

Feminism, 'Weird' Essentialism and the 156 Current¹

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'Bodies have all the explanatory power of minds'. Elizabeth Grosz²

The Thelemic Goddess Babalon is regarded by many magical practitioners within the present-day occult milieu as a revolutionary manifestation of an embodied, erotic, aspect of the divine feminine. However, the limitations of the predominantly binary, androcentric models of gender and sexuality inherent within the Western magical tradition and more specifically in Thelema have been found increasingly problematic by many devotees of Babalon and the '156 Current'³ in recent years. At the same time, the disclosures of abuse and exploitation of women in the occult community in the wake of the #metoo campaign have drawn further attention to the structural imbalances within magical systems which shape attitudes towards women and undermine their position as esoteric practitioners. These developments mark a watershed moment in which women finally have a platform as well as some support and momentum to challenge some of the most toxic, deeply rooted bastions of patriarchal, 'occult' biopolitics. I suggest it is imperative that women now continue to actively define their territory in terms of esoteric sexuality and what they need for their own development—by establishing independent sacred spaces and strategies for autonomous evolution of magical praxis beyond the theoretical and practical barriers that aeons of misogyny have created.

Thus, it seems timely to explore aspects of Babalon's magic that have resisted in-depth investigation and discussion until now. For example, clarifying and reforming the ontological position of women within the *156 Current* and how the path of the Babalon devotee can be developed within a lifelong practice, challenging the theological meanings and interpretations of Babalon within Thelema and beyond into reformed esoteric knowledge systems, and positioning the groundwork for radical new forms of magical sexuality that may potentially emerge via the *156 Current* in the future. I've focussed upon some particular problems that women face in practicing embodied, esoteric sexuality in this essay because I don't believe an

¹ This essay is a slightly revised version of an online article—'Feminism, 'Weird' Essentialism and 156', <https://www.amodali.com/feminism-weird-essentialism-and-156/>, posted March 20th, 2016.

² E. Grosz, *VOLATILE BODIES Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994, p. xiii.

³ This term is based upon the value of the word 'Babalon' which enumerates to 156 in Hebrew gematria. See also the transcription of Crowley's exploration of the 2nd Aethyr (Arn) in Liber 418-*The Vision of the Voice* for some further definitive esoteric formulas associated with Babalon and the number 156.

overall process of reform within the *156 Current* is possible without tackling these issues. I'd like to emphasize and hope that this piece makes clear that the working definition of Babalon herein is that she is regarded as an entity that represents and embodies a wholly inclusive magical sexuality, completely open to all individuals on the gender spectrum and inclusive of every sexual orientation.

A great deal of the repression and taboo surrounding sexuality has waned in the wake of the 20th Century sexual revolution and there is an increasing acknowledgment of the inherent fluidity of gender and erotic expression. At the same time, an increasing articulacy with the 'virtuality' of sexuality as a dynamic, psychic dimension of consciousness is commonplace in contemporary discourse on art, psychology, transhumanism and studies on gender and sexuality. However, there is a darker aspect to this abstracted, disembodied, virtual sexuality, which can negate the sacred immanence of the lived body. More specifically, it can undermine the position of women as can often be seen in the reductive sexualisation and representation of women and the prevalence of misogyny within our increasingly 'disembodied' culture. This brings us to another core element of the *156 Current* that is crucial to this discourse, in that I believe magical, embodied practices are essential to her formulas. Perhaps this position may seem dated or at odds with the *zeitgeist* to those who believe we may already be reaching a stage where the virtual is superseding the physical in terms of human evolution and this has mixed implications for the development of magical forms of sexuality.

Whilst the virtuality of anti-essentialism and its arguments against sexual specificity may challenge prejudice and is useful in breaking down the limitations of gender roles. The negation of corporeality within the seemingly inevitable evolution of virtual consciousness is potentially disastrous in sabotaging the germinal sparks of new forms of sexual intelligence that have arisen since the occult revival and rise of feminism, to which women are making important contributions. I believe that if women are not given the opportunity to develop these hitherto latent magical qualities in the physical dimension it will have a devastating effect on humanity as a whole. Therefore, arguably, the *156 Current* as representing an embodied magical sexuality that reforms the magical position of women is not behind but ahead of the theoretical and cultural curve, because it represents a movement that has not yet existed on the planet. Therefore, although the battle for everyone's rights to sexual immanence can be properly placed under the auspices of Babalon—I must by necessity focus upon questioning the nature of women's subjectivity and agency within the current in this piece.

Any enquiry into contemporary, magical sexuality is incomplete without consideration of feminist theory and I'm very much in agreement with Pollock's stance expanded later in this

piece, that feminism is the ‘greatest revolution in thought of the (20th) century’ and as such my position and body of work must inevitably be classified as post-feminist and post-Thelemic. As although my search for an authentic practice and female divinity is grounded both in Thelema and feminism — the magical models I’m putting forth extend beyond these movements in some specific ways (a position this is not without its problems and contradictions as will be seen).

My belief is that the Babalon current will fulfil its potential through the development of increasingly sophisticated, embodied sacred techniques and practices. However, this is a concept that is rather loaded in terms of gender theory and sexual politics and so I will start to explore in this essay how the female body exists within the *156 Current* and how Babalon’s magic represents new forms of sexuality that incorporate embodied practices within a wider omnisexual framework (the term signifying types of sexuality that have unlimited potential for expression by identifying erotic border spaces and potential modes of engagement between all forms of sentience and the planetary and stellar macrocosm). The intersections between sexuality and ecology are being explored within posthumanist, artistic and philosophical spheres such as Annie Sprinkle’s ‘Ecosexuality’ and Timothy Morton’s ‘Queer Ecology’. But what I would particularly like to focus on in this piece is how the agency and being of women involved in sex-magical praxis may be supported or undermined by such ideas and how the *156 Current* represents a movement which venerates a combination of both somatic gnosis and psychic consciousness within a magical practice that can be negated by some posthuman and anti-essentialist theories.

Even though there has been such a short period of relative freedom in the West for women to consider what the personhood of ‘woman’ actually means, it often seems that as well as the general gender inequalities that still exist at a cultural/ political level, the ongoing investigation into women’s sacred sexuality is in danger of being derailed by a schism between so-called essentialist and anti-essentialist movements in feminism. These movements have more than a marginal influence on contemporary thinking about sex, gender and magical practice and the conflicts that arise between these schools of thought highlight some core issues that I feel should be explored within the ‘156’ community. For example, Irigaray’s ideas on sexual difference⁴ could make an important contribution to discourse upon the erotic, divine feminine,

⁴ ‘Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our ‘salvation’ if we thought it through’. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Cornell University Press. 1993, p5.

but arguably such theories are in danger of being overlooked in favour of anti-essentialist paradigms that valorise the fluid, psychic spaces of gender and sexuality over the realities of the lived body.

Sexual magic requires an incredibly sophisticated interaction between soma and psyche. But the fractures that exist between these aspects of being caused by cultural and historical influences sabotage the harmonious development of their integration, both within the individual and in interaction with others. Magical systems, sacred technologies, and related schema tend to use either male anatomy or non-gender specific frameworks as the template for practices, yet this still leaves the intransigent question of the female lived body hanging outside of any inclusive, rigorous magical theorization. The systems and practices that do include female biological processes are often problematic in their representation, creating an epistemic void which minimises or confuses sexual difference—obfuscating the bio-erotic and phenomenological characteristics of female magical consciousness and how it may be fully developed. Inevitably, in attempting to create an authentic magical practice as a woman, many conflicts and barriers arise.

During more than three decades of practice I have encountered many problematical intersections between my personal post-Crowleyan interpretation of the Babalon current, more orthodox consensus on Babalon and sex magic, feminist critical theory and contemporary, multidisciplinary discourse on sexuality, phenomenology, consciousness studies and ecology. Historical esoteric texts are a minefield of distortion and partiality due to the absence of women and contemporary discourse on sexuality including feminism often seems to perpetuate this negation of women by erasing the realities of the lived body to avoid perceived limitations caused by 'biological determinism'. Thus, one may find oneself somehow doubly marginalized and it often feels very out of step to insist on going deeper into the flesh within embodied practices rather than retreating from it into virtuality and abstracting/negating its essence. Yet this is exactly what I believe the *156 Current* represents in its focus on deep somatic engagement within magical consciousness, which must inevitably be influenced by one's biological reality.

Arguably, not much progress has been made since Elizabeth Grosz published 'Volatile Bodies' in 1994, in which she challenges assumptions about the body shared both by European mainstream philosophy and feminist theory. In terms of mainstream theorists, she considers how although many have contributed 'crucial ingredients for an understanding of sexual

difference ...it is significant that none of them has specifically devoted himself to developing a theory of the body'. Grosz further questions how theories on corporeality produced by Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari have little of help in understanding corporeal, sexual difference and indeed that 'none seem aware that the specificities of the female body remain unexplained'. This lack of acknowledgment of the specificity of women's bodies and experience continues to the present. In terms of magical systems, Grosz's statement that 'Only when the relation between body and mind is adequately re-theorized can we understand the contribution of the body to the production of knowledge systems...' is crucial. If women are to develop autonomous modes of self-understanding and positions from which to challenge existing knowledge systems and paradigms, the specific nature and integration (or lack of it) of the female body and female subjectivity and its similarities to and differences from men's bodies needs to be articulated. Logically all pieces of the territory must be equally understood before any authentic interchange is possible between us all within the erotic cartography of sexual magic.

Pollock looks to Bracha Ettinger's 'Matrixial Sphere' as a concept which has much promise as a potential opening for a specific sacred feminine and generation of practices in which one may encounter the feminine as both an inclusive and specific quality. 'A transcendence of the subject-object interval which is not a fusion, since it is based on a-priori shareability in difference'. I would argue that the magic of Babalon shares this potential and contrary to Pollock's dismissal of the feminist longing for the Goddess as nostalgic escapism and 'manufactured archaicism's'. I would argue that the Goddess can represent much more than this, as a multidimensional matrix that enables retrieval of a profound feminine psychic and somatic subjectivity in which one may explore magical dimensions of both alterity and symbiosis. It is within the *156 Current* that we may find some distinctive magical dimension of an active 'feminine sacred' that is only implicit within Ettinger's model.

I am convinced that the magic of Babalon can make a huge contribution to producing innovative knowledge systems that bring the experiences of female sexuality and corporeality into complex somatic and metaphysical spaces. Yet, an emphasis on exploring and expressing the magical and sexual specificity of female lived body is not at all in conflict with utopian impulses towards wider evolutionary shifts which will produce new expressions of human sexuality. Indeed, the remit of the *156 Current* is to encompass all aspects of sexuality as a dynamic, protean movement that elevates and integrates all elements of eros both mundane and cosmic. Such discourse is inextricably enmeshed with a discussion of gender, essentialism/anti-essentialism, equality and ecology. Therefore, next I'd like to go further into the sexual territory

of '156' and introduce what I perceive to be interesting additions to a discussion on sexual specificity and anti-essentialism/essentialism debate and the implications for theorization on the new sexuality presented by the work of Timothy Morton.

Weird Essentialism

*'To contemplate ecology's unfathomable intimacies is to imagine pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts. Perhaps this is why mysticisms contain reserves of unthought zones of materiality.'*⁵

It's often argued in gender theory that specificity cannot be established 'without violence' i.e., without limiting the agency of individuals and compromising the multiplicity and inherent fluidity of gender and sexual orientation. This has been a core argument within the anti-essentialist movement, but it has also had the effect (as already highlighted) of erasing the female lived body. One could counter that by deconstructing and destabilizing the physical/psychic integrity of an individual/organism by assuming that it is limited by its biology and psycho-physical ecology, thus inhibiting its participation and agency within a wider cultural-ecological system is also a form of violence?

So, how is it possible then to develop a sex-magical practice that both acknowledges the fluidity of the psychic spaces of gender and sexuality within all individuals without losing the inherent 'isness' of the fleshly gnosis of one's biological reality? To achieve this one has to zoom out into what can be described as the cosmic sexuality of the *156 Current*. Exemplified by the image of Babalon gathering the ALL into her cup, vividly illustrated by ATU XI in Crowley's Thoth Tarot Deck. Here one finds symbolism which points to practices in which one may cultivate experiences of an unparalleled fluidity, interrelationship and ecstatic engagement with all aspects of sentience. Thus, the *156 Current* offers a vastly expanded paradigm of magical sexuality that is grounded in the visceral, sexual irruption of the lived body in order to generate new erotic-corporeal languages and a heightened and magical interaction between human and non-human life.

⁵ T. Morton, *QUEER ECOLOGY*.

<https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=pmlamorton2010.pdf&site=58>

In such a practice one is simultaneously rooted in the somatic ground of one's being and a liminal, fluidic space of intercommunion in which one's structural integrity is open to transformation. One is in the words of Irigaray, 'Neither one nor two'. The simultaneity of these states is the basis of the sex-magical processes that are at the core of the mysteries of '156' as the conscious transformation of being using sexual energy works through both psyche and soma in syzygy—the one cannot be transformed without the other. The formulas of *156* express practices that are grounded in the lived body and a fluid psychic omnisexual space which can be accessed by all. However, because the practices do inevitably include the experiences of the body, it is here that aspects of specificity are inescapable. Arguably, it is how we value these biological signifiers that is the problem rather than the insistence of the flesh itself and unfortunately, the laudable goals of anti-essentialism seem to have had the effect of deconstructing and devaluing the lived body—abstracting its reality and influence upon consciousness.

Arguably, one's destiny is by no means 'fixed' by one's biological reality and from a magical, alchemical perspective, each body provides a unique vehicle through which we all may experience and transform our passage through life. The narrative of anti-essentialism seems to be that any impact of biology on the lives of women is limiting, sustains gendered stereotypes and generally hinders participation and engagement in the world. But there is something profound missing here, in that the world itself is simply not balanced and accommodating to women and alternative forms of society that might arise from accommodating the realities of women's lives in a more inclusive way. Morton suggests that movements such as Eco-Feminism overcompensated for this imbalance in some ways by promoting a form of exclusivity that equated women with 'nature' (thus potentially setting up a whole new set of erroneous stereotypes). However, it's undeniable that possibilities for a more female friendly society have been subsumed within technological advances and the many gendered inequalities that still exist remain largely unchallenged. In terms of sex-magical paradigms, if one extends the exploration of '156' beyond the traditional gendered symbolism and heteronormative practices that have defined it thus far, one approaches ideas about essentialism/anti-essentialism that go beyond orthodox 'gender theory' and extend boundaries regarding sexual difference and into a much wider, post-human arena.

Some of the philosophical ground which challenges some of the current dichotomies created by the essentialist/anti-essentialist positions can be found in Timothy Morton's 'Weird Essentialism' and 'Queer Ecology'. Morton explores Irigaray's notion of women as 'unthought' beings i.e. entities that exist outside of patriarchal and what he terms 'agrilogistic' conventions

and applies this as a device for thinking about sentience and ecological systems. For Irigaray an irreducible subjectivity is attributed to each sex, a mystery and 'radical difference' which is engaged in a third space of intersubjectivity, an ambiguous in-between state of oscillation between I and 'not I' that preserves both an individual state and symbioses with an 'other'. Morton promulgates what he calls a 'Weird Essentialism', extending Irigaray's concepts regarding intersubjectivity into his construct of a 'Queer Ecology'. Morton's notion of the 'weird' or 'queer' aspects of the biosphere toys with philosophical rationalism and also acknowledges the "reserves of unthought zones of materiality in mysticism" and examines the paradox of being that confronts the laws of non-contradiction.

Morton proposes that the ideas of Irigaray can be used to conceptualise not only a wide variety of sexualities and gender identities but can also inspire one to reject what he calls the 'philosophy of presence', the predominant agrilogistic/phallocentric models of reality that have driven human thinking for millennia for the more inclusive loops of 'weird essentialism'. Morton emphasizes the importance of recognizing how many parts of a system cohere to create forms of sentience that like women have been part of a rejected or 'unthought' category of life, thus defining states that are both fluid and yet also possess essential qualities as 'life forms'. Applying this paradoxical theory to ecology and sexuality/gender is both innovative and useful and intersects with the magical theory of '156' that I use in my work most succinctly.

The sexuality of '156' has the potential to generate many such radical new, unthought realms of erotic exploration. To support this, the dynamic, magical matrices of creative interpenetration must allow a means of orientation, agency and production to all participating subjects, necessitating a strategic magical essentialism. The denial of difference also erases the essential mystery that an 'other' contains and by extension could be argued erases the joyousness within the sexual impulse. However, it is perhaps much more valuable to see the essentialist/anti-essentialist positions not as antithetical but rather part of a challenge to negotiate much more complex forms of sexual interrelationship that value equally the contribution each embodied form makes to the *prima materia* of the 'Great Work' (terms commonly used in occult literature and practices to describe the raw material and process of magical transformation). Acknowledging the unique qualities and ever changing 'assemblage' of psychic and physical properties that every individual possesses and the exponential complexities that their commingling produces. Thus, in terms of the female sacred one can say that women are both real, that is to say, have an essential quality and still retain an essential 'isness' as a specific life form as Morton has it but also that 'woman' is also simultaneously a fluid, and inclusive psychic space and form of perception with infinite meaning. Within the

practices of '156', the multiplicity of life forms are perceived as being in a multidimensional copulation with each other, a tapestry of omnisexual engagement that has both physical and psychic dimensions.

Morton's 'Queer Ecology' deconstructs the concept of nature as being an artificial perceptual construct that inevitably creates an artificial relationship with the planetary biosphere. In tandem with anti-essentialist feminist theory, he dissolves the gender barrier and hierarchical privilege given to binary relationships of male/female and heterosexuality and takes this further by considering the many forms of sexuality that are displayed in the natural world. Morton affirms the symbiotic nature of all life forms both organic and non-organic, affirming that 'At the DNA level, the biosphere is permeable and boundary-less:' and further that 'life-forms constitute a mesh, a nontotalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations that blur and confound boundaries at practically any level: between species, between the living and the non-living,'

Morton successfully navigates and unites many aspects of the essentialist/anti-essentialist schism within his paradoxical loop of 'weird essentialism', also affirming that the boundaryless 'mesh' would also have no dynamic structure without the individual integrity of the life forms that hold it together, but what is the nature of this integrity? Do we as individual life forms reduce down to nothing? Here we arrive back to the inherent contradiction of being, do we exist or not? Open-ended mesh that we are, are we not simultaneously life forms with an individual psycho-physical integrity that develops over time? So, even if we remain suspended in the paradoxical loop of 'queer essentialism', I must here also invoke Morton's speculation on mysticism's 'reserves of unthought zones of materiality' and suggest that magical sexuality provides mechanisms for such unthought zones to manifest and break down barriers between human and non-human sentience and that by limiting the potential of any given physical life form by denying its unique bio-essence and individuality within the boundaryless mesh—the whole biosphere is diminished. This applies to women but also equally to all humans and non-human entities.

HIEROS GAMOS 156

*"We are all spawned from the matrix of our beautiful jewel-like planet and the Great Work is one of alchemical symbiosis with its substance. The path of sex-magic within the 156 Current is one in which our creative life force is aligned with its astonishing, bewilderingly complex sentience and this provides a template for our future development."*⁶

A reformed vision of Babalon's magic/*156 current* is thus envisaged here as a movement which actively seeks to unite many divisions created by essentialism/anti-essentialism through a strategic magical essentialism. By using reformed rites of *Hieros Gamos* in practice.⁷ There is not the space to explore what such practices would encompass here, but a key lies in the magical properties found in the ophidian lifeforce or *Teth* as expressed in ATU XI and the bridge to omnisexual union that may be found in DNA. The 'new sexuality' of the *156 Current* is distinctive from other magical approaches to sexuality through its addition of feminine initiatory, alchemical practices. It offers a means to resolve many of the conflicts generated within the spectrum of essentialist/anti-essentialist theories of Pollock, Grosz, Irigaray, Ettinger and Morton. Babalon's magic as an embodied practice adds a somatic layer to Irigaray's 'langue feminine' which is conveyed inclusively through psychic spaces and also by expressing the nuances of a voice sculpted by women's magical experiences in the lived body. Each life form has an essential or definitive aspect of its substance at a given moment in time, a unique combination of DNA and life experience that intersects with a fluid layer of mutability and evolutionary growth. The binary nature of existence is not defined within this version of the *156 Current* as male/female but rather as a biphasic 'loop' or borderland between bio-physical/psychic essence and the embodied ground from which one interacts with all sentience and the biosphere, extending sexuality beyond the human gender spectrum. This provides the

⁶ Amodali, *The Marks of Teth*, Three Hands Press, USA, 2020.

⁷ 'Although the heterosexual magical formulas found in the many versions of *Hieros Gamos* in esoteric systems traditionally represent a route to the highest esoteric arcana, it can be construed that corresponding physical practices should not be perceived as mandatory to the sex-magical development of women, particularly in their current state. Arguably, before these formulas can be fully reformed it is important that female magicians move towards developing solo practices that result in adepthood as sexual magicians. In other words, authority is achieved through a life-long independent progression in the sexual mysteries as a woman, a *Great Work* which has its own trajectory and initiatic progression and is based upon active cultivation of magical sacraments and rites of initiation.' Amodali, *The Harlot that Shaketh Death: Aleister Crowley's "Babalon" as a Source of Innovative, Erotic and Phenomenological models in Contemporary Esoteric Practice*, WYRD Journal of the Archaic, VOL.4 Three Hands Press 2019, p 20.

magical ground for innovative forms of magical sexuality that can potentially unite the individual alchemical quintessence with the All.

Perhaps such ideas that advocate a deep immersion in the soma—a retreat into flesh, will be dismissed as regressive in the current momentum that is pushing our evolution, i.e., the influence of transhumanism as associated with virtuality and technological advancement rather than Morton's vision of a posthuman, mutual interdependence of planetary life forms that blurs the distinction between man and 'nature', life and non-life. However, I believe we are in dire need of systems and practices that widen perceptions of sexuality as experienced in omnisexual spaces as well as within hitherto unformulated explorations of embodied practices. To return to the opening quote by Grosz, above all, it seems important to try and rescue the wisdom of soma from the biases and bio-politics of traditional esoteric systems and the abstraction and movements away from the body promoted by some transhumanist and feminist theories. The *156 Current* represents a vehicle that can nurture greater understanding and balance between all aspects of life—a fundamental, equilibrating erotic force that supports new practices which encourage the development of feminine magical languages and erotic, phenomenological spaces that are both specific, distinctive and shared.

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