

QUEER THEORY

Let's start by listing all the associations you might have with the word 'queer.' What does 'queer' make you think of.

Chances are, you listed words like 'homosexual,' 'odd,' 'gay,' and the like. The word 'queer' in queer theory has some of these connotations, particularly its alignment with ideas about homosexuality. Queer theory is a relatively new branch of study or theoretical speculation: it has only been named as an area since about 1991. It grew out of gay/lesbian studies, a discipline which itself is very new, existing in any kind of organized form only since about the mid-1980s. Gay/lesbian studies, in turn, grew out of feminist studies and feminist theory.

Feminist theory, in the mid- to late 1970s, looked at gender as a system of signs, or signifiers, assigned to sexually dimorphic bodies, which served to differentiate the social roles and meanings those bodies could have. Feminist theory thus argued that gender was a social construct, something designed and implemented and perpetuated by social organizations and structures, rather than something merely 'true,' something innate to the ways bodies worked on a biological level. In so doing, feminist theory made two very important contributions. The first is that feminist theory separated the social from the biological, insisting that we see a difference between what is the product of human ideas, hence something mutable and changeable, and what is the product of biology, hence something (relatively) stable and unchangeable. The second contribution is related to the first: by separating the social and the biological, the constructed and the innate, feminist theory insisted that gender was not something 'essential' to an individual's identity.

This word 'essential' is important in theories which tell us about how individual identities are constructed within social organizations.

The humanist idea of identity, or self, focuses on the notion that your identity is unique to you, that who you are is the product of some core self, some unchangeable aspects or markers that are at the heart and center of 'you.' These aspects usually include sex (I am male or female), gender (I am masculine or feminine), sexuality (I am heterosexual or homosexual), religious beliefs (I am Christian, Jewish, Buddhist), and nationality (I am American, Russian, Vietnamese). Within humanist thought, these core aspects of identity are considered to be 'essences,' things that are unchangeable and unchanging, things that make you who you are under all circumstances, no matter what happens to you. This concept of an essential self separates 'self' from everything outside of self – not just 'other,' but also all historical events, all things that do change and shift. You might think of the humanist notion of essential selfhood in survivalist terms: the self exists inside an armored shelter, where nothing that happens in the outside world can touch it. The self might feel jarred or shaken by explosions in the outside world, which rattle the doors of the shelter, but it cannot be substantially changed by what happens outside. It can, however, be destroyed. But those are the only options – the essential self can exist in an unchanging state or be wiped out, but nothing in between.

Feminist theory, by challenging the idea that gender is part of this essential self, caused a 'rupture,' a break, that revealed the constructedness of this supposedly natural self. Feminist theory wasn't alone in causing this rupture; similar kinds of breaks occurred within theories of race and national identity, among others, which contributed to the 'deconstruction' of the idea of the essential self. From this rupture came the poststructuralist idea of selfhood as a constructed idea, something not 'naturally' produced by bodies or by birth. Selfhood, in poststructuralist theory, becomes 'subjecthood' or 'subjectivity.' The switch in terms is a recognition that, first of all, human identity is shaped by language, by becoming a subject in language (as we saw with Lacan *et al.*). The shift from 'self' to 'subject' also marks the idea that subjects are the product of signs, or signifiers, which make up our ideas of identity. Selves are stable and essential; subjects are constructed, hence provisional, shifting, changing, always able to be redefined or reconstructed. Selves, in this sense, are like signifiers within a rigid system, whose meanings are fixed; subjects, by contrast, are like signifiers in a system with more play, more multiplicity of meaning.

Once feminist theory had helped to rupture the humanist idea of stable or essential selfhood, and specifically the idea of stable or essential gender identity, and replaced it with the poststructuralist idea of gender identity as a set of shifting signifiers, other forms of theory began to question other 'essentialist' notions of identity. As we will see, ideas of race as innate, essential, or biological came under scrutiny (particularly within feminism, as the idea of the female subject posited in feminist theory in the 1970s was uniformly white and middle-class). Similarly, ideas about sexuality as an innate or essentialist category also became open to reformulation. This is where gay/lesbian studies, as a discipline and as the academic arm of a political movement, began, in the early to mid-1980s.

FLEXIBLE SEXUALITY?

It is, perhaps, more difficult than with gender to see sexuality as socially constructed, rather than as biological. When we look around, we see 'gender bending' happening in lots of arenas – movies like *The Birdcage* and *Boys Don't Cry*, to name only two, bend the idea of gender roles as essential, and as determined by sex (males are masculine, females are feminine). In fact, we can see gender roles and gender signifiers shifting daily: how many women, ten years ago, had visible tattoos, for instance, and how many men would sport visible piercings, in ears or other body parts? Thinking of these changes (and you can come up with your own examples of flexible or shifting gender constructs), it's relatively easy to see gender as a system of signifiers.

Sexuality is harder, though, in part because of the way our culture has always taught us to think about sexuality. While gender may be a matter of style of dress, sexuality seems to be about biology, about how bodies operate on a basic level. Our culture tends to define sexuality in two ways: in terms of animal instincts, of behaviors programmed by hormones or by seasonal cycles, over which our free will has no control, and in terms of moral and ethical choices, of behaviors that are coded as either good or evil, moral or immoral, and over which we are supposed to have complete (or almost complete) rigid control. In the first way of thinking about sexuality, sexual responses are almost purely biological: we respond sexually to what is coded in our genes and hormones, and this is almost always defined in terms of reproductive behavior. This viewpoint

comes from evolutionary thought, where it is the duty of each member of the species to try to preserve and pass on her or his particular genetic make-up. This view says we can understand human sexual behavior by understanding animal sexual behavior.

The problem with this first view is that human sexuality doesn't work like animal sexuality. If it did, all the females would come into heat at certain cycles, and all the males would frantically try to have sex with them during these cycles; all sexual activity would be geared toward reproduction, and sexual activity in both sexes would occur only during these periods of heat. Obviously, human sexuality works differently. In fact, human sexuality looks very little like animal sexuality in any regard. We are (with perhaps the exception of the bonobo ape) the only species that can copulate more or less at will, without regard to fertility or hormonal cycles, and that alone separates sexual behavior from reproduction for human beings. We also have an enormous repertoire of sexual behaviors and activities, only some of which are linked to reproduction, which further separates the two categories. And – most importantly – human sexual behavior is about pleasure, and about pleasure mediated by all kinds of cultural categories.

Yes, we could argue about forms of animal sexuality and how they do or do not model human sexuality – I have a spayed female dog who likes to 'hump' people's legs, which is an example of sexual behavior not linked to reproductive activity – but the point is that linking human sexuality to animal sexuality serves to construct sexuality in particular ways. If you see humans largely as animals, then you also see human sexuality as largely reproductive in nature, in essence – and thus any behavior not linked to reproduction becomes 'unnatural.' Which leads us to the second way our culture defines sexuality: in terms of morality, in terms of right and wrong behaviors.

Western cultural ideas about sexuality come from lots of places – from science (and particularly from the evolutionary view of sexuality as an animalistic instinctive behavior), from religion, from politics, and from economics, for example. These categories of sexual codification are investigated by Michel Foucault in his series entitled *The History of Sexuality*. Examples of sexuality being defined by politics and economics occur when nations or other social organizations worry about population control, and urge people not to reproduce – or even require abortions or birth control or sterilization to

ensure that; a counter-example of sexuality defined by politics and economics would be in countries or subgroups who urge members to produce lots of children, so that that group will have a greater population than some other group.

These ideas about sexuality often take the form of moral statements about what forms of sexuality are right, or good, or moral, and which are wrong, bad, and immoral. These categories have shifted over time, which is another way of arguing that definitions of sexuality are not 'essential' or timeless or innate, but rather are social constructs, things that can change and be manipulated. Certainly we've seen such changes in the past ten years, not just in relation to homosexuality and heterosexuality, but in relation to ideas of safe sex and the prevention of sexually transmitted disease: in today's culture (in some circles), an immoral sex act might be one that doesn't include a condom or other form of barrier, rather than one that merely isn't involved in a reproductive activity. In previous generations, as in current times, these ways of defining sexuality (through biology, religion, politics, and economics) have produced clear-cut categories of what is right and wrong, usually categories linked to ideas about reproduction and family life. Queer activist Gayle Rubin's article 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' argues that ideas about sexuality are structured in binary oppositions, where one side of the pair is positive, good, moral, right, and the other side is negative, bad, immoral, and wrong.

Rubin argues for the deconstruction of all these binary oppositions; she is, in fact, arguing for the complete separation of all forms of sexual behavior from any kind of moral judgment. And this is where lots of people have a hard time agreeing with her (or with other sexuality radicals). Doesn't it seem that some kinds of sexual behavior *should* be wrong? What about sex that hurts someone else, sex that is not consensual, sex between someone with lots of power and someone with no power? These objections show two things: one is that sexual behavior, in human culture, is almost always about something more than just pleasure and/or reproduction: it's often about forms of power and dominance. The other thing these objections show is how powerful the links are between sexual activities and notions of morality. And the link comes, in part, from defining sexuality as part of *identity*, rather than just as an activity which one might engage in. Hence, if you have genital sexual contact with

someone of the same sex, you are not just having homosexual sex, you are a homosexual. And that identity is then linked to a moral judgment about both homosexual acts and homosexual identities. The recent movie *Brokeback Mountain* illustrates how powerful these ideas have been – and to some extent still are – in Western (both Anglo-European and US Western) culture.

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.