



**HAL**  
open science

## Mind the social gap. Which space for pervert bodies ?

Céline Belledent

### ► To cite this version:

Céline Belledent. Mind the social gap. Which space for pervert bodies?. Përdorimet Politike Të Trupit/les usages politiques du corps/The Political Uses of the Bodies, 2017. halshs-01982808

**HAL Id: halshs-01982808**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01982808v1>**

Submitted on 23 Jan 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Céline Belledent

## **Mind the social gap. Which space for pervert bodies ?**

---

From the slogan “my body belongs to me” and women burning their bra, to the Lesbians of Color strong statements against racism and white eurocentrism inside the feminist and lesbian movements, *passing* by the high heels used as weapons in the trans and homosexual riots of Stonewall, feminist as well as sexual minorities scholars and activists have been considering in many different ways and aspects the body as a starting point for developing political actions, sites of resistances and thoughts.

Many of these claims have been formulated, received and answered in their respective societies as demands for rights in legal terms : right of abortion, right of gay and lesbian marriage... Even though these changes of law improve life conditions of some, they don't challenge the epistemological and political systems which lock some people in their bodies and keep on producing minorized bodies. When I speak about minority I don't speak about people who would be less numerous, I speak in terms of deficit of power on economical, legal, political and social levels. It is a “*disproportion of being*”, to quote the expression of Colette Guillaumin, 1972, and not a deficit of number that is at stake, when sexual minorities will be referred to.

Feminist and sexual minorities claims are publically and sociologically mostly understood as specific and communitarian: women emancipation, homosexual particularism... Focusing on the body, and proceeding from a feminist epistemology, I would like to grasp some political complexities and social implications of what I call : *the pervert body*.

The term “pervert” implies a movement, a direction and its distortions. The Oxford Dictionary online defines pervert as : “1- *distort or corrupt the original course, meaning, or state of (something)* ; 2- *lead (someone) away from what is considered natural or acceptable*; 3- *sexually abnormal and unacceptable*”. “*Natural, acceptable*”, or their contraries, when it comes to bodies and to sexuality, neither the direction, nor its deviances can be sociologically considered as natural, evident. In a first step, I will give some elements on the production of perversions in Western Europe at the end of

the 19th century.

Still focusing on bodies, the hypothesis can be made that if some ways, some paths are “*original course*”, some bodies might have more difficulties to pass. In a second step, I will analyse the pervert technic of “passing” and its potentialities.

The production of the pervert body :

To understand pervert bodies we need to make a detour through the scientific production of perversions. I conducted an epistemological research on the scientific production of sexuality through its perversions in Western Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for my PhD dissertation. The production of sexuality I'm referring to is of course not a matter of sexual practices, people had physical contacts before, I'm talking about sexuality as a new field of investment for European scientists. The word sexuality itself appears in the French dictionary only in 1832.

Many scientists have been studying sexuality in the second part of the 19th century. I focused particularly on the work of Doctor Krafft-Ebing. Krafft-Ebing is a forensic doctor, psychiatrist from the beginning of psychiatry, he is one of the first trying to build an homogeneous scientific field around sexuality. Until nowadays he is considered as the father of sexology, his books are regularly republished in several European languages and he is still studied as a pioneer in sexology<sup>1</sup>. Born in Germany, he lived in Vienna (Austria) and wrote one main book: *Psychopathia sexualis*, reissued twelve times inbetween 1886 and 1902. During these sixteen years, Krafft-Ebing has been developing his theories on sexuality and collecting many sexual observations. At first, he borrowed some observations from colleagues all over Europe, he made some himself when he was called to the court or treating his patients in a private clinic of Graz (Austria). In the preface of the second edition of *Psychopathia sexualis*, he encouraged pervers to write to him and tell about their lives and perversions. All together, he collected more than 650 letters, testimonies and autobiographies from pervers, which constitute a broad first hand documentation. These amount of observations explains why the *Psychopathia sexualis* got thicker : the first edition was only 110 pages the 12<sup>th</sup> one became 437 pages long. To the passion of the author for his topic we have to stress out also the lucrative part of his work. In between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> reissues, four years passed (1894-1898). Krafft-Ebing earned 3000 Marks

---

<sup>1</sup> I followed some lectures in sexology at the university Lyon 1 in 2008; Doctor Krafft-Ebing was then presented like one of the main founding father of the discipline.

for the 10<sup>th</sup> reissue, when he was mostly earning 100 Marks for his publications. *Psychopathia sexualis*, at least the three last reissues were a well paid project which also shows how much the study of sexuality counted and was a field in which money was invested.

All along the *Psychopathia sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing describes sexuality and its perversions.

Although his whole work is a call for a civilized sexuality, one in conformity with the "hidden laws of nature" (*Psychopathia sexualis*, 1895, p. 1), "to propagate a pure race", he is never describing straight how this civilized sexuality should look like. He is encouraging regular intercours between men and women, but he is taking distances from religious prescriptions, his civilized sexuality cannot be reduced to reproductive sexuality. He never mentions eugenics, never mentions contraceptive methods, intercours with prostitutes are advised as cure, treatment or become recovery proofs in case of sexual inversion (inverted men of course). The work of Krafft-Ebing doesn't define a norm. The core of his work is to classify, to study in minute details the behaviours, the bodies, the intimate interactions, to build up a field of sexuality cross-ruling the social. Krafft-Ebing relies on four main perversions to which he gives a contain and limits : sexual inversion, which we would nowadays described as a mixture of homosexuality and transidentities, sadism, masochism and fetishism. Doing this, Krafft-Ebing is not only producing perversions, but through the description of perversions he is building up in negative a normative sexuality and giving it its social territories. *The body will be one.*

Bodies are obviously investigated in their more fleshy, intimate and personal dimensions. Measure is the technic used to observe and describe bodies. Measure in its two meanings : to measure and to moderate the body and its passions. In the *Psychopathia sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing has torn the body apart, distributed a range of values and codes its parts.

Let's go into some details about measure first.

Saying Krafft-Ebing observes, measures the bodies, doesn't mean that he carefully paid attention to the bodies he watched. He did not. Observing is some kind of means to justify his theories, to give them flesh. His gaze is far from naive and surprisingly, for a doctor, his observations are rarely at all linked with pain or discomforts of the perverts. The social body is at stake here, not the individual bodies. Krafft-Ebing did not used a standardized way of observing, like the Bertillonage in France, but if one

pay attention to some of his comments like “no deformity of the hips”, “no sign of degeneracy” it seems he had a frame.

One of the main physiological questions reiterated many times along the *Psychopathia sexualis*, is the problem of locating the perversions in the body, the so called “seat of perversions”. Krafft-Ebing oscillated between a small region behind the hypothalamus, in the cerebral cortex and the genitals themselves. (A small aparte to see where the hypothesis of sexuality located in genitals leads : in the 1920's Germany several medical experiences were made on inverts, an invert locked in a psychiatric hospital got transplanted one extra testicle. The doctors had pretended he should get operated for a hernia, the article says 2 weeks after the operation he affirmed that he was cured, *Wiener Blätter*, 1927). “Seat of perversions”, skulls (containing the brain) and genitals (contained by the hips) will be the highlights of the observations.

When it comes to skulls, it is clear Krafft-Ebing was in touch with Cesare Lombroso<sup>2</sup>, they both influenced each others works : the vocabulary Krafft-Ebing uses to describe the skulls is the same Lombroso uses. Lombroso participated to the translation of the first edition of *Psychopathia sexualis* in Italian. In an article of 1891, Krafft-Ebing explains Lombroso, who had read Alfred Binet, *Fetishism in Love* (1887), used the term “fetishism” in Italian to refer to some parts of the *Psychopathia sexualis*. After this exchanges, in the fourth edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1889), fetishism starts to be part of Krafft-Ebing's vocabulary, and even becomes one of the fourth main perversions. For these two authors the size of the skulls is relevant because they correlate it to the size of the brain. The size of the brain is then supposed to be related to the degree of evolution, development, or on the contrary, degeneracy of the studied person.

Genitals are also systematically measured and their symmetry is considered. Assymetry as much as irregularity are considered problematic : the size of the penises, irregular periods of women, the absence of a testicle, a strongly hairy *mons veneris*, a thin vagina, in which intromission would not be possible and so on...

More generally, big parts of the body are better than smaller, small is a sign of misdevelopment, or one of shrivelling up. Big can also be problematic, big penises or clitorises are signs of sexual excess...

Skulls, genitals, hips are important parts of the body for the science of sexuality, here

---

<sup>2</sup> Cesare Lombroso (*L'homme criminel*, 1887 – *La femme prostituée*, 1889) measured more than 380 skulls to establish links inbetween criminality and the size of the skulls. He has compared the skulls' sizes of killers, thieves, prostitutes... various kind of “criminals”, men and women, Europeans and I quote Lombroso « *Antiques, Etrusques, Egyptians, Niggers, Americans, Semites, Paponas, Peruvians* », some « *prehistoricals* », some « *savages* » and some « *moderns* »...

we see bridges with racial/racist classifications : broad hips are a sign of animality, of inferiority, of degeneracy of the race. I quote (Gobineau, 1853-55, p. 125) : “*Camper and other anatomists stated already hip of black people were particular. Doctor Vrolik for instance, stated differences in between female and male hips in Europe were less pronounced as inbetween black men and women. He concludes to a prominent proof of niggers' animality*” [my translation]. For women if their hips are too narrow they constitute a possible sign of inversion, a suspicion of bad mothering abilities... Hips are coded by sexual differences, racial hierarchies, human-animal division.

Furthermore, skin is also at stake, its colour, its texture and the amount of hair covering it, hairy bodies are considered as a sign of lower class, so are dark skins. Hairy bodies for women constitute a proof of inversion, especially facial hair. Hairy bodies are also a proof of animality. Animality could lead to a suspicion of bestiality, degeneracy of the race, lack of hygiene...

We could go on during hours with all the codes applied to the body and linked to perversions in the PS. We will not. But I would still like to precise that the accessories of the bodies are also invested with meaning, if someone likes furs, he/she might be considered atavistic, close to animality... Liking silk for men is a sign of inversion, this material should only please soft women with sensitive skins... Shoes, handkerchiefs, aprons... to show any kind of interest in these accessories can lead, for men and women, to a suspicion or a proof of sexual perversion.

These statements are also extended to postures of the body, the way of walking, the way of sitting, of talking, of moving the hands... It also extend to feelings and perceptions in general, liking cats is a proof of inversion for men, as well as being afraid of a storm or jumping after a slamming door.

With this theorization - observations dynamic, Krafft-Ebing does not contribute to give a picture of the bodies in their diversity, it is obvious that some women have thinner hips than men, for example..., he built up a standardization of a population anchored in the bodies. Krafft-Ebing explains his working project on sexuality as a try to “*preserve and make the race prosper*” (*Psychopathia Sexualis*, 1895, p. 12). These standards, these norms are then naturalized inside bodies to justify inequalities. Here we reach the second acception of measure, the one of the proper balance.

In all these measures, the proper measure, the one that doesn't imply a suspicion or a proof of perversion, is left to the appreciation of the scientists. It will be the task of

forensic medicine to divide the perverts from the perverted, to part them between jails and psychiatric institutions, taking into account their social status, the position they take towards their perversions, if they feel ashamed, if they justify themselves and so on...

I told you before many perverts wrote to Krafft-Ebing, they use the same vocabulary he uses. They examine themselves like Krafft-Ebing would have done it if he could have observed their bodies. The medical discourses is socially put in circulation by the perverts themselves.

Further more, the science of sexuality did not stay confined in some medical offices, in confidential scientific publications. By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, many books were popularizing these theories and spread all over Europe.

The pervert body was born and like Foucault explained it (*Les anormaux*, 1999), a pervert differs strongly from a monster. A monster is studied and considered in itself, behind a pervert is standing a normative grid which is not only applying to the perverts, but to the society as a whole. Scientifically, socially and politically sexual perversions were not only relevant for, and applied on sexual minorities, but broadly coded anyone's body and its limits, that is to say its proximities, distances and possible interactions.

Some sexual minorities politics play with this power of the pervert and its capacities of resignification of the body, of the sexuality. I quote here an excerpt of the *Lesbian Body* from Monique Wittig 1973, I quote in French and will then give an English translation :

« J// découvert sur tes bras sur tes épaules sur le haut de ton dos sur tes reins sur ton thorax les marques violettes tout en ordre sur la peau de ton corps. » (Wittig, *Le corps lesbien*, 1973, p. 105).

["I/ discover on your arms on your shoulders on the top of your back on your kidneys on your thorax purple/lavender traces ordered on the skin of your body" [my translation, but the text, *the lesbian body*, exist in English too]].

A naive reading of this sentence could wonder what kind of "*purple/lavender traces*" the lesbians are worried about : does she talk about varicose veins, stretch marks, bruises... ?

I don't know what is the origin of this but lavender/purple/violet is a symbolic colour for lesbians: *Lavender Menace*, is a political group in the US 1970's, many lesbian

newspaper titles refer to this : *Lavender Sheets, Lavender Times, Lavender Visions, Purple Rage, Purple Stars* (North America), *Violet Pulse* (Poland), *Lila Schriften* (Austria)... in France, *Violette and co* is the name of a lesbian library in Paris. Considering the production of the pervert body by the science of sexuality, considering lavender/purple/violet as a symbolic colour for lesbians, the sentence of Monique Wittig gets another kind of impact.

This first part gave some insights of what I refer to with the expression “pervert body”, in this second part I will go on with the “passing” as a contemporary *technic of resistance*.

*Passing* as a pervert technic of resistance :

As a preamble, and to understand the *passing*, one should reconsider the concepts gender and sex. If there are two sexes, there cannot be two genders. Here a common split supposes sexes describe biological truth and gender refers to socialization of sexes. This split is problematic considering that biology has its own sociology and is not describing the real, but producing effects of reality (Haraway, 2009). The division in two sexes could maybe be accepted, even though a large feminist critic has shown its problems (Ivekovic, 2003) and even though it is also broadly contested by intersex people (<http://www.isna.org/>), who are bound not to exist or to spend their childhood and puberty at the hospital under hormonal treatments. So if we temporarily still keep this two sexes division, genders have to be considered in their complexities and for this reason, there can't be only two genders repeating what the concept of sex already describes. Genders are many. It is exactly because there are many genders and only two sexes understandable that we can talk about *passing*. *Passing* is a technic of pervert bodies to try to move within an hegemony.

The concept of *passing* which stem from the verb *to pass* is strategically used by some sexual minorities, some pervert bodies to describe the possibilities of being “recognized” (seen, heard, felt...) in and within the codes of hegemony. It is a matter of social movements, a position that has been forced, a location that has been chosen and/or differs from the one in which the person has been brought up. *Passing* means allowing oneself more or less movements according to what one thinks/feels the others think, might think or how they could re/act. *To pass* as concept includes three meanings the English verb *to pass* can have: to move in a specified direction, to go past or across, to go beyond the limits and to succeed.



*Passing* is interesting as such, not so much to understand the individual personal strategies to feel good, it is not the place here to talk about it, this is more a communitarian preoccupation, *passing* is interesting to underline and understand the normative investment in bodies as a technic of population control. The technic of *passing* stretches out that some bodies are produced perverts, are made others in the modernity ( this othering is based on race, sex, sexuality, some disabilities, especially the sensitive ones...).

*Passing* supposes a grid everyone knows, learn and relearn : what passes and what doesn't pass. One can *pass* as a women, one day, or somewhere, become transgender the next day, or everywhere else, nothing has changed, just the *passing*. This grid is a mean to make oneself readable for his/her surrounding and within the public space.

Even though it is evident I repeat here that *passing* doesn't preexist to socialization. If some bodies are supposed normal, regular, it is because they have the power of the hegemony which naturalized and normalized them.

In 2009-10, I conducted interviews with women, lesbians, and trans people. I asked them to describe themselves physically and to describe how they think they are read/ decoded while they move in public spaces. I had left on the side these interviews since I was in the last years busy with my archive work and its epistemological perspective. I got surprised when I listened to these interviews again recently preparing this paper and I found out the description the interviewees made from their pervert bodies made the standards of the *Psychopathia sexualis* resonate again.

Since the political struggles of the 60's visibility as a technic and pride as a posture were emphasized among sexual minorities. *Passing* does not have to be opposed to visibility even though it could at first seem to be, since *passing* is a try to fit into the transparency of the neutral, a try not to focus on one's particularism. Visibility in its beginning let's say in France late 60's early 70's with groups as *les gouines rouges* (red dykes), some parts of the feminist movement (MLF), the homosexual movements like the *FHAR Homosexual revolutionary action front*, *Les pétroleuses*... chose the visibility not to show up as such, but as a disturbing stone in a well oiled system, we could call it the heterosexist hegemony. With the politics of rights and the identity politics choices within the sexual minorities in Western countries in the end of the 1990's and beginning of the 21st century, the context is not the same anymore and visibility as technic should be questioned.

Some might have heard about it abroad, in France last year the government gave the right of marriage and adoption to gay and lesbians. To almost all gay and lesbians,

since eleven nationalities are excluded from this right. French gay and lesbians can't get married with gay and lesbians from : Poland, Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Slovenia, Marocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Cambodge and Laos. This choice of the government could have made the pervert bodies and sexual minorities claims visible. It is actually the contrary that happened. The visible discourses were against the marriage : the conservative right, different racist and nationalist extreme rights, some religious movements predominantly catholic ones, masculinists (who are men affirming they don't have anymore power in a society supposedly dominated by women, their struggle is based on the right of custody of their children) and a new social group which would be a mixture of the aforementioned groups, gathered around a struggle against what they call "gendeur theory" (with the French accent). All this people got a tribune to talk about their project of society and reinforce the sexual norms and sex roles especially concerning what should be said on these topics to children. Concretely, NGO like *SOS homophobie*, report as an assessement of this first year of marriage in France. An increasing amount of physical aggressions towards sexual minorities (one each two days) and a never attended level of discriminating discourses in political institutions, media, public spaces...<sup>3</sup>

On the other side, these new rights and the identity politics of the last decade saw new hierarchies emerging among sexual minorities (while some are demanding for rights, some get pushed further in the margins).

On a geopolitical level, globally as much as locally, homosexuality started to be reused, like at the end of the 19th century with the science of sexuality, as a proof of development, as means to push away some in a barbarian past. This is especially aiming the Muslim minorities in France, in Holland, in the US (Puar, 2007).

Within all these complexities, visibility can't continue to be used as a innocent strategy. *Passing* can be understood as a counter technic, *passing* is a resistance of everyday for oneself within a coercitive hegemony. It implies to know the possible and impossible ways to get some air, to take up more space, to develop some more movements. *Passing* make new alliances possible within complex individual and collective subjectivation processes, always depending on their hegemonic or communitarian surroundings. *Passing* is a concept but it is also a passport, *passing* allows one to circulate in a society, when this one doesn't *pass*, this one is exposed to power abuses (than can range from unpleasant mean gazes, rapes, bashing to life danger) : I quote Sara Ahmed, « *Passing functions here as a technology, which relates*

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.sos-homophobie.org/sites/default/files/rapport\\_annuel\\_2014.pdf](http://www.sos-homophobie.org/sites/default/files/rapport_annuel_2014.pdf)

*physical movement with identity formation: to pass through a space requires passing as a particular kind of subject, one whose difference is unmarked and unremarkable* »<sup>4</sup>.

*Passing* is a sexual minorities technic of resistance but it was also a technic of resistance to racism in the US context during the segregation of the first part of the 20th century. Nella Larsen wrote a novel with this title, the aims seem to be alike, I quote (p. 16. Nella Larsen, *Passing*, 1929): “*It wasn't that she was ashamed of being Negro, or even having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton [a white family for who she passes as white] would probably do it, that disturbed her.*”. It would be interesting to see bridges and doors (Simmel, 1902) in between these different uses of the same technic especially concerning people of color belonging to sexual minorities. On this, I refer to the book of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).

In conclusion, I will open some questions starting with repeating the title of this intervention : *Which space for pervert bodies ?*

This question doesn't intend to focus on the pervert body itself, which sounds too abstract and universal. It is a try to map the production of the pervert body. Mapping is a technic of appropriation (McClintock, 2000), that could in this case be used to grasp the social territories in which pervert bodies were produced and set in. Map could also be a means to understand *passing* not only like bodies in their movements, but also the territories they need and occupy, the spaces they allow to themselves as well as the gaps and permeabilities pictured between themselves (ourselves) and the others.

Which position we choose in the localisation we are given ? Which crossings ? Which gaps ? How do we move? How a body is building itself up ? How a body is legitimate to describe and eventually to change the setting ? Which bodies are setting the tone ?

If we can talk about sexual orientation, how we orientate ourselves ? Where are we located by others ? Which social territories are invested ?

---

<sup>4</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Affective Economies, Social Text*, volume 22, n° 2, été 2004, p. 122.

In the call for paper of this summer university a link was proposed between homosexual claims and pleasures, uses of pleasures, from the famous Foucault's text (1984), I would like to complete this reference to another one: "*Pleasures open bodies to worlds through an opening up of the body to others. As such, pleasures can allow bodies to take up more space.*" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 165)

Bibliography :

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* . Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité, tome 2 : L'usage des plaisirs*. Gallimard, 1984.
- . *Les Anormaux. Cours au collège de France*. Seuil, 1999.
- Guillaumin, Colette. *L'Idéologie raciste*. Gallimard, 1972.
- Ivekovic, Rada. *Le sexe de la nation*. Léo Scheer, 2003.
- Krafft-Ebing, Richard, von. *Psychopathia sexualis*. Georges Carré, 1895.
- Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. Modern Library, 1929.
- Lombroso, Cesare. *L'homme criminel : étude anthropologique et médico-légale*. Bournet, 1887.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge, 1995.
- Morel, Bénédicte Auguste. *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives*. J. B. Baillière, 1857.
- Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist assemblages: homonationalism in queer times*. Duke University Press, 2007.
- Simmel, Georg. *Pont et porte in La tragédie de la culture et autres essais*. Rivages, 1909.
- Wittig, Monique. *Le Corps lesbien*. Editions de Minuit, 1973.