans and other entities? How do other pleasures, dangers, excitements that come from experiencing and treating and thinking geological formations as life, as equal in value to human life, challenge our ways of life.

This obsession with our sexuality, our life, our pleasure—in the absence of developing a care for others, will be, Ruby suggests, the death of us.