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Gender

Jack Halberstam

In American studies and cultural studies, as in the humanities more broadly, scholars use the term "gender" when they wish to expose a seemingly neutral analysis as male oriented and when they wish to turn critical attention from men to women. In this way, a gender analysis exposes the false universalization of male subjectivity and remarks on the differences produced by the social marking we call "sex" or "sexual difference." Poststructuralist feminist theory queries this common usage by suggesting that the critique of male bias or gender neutrality comes with its own set of problems: namely, a premature and problematic stabilization of the meaning of "woman" and "female." In 1990, Judith Butler famously named and theorized the "trouble" that "gender" both performs and covers up. In doing so, she consolidated a new form of gender theory focused on what is now widely (and variably) referred to as "performativity." In recent years, this focus on gender as something that is performed has enabled new modes of thinking about how the transgendered body is (and can be) inhabited, about the emergence of queer subcultures, and about practices that promise to radically destabilize the meaning of all social genders.

As a term, "gender" comes to cultural studies from sexology, most explicitly from the work of psychologist John Money (Money and Ehrhardt 1972). Money is credited with (and readily claimed) the invention of the term in 1955 to describe the social enactment of sex roles; he used the term to formalize the distinction between bodily sex (male and female) and social roles (masculinity and femininity) and to note the frequent discontinuities between sex and role. Since sex neither predicts nor guarantees gender role, there is some flexibility built into the sex-gender system. This reasoning led Money to recommend sex reassignment in a now infamous case in which a young boy lost his penis during circumcision. Given the boy's young age, Money proposed to the parents that they raise him as a girl and predicted that there would be no ill effects. Money's prediction proved disastrously wrong, as the young girl grew up troubled and eventually committed suicide after being told about the decisions that had been made on his/her behalf as a baby.

This case has reanimated claims that gender is a biological fact rather than a cultural invention and has led some medical practitioners to reinvest in the essential relationship between sex and gender. It has also been used by some gender theorists to argue that the gendering of the sexed body begins immediately, as soon as the child is born, and that this sociobiological process is every bit as rigid and immutable as a genetic code. The latter claim (concerning the immutability of socialization) has been critiqued by poststructuralist thinkers who suggest that our understanding of the relation between sex and gender ought to be reversed: gender ideology produces the epistemological framework within which sex takes on meaning rather than the other way around (Laqueur 1990; Fausto-Sterling 1993).

All of these arguments about how we ought to talk and think about sex and gender assume a related question about how the modern sex-gender system came into being in the first place. Different disciplines answer this question differently. In anthropology, Gayle Rubin's work on "the traffic in women" (1975) builds on Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist analysis of kinship (1971) to locate the roots of the hierarchical organization of a binary gender system in precapitalist societies in which kinship relied on incest taboos and the exchange

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of women between men. Esther Newton's (1972) ethnographic research on drag queens in Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s finds gender to be an interlocking system of performances and forms of self-knowing that only become visible as such when we see them theatricalized in the drag queen's cabaret act. In sociology, Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1990) have produced a brilliant handbook on the production of gendered bodies, providing readers with a vocabulary and a set of definitions for the study of gender as a system of norms.

Working across these disciplinary formations, American studies and cultural studies scholarship on gender continues under numerous headings and rubrics. Researchers studying the effects of globalization have paid particular attention to transformations in the labor of women under new phases of capitalism (Enloe 1989; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). Scholars working on race have traced very specific histories of gender formation in relation to racial projects that attribute gender and sexual pathology to oppressed groups. In African American contexts, for example, black femininity has often been represented as vexed by the idealization of white femininity on the one hand and the cultural stereotyping of black women as strong, physical, and tough on the other (Hammonds 1997). Other scholars seeking to denaturalize cultural conceptions of manhood have examined masculinity in terms of new forms of work, new roles for men in the home, the function of racialized masculinities, new styles of classed masculinity, the impact of immigrant masculinities on national manhood, and the influence of minority and nonmale masculinities on gender norms (Bederman 1995; Sinha 1995; Harper 1996). Queer theorists have detached gender from the sexed body, often documenting the productive nature of gender variance and its impact on the way gender is understood and lived.

In all of these research contexts, gender is understood as a marker of social difference, a bodily performance of normativity and the challenges made to it. It names a social relation that subjects often experience as organic, ingrained, "real," invisible, and immutable; it also names a primary mode of oppression that sorts human bodies into binary categories in order to assign labor, responsibilities, moral attributes, and emotional styles. In recent years, cultural work dedicated to shifting and rearticulating the signifying field of gender has been ongoing in queer and transgender subcultures. Drag-king shows, for example, have developed along very different lines than their drag-queen counterparts (including those documented by Newton). While drag queens tend to embody and enact an explicitly ironic relation to gender that has come to be called "camp," drag kings often apply pressure to the notion of natural genders by imitating, inhabiting, and performing masculinity in intensely sincere modes. Whereas camp formulations of gender by gay men have relied heavily on the idea that the viewer knows and can see the intense disidentifications between the drag queen and femininity, drag-king acts more often depend on the sedimented and earnest investments made by the dyke and trans performers in their masculinities. Drag-king acts disorient spectators and make them unsure of the proper markings of sex, gender, desire, and attraction. In the process, such performances produce potent new constellations of sex and theater (Halberstam 1998).

Understood as queer interventions into gender deconstruction, drag-king performances emerge quite specifically from feminist critiques of dominant masculinities. In this sense, they can be viewed as growing out of earlier practices of feminist theory and activism. Consider Valerie Solanas's infamous and outrageous 1968 *SCUM Manifesto* (SCUM stood for "Society for Cutting Up Men"), in which she argued that

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we should do away with men and attach all the positive attributes that are currently assigned to males to females. As long as we have sperm banks and the means for artificial reproduction, she argued, men have become irrelevant. While Solanas's manifesto is hard to read as anything more than a Swiftian modest proposal, her hilarious conclusions about the redundancy of the male sex ("he is a half-dead, unresponsive lump, incapable of giving or receiving pleasure or happiness; consequently he is an utter bore, an inoffensive blob," etc. [1968/2004, 36]) take a refreshingly extreme approach to the gender question. The performative work of the manifesto (its theatricalization of refusal, failure, and female anger and resentment; its combination of seriousness and humor) links it to contemporary queer and transgender theaters of gender. Like Solanas's manifesto, drag-king cultures offer a vision of the ways in which subcultural groups and theorists busily reinvent the meaning of gender even as the culture at large confirms its stability.

It is revealing, then, that Solanas is at once the most utopian and dystopian of gender theorists. While Butler, in her commitment to deconstructive undecidability, cannot possibly foretell any of gender's possible futures (even as she describes how gender is "done" and "undone"), Solanas is quite happy to make grand predictions about endings. Many academic and nonacademic gender theorists after Solanas have also called for the end of gender, noted the redundancy of the category, and argued for new and alternative systems of making sense of bodily difference (Bornstein 1994; Kessler 1998). But socially sedimented categories are hard to erase, and efforts to do so often have more toxic effects than the decision to inhabit them. Other theorists, therefore, have responded by calling for more categories, a wider range of possible identifications, and a more eclectic and open-ended understanding of the meanings of those categories (Fausto-Sterling 2000). It seems, then, that we are probably not quite ready do away with gender, or with one gender in particular, but we can at least begin to imagine other genders.

Whether by manifesto or reasoned argumentation, scholars in the fields of American studies and cultural studies have made gender into a primary lens of intellectual inquiry, and the evolution of gender studies marks one of the more successful versions of interdisciplinarity in the academy. Indeed, as U.S. universities continue to experience the dissolution of disciplinarity, a critical gender studies paradigm could well surge to the forefront of new arrangements of knowledge production. At a time when both students and administrators are questioning the usefulness and relevance of fields such as English and comparative literature, gender studies may provide a better way of framing, asking, and even answering hard questions about ideology, social formations, political movements, and shifts in perceptions of embodiment and community. Gender studies programs and departments, many of which emerged out of women's studies initiatives in the 1970s, are poised to make the transition into the next era of knowledge production in ways that less interdisciplinary areas are not. The quarrels and struggles that have made gender studies such a difficult place to be are also the building blocks of change. While the traditional disciplines often lack the institutional and intellectual flexibility to transform quickly, gender studies is and has always been an evolving project, one that can provide a particularly generative site for new work that, at its best, responds creatively and dynamically to emerging research questions and cultural forms, while also entering into dialogue with other (more or less established) interdisciplinary projects, including cultural studies, American studies, film studies, science studies, ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies.

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