

Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Gendering of Sexual Identity: A Contemporary Analysis

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GENDER PRIMACY IN SEXUAL IDENTIFICATION: AN INTRODUCTION

She looked stricken, horrified, then turned and ran from the room. I don't know what was actually going through her mind, but I know people took her aside later and told her about me, about who and what I am. I hope she got it. I hope she finally understood that whenever a line is drawn, it passes through someone's flesh. ~Raven Kaldera (2002), Gender Queer, p. 157

One woman I know identifies as a dyke but has only male lovers. She explains that dyke identity is essential in a heteropatriarchal world. Aren't false identities the hallmark of the heteropatriarchal world? ... Another friend ... says "if Women who sleep with women threaten the structures of patriarchy, then women who sleep with whomever they please are outright anarchists." She defines her sexual identity as Sovereign. ~Lionhart (2002) Gender Queer, p. 233

In *Two Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality* (1997), Farrer tells a story of "A Mescalero Apache Singer of Ceremonies." While discussing Apache institutionalized homosexuality, Farrer writes of the same sex relations in which Apache men partake while on hunting trips: "This [same sex relation] did not mean either or both [men] were homosexual; it was, rather, situational homosexuality" (1997). The lines in American definitions of sexuality have come to depend on a rigid, gender binary where the basis of sexual identity becomes broadly defined by gender preference rather than situational experiences, desires, and behaviors. The naturalness of masculinity/femininity, male/female, is an assumed part of American social institutions. This naturalization of gender binaries, called heteronormativity, is at the very foundation of society and shapes institutions such as marriage (Jackson 2006). The problem when looking at the heteronormative definitions of sexuality is that they assume that desire, behavior, and identity are one and the same—that is, sexual desires and behaviors match up with overall sexual identity categories. For example, masculine men desire and have sex with feminine

women society defines as heterosexual, and anything else is socially and institutionally deemed perverse and homosexual.

It is through heteronormativity that gender becomes the basis for sexual identification. As gender roles are normalized, so is the role of sexuality in reproduction. Institutionally, marriage and sodomy laws have regulated sexuality as the natural partner to reproduction, and therefore gender roles. However, the idea of basing sexual identities on gender preference of partners, as in the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, fails to suggest anything about a heterosexual's or a homosexual's sexual history. Desires, behaviors, and personal sexual identification for individuals vary greatly in the experiential realm.

Queer theorists have deconstructed and questioned the primacy of gender in determining individual sexualities. Butler, Halberstam, and Wilchins (1997, 1998, and 2002) all address the construction and performative nature of gender. I would like to extend this discussion to sexuality. Why does gender persevere as a master category and determinant of sexuality, despite the variances in individual sexual histories? With the assertion that gender preference has become the determining factor in accounting for sexual identification, I will explore how contemporary queer theorists have accounted for the slippage and dissonance in sexual identities, and the role gender plays in becoming the primary marker of sexual identities.

BUTLER'S POST-STRUCTURAL APPROACH to SEXUAL/GENDER IDENTITIES

I don't mean to suggest that purely cultural signs produce a material body, but only that the body does not become sexually readable without those signs, and that those signs are irreducibly cultural and material at once ~Butler, 2004: 87

Judith Butler (2004) discusses gendered identities as they are reinforced by heteronormative society, in which the media, political, and social institutions are constructed through the biased lens of assumed heterosexuality. Butler

relates how sex is made understandable through the reading of material bodies that are interpreted through a cultural understanding of specific gendered social roles and expectations. Therefore, she argues, bodily indicators become the cultural means to distinguish “sex” and assign gender (Butler 2004: 87). That is to say, “society” assigns people to gender categories through signs that have been culturally defined and marked as masculine or feminine. However, while Butler acknowledges the social construction of gender, she argues against the notion of a true unified identity based on sexuality. Butler (2004:15) writes:

On the contrary, it [sexuality] emerges precisely as an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints ... It would follow, then, that to a certain extent sexuality establishes us as outside of ourselves; we are motivated by an elsewhere whose full meaning and purpose we cannot definitively establish. This is only because sexuality is one way cultural meanings are carried, through both the operation of norms and the peripheral modes of their undoing. Sexuality does not follow from gender in the sense that what gender you ‘are’ determines what kind of sexuality you will ‘have.’

Here, Butler is addressing the larger assumption that gender corresponds and is the basis for defining sexuality. Gender and sexuality are separate identities, yet the coding of behaviors as female/male leads sexuality to be closely intertwined with gender, as they both are binary systems where attributes of one are put into opposition with the other. Women become what men are not, and homosexuals take on traits that are different than heterosexuals. While Butler sees sexuality as operating separately from gender, she does acknowledge the dissonances that exist within sexual identities that operate within heteronormative society. Dissonance occurs when traits that are associated with binary categories are not “matched.” Thus, heterosexual women can be masculine and date women, and heterosexual men can be sensitive and caring. In terms of sexuality, identity slippages occur when people have behaviors that are not entirely straight or gay. Such slippages deconstruct the natural assumptions of sexuality; if these sexual categories were natural, individuals would not experience desires and behaviors outside of their homosexual/heterosexual identity.

Butler (1997) asserts that the belief in a core identity among females or males is false. While gender norms pressure people to engage in practices appropriate to their socially assigned, sexed bodies (M/F), these practices create the illusion of unified gender identities that are at the core of human motivation and action. This repetition leads to the assumption of true inner differences along gender lines. In the case of sexuality, sexual categories are perceived as identities through the repetition of coded practices. Butler (1997:304 original emphasis) writes:

To say that I 'play' at being one [lesbian] is not to say that I am not one 'really'; rather, how and where I play at being one is the way in which that 'being' gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed. This is not a performance from which I can take radical distance, for this is deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play, *and this 'I' does not play its lesbianism as a role*. Rather, it is through the repeated play of this sexuality that the 'I' is insistently reconstituted as a lesbian 'I'; paradoxically, it is precisely the *repetition* of that play that establishes as well the *instability* of the very category that it constitutes.

Here, Butler herself is engaged in practices that are specifically associated with being a lesbian, and it is these very practices that socially project her identity as a lesbian. At the same time, these practices underscore individuals as being in some fundamental way male/female, homosexual/heterosexual. Individuals have no choice but to engage in these repeated practices that mark them as insider/outsider and masculine/feminine because of the discourses that exist in heteronormative society. The only discourse that exists is within the socially constructed terms of the female/male, feminine/masculine, and heterosexual/homosexual binary oppositions. Any attempt to operate outside of these binaries marks individuals as being fundamentally wrong and unnatural.

The dissonance between sexual identities, desires and behaviors can be accounted for through the performative nature of gender and sexualities. If it is the practices that define people as homosexual or heterosexual, then there must be key practices that become primary indicators of sexuality. For Butler (1997: 302) as a lesbian, this becomes a matter of "coming out" about gender

preference, and proclaiming a dominant sexual attraction for women. Even though there may be discrepancies between sexual acts and sexual identification, the practices that are repeated the most often come to categorize the individual as homosexual or heterosexual. This understanding of identities based on performances and practices supports the assertion that sexuality is diverse in its experience. Repeated practices, then, are the basis for sexual identification.

In Butler's theory, there is no natural alignment between sex and gender. The role that gender has in determining sexuality is the product of institutional and social orders. This socially constructed order is a product of compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality serves to create gendered social and cultural practices through social coercion. The coercion refers to the power of compulsory heterosexuality to regulate and normalize behaviors that come to be recognized and defined as feminine/masculine. In turn, the order of compulsory heterosexuality provides authentication for sexual and gendered identities (Butler 1997: 306). Compulsory heterosexuality assigns and creates individual gendered and sexual identities by enforcing and pressuring individuals to partake in repeated, normalized gendered acts to be legitimated and recognized in American society.

BEYOND SEXUAL BINARIES: RIKI WILCHINS and GENDER/SEXUAL DISPLACEMENT

We say two sexes is 'nature's way.' But Man produces this feminine version of Mother Nature – passive, pure, and reserved – when we need her, and then pushes Her aside when the facts don't fit His needs. (Wilchins, 2002: 32).

The naturalization of gender, for Wilchins, becomes a way to control social definitions of gender. Because it has befitted those in power, i.e. the "Man," or men in power, women are put in (and are socially rewarded to act in) subordinate social roles. When individuals vary from the rigid definitions of woman/man (when the facts don't fit His needs), they are dismissed by society as illegitimate and disordered.

In Wilchins' discussion of gender and sexuality, she perceives gender as performative, but also as a form of displacement. Displacement occurs when normative gender roles force individuals to define themselves by socially constructed, external identities that exist within the binary oppositions of female/male, and feminine/masculine rather than basing their sexual identities on fantasies and sexual behaviors. This coerces individuals to perform externalized acts that are not reflective of their inner personality. Gender operates outside of individuals as a means of controlling individual genders, and therefore, sexualities. Hence, sexuality is being defined on the basis of socialized conception of gender roles (Wilchins 2002:29). This displacement from what one's gender is and the roles they take on that fall outside of their appropriate gender prevent us from working outside of the gender binary to assert that what is masculine can be feminine, and vice versa.

In the essay "Queerer Bodies" (2002), Wilchins addresses how scientific studies of sexuality become a form of institutional and ideological control over individual reproduction. "Realness is not only about naturalness and the distinction between the groin you were born with and the one you bought yourself for Christmas. If gender is about language and meaning, the Realness is also about ownership, about who is allowed to use what meanings legitimately" (Wilchins 2002:41-42). Wilchins argues that knowledge has come to live not in science but in politics, which has allowed for the institutionalization of heteronormative practices to occur (2002:37). It is the "capital P" (politics) that decides what is real, as the political has come to have ownership over individual meanings. For example, it is the P that determines who can and cannot marry, and legitimates the meaning of the "sanctity" of heterosexual marriage. In order to attain privileged statuses in American society, individuals are socially forced to operate within gendered social roles.

In another essay, "Changing the Subject" (2002), Wilchins goes on to discuss gender and its role in sexual identities. The essay begins with the pressing question that destabilizes the authority of gender/sexual identities:

What do we mean by *identity*? No one is perfectly gay, completely straight, totally womanly, or wholly transgendered. So what do we mean when we identify as such? Are identities real properties of people, or are they more like approximations, normative ideals against which we measure ourselves but never perfectly fit? (Wilchins 2002:47).

Again, identification becomes a source of displacement in and of itself. As compulsory heterosexuality rewards people who identify as hetero or homo, people are obligated to look for a definition of their sexuality that is socially acceptable and created. Therefore, sexual identities are made in reference to what is institutionally appropriate for their gendered selves. Identities become structured in the language of acceptable sexual practices and desires based on gender (Wilchins 2002:48). For Wilchins, the solution to fighting against and changing gendered discourses is in practicing and embracing new identities, such as genderqueer, where skirts become masculine and females have penises in their own right and truth.

Wilchins (2002) also points to the role of compulsory heterosexuality in masking the true complexity of gender and sexuality, and its marginalization of people who fall between and outside of binary lines. Sexuality and gender are both culturally constructed and recreated through public performance, but the necessity to perform gender identities means that no one truly ever fits perfectly within one gender confine or the other: "Where gender and meaning is concerned, there are lots of little truths" (Wilchins 2002:39). The inconsistencies in sexual and gender identities become evidence of a lack of truth in the idea that biological sex determines what social and sexual roles individuals take in society. By denaturalizing gender and sexual roles, it becomes clear that gender and sexual orders are instituted as a means of social control over reproduction. The way to destabilize the predominant binary system is to de-center knowledge about the body, and to look beyond masculine and feminine knowledge. Only then can new forms of knowledge emerge and truly come to represent individuals and their unique perspectives and experiences beyond the scope of males and females (Wilchins 2002:39).

THE STONE BUTCH in HALBERSTAM'S (1998) *FEMALE MASCULINITY*

Halberstam's (1992:118) exploration of masculinity outside of the male body argues in part for a sexual discourse that addresses the myriad of acts that have come to make up queer gender identities. In the chapter entitled "Lesbian Masculinity: Even Stone Butches Get the Blues," Halberstam (1998:117) uses common practices and definitions of the stone butch to exemplify sexual identities beyond gendered understandings:

A discourse of acts in and of itself, of course, does not really solve the problem of heterosexism or rampant homophobia; nor does it remove sexual scenes and sexual practices and pleasurable identifications that are often rendered invisible by the homosexual-heterosexual continuum. Finding out what people do sexually, and furthermore, what kinds of erotic narratives they apply to what they do sexually can rewrite both psychoanalytic theories of desire and scientific theories of sexuality. It can also clear up homogenizing notions of gay and lesbian desire that hold that all lesbians are attracted to all other lesbians and all gay men to other gay men.

The discrepancies between intimate desires, behaviors, and self-identification based on gender preference serve to hide and silence the fluidity of individual sexuality. Halberstam calls for study into the slippages in desires, pleasures, sexual acts, and self-identifications to unmask the role that heteronormative discourses have in regulating sexual identities by limiting them to gender preference.

Halberstam goes on to examine the role of the stone butch, and the continuum of experiences between hard/soft stone butches. The stone butch, as understood in the context of female masculinity, comes to be a sexuality that is "both closed and open, repressive and productive" (Halberstam 1998:128). Stone butches are culturally recognized and stereotyped through the rejection of penetration and traditional femininity (being closed to that part of sexuality). However, they remain open to other sorts of sexual pleasure (rubbing/friction) and queer forms of masculinity. This, in turn, creates new modes of sexual expression and desire that are beyond masculine and feminine, and are unique to the stone butch/femme dynamic alone. In Halberstam's (1998:126)

clarification of Butler's gender performance theory using the example of the stone butch, she asserts that:

If we apply this argument to the stone butch, gender becomes visible within the stone butch as a performance that is not only a repetition but one that is necessarily imperfect, flawed, and rough. This imperfect performance reveals, furthermore, that gender is always a rough match between bodies and subjectivities ... Where sex and gender, biology and gender presentation, fail to match (female body and masculine self), where appearance and reality collide (appears masculine and constructs a real masculinity where there should be a 'real' femininity), this is where the stone butch emerges as viable, powerful, and affirmative.

It is precisely the mismatch between the female body and the masculinity of the stone butch that deconstructs the notion of gender identification and sexual identities. The stone butch allows for a sexual identity that encompasses both master traits of femininity and masculinity, and works outside of heteronormative discourses of rigid gender binaries. Once recognized and legitimated (instead of being medicalized and deviated by social/medical institutions), identities that function between masculine and feminine, like the stone butch, can create new spaces for sexual practices and identities (Halberstam 1998:119).

Halberstam (1998:114) argues against contemporary queer theorist arguments to say that more needs to be done than simply denaturalizing sexuality:

We almost seem to assume that particular practices attend particular sexual identities even as we object to the naturalization of the homosexual-heterosexual binary ... and yet we still seem to think that anal sex between men and oral sex between women provide paradigms for gay and lesbian sexual behavior in much the same way that vaginal intercourse might for heterosexuals.

By focusing on sexual practices, the gendered hierarchical structure of sexual identities and the hetero/homo binary become deconstructed, and new identities, such as the stone butch, are allowed to exist outside of heteronormative binary discourses.

While Butler (1997) asserts that there are primary practices that serve to identify individuals as heterosexual or homosexual, Halberstam (1998) goes beyond to suggest that the complexity of sexuality lies beyond practices, desires, or self-identifications from definition or representation alone. In this, Halberstam negates the assumption that sexual desires, pleasures, practices, behaviors, and self-identification are rigid and correspond without contradiction across these different aspects of sexuality.

CONCLUSION

Modern conceptions of gender and sexual identities serve to create an insider/outsider dichotomy between the accepted and normative realms of heterosexuality and the external and perverse world of the homosexual. While it is clear that in the experiential realm of sexuality, sexual identities are more complex than the gender binary and normatively heterosexual categorization can account for, the question remains of how to, in Butler's language, "undo" these systems. To visit one of the quotes I began this paper with, these discursive constructions, while failing to accurately represent the fluidity of individual sexual identities, consistently draw lines between what are accepted social practices and what is perverse and morally wrong. While they are false in their ideological constructions, they nonetheless have very real consequences for individuals who stray from the normative vision of the healthy, gendered, sexual citizen.

We need new social discourses to allow for individuals to operate outside of the binary confines of gender and sexuality to allow for fluidity in sexual and gendered experiences. In order to uproot the political power in Wilchins' theory, we must extend the performance of gender to encompass new ways of experiencing pleasure and sexuality. Halberstam argues for a world where contradictions are embraced, and open sexualities do not become opposed to closed ones, but instead operate as valid identities on their own.

Furthermore, what is imperative to changing social discourses is an examination of how individuals are navigating dissonances in their own sexual

histories, and how binary categories function on a micro level. Binary categories remain primary markers of sexual identities despite inconsistencies in sexual narratives in the political and social realm. The multiplicity of desires, pleasures, and sexual acts themselves assures that sexuality becomes an experience so highly personal that no one term can come to represent sexualities. With the myriad of experiences, a more important question arises of why gender preference is coming to define these varied sexual identities, rather than the acts that comprise individual sexual histories. Is this the reach of compulsory heterosexuality that is continually privatizing sexual acts and enforcing the binary sexual order? As Halberstam notes, the solution is in researching the sexual narratives in contemporary American society, and looking at dissonances in accounts of sexuality to shed light on how old social constructions function in a new generation.

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