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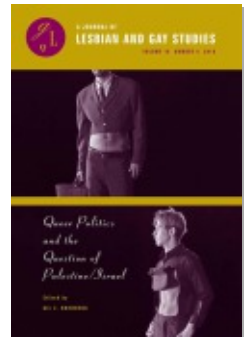
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The Categories Themselves

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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