

QUEER THEORY,  
GENDER THEORY

An Instant Primer

RIKI WILCHINS

 alyson books  
los angeles

After extended discussion, IGM became a transgender issue.

Of course, none of these groups was ill intentioned or predisposed toward excluding intersex issues and IGM. They were all progressive, committed, and compassionate. Yet if national feminist groups even suspected that doctors performed clitoridectomies on thousands of baby girls each year, they would try to shut down hospitals across the country. If gay rights activists suspected that doctors were using hormones and surgery to erase thousands of potential lesbians each year, queer activists would be demonstrating in the halls of hospitals and lobbying in the halls of Congress.

But none of these scenarios have happened, all because an arbitrary definition means that these infants aren't female or possibly lesbian or even transgender. They're this other thing called intersex, which is not an issue for women or gays or transgender people; it's a medical issue. Presented with an enormously damaging and barbaric practice that harms thousands of kids, no group was able to embrace IGM as an issue. The rules of identity meant that intersex infants—the noise in the system—didn't fit.

It's enough to make you wonder if identity politics is permanently troubled. For that, we need Judith Butler and the critique she mounts of politics in the age of identity.

## 8. CAN SEX HAVE OPPOSITES?

“Does sex have a history? Does each sex have a different history, or histories?”

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

Sex has no history. It is a natural fact...it lies outside of history and culture.

David Halperin, “Is There a History of Sexuality?”  
in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*

“Somewhere in the 18th century, sex as we know it was invented.”

Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*

### INESCAPABLE KNOWLEDGE

It feels ominous that a number of people have warned me about including this chapter, anxious that any attempt to deconstruct Sex itself would be so far-fetched that it would undercut the book's credibility and alienate readers.

Attacking the transcendence of any immediate perceptual given, such as skin color or sex, always sounds a bit implausible at first.

For instance, skin color is so compelling that most people can't help but see race when they look at bodies. Like *Sexes*, bodies appear to actually be—in some fundament beyond culture, language, or discourse—of various races.

Yet recent Eastern European immigrants to the United States have had to learn that they were white. Because while skin color was just *there*, whiteness—at least as we view it in the United States—is a uniquely American concept. As is blackness, owing to our national history's uniquely pernicious “one-drop” rule, whereby a single drop of African-American blood was held to render a person nonwhite.

Even today, most Caucasian-Americans see only white and non-white. But many African-Americans see an entire spectrum, because in a racist system such distinctions are crucial in the access to privilege. One study in the 1940s noted that black teens had more than 150 terms for skin color, including half-white, yellow, light-brown, medium-brown, brown, chocolate, and blue-black, each with its own reality and meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Although race and skin color are *out there* somewhere, whites and African-Americans are not seeing the same thing. Color may be there, but everything they mean in terms of whiteness and blackness is clearly not.

Critical race theorists and others have increasingly drawn our attention to the ways that race can be deconstructed. So perhaps it's not too much to hope that we can deconstruct *Sex* as well—just a little. This is important because a central problem for gender theory has been that no matter what telling points are made about gender, *Sex* lurks right behind, pulling everything right back in the direction of immutable biology.

“When it comes to reproduction there are,” a student reminded me at a college event, “inevitable differences between boys' and girls' bodies you can't get around.” Of course there are. But the question has always been how much difference that difference makes.

*Sex* is not just about reproduction and the interesting property of some bodies to produce offspring when they are rubbed together

at the right time. On the contrary, *Sex* is the primary property of all human bodies, including those that cannot now or never will participate in procreation, such as infants, adolescents, transsexuals, the very old, women past menopause, sterile and infertile people, vasectomized men, hysterectomized women, the seriously infirm, and some intersexuals.

If *Sex* is not just about reproduction, it is not just about genes, XY chromosomes, and hormones either. *Sex* is introduced to explain skeletal structure, mental aptitude, posture, emotional disposition, aesthetic preference, body fat, sexual orientation and responsiveness, athletic ability, social dominance, shape and weight, emotional lability, consumer habits, psychological disposition, and artistic ability. It is also supposed to explain any number of so-called “instincts,” including the nesting instinct, the maternal instinct, and perhaps even the Budweiser instinct.

### THE FAR SIDE OF LANGUAGE

In fact, sometimes it appears our culture has created a new sex industry devoted to producing *Sex* 24 hours a day, seven days a week—not by putting people to work on street corners in short skirts to solicit cash from passersby, but by putting them to work in white coats in well-lit laboratories to solicit grants from universities and foundations.

Hardly a month passes without some arm of the sex industry announcing the results of a new study confirming the differences between men and women. The results are then endlessly recycled by popular culture and consumed by us as a reassurance of the fundamental binary nomenclature of all bodies.

For instance, as I write these paragraphs, I notice that the Discovery Channel is rebroadcasting its hour-long special *The Science of the Sexes*, a program devoted to the neonate biology that produces *opposite sexes*. Of course, the program is silent on the definition of what counts as “difference,” or “opposite,” or the overwhelming evidence of neonate biological similarity. Because who would be interested in that?

The narrator recounts in suitably hushed tones an experiment showing how girls and boys react differently when a glass barrier separates them from a parent. Boys try to get through; girls cry for help.

But surely many boys and girls reacted similarly. I suspect some responded with a mixture of reactions. Some reacted in totally unique and unexpected ways. About this we hear nothing. Nor do we hear about boys like me (who probably would have sat down and wept) or girls like Leslie Feinberg or Martina Navratilova (who probably would have annihilated the barrier). Why? Because we don't count—we're problems, not data.

In fact, in the hundreds of shows about neonate sexual development I've viewed over my lifetime, I can't recall a single one that mentioned—even in passing—the fundamental similarities between male and female infants. Difference is what we want, and difference is what we get. Even studies that produce results that have only statistical significance—say, an experiment that finds a reliable sex-based difference in three out of every 10,000 infants—are held dear, although their effects are so small as to have no practical value.

Indeed, as Anne Fausto-Sterling has noted, research that fails to find evidence of male/female differences is thrown out; it is unpublishable. Researchers cannot even apply for a grant to study such similarities because there is no interest in them. We spend millions of dollars creating and documenting sexual difference while any sixth grader with a pen and a few reams of paper could cite endless evidence of sexual similarity.

The very term "opposite sexes" itself gives us a sense of the overheated cultural impulse that drives the sex industry. This social institution has reversed the order of knowledge, so that Sex is no longer something about bodies; rather, bodies have become something about Sex.

As Butler notes, unlike gender, "physical features" appear to be in some sense there on the far side of language, unmarked by a social system" {p. 114}. They are implacable, indisputable, and absolute.

Deconstructing Sex is impossible. It is a center for which there truly appears to be no Other. The body becomes a text that is always

and only read one way. Any questioning of Sex is suspect. It must explain itself quietly, set its terms narrowly, and offer its arguments tentatively. Sex itself requires no explanation. It is the perfect transcendent Given—original, primordial, and indisputable.

### THE FIRST GIVEN

"Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it."

Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*

But if Sex is such an obvious and natural fact of bodies, why is it something that children must be taught? Why does it take so much trial and error for sexed knowledge to take hold, for the small discoveries of playing doctor to take on the overwhelming and pervasive meanings we carry into adulthood?

What if, like skin color or gender, Sex is both there *and* constructed? How is such a construction be accomplished?

Constructions can still be compelling. I am reminded of the first time my friend Tony pulled down his jeans to show off his new \$33,000 penis. As I looked on with fascination, he began razzing me with various invitations, all of which had the words "my dick" and "suck" in them.

I quickly found myself immersed in the usual complex reaction I have to the idea of giving head, until it dawned on me that—given the donor site for his graft—I would be sucking off his forearm.

We can get a glimpse of this in the work of Emily Martin. Martin went looking for the medical and scientific facts of sex and reproduction, and she found gender instead to be the sort of upset-the-apple-cart stuff that would never, ever be used by the Discovery Channel.

Start with gametes, the foundation for reproduction. The sperm

is inevitably characterized in a narrative of virility, aggression, and mobility. Eggs are...well, your basic egg is usually described as a combination of Sleeping Beauty and a sitting duck. Plump, round, and receptive, it waits—passive and helpless—for the sperm to throw itself upon her moist, quivering membranes. Conception itself is equally memorable. The sperm push furiously at inert egg until one of them finally penetrates deep into the warm, defenseless tissue.

It is not that the facts are wrong—quite the opposite. Rather, it is that the meaning we give them creates a cross between a Harlequin bodice-ripper and a *Dirty Harry* film. The role of the .357 Magnum (“the most powerful handgun in the world”) is played by that veteran character actor, Mr. Penis, and a sperm is Clint Eastwood with rabies, just looking for an egg to “make my day.”

Necessarily so, since the simple facts are pretty barren. A gamete does this, and a chromosome does that. Like the body itself, the facts of sexual reproduction have resonance only if we imbue them with in a meaningful narrative, a context. In this case it’s the cultural narrative of power and gender, as we understand it in a sexist, hetero-centric culture.

Medical texts render gamete production in a similar manner. The testicles’ production of two trillion little flagellant critters during the male’s lifetime is described in metaphors of activity, creation, and the miracle of biology.

Egg production, on the other hand, is a big disappointment, miracle-wise. Females have all the eggs they’ll ever need at birth. As they age, the eggs age too, pulled off the shelf (yawn) at a rate of one per month, and the longer they’re on the shelf, the more they deteriorate. If the testes are Marines on Paris Island, the ovaries are all inventory problems and K-Mart.

Even conception does not escape this treatment. Menstruation is described by means of a narrative of loss, debris, and failure, because it entails wasting half of one potential person-type cell that might have grown up to be you or me (well, you anyway), along with several teaspoons of lukewarm fluid.

Ejaculation also involves the loss of several teaspoons of lukewarm fluid, along with enough potential person-type cells to repopulate this planet and several others. However, ejaculation is unfailingly described as a life-giving phenomenon: potent, energetic, and hearty. The notion of waste is nowhere to be found.

As with body temperature or race, the facts are there, but the meaning is added. This is knowledge of a different order, made not for understanding but for politics, for reading a narrative of difference, of masculine and feminine, onto reproduction.

If reproduction is constructed, then could the sexed body be constructed as well? Could our understanding of Sex itself be in some way a result of our use of meaning, image, and metaphor?

To answer that question, we need Thomas Laqueur.

### DISAPPEARING BODIES

“The notion of sex made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures...a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere: sex was thus able to function as a unique signifier and as a universal signified.”

Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*

Laqueur’s work is an attempt to give Sex a history, to reveal its hidden assumptions, and to show that our understanding of Sex has a human origin. Laqueur begins with the female orgasm, which had historically been considered necessary for conception to occur. Naturally early medical texts gave a lot of space to facts about female orgasm. But by the 19th century, female orgasm disappeared. Within decades, doctors were hotly debating whether such a thing even existed.

For the anxious reader, let me quickly reassure that the female orgasm was rediscovered in the late 1960s. Unfortunately, by then it had acquired unexpected baggage in the form of a G Spot and the truly sexually impertinent female ejaculation.

Female ejaculation had always been around, but it was written off as urine or other secretions. Men ejaculated; the more demur sex did not. Science's and popular culture's rediscovery of the female ejaculation was not a result of more and better knowledge, but rather a shift in attitudes that allowed us to view the female body in a new light.

The more Laqueur hunted for the "lost" female orgasm, the more the reassuring specter of a fixed—and binary—Sex retreated. In its place he found a body thoroughly politicized and culturally obedient, a body whose contours, functions, and meanings shifted dramatically through history.

Facts were produced and dismissed, emphases shifted, categorizations changed, organs were redrawn, and names were changed to protect the innocent. In short, Laqueur began to find a history for opposite Sexes.

### ONE BODY, ONE SEX

According to Laqueur, since the first Greek anatomists—about two millennia ago—there had been one body and one Sex and it was Male. The Female body was considered to be essentially similar in nature, but an inferior version lacking in some vital essence that caused it to be smaller, more delicate, and come with an *inny* instead of an *outty*.

This was not because Greek and later European doctors were stupid. Nor was it because they didn't see what was right in front of their eyes when they opened up a body. Rather, wherever Science looked at bodies—male or female—it saw similarity, because that was what it was looking for. The reigning paradigm of Science until the last few centuries had been one of finding similarity.

For instance, Natural History stressed the overall appearance of things, their relationship in the order of things, and their completeness as wholes. Cats and dogs might be lumped together because of their similar appearance, shared cultural status in art and literature, and common niche as household pets.

As for male and female bodies, there was plenty of difference to go around, but difference was understood through social roles and the conventions of culture. Male and female difference was located in how that body behaved, where it fitted into the order of things, and its cultural role, not in any deep-seated, organic difference in bodies themselves.

The understanding of male and female bodies as basically similar reflected the larger belief in a world that was singular and divine and natural. The task of Science was to find and document the essential relatedness of things.

But over the last 300 to 400 years, a new paradigm arose and, with it, new ways of seeing.

The world was understood less as God's than Man's, and Science's task was not to find the divine underlying similarity in a thing's design, but rather to catalog and classify the differences among things in ways that might help Man to understand, use, and control them.

This Enlightenment Science stressed difference over similarity, ordered pieces over wholes, separation and distinction over connectedness, isolation over context, and the breakdown of inner structure like the skeleton over the totality of outward appearance. With the emergence in biology of Linnaeus's chart of species, Science's task had clearly become dividing all living things into separate, distinct species and classifying them accordingly.

### THE SEAT OF DIFFERENCE

"But a penis and vagina are fundamentally different. There's no way you can get around that."

A reader's comment on an early draft of this chapter

"Instead of being divided by their reproductive anatomies, the sexes [were] linked by a common one."

Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*

But what of the seat of sexual difference for us: the penis and vagina? Aren't they manifest evidence of opposition and difference?

Doesn't the entire argument Laqueur is making founder upon them?

In fact, for most of recorded history, the vagina did not even have a separate name. And since it clings to the viscera with no particular shape of its own, it was drawn pretty much in the same shape as the penis, but pointing in instead of out. The penis and the vagina were considered merely two varieties of a common organ: one fitting over or into the other.

This may sound odd to us, but it is not the least bit far-fetched. The penis and vagina and their surrounding tissues evolve from exactly the same underlying fetal tissue, share the same physical location, and have a common underlying structure (penis-clitoris, labia-scrotum, etc.). They also share a common function in reproduction, and they even behave in similar ways: stroking each produces arousal, secretion, and orgasm.

In fact, starting from a paradigm of similarity, it's perfectly reasonable to see the penis and vagina as providing, not primal difference, but strong evidence of bodies' underlying and inherent similarity.

### OPPOSITE SEXES

Sometime in the 18th century, sex as we know it was invented. As Carol Travis has noted, it is no accident that theories of difference flourish precisely when the differences in question begin to fade. As social roles began to grow together and less distinct, "difference that had been expressed with reference to [social conventions of] gender now came to be expressed with reference to sex" and a "language of similarity began to be replaced by a language of incommensurable difference."

As a dominant and monolithic Center, Male was not differentiated from Female so much as Female—the Other—was differentiated from Male. Female was used as a blank surface where whole new truths could be written. The notion of differentness extended itself over the Female body like a shroud.

The ovaries, which—like the testes—had historically been known simply as the gonads, were given separate names and meanings. The vagina was named, to make it more distinct from the penis.

Menstrual blood was separated from all other fluids and discharges—particularly from all other kinds of blood and bleeding—and given an enormous weight of cultural meaning. Along with the ovary, menstrual blood became the very definition of Femaleness, and the immediate, visible symbol of femininity.

In the late 1600s, the first Female skeleton was assembled for study using the most feminized cadaver that could be found—especially wide hips, narrow rib cage, small head, and tiny hands, wrists, ankles, and feet.

This choice was made not because there were new bones to be shown, but rather to display and anchor difference. From then on, anatomists would draw the Female skeleton so as to maximize its divergence from the Male. The two sexes, in other words, were invented as a new foundation for gender.

### ARE OPPOSITE SEXES NECESSARY?

It is easy to believe that in this story of opposite Sexes—if we decide to give it any attribution at all—is simply an example of modern Science doing its stuff. The scientists were ignorant; we know better—end of story.

Yet the rise of two-sexed bodies did not result from our knowing more. So what dictated the rise of the two-sex model? As we saw with the rise of a new Science of Homosexuality, everything that was necessary to derive one model or the other had been common knowledge for centuries.

More and better Science did not dictate the rise of a two-sexed body for the simple reason that "the nature of sexual difference is not susceptible to empirical testing. It is logically independent of biological facts. Two incommensurable sexes were, and are, as much the product of culture as was, and is, the one-sex model." Each model is just that: a model for organizing and contextualizing the body that "is logically independent of biological facts because already embedded in the language of science, at least when applied to any culturally resonant construal of Sex, is the language of gender."<sup>6</sup>

More facts and better Science can never resolve such debates because all they can offer is more ammunition to each side. In the final analysis, what bodies, organs, and fluids mean, and whether the glass of similarity is half full or the glass of difference half-empty, are not problems of Science, but of politics.

Laqueur also asks the obvious questions: Why sex? Why this particular collection of parts and why this particular assembly? Why do we need Sex to be present for us on all bodies at all times, even those not engaged in reproduction, even those (like mine) forever unavailable for reproduction?

In spite of all the knowledge we already have, it remains permanently unclear what we expect Sex to tell us, and why we need to have a Sex for every body (lest it appear to us utterly, piteously, frighteningly naked).

### IS VISUAL LANGUAGE TRANSPARENT?

Even if we reject Laqueur's attempt to provide us with this story of opposite Sexes, in a way it doesn't matter if he's literally correct or not. What is important is that Laqueur's historical survey provides the basis for an alternative way that bodies could be understood, for organizing the surface of the body in other than two oppositionally different Sexes.

In doing so, we see that while Sex is not necessarily inevitable and essential, it might have a human history after all—not Sex as the capacity to reproduce, but Sex as this infinite quality pervading every aspect of our bodies and separating humanity into two distinct binary halves.

Laqueur forces us to confront the frightening, dislocating idea that—like our textual language—the visual language of bodies isn't transparent either. In other words, body parts aren't necessarily or only what we see them to be, because, as belief changes, vision can change too. We learn to see things a certain way, and by seeing them that way, we rely on our belief in that vision to inform us about what is ultimately *real* and *out there*.

This might seem another prescription for the irrationality and

uncertainty of the Abyss, where nothing is known or definite. Yet a little dislocation and even apparent irrationality are the price we pay for a certain kind of freedom, in which other ways of knowing can emerge and survive.

Perhaps Foucault came closer to the truth in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History" when he observed that "Nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self-recognition, or for the understanding of other men."



## 11. BUTLER AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

“[T]he identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics...in order to mobilize feminism as an identity politics, simultaneously work to limit...in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up.”

“Laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable to feminism.”

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble:  
Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

### THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITIES

What attracts us to many causes is the principle involved. You don't have to be a whale to join Greenpeace, and you don't need to be locked up in a foreign cell to support Amnesty International.

But when it comes to rights, we are attracted to the notion of identity—of rights for *us* as members of *our group*. Yet as theorist Judith Butler has shown, basing our politics on who belongs to which identity almost always leads to the same familiar set of problems.

Butler has questioned the traditional categories of identity—by gender, sex, sexual orientation, and race—that we use to navigate the traditional liberal narrative. In the process, she has reinvented much

of feminist theory, becoming one of the founders of what has been named *queer theory*.

Her main tactic has been to refuse to accept identities at face value. She chooses instead to subvert them by asking such “upstream” questions as how they were created, what political ends they serve, what erasures have made them possible, and how they are able to present themselves as real, natural, and universal.

According to Butler, identity politics may have permanent problems. Because the concept of identity that underlies it—of *being* one’s race or sex or sexual orientation—is itself seriously flawed.

She begins, strangely enough, with feminism. Feminism is understood as the movement that represents and pursues the political interests of women. What could be more straightforward than that? Yet, assuming a commonality to *any* identity, even one as apparently uncomplicated as Woman, can mean assuming a unity that doesn’t exist in reality.

A political category called Woman may sound like a good idea in theory, but it hides immense racial, economic, gender, and cultural differences within it. Because of this, subpopulations within a common category may have very different political agendas. For instance, at one international women’s conference, friction arose because American feminists were pushing an agenda focused on things like abortion rights and equal pay, while their Third World counterparts were pushing for an end to polygamy, female infanticide, female genital mutilation, and laws forbidding female property ownership.

Because it is unmarked for considerations like age, race, class, or nationality, the identity of Woman risks being—for political purposes, at least—more white, adult, middle-class, gender-normative, and Eurocentric than it should be.

The identity of Woman has also generated serious controversy over issues of ownership and identification. Some women have begun refusing the identity, particularly when it seems to draw—consciously or unconsciously—on middle-class, Eurocentric, feminine norms with the ironic effect that “women” are now opposing the unintended political effects of the very feminism working to liberate them.

Feminism has also faced conflict for just the opposite problem: refusing individuals who themselves identify as women and want to be represented by it. Stone butches, transsexual men and women, cross-dressers, intersexuals, queer youth, and drag people have all sought varying degrees of shelter and support under the banner of womanhood, only to be met with varying degrees of resistance.

This refusal itself generates additional problems. Not just the obvious one of correctly judging who should be allowed in, but the more subtle one of who is qualified to judge. For the very act of judging—regardless of who does it or what decisions they reach—creates a hierarchy in which some individuals are prelegitimated as women to judge those who follow. Liberatory movements should be about flattening hierarchies, not establishing new ones.

Yet the very act of judging itself assumes norms for acceptable womanhood and whose needs will really count. Once a hierarchy is in place, few who have been so judged will want to get involved, because no one wants to be a second-class citizen at their own party.

This is especially true with issues of gender, as mainstream feminism continues to either struggle with gender expression and identity or ignore these issues altogether, and young genderqueers—perhaps unaware that they are enacting a kind of fourth-wave feminism—turn away from mainstream feminism in droves.

This is the same problem we saw in other contexts with transgender organizations that are “also for anyone who is gender-different” or gay organizations that are “also for bisexuals.” It’s obvious who comes first, and thus who will actually come to play.

This problem cannot be resolved simply by saying, “Okay, then anyone can be a woman.” If anyone can be a woman, then no one is a woman; the category loses any meaning. For it to retain any coherence, some people must inevitably be turned away. Feminism—a movement founded to counter the marginalization and erasure of women—ends up in the paradoxical position of installing its own margins and erasures.

Even worse, in the act of creating boundaries, feminism also creates its own limits. It risks creating a feminism that says to its young: Be all you can be, go wherever your heart and mind and talent can take you, but don't become too male-identified, too queer, or too masculine. If we can't recognize you as a Woman, we might not be able to represent you within feminism any more.

In this way, according to Butler, a movement that embarks on the critical task of freeing women paradoxically also ends up imposing a new set of limits and restrictions on them. By refusing to analyze its own origins, feminism risks resembling that other universal monolith—patriarchy—that perpetuates its own dominance by asserting its naturalness, erasing whatever doesn't fit, and reimposing the Same.

### STRENGTHENING THE BINARY

Upon further reflection, the problem may be even worse than it first appears. Feminism may have torn down many gender boundaries. But by unconsciously basing itself on binary genders, it has actually solidified structures like male/female, man/woman, and masculine/feminine in new and unexpected ways.

Woman turns out not only to be opposed to Man, but in some fundamental way—just as light requires dark—it actually produces binary notions of Man and Manhood. After all, what could it mean to be a Woman if not for Man and Masculinity? The terms are not only completely interdependent, like all binaries; moreover, they act to squeeze whatever doesn't fit, whatever “queers the binary,” out of existence.

In this way, feminism has actually helped obscure the notion of gender transgression and the political aspirations of those who transcend gender norms by articulating its politics as if the whole world was divided neatly, naturally, into Boys and Girls. Similarly, the uncritical acceptance of gayness has reinforced the idea that an individual's sexuality ought to be the basis of his or her primary social identity, something unthinkable barely a century ago.

Meanwhile, gay activists have continued to fight for mainstream

acceptance by pointedly comparing gayness to straightness—by arguing that gay people also are monogamous, raise families, and look gender-normal. While this has been politically effective, it has also made fidelity to sexual and romantic norms the basis for demanding social recognition.

Once again, difference is pushed aside. But as Butler points out, this is typical of power's uncanny ability to incite only those rebellions which—on a deeper level—are bound to fail because they unconsciously adopt and reenact the terms of their own construction.

### FEMINIST REJOINDERS

Some feminists have tried to rebut these problems by reasserting a universal basis for Womanhood in women's common experience of patriarchal oppression. However, “the effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse instead of offering a different set of terms.”<sup>14</sup>

In other words, just as feminists complain that patriarchy tries to reduce all women to a single narrow stereotype, so reducing patriarchy to a single narrow stereotype proves feminists can engage in the same tactic. Butler adds, “That the tactic can operate in feminist and antifeminist contexts alike suggests that feminism is capable of its own colonizing gestures.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, using male oppression as a unifying basis for womanhood renders Woman once again dependent on and derivative of Man. Even worse, it means that women are not defined by what they have become or what they have accomplished but rather by the sheer fact of their subjugation at the hands of men.

To avoid these difficulties, other theorists have tried to claim Woman as a strategic shorthand instead of a real identity. As a sort of temporary political position adopted for current political needs, it would not be expected to spell out its full meaning and complexity.

On one hand, temporary shortcuts for the sake of progress make sense. But they are also another kind of erasure, one that defers

explaining all the messy, marginal subgroups that make up Woman in the name of political advancement. In fact, a goal of feminist advancement should be to recognize these marginalized components of Woman so that their experience is finally heard and acknowledged.

For the last couple of decades, so-called “radical” lesbian feminists have tried to perform an end run around all these problems. Refusing to debate any more nuanced notions, they have instead worked to construct a clear and specific definition of womanhood based on a specifically female embodiment.

Because of the way meaning is divided up in the gender binary, this embodiment has necessarily focused on those things that belong unarguably to the Feminine: motherhood, reproduction, and a distinctively female psychology that features empathy, nurturing, cooperation, sensitivity, and communicativeness.

The philosophical clarity of this view is refreshing. Such theorists have drawn a clear line in the sand for distinguishing “real” women from transsexuals, intersexuals, male-identified dykes, and others on the margins of identity.

Yet such “radical” essentialism has often seemed to come less from theoretical convictions than (as theorist Gayle Rubin has noted) a desire to make the offending messy realities disappear.

Which is to say, essentialist formulations often appear less like practices of identification than political formulas for legitimating exclusion. In any case, such essentialist arguments confound assertions that biology is not destiny or that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one. They require women to assume maternity and femininity as the essence of selfhood, in effect, reducing women to yet another stereotype, even if this time it is an entirely positive—or even “superior”—one.

Worse yet, a woman who fails to meet such standards—who does not yearn for the patter of little feet around the house; who is not nurturing, soft, or supportive; who revels in tough competition and in being an aloof, irritable loner—risks being written off as unfeminine or even male-identified. And she may be better off for it.

## FEMINISM WITHOUT WOMAN?

The response to the arguments Butler raises isn't to ask feminism to completely refuse identities. In fact, it's likely that such a refusal is impossible, since discourse always carves up the political field into constituencies that will seek representation.

The answer is also not that the identity of Woman “simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality”<sup>16</sup> so it can move forward in unity and conflict-free. The price of a less coercive feminism may be resigning ourselves to conflict and fragmentation and then agreeing to move forward with all our contradictions intact. Unities are boring, and a premature unity almost always means suppressing uniqueness, mobility, and difference.

As we saw with Foucault, identities are themselves the product of cultural constructions. If you begin identifying, tracking, and managing same-sex attractions, you eventually end up with a class of people understood as homosexuals. So perhaps it is not enough for feminism to simply fight for women's rights. Maybe part of a feminist agenda includes asking the “upstream” question of where the identity of Woman originated, how it is maintained, what hierarchies it creates, and whom these hierarchies serve.

Maybe, in addition to representing women, part of a feminist agenda should be questioning, even deconstructing the category itself, so that—paradoxically—feminism actually precludes a complete and final definition of Woman. In such a revitalized feminism, Woman is no longer assumed but is always incomplete and unstable, in the process of dissolving and reforming as the political needs emerge. And mobility of identity is no longer a threat, but an important tactic, even a central feminist goal, and the disruption of identity becomes a means to overturn the male/female, boy/girl, man/woman binaries that make patriarchy (and gender stereotypes) possible. The loss of unity and the incompleteness of the category might even promote new meanings, new ways of being, and new political possibilities for women to engage.

## REIMAGINING GENDER IDENTIFICATION

A gendered identity is supposed to be an integral facet of "inner" personhood produced by one's biological sex. But there are problems with this. To begin with, what is the mechanism by which sex produces this inner identity? Where does the idea of interiority arise, and by what means "does the body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth?"<sup>17</sup> And how does biological sex produce a gendered identity that invariably expresses itself into the same binary gender displays we inevitably see around us: dresses and high heels or suits and ties, pipe smoking or big hair and long nails?

For that matter, why do we understand the emergence of a proper gendered experience as a kind of achievement? Why does Aretha Franklin sing that her lover makes her feel "like a natural woman," or a soldier confide to his buddy that firing off a 50-caliber machine gun makes him feel like a real stud? Even our need to call attention to an especially authentic experience of gender by prefacing it with adjectives like *real* and *natural* illustrates how unconsciously aware we are that such states are psychological accomplishments.

And what can it mean to feel like a natural woman or a real man? Since these are binary opposites, one can only distinguish feeling like a real man to the exact degree that one does not feel like a real woman, and vice versa.

It appears that gendered identifications are only meaningful within a binary framework in which one term's separation from the other gives it meaning. Which points to a second problem: Each gendered identity must maintain a strict coherence among sex, gender identity, gender expression, and desire. Female is to woman as woman is to feminine as feminine is attracted to Male.

Breaking any link causes a gender to fall right off the grid of cultural intelligibility. Which is what happens to new formulations like bi-gendered cross-dresser, tryke (transsexual dyke), bio-boy (biological boy), andro (androgynous), butch bottom, or no-ho (no-hormone) tranny boy.

By breaking the links between gender, desire, and sex, they

become incomprehensible, idiosyncratic, a clever thing to do with words. What does gender identification mean if it doesn't tell us about a person's body, gender expression, and sexual orientation?

Yet since many combinations are available, how is it that only two intelligible genders are available? In fact, since we only become acceptable social actors by conforming to one of these two roles, maybe we should rethink the politics of gendered identification. Maybe our persistent sense of gendered personhood is actually an effect of gender instead of its origin. Maybe being a man or a woman is less the result of something we are than the result of regulatory practices of the gender system.

Perhaps "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is...constituted by the very 'expressions' of gender that are said to be its results."<sup>18</sup> "Being" a gender is always a *doing*, a continuous approximation of normative ideals that live outside of us and were always already there before we arrived.

The shift in focus from the regulatory practices of the gender system to our inner "gendered identities" conceals gender's true origins beneath a substitute myth about nature, sex, and what is *inside of us*. Gendered identification is not an integral, independent feature of experience, but two accepted sets of meanings through which we are called to understand ourselves and to be understood by others.

As my friend Mariette once put it, "I know I am a woman, but a lot of the time, I don't feel like a woman. I don't feel particularly like anything at all. It's only when I put on a dress or a man looks at me that I really become conscious of it."

How, I wondered, is it possible to feel "like a woman?" Do all women feel alike? Does womanhood have a specific and universal kind of feeling? Is it a result of femininity, and if so, perhaps cross-dressers and drag queens feel "like women." Certainly, it is more than having a collection of female body parts.

Returning to Butler's notion of coherence, perhaps it is the authorization to understand and announce one's feeling of womanhood, because one has the proper links among sex, gender, and

desire. I suspect that many of us are like Mariette. Most of the time—whether we're brushing our teeth, driving the car, typing on our computer—we aren't conscious of any gendered identification at all. It is only when we're involved in a gendered act or situation that we feel like something specific, and then it's always one of two possibilities.

Because those are the only intelligible genders, the only ones that make sense. If the terms transgender male, boy-identified dyke, or intersexual female were available, maybe these would have been the identities with which we identified. For that matter, maybe these are the identities with which we identify, only we're unaware of it. If gender is a way to structure meaning, then we might easily be one of these genders and not know it, because—within our simplistic binary framework—they cannot exist.

In fact, why do any gender at all? What is the cultural demand that we answer to any gendered norm? Why can't Mariette simply feel like a woman when she does, feel like nothing at all when she doesn't, and have her little moments of masculinity if and when they emerge? Why can't she let all that be whatever it is?

### GREAT PERFORMANCES

Butler believes that what we see as gender is performatively produced. This has been widely misinterpreted as "all gender is just a performance," something she not only didn't say but with which she very much disagrees. At a time when youth are increasingly aware of gender's elasticity and symbolic displays, when Hilary Swank wins an Oscar for playing Brandon Teena and Harvey Fierstein wins a Tony for playing *Hairspray's* Edna Turnblad on Broadway, when college teens stage drag king parties, the notion of "gender as performance" is probably with us for good.

*Performatives* are the name for special kinds of speech that also qualify as official social acts. It sounds a little obscure, but consider that the words "I now pronounce you husband and wife"—when uttered by the right person at the right time before the right audience—create a marriage between a couple.

The words "I now pronounce you" do not comment *about* a marriage; rather, they *conduct* one. They do not just represent speech but also a specific kind of official social act. Such speech-acts are performatives, and we give them the power to do magical things.

For instance, a policeman who yells "you're under arrest!" at a fleeing suspect, or a woman who announces "I bet \$1,000" in a poker game are not making descriptive statements *about* placing a suspect under arrest or making a bet. They are the acts of arresting someone and placing a bet themselves.

If I put on jeans, a tool belt, and hard hat, I don't really create the social state of my being a construction worker. I'm just referencing a particular style of dress associated with being a construction worker. But when I dress and act in a gendered way, when I pull on a dress and high heels and act in a recognizably feminine manner—when I *do* Woman—I am not simply referencing a gender role but constituting myself as one. I am creating the social state of being a woman.

This woman-ness is never there apart from my actions; I call it into being by creating it moment to moment. It has no more underlying identity or reality than being married, being under arrest, or making a bet. All of these exist only through a recognized set of acts that call into being important social states.

Unfortunately, performativity doesn't yet tell us a lot about why some performatives work and others don't—which with gender is a central issue. We want to know why some versions of *woman* or *man* work, while others fail.

For instance, I can do woman all I want, but I'm still going to be called "Sir" about half the time. And I have some butch friends who are very much involved in *not* doing woman, but who still get referred to as "Miss" (not to mention "Honey" or "Sweetie") about half the time. But the idea of performativity gives us hope that we might be able to reenact gender differently, to see genders that aren't *there* for us right now.

It reminds me of the parable of the anthropologist who goes in search of new genders. He sails to a remote, distant island, where the inhabitants recognize six of them. He goes ashore, and finds

himself face-to-face with half a dozen statues representing gods, with one for each recognized gender. Crestfallen, the anthropologist turns around to continue his search elsewhere because, as he reports back, "like everyplace else, they had only two genders." Two genders were all he could see.

### COPIES WITH NO ORIGINAL

The physical appearance of all males as men and all females as women is so compelling that it feels inevitable—a fact of Nature. Man and Woman look like the "real" genders. Anything else—male femininity, female masculinity, or something off the binary altogether—appears as a kind of gendered failure, bad copies, or knockoffs that didn't quite work.

For instance, drag works even though it shouldn't because we recognize its references as something real. When we see a drag queen, we may know the performer is not a woman, but we can't help seeing one because s/he stylizes her body in very specific, learned ways we recognize.

Yet the more we go looking for that real gender, the more it recedes and in its place, we find only other women, who also stylize their bodies in very specific, learned ways we recognize. Woman is to drag—not as Real is to Copy—but as Copy is to Copy. Gender turns out to be a copy for which there is no original. *All* gender is drag. All gender is queer.

Even the "real" genders are unstable and always changing. Think of Superman, the model of male masculinity. George Reeves, the original 1950s TV Superman, had a stomach that was larger than his chest, arms and legs that lacked any muscularity, a *tochis* built for two, and was clearly entering middle age. By comparison, his 1980s successor, actor Christopher Reeve, was the very embodiment of the young movie stud-muffin: taut, trim, youthful, and buffed-to-kill.

Butler finds the extraordinary energy we invest in embodying these moving, mutating, impossible heterosexual roles funny. "Indeed, I would offer heterosexuality as both a compulsory position and an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself."<sup>19</sup> I

would only add that the gay and transgender positions we try to embody are, in their own way, intrinsically comedic as well.

### SEX INTO GENDER

Feminism has long stressed the separation between Sex and Gender to counter the assertion that women are defined by their ability to become pregnant and reproduce. Biology is destiny. Being female may be biological and thus unavoidable, but being a woman is cultural and therefore changeable.

From this perspective, gender is what culture makes of the sexed body. Put another way, "Sex is to nature or 'the raw' as gender is to culture or 'the cooked.'"<sup>20</sup> If gender is constructed, then Female need not become Woman. It could just as easily become Man, or something else entirely. And masculinity might become a property of Female as well as Male (or femininity a property of Male). In fact, if gender is what culture makes of sex, then even if sex is fixed and binary, there's no reason gender couldn't be multiple and variable.

Yet these things don't happen. Maybe if gender is what culture makes out of the raw material of sex, we need to ask exactly how that magical transformation occurs. Perhaps the distinction between sex and gender is not as useful as it first appears.

For one thing, if becoming a woman is an invariable result of being born female, then culture—not biology—is destiny. And all we've accomplished is to substitute one inevitability for another.

In addition, the sex-versus-gender distinction looks suspiciously like another return of the binary—and not only the obvious one of nature versus nurture. It also reenacts the more subtle binary of masculine versus feminine, in which the mute and passive body-as-feminine sits waiting, receptive and blank, for a vigorous and forceful culture-as-masculine to imprint it with meaning.

Once again the Feminine serves as Other, a *tabula rasa* to be appropriated for whatever meanings are necessary. Maybe the real problem is that there is no distinction between sex and gender. Maybe both are inevitabilities within a culture where reproduction becomes the central organizing principle for bodies.

Perhaps sex—the great, preexisting Given, the one immutable bodily fact upon which all deconstructionist arguments fail—is itself to some degree constructed. As we saw in the writings of Martin and Lacquer, although reproduction is a fact, what we make of it is heavily shaped by culture.

The weight of meaning accorded the male chest and female breast, the erect penis as potent and masculine, and the erect nipple or clitoris as feminine and vulnerable—all this seems less the result of a pristine Nature that lives out beyond culture than a construction that is culture's own product. An untouched and immaculate Nature turns out to be a very useful thing, successfully anchoring assertions about sex and bodies while inoculating them from all debate.

Yet Sex looks more like a gendered way of looking at bodies, of looking for and producing binary difference and then establishing it as the body's central organizing principle. We get a flavor of this gender-into-sex enterprise in over-the-top terms like opposite sexes, as if male and females were matter and antimatter.

Then Gender will not only be the meaning culture attaches to the sexed body, but the means by which and the reason that Sex itself is produced. Sex will be shown to have been Gender all along. The designation supposed to be most in the raw proves to have been already cooked, and the central distinction of the sex/gender narrative collapses.

### POLITICAL POSSIBILITIES

If gender is constructed, what kinds of possibilities open up by virtue of its constructedness? If gender is a repeated doing that is always in danger of failing, what new political actions become possible?

This constructedness also allows for the possibility of subverting the gender an individual is *in* by embracing the failure, by failing publicly and purposefully and thus revealing gender's constructedness. The focus on individual subversive tactics reflects postmodernism's longstanding preference for private individual action. If enough people did it, it might indeed be a successful way to break

down gender norms. But even if we accept the idea that a gendered identity is illusory or variable, many of us do gender as a way of expressing and communicating: "This is who I am. This is how I see myself. This is how I want *you* to see *me*."

We understand gender as saying something important about us. We are not interested in subversion per se so much as a renewed sense of authenticity, of being all that we are, all of the time, without fear or shame or omission. For instance, when I fly, I'm often addressed loudly and repeatedly as "Sir" by airport security personnel who are busily wandering my breasts. I console myself with the reminder that this is what subversion looks like.

This confusion over pronouns and genders used to make me feel ashamed, as if I was a personal failure. But then one day I was shopping and ended up going from the men's shoes to women's lingerie to men's socks. Every salesperson, every department, fumbled for pronouns. All of them were unsure how to treat me. (Was I looking for men's shoes for myself or shopping for my boyfriend? Was I a lady buying underwear or a pervert pawing through women's underthings?)

I remember asking myself, Why should everyone be able to tell instantly on sight whether I'm a man or woman? Doesn't that reenact the central tyranny of the gender system—that we must fit ourselves into these little boxes so people can always tell what we are at a glance?

Maybe all the social discomfort and confusion I was causing—not to mention my shopping spree's zigzagging across gender lines—was the price for a certain kind of freedom. Maybe it was the price of something new. Maybe in the face of all the gender restrictions we must confront, *new* feels like anxiety, social awkwardness, and even tension as people try to figure out something that makes them suddenly unsure.

For myself, I realized I was not so much interested in parody, but in—as my partner likes to put it—"using all my voices." If being "who we are" is off the gender binary and therefore appears to parody and therefore subvert gender roles, then we might embrace



subversion. But otherwise it's unclear whether subversion per se has much of a future as a sustainable political practice.

If her solutions have not yet been totally embraced, Butler's ideas have nonetheless generated enormous enthusiasm among students, academics, youth, and activists. In the end, the question that hangs over Butler's brilliant, unruly philosophical campaign is the one with which she herself introduces her first book: What shape of politics emerges when identity no longer constrains our politics?

At present, postmodernism is unable to tell us why we should care about the shape we have or why we should desire a different one. It's more than a little like Scarlet O'Hara promising breathlessly that "tomorrow...is another day," without knowing that tomorrow will be better or even explaining why it should be.

In this sense, postmodernism seems to trade on the assurance that newness itself is filled with enough promise. And it is this hopefulness that I think postmodernism trades in (even if unintentionally).

There is an increasing sense among people interested in liberation movements that the traditional progressive narrative is stuck. As befits a broad coalition of groups and identities, we are concerned with issues of inclusion and difference.

At the same time, particularly in the case of gay rights, we sometimes risk becoming obsessed with making sure no one is left out of or unnamed in our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual, queer, questioning, straight-sympathetic allies youth movement—otherwise known as the LGBTIQSSAY.

And identities, which once promised such pride and freedom, have sometimes looked like overly simplistic labels that submerge our individuality and erase more complex intersections with factors like age, race, and class. In addition, the emphasis on difference and identity has produced a loose mosaic of differing agendas brought together by necessity rather than a strong coalition of shared values that engages in effective political action.

Finally, youth are emerging with a new vision that sees narrow, fixed identities as confining and unnecessary. Young folks embrace nonbinary genders and multiracial identities with equal facility.

It's time for the next step, which is what postmodernism and the possibility of postidentity politics offers. When Butler impertinently demurs from the idea of writing for a gay anthology as a lesbian, because the name announces a set of terms she wants to contest, we sense that something new and unexpected is in the offing.

With gender, as with politics, there is also this feeling of being stuck. Thirty years of feminism and gay rights have convinced many of us that there is something deeply wrong with gender roles, yet gender seems as compelling and inevitable as ever. We look around, and all we ever see are men and women and nothing else.

So for me, Butler's primary value was to help me to see that this was not inevitable—that there were cracks in the system. These openings could be used to introduce change—to allow me the space to believe that seeing men and women on every corner didn't mean either that they were there or that I necessarily had to become one.

This sounds simple enough, but for me, ideas like these represented enormous personal breakthroughs, and they were the main reason I buried myself in gender theory. Yet despite gender theory's popularity on college campuses, it has also remained largely a creature of academia—obscure, complex, and abstract. While it undoubtedly offers new tools to "open up the discourse," can that be translated into organized political action?