

GAY/LESBIAN STUDIES

Gay/lesbian studies looks at the kinds of social structures and social constructs which define our ideas about sexuality as act and sexuality as identity. As an academic field, gay/lesbian studies looks at how notions of homosexuality have historically been defined – and of course, in doing so, also look at how its binary opposite, heterosexuality, has been defined. Gay/lesbian studies also looks at how various cultures, or various time periods, have enforced ideas about what kinds of sexuality are normal and which are abnormal, which are moral and which are immoral.

Gay/lesbian literary criticism, a subset of gay/lesbian studies, looks at images of sexuality, and ideas of normative and deviant behavior, in a number of ways: by finding gay/lesbian authors whose sexuality has been masked or erased in history and biography; by looking at texts by gay/lesbian authors to discover particular literary themes, techniques, and perspectives which come from being a homosexual in a heterosexual world; by looking at texts – by gay or straight authors – which depict homosexuality and heterosexuality, or which focus on sexuality as a constructed (rather than essential) concept; and by looking at how literary texts (by gay or straight authors) operate in conjunction with non-literary texts to provide a culture with ways to think about sexuality.

Gay/lesbian studies, as a political form of academics, also challenges the notion of normative sexualities. As the prevalence of the structure of the binary opposition tells us, once you set up a category labeled 'normal,' you automatically set up its opposite, a category labeled 'deviant,' and the specific acts or identities which fill those categories then get linked to other forms of social practices and methods of social control. When you do something your culture labels deviant, you are liable to be punished for it: by being arrested, by being shamed, made to feel dirty, by losing your job, your license, your loved ones, your self-respect, your health insurance. Gay/lesbian studies,

like feminist studies, works to understand how these categories of normal and deviant are constructed, how they operate, how they are enforced, in order to intervene into changing or ending them.

Which brings me – finally – to queer theory. Queer theory emerges from gay/lesbian studies' attention to the social construction of categories of normative and deviant sexual behavior. But while gay/lesbian studies, as the name implies, focused largely on questions of homosexuality, queer theory expands its realm of investigation. Queer theory looks at, and studies, and has a political critique of, anything that falls into normative and deviant categories, particularly sexual activities and identities. The word 'queer,' as it appears in the dictionary, has a primary meaning of 'odd,' 'peculiar,' 'out of the ordinary.' Queer theory concerns itself with any and all forms of sexuality that are 'queer' in this sense – and then, by extension, with the normative behaviors and identities which define what is 'queer' (by being their binary opposites). Thus queer theory expands the scope of its analysis to all kinds of behaviors, including those which are gender-bending as well as those which involve 'queer' non-normative forms of sexuality.

Queer theory insists that all sexual behaviors, all concepts linking sexual behaviors to sexual identities, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities, are social constructs, sets of signifiers which create certain types of social meaning. Queer theory follows feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies in rejecting the idea that sexuality is an essentialist category, something determined by biology or judged by eternal standards of morality and truth. For queer theorists, sexuality is a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interact to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment, and which then operate under the rubric of what is 'natural,' 'essential,' 'biological,' or 'god-given.'

One of the most important contemporary queer theorists is Judith Butler, whose work on *Gender Trouble* uses concepts from Freudian psychoanalysis to question cultural assumptions about gender and sexuality. 'Bricolage' is perhaps the best term to use to think about what Judith Butler does to and with Freud's psychoanalysis. She uses bits and pieces of Freud in order to problematize gender and sexuality as categories of essence. She wants to question the idea that a person is male or female, masculine or feminine, which are the fundamental ideas Freud started with. Butler wants to

show that gender is not simply a social construct, but rather a kind of performance, a show we put on, a set of signs we wear, as costume or disguise – hence as far from essence as can be.

She starts by asking questions about the category ‘woman:’ who does it include, and how do we know who it includes? And who decides what’s in this category anyway? We’ve already gone over this: in phallogocentric Western discourse, ‘woman’ is always the other of ‘man,’ hence excluded from culture or the Symbolic. In feminist theory, ‘woman’ is a universal category, which thus excludes ideas of differences among women (differences of race, class, or sexuality, for example). Both types of theory – psychoanalytic and feminist – rely on a notion of ‘woman’ as referring to an essence, a fact, a biological given, hence a universal.

Butler says we need to think about ‘woman’ as multiple and discontinuous, not as a category with ‘ontological integrity.’ She turns to psychoanalytic theory to do so.¹ She gives an overview of Freud and Lacan as setting up ‘woman’ as an eternal abstract universal category, and implicates Irigaray in doing the same thing. Then she points to the poststructuralist theoretical feminists who destabilize the concept of the subject as masculine/male by saying that the female isn’t a subject, isn’t fully in the Symbolic, that ‘woman’ is on the margins, in the body, and is thus more free to play than man. But, if ‘woman’ is not a subject, can she have agency? And if there is no normative or unitary concept of ‘woman,’ can we have feminism as a movement or as a theory? If there’s no single ‘woman,’ then there can be no single feminism.

Thus the problem is to think about ‘woman’ as fragmentations, and about feminism without a single unitary concept of ‘woman.’ Butler then looks at how psychoanalysis constructs ‘woman’ as a unitary category. Psychoanalysis is a story about origins and ends, which includes some aspects, and excludes others. The story starts with a utopian non-differentiation of the sexes, which is ended by enforced separation and the creation of difference. This narrative ‘gives a false sense of legitimacy and universality to a culturally specific and, in some cases, culturally oppressive version of gender identity.’²

In a way, Butler is asking the question about what happens in a psychoanalytic paradigm if you don’t have a mother and father and no one else; if you’re raised by a single parent, or two parents of the same sex, or by a grandmother, or by a TV set or computer. She looks at how Freud’s versions of the Oedipus Complex privilege a

certain story, a certain pattern of identifications, that supposedly produce a coherent unified gendered self (man, woman, masculine, feminine), and says no, that's not how it really works – you could have variations, fragmented identities, discontinuous or provisional understandings of our gender identities based on a wider variety of identifications, beyond just mother/father/child.

Freud sets up a system where certain identifications are primary in forming a (gendered) self, and others are secondary; the primary identifications have more power to shape a self than the secondary ones, and are subordinated/subsumed within the primary ones. Hence relations with the mother are primary (for both sexes), while relations with siblings, for example, are secondary, not as important in the narrative of how the gendered self is formed. The primary/secondary identifications are temporal: the primary ones happen first, the secondary are added on. Without that temporal placement (first this happens, then this happens), you couldn't tell which identifications were more important than others – which were substance and which were attributes. If we could redesign the Oedipal narrative so it that wasn't linear/temporal, we'd have all the identifications going on at once, or without ranking – so that all would be equally important, all would be attributes without one being substance (or all would be copies without one being original).

Butler wants to understand gendered subjectivity 'as a history of identifications, parts of which can be brought into play in given contexts and which, precisely because they encode the contingencies of personal history, do not always point back to an internal coherence of any kind.'³

She then presents the idea that the concept of the unconscious makes any idea of coherence or unity suspect – whether we're talking about a slip of the tongue, or any narrative/story – including the Oedipal story of psychoanalysis. Freud's story works hard to be unitary and coherent, to tell a connected story about how gender is formed. It does so by repressing certain elements, excluding them from the story. One of the ways it achieves this is to repress or exclude ideas of simultaneity and multiplicity in gender and sexual identity. According to Freud, you either identify with a sex or you desire it; only those two relations are possible. Thus it's not possible to desire the sex you identify with. If you are a man desiring another man, for instance, Freud would say that's because you 'really' identify with women.

Butler looks at how Freud tells the story of how fantasy identifications (identifications that happen in the unconscious) shape our identity (who we are). When we identify with someone else, we create an internal image of that person, or, more precisely, who we want that person to be, and then we identify with that internalized and idealized image. Our own identity, then, isn't modeled on actual others but on our image of their image, on what we want the other to be, rather than what the other really is.

Gender, as the identification with one sex, or one object (like the mother). is a fantasy, a set of internalized images, and not a set of properties governed by the body and its organ configuration. Rather, gender is a set of signs internalized, psychically imposed on the body and on one's psychic sense of identity. Gender, Butler concludes, is thus not a primary category, but an attribute, a set of secondary narrative effects.

Gender is a fantasy enacted by 'corporeal styles that constitute bodily significations.'⁴ In other words, gender is an act, a performance, a set of manipulated codes, costumes, rather than a core aspect of essential identity. Butler's main metaphor for this is 'drag,' i.e. dressing like a person of the 'opposite sex.' All gender is a form of 'drag,' according to Butler; there is no 'real' core gender to refer to.

NOTES

- 1 Judith Butler, 'Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse,' in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990, p. 325.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 330.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 331.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 334.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Berale, and David Halperin, eds, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004.
- Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press, 1993.
- Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor, eds, *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997.