

## Queer Alice's Looking Glass: The Dildo and the Countersexual Revolution

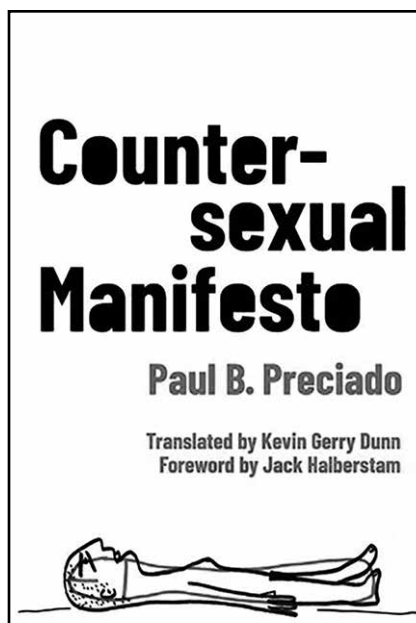
BY JULIA ANDERSON

Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*. Trans. by Kevin Gerry Dunn; fwd. by Jack Halberstam. Columbia University Press, 2018 (originally published in French in 2000). (Critical Life Studies.) 240 pp. notes. bibl. index. pap., \$25.00, ISBN 978-0231175630.

This is an enthusiastic and nuanced rejection of heterocentric conceptions of sexuality, gender identity, sexual organs, sexual pleasure, and prosthetics. Moving beyond the traditional focus on identity politics and social titles, Paul B. Preciado calls for “exuberant expenditure, affect experimentation, and freedom” focusing on the materiality and performance of identity in lived experiences (p. 10). Countersexuality is a complete departure from binary theoretical understanding, moving toward “radically experimenting with new practices of collective sexual emancipation and sexual self-government” to allow for the multiple and perpetual avenues of self-determination (p. 14). Preciado focuses on sexual technologies when discussing countersexual ideologies, specifically the dildo, likening gender and the dildo in that “[t]heir carnal plasticity destabilizes the distinction between the imitated and the imitator, between the truth and the representation of the truth, between the reference and the referent, between nature and artifice, between sexual organs and sexual practices” (p. 28). Preciado offers a refreshingly radical take on recognizing and renegotiating supposedly biological scripts to support inclusivity, diversity, and equity.

Countersexuality disrupts assumptions of sex, gender, and sexuality

by focusing on trans and intersex narratives that expose the influence of these assumptions on major social institutions. Preciado states that it “is not the creation of a new nature but rather the end of nature as an



order that legitimizes the subjection of some bodies to others,” citing the legal, medical, and social fabrication of binary gender (p. 20). Countersexuality as theory delegitimizes the binary polarities that create arbitrary and unrealistic biological truths used to construct bodies and identities, “consider[ing] the different elements of the sex/gender system...

as well as their sexual practices and identities, to be nothing more than machines, products, instruments, apparatuses, gimmicks, prostheses,” and so on (p. 21). Countersexuality as activism has two primary goals: the first to “[commit] to the systematic deconstruction of naturalized sexual practices and the gender system” and the second to “[proclaim] the equivalence (not the equality) of all living bodies that commit themselves to the terms of the countersexual contract and are devoted to the search for pleasure-knowledge” (p. 21). Preciado suggests this can be done through the adoption of a countersexual mindset that not only eradic-ates the binary, but looks beyond it to possibilities unacknowledged, like the relationships between sexuality and technology. Preciado anchors countersexuality in the queer canon through references to Butler, Halberstam, Rubin, Kristeva, Foucault, and Haraway, outlining the queer history of dildos and its contributions to gender. Preciado roots his discussion of the dildo in the history of prosthetics and technology, taking a brief foray into masturbatory aids, sex toys, celibacy technology, and gender confirmation surgery, solidifying its reputation as a long-established but under-studied “queer Alice’s looking glass, through which we can read different sexual cultures” (p. 59). One significant theme of Preciado’s work is the separation of the dildo and

the phallus, establishing “the dildo within a complex web of technologies of material production, of signs, of power, and finally, of technologies of the self” (p. 79).

This text would fit in a queer theory syllabus as a fresh voice in the canon, ideally for graduate or advanced undergraduate study. Preciado centers queer identities in his analysis “with the realization that we are the revolution that is already taking place” by living out the tenets of counter-

sexuality every day (p. 4). He also prioritizes an activist and nonacademic audience in the construction of the book, beginning with a call to action that is followed by the weaving of feminist, trans, disability, and queer theories, rather than the other way around. He provides 13 articles for seriously integrating countersexuality into normative life, with topics including codes, names, legal customs, relationships, education, time, space, and sex work. These articles attempt to universalize the

countersexual experience in a way that encourages grassroots activism and institutional change. The theory is often rigorous and the exercises brazen, but the work is rewarding in its refreshing take on the queer history of sexual technologies and gender development. The positionality and layout of the book suggest that it is truly centered on organizing, bringing to life many of the core tenets of queer theory in accessible and tangible ways.

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