

Studies in Gender and Sexuality

(2003). *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 4:113-139

Ironic Gender/Authentic Sex

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Feminism and the postmodern turn have vaporized the commonsense materiality of gender and sexuality, both in theory and, for many, as lived experience. But where gender has moved to the ironic, sexuality still holds the space for the “authentic.” Gender now seems squarely positioned in a postmodern sensibility, but sexuality still veers between the modern and the postmodern. We can conceive and experience gender as being “made,” but sexuality retains the mark of something “found” and often, as Foucault demonstrated, of something “found out.”

In an attempt to account for these divergent trajectories, the author attempts to historicize and deconstruct the categories of gender and sexuality in order to reflect on their modes of psychic action and to consider how they work with, and against, each other in mind and culture.

Heterosexual masculinity is an ideal in ruins. Kept on life support by a band of Euro-Lacanian and a few surviving True Believers, Freud's theoretical contrivances on behalf of the penile phallus are now taken as *prima facie* evidence of his ambivalent homophobia, casual misogyny, and traditional family

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values. Contemporary feminists, gay and lesbian scholars, queer theorists, and generations of psychoanalysts looking for better ideas about sex and gender have debunked and revised Freud's phallic monism many times over. The best of that work has made it impossible to take any form of gender or sexuality as a given, even a psychoanalytic one. In place of the convoluted teleologies of development and essentialized categories of identity that erased and debased so much of psychic life, the new work argues for theories that refuse to sit still, retaining the density of the analytic perspective while digging up the ideological infrastructure of normativity, objectivism and biologism.

Yet there are many unarticulated contradictions within and between contemporary views of gender and sexuality. Modernist and postmodernist visions cohabit uneasily, sometimes in self-conscious tension, but more often the contrasts and their problematics go unformulated. In the modernist tradition of feminist theory, gender and sexuality are taken as transhistorical features of culture, just as the modernist viewpoint within psychoanalysis conceives of sex and gender as universal psychic phenomena. By contrast, the postmodern traditions in both feminist theory and psychoanalysis conceive of gender and sexuality as emerging in and through history and culture and thus consider them to be fluid and variable social categories.

Muriel Dimen and I (2002) have distilled the modern-postmodern contrast in gender theory as a shift from the question, “Gender, *what* is it?” to “Gender, *is* it?” (p. xvii). Another distinctive contrast could be condensed as the difference between the questions “How does gender work?” and “How is gender *worked*?” As I discuss later, the paradigm shift in gender studies has also been described as the move from theorizing the meaning and action of gender *per se* to theorizing the meaning and action of “Difference” itself.

As queer theory displaced feminist theory as the critical tradition to reckon with, gender, the foundational modernist category of my generation, got a second chance to speak its truth under the sign of postmodernism. The modern-postmodern dialectic is reflected in three closely related metaphors crafted by members of my own cadre of gender ironists. Following Lacan, Adrienne Harris (1991) writes of

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gender as a “necessary fiction,” appropriating the Marxist metaphor, Jessica Benjamin (1992) calls gender a “real appearance,” and I (Goldner, 1991) landed on the notion of gender as a “false truth.” Each of these contradictions encompasses the art of the double-take, distilling the insight that, although gender is obviously not an identity or essence at the core of a person, it is just as obviously a core *experience* that comes to *constitute* identity. Put in axiomatic terms, this

perspective dictates that we can neither essentialize gender nor dematerialize it.

This “axiom” holds a critical tension we should preserve, but it can devolve into an oppositional stalemate in which we are either fixed on gender's cruelties or enthralled by its plasticity; convinced that sexual identity and desire are, at the end of the day, still bedrock phenomena, or certain that they are ideologically charged and historically specific, telling us nothing fundamental about “who we are” as persons.

These debates, crucial to theory development in the 1990s, are no longer interesting when framed in these terms. But while the contrasts in theory and popular culture that now strike me as worthy do not map reductively onto the modern-postmodern divide, they do wrap *around* it, and I could not do my thinking without recourse to these categories. Just do not expect all this to come out tidy and neat; we are beyond that now.

Modernist Sex/Postmodern Gender

By the closing decades of the last century, feminism and the postmodern turn had effectively vaporized the commonsense materiality of gender and sexuality, both in theory and for many, as lived experience. As a consequence, gender has, for the most part, moved to an ironic register, while sexuality, except at the radical margins, still holds the space for the “authentic.” Put another way, gender seems squarely positioned in a postmodern sensibility,¹ but sexuality still veers between the modern and the postmodern, as it has ever since Freud's mind split between

¹ The exception is the paradox of transsex identities, which simultaneously critique and reinscribe traditional gender polarities.

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his deconstructive view of sexuality as a personal idiom and his self-imposed role as the Bourgeois Doctor, naturalizing heterosexual reproductive coitus as the inevitable telos of sex and the ultimate statement of maturity.

Many commentators have reflected upon how the radical Freud (1905), the one who was to “disturb the sleep of the world,” set sail at the outset of “The Three Essays” but quickly retired below deck to the footnotes, undermining the doctor's heteronormative text taking shape above the line (Bersani, 1986; Davidson, 1987; May, 1995; Dimen, 1999). The two alters continually interrupted and undercut each other, a dialogue Freud always felt was unfinished and unsatisfactory. One hundred years later, their differences remain unresolved, but, more problematically, the questions underlying those differences remain undertheorized.

Of course, Freud's readings of gender are also rife with contradictions. As Benjamin (1998a) has shown, Freud (1925) was capable of stating that “pure masculinity and femininity are constructions of uncertain content” (p. 258), but he himself acknowledged that he had made “use of what is obviously an inadequate empirical and conventional equation: we call everything that is strong and active male, and everything that is weak and passive female” (Freud, 1940, p. 188). Benjamin demonstrates how Freud repeatedly made use of, and also rejected, the categories of activity and passivity to define masculinity and femininity. At a higher level of abstraction, she argues that he “oscillated between the construction and deconstruction of gender categories” (p. 38) but could not see how his doing and undoing was itself the enactment of gender's truth as an epistemological paradox. It would take postmodern psychoanalytic feminism to recast gender as a “transcendent analytic category whose truth, though false, [was] central to thought, constructing the very analytic categories we would use to *de* construct it” (Goldner, 1991, p. 70).

The paradigm shift accomplished by the postmodern turn in psychoanalytic gender studies has left us more capable and inclined to see through gender. We know that it is, in the words of Bourdieu and Eagleton (1992), “everywhere and nowhere,” indeed that it is not *anything* at all, except perhaps an all-purpose

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container for the representation of binary oppositions, a “force-field of dualisms,” in Dimen's (1991) felicitous metaphor.²

Just as gender has been deconstructed in the clinic and the academy, the articulation of gender as artifice has also been intensifying in the culture through the incessant, hyperbolic disassembling and reassembling of gender signifiers in hair, clothes, psychic attitude, body stance, gait, and, in transgendered and transsexual persons, in actual body morphology. These incongruous images bear witness to the epistemological rift between gender signifiers and their signified corporality that carries the message that gender can be maneuvered as a site of personal expression and meaning.

Thus, while gender remains a foundational aspect of identity, we, at least some of the time, live it “in quotes” as an ironic idiom. But sexuality still possesses us, in life and in theory, in a much more complete sense than gender does; sexuality carries the flag for what we take to be “authentic.” While we can now conceive of and experience gender as being “made,”

sexuality retains the mark of something “found,” and often, as Foucault demonstrated, of something “found out.”

How can we account for the divergent trajectories of sex and gender in cultural and mental life? Indeed, are these contrasts “real,” or are they merely rhetorical? Although this is not a question that would obtain in a postmodern framework where what is real is what we make meaningful, the merits and implications of this thesis still need to be established, not merely asserted.

One approach, developed by Foucault (1978), is to contrast what he called the “genealogies” of sex and gender by tracking how each has been discursively positioned in the history of psychoanalysis and, by extension, in popular culture. Obviously, any such history would be a highly personal precis that coheres only by deliberate simplification. Thankfully, I am not looking to do another history of our history (see Chodorow, 1989; Young-Bruehl, 1996; Dimen, 1997), but rather to deconstruct and

² Testosterone and estrogen may differentially suffuse the fetal bloodstream of males and females, but it is we who make these hormonally derived differences into a singular polarity of counteridentities.

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historicize the categories of gender and sexuality in order to reflect on their modes of psychic action, and to consider how they work with, and against, each other (a project originally conceived by Gayle Rubin, 1975, and later by Judith Butler, 1990, both to profound effect).

First, with apologies to our “been there, done that” readers, I begin with a Foucauldian reading of the discursive status of sexuality in psychoanalytic thinking.

Freud and Foucault

In his introduction to a 1975 printing of *The Three Essays*, Steven Marcus (1975), leaving no hyperbole to chance, maintained that “nothing has come along in the last 70 years that remotely resembles the “Three Essays” in explanatory power, coherence and integrity, no intellectually serious challenge has taken or lasted, and Freud's own followers are now about four inches ahead of where he left off” (p. xli). Luckily for those of us not prepared to accept the end of history, it would be only three years until Foucault (1978) turned all truth into discourse, fatefully undermining the Freudian canon by launching an oppositional counter discourse with the publication of *The History of Sexuality*. Now, it is no longer possible to read Freud's revolutionary, monumentally flawed statement on sex outside the orbit of *this* paradigm-shifting volume, the one Marcus did not see on the horizon.

By historicizing the appearance of sexuality as a site of public discourse, Foucault (1978) used Marcus's (1975) book, *The Other Victorians*, an analysis of the steamy underside of Victorian culture, to demonstrate how sociomedical categories actually *create* the very phenomena they aim to explain, in this case, “sexuality” itself. Foucault shattered the illusion that the Victorians did everything possible to disappear sex. He showed how their preoccupation with sexual regulation and control made sex the subject of what he called “an immense verbosity.” “Rather than massive censorship,” he wrote, “there was a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse” (cited in Davidson, 1987, p. 258).

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Freud's, (1905) “Three Essays” were part of this heat wave of medical porn, and they are deeply and paradoxically implicated in the cultural incitement to regulate and self-regulate sexuality. As gay and queer scholars have repeatedly demonstrated (e.g., Domenici and Lesser, 1995) homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, and perversion could no longer be lived as unremarkable and contingent sexual practices once Freud's classification schemes took hold. Instead, sexual behavior and desire became the basis for ideologically laced identity categories that sexualized, separated, classified, and evaluated persons in a hierarchy of normality and morality, terms that, as Dimen (1995) has demonstrated, are themselves hopelessly entangled. This heteronormative system of objectification has produced enormous suffering and confusion over many years. Freud's confusion and culpability are, once again, all over “The Three Essays,” one emblematic juxtaposition being the notorious phrase, “the descending scale from health to insanity” coexisting with the ironic, “the highest and the lowest are always closest to each other in the sphere of sexuality” (cited in May, 1995, p. 161).

Although the queering of psychoanalysis has succeeded in shaking loose any crude equivalencies between sexual practices and degrees of developmental achievement or arrest (see Goldner and Corbett, 2002), the deep structure of the psychoanalytic project still privileges sexuality as foundationally determinative of the subject. We still reflexively drift toward construing sexual life as an X-ray measure of personhood—as a reflection of our core conflicts and deepest needs, and our capacity for relatedness and aloneness, for creative regression and ruthlessness, and so on. This article of faith, however

subtle and nuanced, keeps us caught in the terms of Foucault's (1978) confessional, in which the analyst as expert interlocutor embarks on a mission to penetrate and possess the subject's hidden truth.

Robert Stoller (1979) for example, set out the terms of his path-breaking study of sexual excitement with the idea that “people have a paradigmatic erotic scenario, the understanding of which enables us to understand the person [as a whole]” (p.xi). This commonplace analytic premise is echoed in the

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important work of Ethel Person (1980), who speaks of sexual orientation as “revealed.” She comes early to the metaphor of a “sexprint,” which she defined as an individual's “erotic signature,” as “unchanging and unique as a fingerprint” (p. 51). Although she has produced a major critique of the axiom that sexual functioning is a barometer of psychological functioning — by showing how this idea seems to hold for men but not for women—she remains drawn to the metaphor of the Investigator. Person (1995) suggests that analyzing daydreams and erotic fantasies may prove to be “the Rosetta Stone to decipher a core conflict” (p. 15). Money and Lamacz (1989), similarly captivated by archeological imagery, move us yet more deeply in time with the notion of a sexual “paleodigm,” which can be “deciphered,” in this case, into “seven grand strategems.” All these metaphors betray the marks left by a master narrative of detection and surveillance—deciphering codes, classifying fingerprints, “revealing” the “truth”—a project that, as Foucault (1978) demonstrated, erotically captivates not only the subject, but also the object of the gaze.

It is customary to distill the Freud-Foucault distinction with the insight that, whereas Freud positioned sexuality as fundamentally antisocial and transgressive, Foucault argued that it had become emblematic of a new form of docile subjectivity: a form produced by an all-encompassing matrix of regulatory practices and ultimately including psychoanalysis. Foucault considered psychoanalysis to be the founding confessional discourse of our therapeutic society. In the discursive economy of the confessional, pastoral or psychoanalytic, speech that is positioned as oppositional—“Don't make me tell-You must tell”—is ultimately compliant to the extent that it is inscribed in an erotic circuit of scrutiny and disclosure.

Indeed, when sex is the subject, this erotic constellation is unavoidable because sexual speech is inherently performative in that it materializes what it aims to describe. In the analytic situation, where sex comes to us in spoken words and in body language, even conversations that attempt to contain its excess and analyze its action-driven character are bathed in its heat. Thus there is always a risk of collapsing into a forced choice between “talking dirty” or not talking at all. Remarkably,

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although every other subject and process in the psychoanalytic canon has yielded its lode of truth to these conditions of mutual influence and social regulation, we still seem to take sex at its word. Indeed, as a holy grail.

Developmental Reasoning and the Authority of the Childhood Past

I suggest that sex retains its unique and privileged position in the psychoanalytic canon because of its association with the childhood body and thus with the voice from “deep time.” It may be the one place where we remain in complete agreement with Freud: adult sexuality is bonded to its infantile origins; it speaks its core truths to us from somewhere very far away. Freud (1905) laid out this premise with the wonderfully crafted metaphor of childhood as a “primeval period, which falls within the lifetime of the individual” (p. 173) because “infantile amnesia ... turns everyone's childhood into something like a prehistoric epoch ... conceal[ing] ... the beginnings of [our] own sexual life” (p. 176).

Whether we privilege sexuality or object relations as the ultimate fount of subjectivity, psychoanalysis still remains in the thrall of its search for embodied origins. Our belief in the adhesiveness of early object relations, the presumption that early bodily experiences become paradigms for all subsequent psychological events, and the view that the early maternal kindling of skin erotism launches the possibilities and limitations for subsequent erotic life are principles that are central to psychoanalytic self-identity. As long as sexuality is thought of as the embodied “voice of the past,” sex will retain the scent of childhood and will remain epistemologically enchanted—a special form of truth telling.

On this we have not wavered, despite 20 years of cogent critical writing rigorously questioning our axiomatic idealization of the archaic. Spence's (1982) skeptical questioning of the dominance of the “archeological metaphor”; Mitchell's (1988) trenchant observations on the dangers of developmental reasoning and the metaphor of the baby; Chodorow's (1996) masterful deconstruction of the authority of the childhood past; and

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Corbett's (2001) move from the etiological “why” to the relational “how” are all memorable attempts to dislodge this mind set. But, despite the intellectual power of these critiques, it seems as if we need to leave sex undisturbed by voices from within our ranks as well as from those on the radical margins. We leave sex undisturbed, I believe, not only because sexuality implicates so many of our foundational principles, but also because our modernist vision of sex allows us to retain an authorized space for the nostalgic belief in the conditions of privacy, intimacy, and intact family life that have been blown apart by contemporary cultural circumstances. As long as we locate sexuality in the timeless quiet of Winnicott's postwar nursery or in the late 19th-century dramas of the Freudian bedroom and toilet, we can keep sex indoors, contained among a very small cast of characters, indeed defined as a regime of two, erotically situated around the exclusion of a third.

This small personal world in which we locate our decisive prehistory is no longer credible or even plausible, yet it is how we tell the story of individual sexual origins, which we keep in permanent exile from the engulfing features of our sexually relentless, media-saturated culture.³ This way we can shield ourselves from considering the psychic and sexual meanings of growing up in our moth-eaten families, with their samba line of caregivers, where parents continually reinvent themselves personally and sexually as their children produce gender-bending cyber identities, constructing a virtual sex life that may be unrealizable in time or space or by the facts of bodies as we know them. To put the sexual body back behind the picket fence of domestic fantasy may be reassuring, but it is about as realistic

³ Work on sexuality by Stein (1998a, b) and Benjamin (1998b) critiques and transcends the hegemony of this oedipal paradigm. Benjamin, for example, shows how the problems of oedipal sexuality—either/or, have/have not, love/like—are woven through post-oedipal forms. But this important work still takes the domestic family as sexuality's timeless fount of passion and conflict. Davies (2001) has begun to question the privileging of childhood in the developmental story of sexuality and to consider the all-encompassing effects of mass culture on how sexuality is formed and lived. See also Chodorow (1994).

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as those “Father Knows Best” families we all wished for on the TV screens of our youth.

Experiential Sex: Multiplicity and the Distributed Self

But sex also lends itself to the creation of grand mythologies about its origins and action. The drive metaphor in psychoanalysis, although epistemologically antiquarian, retains its appeal because it captures something of the phenomenological edge of erotic subjectivity: its preemptory conviction and poignancy, the “Otherness” that transforms the ordinary self into the erotic subject. Irony and reflexivity, the hallmarks of postmodernity, are the obvious enemies here. The erotic, which Stoller (1979) and others (see, for example, McDougall, 1985, and Simon, 1996) have likened to the dramaturgical, requires, like any piece of theater, the suspension of disbelief. Turning up the houselights, even for a passing thought, breaks the spell. This is why we are afraid to analyze sex that works, no matter how exalted or shameful.

Moreover, sex trades on the thrill of discovering (over and over again) that we are unknown to ourselves. Indeed, the telos of sex is the move into the unknown. Fueled by the dialectic of the familiar versus the exotic (itself an eroticization of the foundational tension between the known and the unknown), sex allows us to “break out” while staying in. What makes for the adventure is not only the novelty of the Other, although that helps, but the Otherness of the self.

Sexual excitement intensifies this experience, but does not create it. Rather, it is a reflection and consequence of a fundamental aspect of self-organization; it provides experiential confirmation for the postmodern, relational view of the self as multiple, distributed, and decentered.⁴ Indeed, it is the ordinary circumstance of psychic multiplicity and the nontraumatic action

⁴ See Bromberg (1998), Davies and Frawley (1994), Harris (1996), Pizer (1996), and Fairfield, (2002) among many others. This view is also supported by brain science (see especially Schore, 1994).

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of everyday dissociation that creates the conditions of self-alienation that fuel sexual passion.

Erotic subjectivity is not only, or even primarily, *inter* subjective in the whole-object “I-thou” sense, but it is always *intra* subjective in that sexual excitement involves an encounter between a familiar subjective “I” and a lesser known “me,” or actually multiple “me's.” Each erotic self can be called forth by an incipient fantasy triggered by an image, a touch, an interior sensation or affect, an unconscious memory, a dirty word, an experience of the Other's experience. These cues and their evoked subjectivities constitute the beginnings of an erotic script that involves a crowd of body parts, part-objects, and self-objectifications (an erotic relationship between an “I” and a “me”) meeting up with the lover's counterparts. The aroused

sexual subject—already a different self from the workaday “I” and already somewhat “in character” as the object or subject of desire, as reluctant or insistent, gender concordant, discordant, or some contrarian melange (whoever first emerges) is the one who coconvenes the erotic situation with the outside other.

Benjamin (1998b) theorizes that the vulnerability, risk, and trust entailed in the intersubjective sexual situation creates a context for its deconstructive, fantastical action. She shows how lovers can attune kinetically at the intersubjective level while simultaneously turning inward to access an intrapsychic domain of fantasy, thus keeping them linked, even as their various unlinked states have their hour on the stage (see also Goldner, 2002a).

As the *mise-en-scène* unfolds and the crowd gathers, the resulting condition of sexual passion both entails and produces an intensification of shifting self-states. Each erotic grouping of parts and wholes must surrender to the story, must enact the scene with the single-minded conviction of a Method actor. Otherwise, all will be driven away by ordinary daylight and its conventional expectations.

But while we depend on the fiction of sex for permission to unravel and dissociate, we also depend on our implicit knowledge of sex *as* fiction to make the leap into its incoherencies. In this sense, it is not that sex “reveals” what is

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personally authentic, but rather that the appearance of such “revelations” depends on the cocreation of an “authenticity-in-quotes” experience—a paradox worthy of the postmodern condition.

Ironic Gender

While even the most ordinary sexual dramas depend on the creative deployment of dissociation, normative gender performances mask their multiplicity and discontinuity with a smoothly averaged surface. It is easier to think of sexuality in dynamic and personal terms because the psychoanalytic gaze has always been transfixed by the bedroom, and mastering the art of reading sex “against the grain” is central to the analytic project. Moreover, sex is culturally defined by its individual signature and is socially positioned as a site of excess and willful incoherence. Doing sex engages the cultural trope of transgression, whereas gender is a crucial aspect of our daytime social presentation. This is why we are deeply unsettled by gender performances that announce themselves as personal creations: they demonstrate that what we take as a given is actually fashioned, an erotic thrill after business hours, but an unwelcome disturbance during the work day.

Normative gender's masquerade is that it appears to be generic and unmediated, as if it were an unremarkable, background aspect of character. This lapse into common sense erases Wilhelm Reich's (1980) seminal insight that character is an embodied, living history of sedimented object relations held in muscle, skin, and (even) bone. As a theoretical move, Reich's take on character allows us to dispense with the essentializing view of gender as “residing *in* the body,” while complicating the ironic view of gender as “written *on* the body” by establishing a view of gender as “*held by* and *throughout* the body.”

Once again, dramaturgical metaphors suggest themselves. Whether by Method acting (Harris, 1996) or drag performance (Butler, 1990), the actor (subject) “gets” the character through a gestural vocabulary that meets up with the (cultural) script, thus rendering gender a uniquely personal interpretation of a

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cultural archetype, an embodied expression of the statement “*This is what I mean by femininity (masculinity).*”⁵

Gender, in this view, is culturally mandated, but individually crafted, permeable, yet embodied, simultaneously inventive and defensive, and crucially relational in its design. This thickly described, densely theorized statement is the accomplishment of clinically grounded, postmodern psychoanalytic gender theory (still a collective work-in-progress). This project has moved from the original insights of psychoanalytic feminism, to the paradigm shifts of queer theory and the work of deconstruction, to the current focus on *reassembling* gender in ways that do not *reessentialize* it. Once again, with apologies to those of you who know or have been part of this story, let me begin at the beginning.

Modernist Gender Theory

First came classical psychoanalysis. Freud began with the so-called anatomical difference, a social distinction that fixated on the genitals. From this base he derived, in what is now a suspect sequence, the derogation of femininity, the normative dominance of heterosexuality, and the dichotomous, complementary division of gender into the polarity male-female, which carried the arbitrary psychic oppositions activity and passivity. In this developmental schema, the genitals determined sexuality, which in turn, determined gender identity, which then constructed psychological subjectivity.

Now, every term in this sequence has been disrupted by doubt. At the very least, we would all be inclined to reverse the

direction of action, such that individual subjectivity would determine one's experience of gender and sexuality, as well as the personal meaning of the anatomically sexed body. But this reformulation

⁵ See also Goldner (2002b) and Layton (1998, 2002) for a related statement and argument. Althusser's (1971) concept of "interpellation," which grounds my argument here, remains a central tenet in postmodern theories of how we become a raced, sexed, and gendered subject.

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is not noteworthy because the privileging of personal meaning and the methodology of its deconstruction was itself Freud's revolutionary contribution, the other side of his scientific, socially conformist reasoning.

What *is* noteworthy about the feminist rethinking of the classical position is that it critiqued and reworked *both* versions of the Freudian canon. The privileging of the "anatomical difference" and the privileging of subjectivity were simultaneously undermined by second-wave feminism's founding insight: the paradigm-shifting act of creating gender as a unique analytic category and metaphysical principle. From this perspective, the starting point was the omnipresent regulatory work of culture, which insisted on two mutually exclusive "opposite" sexes, each defined by what the other was not. Thus, feminists argued, the gender binary operated with the force of truth, as an invisible "a priori" (de Lauretis, 1990).

No longer a consequence of mind or body, gender was now abstracted from the realm of the personal, having been conceived as a "socially instituted normative ideal" (Butler, 1990) that sexed the body and gendered the mind in compliance with the hegemonic principle of gender polarity. Indeed, as Butler ultimately demonstrated, gender actually *created* subjectivity itself since "persons only become intelligible through becoming gendered" (p. 6).

Articulating the psychic implications of gender's regulatory regime has been one of the core projects and accomplishments of psychoanalytic feminism. The gender imperative was linked to a pathogenic social process whose psychic effects, though masked by normativity, were fundamentally and foundationally catastrophic. Chodorow's (1978) early work showed how culturally mandated kinship arrangements produced and reproduced genders hobbled by pathology, such that masculinity was defined by the "not me" experience of difference (from femininity), whereas femininity could never escape its origins in the "part of me" sameness with mother (a female). Benjamin's (1988) later work on gender unpacked the subject-object logic of the polarity "masculinity-femininity" by showing how it was held in place by the pathogenic action of splitting.

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I (Goldner, 1991) have argued that the psychic construction of gender required the alienation of subjectivity, such that any thought, act, impulse, mood, state, trait, fantasy, erotic aim or object, or form of embodiment that was culturally incongruent with normative femininity or masculinity would have to be foreclosed, disavowed, displaced, disguised, projected, or otherwise evacuated. I concluded that the either/or structure of the gender paradigm constructed a "universal pathogenic situation" that induced a traumatically compliant false-self system, which itself produced a multitude of symptoms and innumerable forms of suffering unrecognized as such.

Examples include the melancholia and homophobia that haunt the very condition of gender, the narcissistic trauma that constitutes femininity as a second-rate sex, the reciprocal gender pathologies of brittle pseudoautonomy, defensive aggressivity and hypersexualization characteristic of normative masculinity, and the depressive relationality and inhibition of agency and desire that constitutes normative femininity.⁶

Postmodern Gender Theory

But the critical explanatory power of all this vibrant scholarship ultimately proved insufficient to gender's complexity. The postmodern turn in gender studies locked in on feminist theory's defining move: the monolithic, transhistorical category of gender itself. It showed how gender is not a timeless principle of polarity, unmoored from the conditions of its making, but is itself constituted and stabilized by a network of interimplicated cultural oppositions. Anatomical sex, gender and sexuality could no longer be construed as separate, independent categories to be positioned in one preferred theoretical hierarchy or another, because they were now understood as mutually reinforcing oppositions that required and implied one another.

⁶ These gender contrasts were initially theorized by Dinnerstein (1976), Chodorow (1978), and Benjamin (1988), and they still continue to ground important new work. See, for example, Corbett (2001), Elise (2000), and Layton (1998, 2002).

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For example, Butler (1990), building on the early work of Rubin (1975), showed how the axiom “opposites attract” naturalized heterosexuality by yoking it to the gender binary through the assumption that heterosexual desire is actually *brought into being by a given polarity between the genders*. Butler explicated the coercive implications of this cultural axiom with the memorable insight that “those gender and sexual identities that fail to conform to (these) norms of cultural intelligibility appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities” (p. 21).

As gender began to decompose under the bright lights of postmodern theory, interest shifted from theorizing gender to theorizing “difference.” The psychic action of gender was conceived to be analogous to the action of other cultural binaries, in particular, race and sex. Each of these (false) oppositions was taken as an exemplification of the pathogenic process through which unremarkable variations (in skin tone, body morphology, or sexual preference) could become simplistic polarities (black-white, male-female, gay-straight) elevating a normative “we” (heterosexual, white, and male) over a stigmatized “they” (homosexual, black, and female).

The historian Sander Gillman (1993) was eventually able to show how these oppositions coded for one another in the cultural unconscious. Gillman suggested that these equivalencies made it possible for Freud to project the personal debasement he had experienced as a Jewish male onto the categories of femininity and homosexuality. Gillman demonstrated how, in Freud's theory of mind, heterosexual masculinity represented the racially charged figure of the Aryan male, while femininity was cast as the designated site of castration in order to erase the presence of the circumcised (and thus emasculated/homosexual) Jewish male (Freud) who occupied that debased position in the anti-Semitic European context of his time.

In Gillman's brilliant deconstruction, we can see how Freud maneuvered these hateful oppositions to his own psychic advantage. Gillman's strategy shows that it is not enough to delineate how the dictates of gender or sexuality are traumatically “absorbed” by way of various mechanisms of compliance. We must also be able to articulate how the subject engages these categories, indeed talks back to them. In other

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words, to return to our prime example, not only does gender, act *on* (i.e., “against”) us, it is also a cultural trope available *to* us, one that can actually be deployed by the subject in the service of its *own* aims, including the subversion of gender imperatives themselves

Conceptualizing gender as a “symbolic resource” rather than as an inherent, given cultural imperative is a postmodern move that takes us beyond the view of gender as a one-way linear process through which the external somehow travels from the “outside in.” Working in very different theoretical traditions, both Schafer (1968), delineating the psychic action of internalization, and Butler (1993), explicating “the citation of normativity,” have argued against any notion of a one-to-one correspondence between outer and inner. Each has shown how the subject metabolizes and reworks the “outside” in a creative, *sui generis* act of resignification.

As agents, and not merely objects of gender's regulatory gaze, we never swallow the gender binary whole. No gender formation literally reproduces gender categories, since each is a personal interpretation *of* a gender category. As Clifford Geertz (1986) noted, “It is the copying that originates” (p. 380). At this moment of theory, it seems clear that this view should be routinely positioned as (modernist) gender's counternarrative.

Gender as a Compromise Formation

It took me years to formulate this dialectical insight so economically, even though it was present in my earlier work and is implicit in the tradition of psychoanalytic feminism. This delay is due, in part, to the fact that feminism and psychoanalysis have been split, historically and ideologically, on either side of the “inside-outside” binary. Where feminists initially, and by inclination, took up the ways in which social and cultural forces (including theory) construct the subjects that are the objects of their gaze, psychoanalysts focus on the myriad processes through which subjects invent themselves nonetheless.

But it now makes obvious sense to conceive of gender ambivalently, as both a site of injury and a creative, potentially defiant idiom of the self. This perspective is consistent with the

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psychoanalytic theorization of sexuality in which the erotic is seen as crafted in the shadow of the traumatic. From the traumatic losses written into the Freudian story of the oedipal passage, through writers as diverse as Laplanche (1989) and

Stoller (1979), and more recently Stein (1998a, b), Benjamin (1998b), and Davies (1998, 2001), sexuality has been theorized as coming into being under conditions of relative endangerment, as for, example, through the infant's experience of "excess." We might now conceive of gender in similar terms. Emergent in the cross-currents of family politics that are inevitably deformed by the requirements of the gender binary, an individual's gender could be understood as both the embodiment of some sort of traumatic loss of self and other and also as some kind of solution to that loss.⁷ Gender thus would lean equally on both terms, "trauma" and "solution."

In my early work on the relational construction of gender (Goldner, 1991), which was uncritically positioned between the seams of the modern and postmodernist traditions, I focused on gender's traumatic action. I made the case that "gender requires the activation of splitting and false-self operations since complying with ... the impossible terms of [the gender binary] is tied to sustaining the child's primary object relations" (p. 85). Eight years of theory later, Harris (1999) made virtually the same observation about the relational context of gender but drew precisely the opposite conclusion: "In the goal of keeping an internal object world alive (and originally an external scene alive and vital), gender can be the brilliant solution" (p. 4).

A relational update of the classical construct of the "compromise formation" could contain the tension of this contradiction. Gender would be construed as a fixed social identity *and* a fluid psychic state, constituted in the tension between objectification (however that is defined in a particular cultural and family context) and agency (the individual subject's continuous project of self-creation).⁸

⁷ This is not proffered as an *uber*-paradigm, but as one aspect of gender's protean dimensionality. See Chodorow (1999) and Harris (2001) for exemplifications of gender's multiplicity.

⁸ For other references to gender and sexuality as compromise formations, see Harris (2001), Gerson (1996), Chodorow (1994), and Lewes (1988).

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This perspective is implicit in the tradition of psychoanalytic feminism. For example, although "femininity" may be *constituted* as a condition of abjection, the site of what masculinity repudiates, feminists have shown that it is not *only* an abject state; the women who inhabit that category are agents with intentions, not only containers for masculine detritus. Feminist indignation, leavened with psychoanalytic insight, has historically provided a counternarrative through which to read both the symptom picture of femininity and, more radically, the condition of femininity itself (Harris, 1991). A feminist shadow canon has emerged around anorexia, hysteria, sexual and romantic subjugation, even borderline personality disorder. It argues that such conditions are embodied critiques and survival strategies, not merely states of sickness and defeat.

Beginning with Joan Riviere's (1929) prefeminist work on "femininity as masquerade," normative femininity itself has also been reread as a subversive strategy. Theorized as a means to deflect ambition and competition, Riviere's hyperfemininity was a kind of "masculinity in drag." Much later, feminist scholars de Lauretis (1990) and Dimen (1991) independently produced the elegant condensation that femininity was the state of being a "subject-as-object," a perfect evocation of the notion of gender as a traumatic solution. This contrarian strategy culminated with Butler's (1990) postmodern account of "gender melancholy," in which normative femininity (masculinity) was revealed to trade on the embodiment of ungrieved homoerotic longing for the mother (father). In Butler's scheme, workaday gender becomes instantly eroticized and ironized as we imagine every performative gesture, every iteration of masculinity or femininity in street clothes and between the sheets, as an enactment of a forbidden homoerotic longing that savors the implicit pleasures of what has been foreclosed—an exhibitionism that not only conceals its unconscious motivation but also conceals *itself*.

Each of these deployments of gender normativity constitutes both a resistance to, and a compliance with, gender's pathogenicity. Gender melancholy encodes and compounds the unconscious trauma of ungrieved loss, since one's knowledge of homoerotic love must be denied, expelled, and hated as "other." All that

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remains of the soulful erotic bond with the same-sex parent is one's gender normativity. In masquerade, the powerful self that is forbidden within the contours of femininity is betrayed through an eroticized submission to male power; and, in the stance of the "subject-as-object," mental privacy and interiority are sacrificed in the act of crafting the self as an object of the male gaze.

But these self-betrays also serve to protect the vulnerable self from the omnipresent dangers of homophobia and misogyny. Under the guise of gender conformity, they provide a means to enact what the gender binary forbids. Thus they protect and gratify in the context of traumatic endangerment.

Personal Gender

Like all schematic accounts, these examples universalize a single scenario in a one-size-fits-all thesis. In fact, the pathogenic demands of the gender binary tell us nothing about its action in any particular mind, including how that binary is being used against itself to expand the possibilities that normative gender refuses. As Harris (2000) has demonstrated, psychoanalytic gender theory cannot presume what is avowed or disavowed, grieved or ungrieved, or how desire and identification are interwoven in the personal crafting of gender in any one's life. Chodorow's (1999) work on "personal gender," as well as contributions by Layton (1998) and Harris (2000), have shown how everyone creates a uniquely personal, dynamically inflected, relationally savvy version of gender assembled from the gender tropes that each culture and historical period make available.

Cross-gender identities and self-states, which announce themselves as counterformations, make the personal crafting of gender easier to see. Coates (1990), Harris (2000), and Corbett (1996) have all shown how these unique psychic constructions are also creative attempts to confound the operation of normativity while protecting the self.

For example, just as the arbitrary fact of a child's anatomical sex can prompt a parent to sexually violate a girl child or prematurely abandon a son, the emergence of a gender-incongruous self-state can provide a magical shield against the

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effects of such traumas. If a girl's nominal gender as female is experienced as the "me-self" who endured the trauma of violation, a boy-self may surface to keep her going (Harris, 2000), just as a boy's enactment of femininity can be understood as a desperately innovative strategy to keep an abandoning mother psychically within (Coates, 1990). The depressive silence of femininity can be refused through a "tomboy" identity (Harris, 2000), the aggressive rough-and-tumble of normative masculinity can be refused with a "girlyboy" sensibility (Corbett, 1996), and so on.

In fact, each of gender's false truths provides a means whereby unformulated aspects of the self can be articulated. The common-sense beliefs that split gender attributes into male or female allow us to use gender to make a claim on dimensions of self that could not be found, owned, or elaborated in any other way.

Thus, gender-congruent and incongruous identities and self-states can be shown to create boundaries, make connections, sexualize or desexualize relations, disguise intentions, ward off depressive or aggressive affects, and so on. In this sense, gender is clearly a protean deus ex machina solving the dilemmas of attachment and meeting the demands of self expression and self-protection.

How Gender is Worked

Of course, these states are fictions. None of gender's attributes are inherent to gender; and, as Layton (1998, 2002) argues, in the process of genderizing a human capacity, we get more than we bargained for. For example, if "agency" codes as masculine, it will be infested with the defensive splitting off of dependency. Gender's multiple meanings are ultimately normative conveniences whose every deployment reinscribes the very polarities that have been so injurious. Ultimately, gender formations succeed "so well" as compromise formations *because they lean on the paradoxes inherent in gender categories themselves*, paradoxes that, as we have seen, simultaneously potentialize and foreclose.

Clearly, we ought to be critically ambivalent about the use of gender in the design of intimacy and of the self. But, when

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talking back to gender, we must be mindful not to reinscribe the very concreteness we aim to critique. Gender is a form of symbolic elaboration that confers meaning to bodies, acts, and relationships. Since the map is the territory, the goal cannot be to wipe our world clean of gender meanings.

The issue, therefore, is not gender per se, but how rigidly and concretely it is being used in an individual mind or family context, and what psychic and intersubjective work it is being deployed to do. Put in Ogden's terms, as both Sweetnam (1996) and Aron (1995) have done, the question becomes the extent to which the subject experiences herself as personally investing gender with meaning, or whether gender is a "meaning happening to her."

The capacity to make this critical distinction has been conceptualized by Bassin (1996) and Benjamin (1995) as a major developmental achievement. In closely related statements, they demonstrate how, in the course of development, the capacity to symbolize makes it possible to rework the old oedipal oppositions in personally symbolic terms. Rather than concrete mental states bifurcated by gender, oedipal oppositions can become dialectically fluid positions available for psychic use rather than concrete mental states bifurcated by gender. But insofar as gender is an "everywhere and nowhere" phenomenon,

we cannot see through it on our own, no matter how evolved our capacity for symbolization. In some families or cultures where gender is still taken as a fact of nature, it would be impossible to take a metaposition toward it. Gender irony requires the cultural appearance of counteridentities and critiques that create what Bateson (1972) called “news of a difference,” undermining the naturalization of gender conformity and normativity.

Coming Full Circle

Gender and sexuality are foundational categories of mind and culture. They become visible as normative imperatives and as symbolic resources only through the work of critical deconstruction—political, psychoanalytic, academic. This essay aims to contribute to that project.

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Goldner, V. (2003). *Ironic Gender/Authentic Sex*. *Stud. Gen. Sex.*, 4:113-139

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