

THINKING SEX/THINKING GENDER

Introduction

Annamarie Jagose and Don Kulick

Many of the key debates and conceptual overhauls that have animated lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) studies over the last ten years or so might be broadly described in terms of their common interest in specifying the proper relations between gender and sexuality. If LGBTQ studies initially insisted on a clear distinction between gender and sexuality, that cleavage was subsequently contested by many who objected to the normalizing capacity of any neat quarantining of the cultural work of sexuality and gender. Ensuing discussions of what was at stake in adjudicating the relative independence or imbrication of gender and sexuality gave critical heft to a range of terms such as gender performativity, butch/femme gender, female masculinity, and transgender subjectivities, whose implications are still shaping the direction of sexuality studies.

In addition, attention paid to the shifting relations between gender and sexuality has enabled a number of projects that seem more prominently organized under other scholarly rubrics. An abbreviated list might include the historicizing of sexual identities and the concomitant untangling of genealogies of identification and desire, the critical engagements with and swearings off of psychoanalytic models of subjectivity, and the increasingly fine-tuned analyses of the articulations of race and ethnicity with local and global productions of sex/gender formations.

Of course, the correct relation between sexuality and gender can never be definitively specified. One of the enduring motivations of LGBTQ and feminist scholarship is precisely its inability to pin down that relation or—to put it otherwise—our ceaseless imagining of it in new ways. It therefore seems productive to ask scholars and activists for their thoughts on the place of gender in current understandings of sexuality. Where does gender fit into the study of sexuality nowadays? How do we conceive of sexuality, and the field of sexuality studies, in

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relation to the category of gender and what it represents? What are the implications of the interrelated histories of gender studies and sexuality studies? Has gender assumed a new salience in LGBTQ studies recently? Is it necessary to preserve a sense of the specificity of sexuality in relation to the study of gender, or a sense of the specificity of gender in relation to the study of sexuality? Addressing a persistent thematic in feminist and queer theorizing across a range of disciplinary and methodological differences, the following responses to our questions elucidate variously the complex and mobile relations between sexuality and gender that energize our everyday teaching and writing, reading and thinking.

Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin

Susan Stryker

If queer theory was born of the union of sexuality studies and feminism, transgender studies can be considered queer theory's evil twin: it has the same parentage but willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *heterosexual*) over the gender categories (like *man* and *woman*) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim.

In the first volume of *GLQ* I published my first academic article, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," an autobiographically inflected performance piece drawn from my experiences of coming out as a transsexual.¹ The article addressed four distinct theoretical moments. The first was Judith Butler's then recent, now paradigmatic linkage of gender with the notion of trouble. Gender's absence renders sexuality largely incoherent, yet gender refuses to be the stable foundation on which a system of sexuality can be theorized.² A critical reappraisal of transsexuality, I felt, promised a timely and significant contribution to the analysis of the intersection of gender and sexuality. The second moment was the appearance of Sandy Stone's "The 'Empire' Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," which pointedly criticized Janice G. Raymond's paranoiac *Transsexual Empire* and called on transsexual people to articulate new narratives of self that better expressed the authenticity of transgender experience.³ I considered my article on transgender rage an explicit answer to that call. The third moment was Leslie Feinberg's little pamphlet, *Transgender Liberation*. Feinberg took a preexisting term, *transgender*, and invested it with new meaning, enabling it to become the name for Stone's theorized posttranssexualism.⁴ Feinberg linked the drive to inhabit this newly envisioned space to a broader struggle for social justice. I saw myself as a fellow traveler.

Finally, I perceived a tremendous utility, both political and theoretical, in the new concept of an antiessentialist, postidentitarian, strategically fluid “queerness.” It was through participation in Queer Nation—particularly its San Francisco–based spin-off, Transgender Nation—that I sharpened my theoretical teeth on the practice of transsexuality.

When I came out as transsexual in 1992, I was acutely conscious, both experientially and intellectually, that transsexuals were considered abject creatures in most feminist and gay or lesbian contexts, yet I considered myself both feminist and lesbian. I saw *GLQ* as the leading vehicle for advancing the new queer theory, and I saw in queer theory a potential for attacking the antitranssexual moralism so unthinkingly embedded in most progressive analyses of gender and sexuality without resorting to a reactionary, homophobic, and misogynistic counteroffensive. I sought instead to dissolve and recast the ground that identity genders in the process of staking its tent. By denaturalizing and thus deprivileging nontransgender practices of embodiment and identification, and by simultaneously enacting a new narrative of the wedding of self and flesh, I intended to create new territories, both analytic and material, for a critically refigured transsexual practice. Embracing and identifying with the figure of Frankenstein’s monster, claiming the transformative power of a return from abjection, felt like the right way to go.

Looking back a decade later, I see that in having chosen to speak as a famous literary monster, I not only found a potent voice through which to offer an early formulation of transgender theory but also situated myself (again, like Frankenstein’s monster) in a drama of familial abandonment, a fantasy of revenge against those who had cast me out, and a yearning for personal redemption. I wanted to help define “queer” as a family to which transsexuals belonged. The queer vision that animated my life, and the lives of so many others in the brief historical moment of the early 1990s, held out the dazzling prospect of a compensatory, utopian reconfiguration of community. It seemed an anti-oedipal, ecstatic leap into a postmodern space of possibility in which the foundational containers of desire could be ruptured to release a raw erotic power that could be harnessed to a radical social agenda. That vision still takes my breath away.

A decade later, with another Bush in the White House and another war in the Persian Gulf, it is painfully apparent that the queer revolution of the early 1990s yielded, at best, only fragile and tenuous forms of liberal progress in certain sectors and did not radically transform society—and as in the broader world, so too in the academy. Queer theory has become an entrenched, though generally

progressive, presence in higher education, but it has not realized the (admittedly utopian) potential I (perhaps naively) sensed there for a radical restructuring of our understanding of gender, particularly of minoritized and marginalized manifestations of gender, such as transsexuality. While queer studies remains the most hospitable place to undertake transgender work, all too often *queer* remains a code word for “gay” or “lesbian,” and all too often transgender phenomena are misapprehended through a lens that privileges sexual orientation and sexual identity as the primary means of differing from heteronormativity.

Most disturbingly, “transgender” increasingly functions as the site in which to contain all gender trouble, thereby helping secure both homosexuality and heterosexuality as stable and normative categories of personhood. This has damaging, isolative political correlaries. It is the same developmental logic that transformed an antiassimilationist “queer” politics into a more palatable LGBT civil rights movement, with T reduced to merely another (easily detached) genre of sexual identity rather than perceived, like race or class, as something that cuts across existing sexualities, revealing in often unexpected ways the means through which all identities achieve their specificities.

The field of transgender studies has taken shape over the past decade in the shadow of queer theory. Sometimes it has claimed its place in the queer family and offered an in-house critique, and sometimes it has angrily spurned its lineage and set out to make a home of its own. Either way, transgender studies is following its own trajectory and has the potential to address emerging problems in the critical study of gender and sexuality, identity, embodiment, and desire in ways that gay, lesbian, and queer studies have not always successfully managed. This seems particularly true of the ways that transgender studies resonate with disability studies and intersex studies, two other critical enterprises that investigate atypical forms of embodiment and subjectivity that do not readily reduce to heteronormativity, yet that largely fall outside the analytic framework of sexual identity that so dominates queer theory.

As globalization becomes an ever more inescapable context in which all our lives transpire, it is increasingly important to be sensitive to the ways that identities invested with the power of Euro-American privilege interact with non-Western identities. If the history and anthropology of gender and sexuality teach us anything, it is that human culture has created many ways of putting together bodies, subjectivities, social roles, and kinship structures—that vast apparatus for producing intelligible personhood that we call “gender.” It is appallingly easy to reproduce the power structures of colonialism by subsuming non-Western configurations of personhood into Western constructs of sexuality and gender.

It would be misguided to propose transgender studies as queer theory for the global marketplace—that is, as an intellectual framework that is less inclined to export Western notions of sexual selves, less inclined to expropriate indigenous non-Western configurations of personhood. Transgender studies, too, is marked by its First World point of origin. But the critique it has offered to queer theory is becoming a point of departure for a lively conversation, involving many speakers from many locations, about the mutability and specificity of human lives and loves. There remains in that emerging dialogue a radical queer potential to realize.

Notes

1. Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” *GLQ* 1 (1994): 237–54.
2. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
3. Janice G. Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston: Beacon, 1979); Sandy Stone, “The ‘Empire’ Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 280–304.
4. Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (New York: World View Forum, 1992).

The Categories Themselves

David Valentine

This forum seeks to consider the relationship between sexuality and gender. Still, for me, there is a question that needs to be asked before we can explore that relationship: among those human experiences in which we are interested, which count as “gendered” and which as “sexual”? Or, more simply, what exactly do we mean by “sexuality” and “gender”? Putting these terms in quotation marks highlights the fact that “gender” and “sexuality” are themselves categories that hold certain meanings. Like those of other categories, these meanings can shift, are historically produced, and are drawn on in particular social contexts.

In short, to ask about the relationship between “gender” and “sexuality” requires that we conceptualize them as distinct in the first place. In contemporary social theory, “gender” and “sexuality” are (like all categories) heuristics that generally and respectively describe the social meanings by which we figure out who is masculine and who is feminine and what those gendered bodies do with

one another or feel about one another in a realm we call sex. Yet it is clear that these broad understandings are complicated by the ways that “gender” is inflected by our understandings of “sexuality,” and vice versa. Hence this forum.

Asking about the relationship between “gender” and “sexuality,” then, presents us with a dilemma: the question requires us to understand them simultaneously as discrete categories even as we recognize the interpenetration of experiences expressed through them. To return to the concern of my opening questions: how is it that, despite this dilemma, certain meanings have cohered around “gender” and certain ones around “sexuality”?

The separation of “gender” and “sexuality” has several, interrelated roots in recent history. In *How Sex Changed* Joanne Meyerowitz makes a convincing argument for the role of discourses and practices in the development of transsexuality in the United States as sources of the separation of biological sex, gender, and sexuality.¹ Drawing on late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century European sexologists, U.S. doctors and researchers used the concepts of gender and sexuality to mark a difference between same-sex desire in gender-normative people (what we understand as homosexuality) and the desire to transition to another gender because of a deep sense of gender identity at odds with that ascribed at birth (what we understand as transsexuality). Meyerowitz notes that this schema was strengthened at least in part by those who desired new surgical possibilities for transforming their bodies and selves by denying not only homosexual desire (i.e., desire for people with similar embodiments prior to surgery) but sexual desire in general. Asexuality was, indeed, a primary criterion by which transsexual people were allocated a place in university-based gender identity clinics for sex reassignment surgery. The desire of gender-normative homosexual men and women *not* to have surgery, or their insistence that their core gender identity was in accord with their ascribed gender, further elaborated this model.

In feminist scholarship, too, the distinction between “gender” and “sexuality” has had a vital place. In the context of the “sex wars” of the 1980s, the separation of “sexuality” from “gender” was an essential part of a liberalizing move to recognize that oppressions do not apply evenly through the gendered categories of “woman” and “man” and that the separation of gender and sexuality as analytic categories enabled a more nuanced (and potentially liberatory) mode for understanding sexuality as something more than simply a tool of oppression.² Likewise, in mainstream gay and lesbian activism, the assertion of homosexual identification without the implication of gender-variant behavior has been essential to the gains of accommodationist groups seeking civil rights protections in the past thirty years.

What I have outlined so far is self-evident to contemporary social analysts, as is the recognition that gender and sexuality are inflected by other kinds of social differences: race, class, national origin, and age, to mention a few. However, what I am after here is a deeper observation: that the intersections of these experiences, as described and laid out in analytic categories, require the corralling of experience into discrete segments. This is, indeed, the basic problem of language: to describe something as seamless as lived experience, one needs categories. Yet a danger arises when those categories come to be seen as valid descriptions of experience rather than as tools used to apprehend that experience.

I am concerned, then, that the recent tendency to claim, as empirical fact, that gender and sexuality are separate and separable experiences results in a substitution of an analytic distinction for actual lived experience. For while this model describes some contemporary Western identities well, it is not the only model available. Indeed, the claim that bodily sex, social gender, and sexual desire are distinct categories stands in contrast to a much broader U.S. folk model of these experiences as a neatly aligned package. Their analytic separation has helped in, among other things, the analysis (and political validation) of queer, nonnormative identities and experiences, but it should be recognized that this is still only a model; it does not describe everyone's experiences.

And I am not necessarily concerned with Western heterosexual, gender-normative identities and experiences. Margaret Jolly and Lenore Manderson's discussion of desire and pleasure in Asia and the Pacific is instructive here. In considering contemporary critiques of Bronislaw Malinowski's collapsing of sexuality into reproductive heterosexuality and kinship, they argue: "The issue extends beyond the separation of sexuality and reproduction to the broader supposition that sexuality has ontological status in all times and places, that it is a thing that can be named and to which a set of behaviors, feelings, and desires can be attached."³ That is, they propose that "sexuality" is not just about individual desire and that to understand it, we may need to look at things like reproduction, usually gathered into "gender," in those contexts where it is a significant aspect of what "sexuality" might signify for certain social actors. Thus Jolly and Manderson ask us to think about the ontological status of "sexuality" and "gender" in using those categories cross-culturally.

My own data indicate that such a critical question should also be directed at Western subjects who are assumed to be easily explained by the truth of a distinction that is itself culturally constructed. In New York City in the late 1990s, some people who were understood as "transgender" by social service agencies and

activists either rejected that category or, often, did not use it to describe their own identities even though they knew it was used about them. Most of those who did not use it were young, poor, African American or Latina/o self-identified “gay” people, the same community made famous by Jennie Livingstone’s film *Paris Is Burning* (1990). I put “gay” in quotes here because many people who see themselves as gay in this setting are not interpreted as such by the social service agencies under whose aegis I conducted my research. In the constellation of performative categories available at the balls, there are, indeed, strict distinctions between fem queens (male-bodied feminine people), butch queens (male-bodied masculine people), butches (female-bodied masculine people), and women or lesbians (female-bodied feminine persons). But the divisions, strictly enforced as they are, are seen at the balls to be united by the category “gay.” At the ball, in other words, no matter what your embodiment, clothing, or behavior, everyone is considered to fall into a broader category of “gay.”

In terms of more mainstream understandings of identity, though, this unity is rejected in favor of another distinction—between fem queens and butches (“transgender”) and butch queens and lesbians (“gay”). These distinctions have real and institutional effects. Safer-sex outreach programs, social services, and, currently, federally funded AIDS research directed at the ball community are organized around the categories “gay” and “transgender.” The rationale is based on the very distinction I am discussing: “transgender” identities are seen to flow from experiences of “gender” that are different from the “sexual” identity of “gay.” The unity of the ball community as “gay” is not given credence precisely because fem queens and butches are, in theoretical and institutional terms, seen to have sources of identity that are ontologically distinct (residing in their “gender”) from those of their butch queen and lesbian peers (who are seen to be united by their “sexual” identities). At root, this etic distinction relies on the analytic distinction between “gender” and “sexuality,” which overrides local understandings of those experiences we call gender and sexuality. The unity of the ballgoers as “gay” people is, I would argue, defined not by a distinction between “gender” and “sexuality” but by the conjunction of their disenfranchisement in terms of both class and racial memberships and their nonnormative “genders” or “sexualities.”

As in Jolly and Manderson’s discussion, the claim that the “gendered” practices of body transformation, cross-dressing, and the assertion of a nonascribed gendered identity are analytically separate from the “sexual” produces an effect in which the analytic model overrides understandings of self on the part of the young fem queens and butches of the balls. Indeed, such understandings, in which gender-transgressive practices and same-sex sexual desire are inextricable, are

often decried by scholars as a kind of “misreading” or “false consciousness” or as “pre-modern.”⁴ Yet such conceptions of personhood exist historically and, I would add, persist in the modern West. To claim that fem queens and butches are “conflating” these experiences, or that they are holdovers of a premodern form of identification, is to make a modernist claim to progress and to the discovery of the truth of the separateness of “gender” and “sexuality.”

The political stakes of this conceptual disjunction should be clear. In professing “gay” identities, the fem queens and butches become unrepresentable both in mainstream LGBT politics and in academic representations because they are claiming identities seen to be inherently false. This interpretation is licensed in turn by an analytic distinction between “gender” and “sexuality” that is seen to have ontological truth.⁵

The question “What is the relationship between gender and sexuality?” is therefore, for me, ultimately ethnographic and historical rather than purely theoretical, because this relationship is itself possible only in historical and cultural contexts where “gender” and “sexuality” have come to be—and are able to be—conceptualized as distinct arenas of human experience. The question requires us to think not simply about how these experiences intersect but about *which* lived experiences these terms might describe for historically and culturally located subjects.

I am certainly not calling for a return to a situation in which “gender” and “sexuality” cannot be conceived of as separate experiences or useful as analytic categories. After all, this distinction is not only relegated to the pages of scholarly journals but operative in (among other arenas) the cultural politics of civil rights activism, media representations, and (at least some) gay-, lesbian-, bisexual-, and transgender-identified people’s self-understandings. But it is vital to recognize that it is also a modern (and modernist) technology of understanding the self that developed in the West in the mid- to late twentieth century. More important, it does not explain everyone’s understanding of self in all times and places. In short, in much of the discussion about “gender” and “sexuality,” the categorial power of these terms has come to be read as experiential fact; or, more succinctly, the experiential is subsumed and reordered by the categories we use to make sense of experience. Where this becomes dangerous is in the reordering of experience through analytic categories seen to be transparent and natural, a reordering that can, for all its progressive impetus, reproduce the invisibility and disenfranchisement of people who have had little voice, historically, in the debates and policies that have shaped their worlds.

We need, then, to think less about a relationship between “gender” and

“sexuality” than about the constitution of those categories themselves as a historically located social practice. As with any relationship, it makes sense to think about the history of the parties involved before assessing what the relationship is.

Notes

1. Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).
2. See Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Pandora, 1992), 267–319.
3. Margaret Jolly and Lenore Manderson, introduction to *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 24.
4. See, e.g., Ken Plummer, “Speaking Its Name: Inventing a Lesbian and Gay Studies,” in *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experiences*, ed. Ken Plummer (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–25; and Gert Hekma, “‘A Female Soul in a Male Body’: Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth-Century Sexology,” in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone, 1994), 213–39.
5. For a more developed version of this argument see David Valentine, “‘We’re Not about Gender’: The Uses of ‘Transgender,’” in *Out in Theory: The Emergence of Lesbian and Gay Anthropology*, ed. Ellen Lewin and William L. Leap (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 222–45.

The Politics of LGBTQ Scholarship

Jacqueline Stevens

In early 2003 I attended a talk at the University of California, Los Angeles, by one of a handful of Israeli academics whose history of Israel’s founding is along the lines of that proffered by Edward W. Said.¹ That afternoon he was speaking about who was where in the Palestinian territories administered by Britain until 1948 and was describing the expulsions by Zionist terrorists and then by the Israeli state.

The audience, numbering about a hundred, was divided and tense; all had flyers in their seats commending Israel for its progressive policies on homosexuality, including the service of gays and lesbians in the military, antidiscrimination laws for employment, and same-sex partner benefits in many sectors. The flyer