

Anthropology of Gender and Sex Differences

**In cross-cultural perspective
ANTH 365/465, WGST 365
August 26, 2019**

Introductions in the room

- Your name?
- What do you want to learn in this class?

Who am I, the instructor?

(Dr.) Eli Thorkelson

Why study gender and sexuality?

**What are things that you find
puzzling about gender and
sexuality?**

Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition.

— R. W. Connell

Why should we study gender through labor and reproduction?

- We are studying less gender *identities* than gendered *social processes*.
- In the background: How do contemporary societies keep functioning?
- It takes *work* to keep a society going. Work is very often gendered.
- It also demands more or less successful processes of *social reproduction* over time.
- Reproduction is often a tenuous process.

Why explore gender ethnographically?

- The personal is (socio)political.
- The readings take us far from here, but gender is already around us.
- We're trying to hone our senses, our abilities to observe, to write.

Friction

On one side of the café January (they talk at length of her name) is on a date with a sweet internet hookup whose fingers are like Tiparillos. And it's going so great for a while until January says no, in a slightly louder voice, no, I do not eat meat, it makes me feel bad, I won't even have plants. The guy loves meat. It's the only reason I see my father, he says: no one cooks meat like him. The conversation gets quiet and then turns toward work, and phrases like "and whatnot" spring up, so things get sweet again.

I have eight pairs of khakis and eight shirts, he says, so I never have to make a decision. My underwear is all sorts of colors, but that doesn't mean anything, she says—I like to live simply—and to look at her metal T-shirt and sweet flats with jeweled skulls embroidered on them, I get it. They are trying to maintain. They already know how they will fail because when they're not alike their jaws get set. Santa over here wants to give them five pouches of patience and some Xanax to help them ace the test like in fairy tales.

Outside, in the sun, a couple who divorced a year ago has a date to take an “inventory.” Before the woman arrives the man tells a friend he runs into that it’s been a year since he’s seen his ex: they’ve kept it to email. The friend nods and backs off. The remainder tilts back in his chair, straightening up when she arrives in a van. She is a foot taller than he is: wider too. There is no awkward hug, just the scraping of metal chairs. Both are gray-pale, as though they’d remained inside since the apocalypse poisoned the air.

Each ex has a paper with penciled notes—I'd bet anything that their mediator, or someone's shrink or sponsor, suggested this tool so that they could erase their bullshit if it showed up for a fight. From the outside they seem tired. The woman is wearing big metal jewelry and the man a baseball cap backward. I'll begin, she says.

1. I was a narcissist.

Then quiet. Things have gotten so bad, she rebegins, that I had to do an inventory with another friend too, and she made me admit it: I'm all about my own feelings. The guy gets sad and seems humiliated, too, that still, a year later, he is profoundly passive in the air of her. He makes supportive noises.

1. I had my stuff, too, he mutters, looking at the paper. I tested you. We played games, she said. I wasn't trusting, he said.
2. Also, she said, I owe you money, I took a lot from you when you were sleeping, and she hits the table with a crushed ball of bills that scatter to the ground. Everyone on the outside rises and laughs, pretending to steal what wasn't ours, or theirs.

(The Hundreds, Lauren Berlant and Katie Stewart, 35-36)

Key claims of the course

Part 1: Basic concepts in gender, culture, and power

- Gender is a 'social construct'
- Gender interacts with race, class and other social processes
- Gender is organized around (hetero)sexuality
- Gender is political
- Gender organizes social space
- Gender fixates on the body
- Identities shift, and become hybrid, as they move through the world

Part 2: Gender, sexuality and reproduction

- The way we see biology is cultural
- Reproduction is racialized
- Pregnancy has politics
- Reproduction is a pedagogical project
- Parental roles are (often) ambivalent
- As norms shift, reproduction becomes a problem
- While formal education remains a key scene of gender policing

Part 3: Gender and labor

- Gender and class emerge together
- Emotions are work
- Cleaning a house is also work
- Feminized workplaces are sites of gender discipline and agency
- Workplace gender discipline is also sexual discipline
- It takes work to hide the work
- Work (often) can't hold up the world
- "People do things however they can" (in changing sexual economies)
- Work can reorganize the (sex) worker's self
- Although (sex) workers can also self-organize

Syllabus review

- Units & readings
- Requirements & grading
- Policy issues

For next time

- Read the first reading, by Lorber
- Post your first reading question on Canvas (by 11am Thursday)
- Be ready to talk about your question in class
- Make a Medium.com account
- Think about sites around you that pose interesting gender issues, where you might want to conduct your fieldwork exercises