

# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO WOMEN AND MEN? GENDER AND OTHER CRISES IN ANTHROPOLOGY\*

by

Henrietta L. Moore\*\*

**Abstract:** The chapter explores the sex/gender debate in contemporary anthropological theory. It argues that sex, gender and sexuality are the product of a set of interactions with material and symbolic conditions mediated through language and representation. What we need is to manage the sex/gender debate as we live our lives, that is as a complex relation between a radical materialism and a radical social constructivism.

**Key-words:** Gender; anthropology; sex.

The 1970s were great years: Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, flared trousers, low-fat margarine, Charlie's Angels and a wine that went by the name of Bull's Blood. A decade when women were women and men were men. The 1970s were great years for anthropology because back then was the only time we've ever been sure in our minds that we knew what sex and gender were. Like all good things, this certainty has since come to an end. This text is about certainty and uncertainty, and about the instability of particular kinds of conceptual project.

## What is gender?

It was in the 1970s that the distinction between sex and gender was established in the social sciences and subsequently took hold in all the academic disciplines in the humanities, with the exception of philosophy. The proposition that gender was

---

\* Chapter 6 of the book *Anthropological Theory Today* (1999) (ed. Henrietta L. Moore), Cambridge, Polity Press. We must thank the author and the publisher for kindly authorising its reproduction here.

\*\* London School of Economics, UK.

to be understood as the cultural elaboration of the meaning and significance of the natural facts of biological differences between women and men came to assume an almost unquestioned orthodoxy (Moore, 1988). The only rearguard action that continued to be fought was with our cousins the biological anthropologists, among whom even the most liberal would only go so far as to say that while sex might not determine all of gender, it certainly determined a part of it. Social anthropology took the lead in arguing that sex could not determine gender, and provided evidence in terms of divergent cultural elaboration and examples of third genders and other forms of transsexualism. The work produced in the 1970s was fairly uniformly referred to as the anthropology of women, and was primarily concerned with documenting women's lives ethnographically and seeking explanations for the position of women in society, their universal subordination. It was only in the 1980s that the critical focus of the field shifted sufficiently for it to be renamed as the anthropology of gender: the study of gender relations as a structuring principle in all human societies; the study of women and men in their relations with each other. In both decades, gender was the object of study and sex remained remarkably under-theorized (Moore, 1988). This was not surprising since the latter's relegation to the category of the natural removed it from the purview of an anthropology concerned with matters social and cultural. The easy overlap between the categories of sex and gender and those of nature and culture made complete sense not only in terms of the influence of structuralist thought on the analysis of gender in anthropology, but also in terms of the salience of the nature/culture divide for the definition of disciplinary parameters, and in regard to the importance of this distinction for theories of the relationship between the body and representation and consciousness.

However, despite all the theorizing about gender, there was a curious, but unacknowledged problem about what exactly gender was. On the one hand, gender and gender relations were concerned with the sexual division of labour, with the roles, tasks and social statuses of women and men in social life broadly understood. On the other, gender was about cosmological beliefs and symbolic principles and valuations. It was not difficult to establish that the two were not always concordant. Societies where women were apparently clearly subordinate in domestic, economic and political life could also be those where symbolic principles and cosmological beliefs valued powerful aspects of femininity. Likewise, societies where symbolic systems created hierarchical and relatively fixed relations between the male and the female might also be those where women carried influence and power in day-to-day contexts. The social and the symbolic while never completely divergent resisted any easy theory of reflection and could certainly not be said to determine each other. Some of the best anthropological work during this period was concerned with investigating the refracted relationship of these different aspects of gender, but the con-

tinuing influence of Marxist and neo-Marxist frames of reference meant that the issue was most often treated as a problem about ideology rather than one about how to theorize the intractable relation between the social and the symbolic. This was to have interesting consequences. In any event, in the 1970s we were not seemingly worried about the apparent ubiquity of gender, that everything seemed to be about gender, that we were using one term to refer, as one scholar nicely put it, to everything “from the description of the gods to the terms for a carpenter’s joining” (Belo, 1949: 14, cited in Errington, 1990).<sup>1</sup>

### **What is sex?**

Tracing a chronology involves creating a narrative history, but there is always more than one way to tell a story, and stories often tell us more about the present than they do about the past. With this in mind, I want to describe what happened next in the great sex/gender story. If the 1970s and 1980s had established that gender existed, the late 1980s suggested that sex did not. Within the narrow confines of anthropology it self, Collier and Yanagisako (1987) reopened the formerly neglected question of sex by asking what it means to say that gender is the cultural elaboration of the natural facts of sexual difference. Their contention was that this model is predicated on a Western assumption that sex differences are about reproduction, and that this assumption also underpins anthropological work on kinship, thus leading them to the conclusion that anthropological theories of kinship are simultaneously Western folk theories of biological reproduction (p. 31). In this, of course, they were simply continuing an old line of argument that anthropologists are weighed down by their own cultural baggage when analysing data and constructing analytical categories and models. Their overall argument was there is no reason to assume that the biological difference in the roles of women and men in sexual reproduction will necessarily lie at the core of differing cultural conceptions of gender (p. 32). They subsequently suggested that the study of gender should be disassociated completely from the concept of sex because of the latter’s culturally specific meanings, thus apparently abolishing sex altogether.

Shelley Errington took issue with Collier and Yanagisako on this point and introduced a distinction between three terms: sex (lower case), Sex (upper case) and gender. Her contention was that we should distinguish between biologically sexed

---

<sup>1</sup> Mary Hawkesworth (1997) has questioned whether one concept can really be used to encompass such a vast terrain, and discusses critical debates about the utility of gender as an analytic category.

bodies – sex – and a particular construction of human bodies prevalent in Euro-America – Sex – which influences the way anthropologists understand the sex/ /gender distinction (Errington, 1990: 19-31). Gender as a term would be reserved for “what different cultures make of sex (lower case)” (p. 27). Errington argued that Collier and Yanagisako had confused Sex with sex, and thus her analysis – far from making sex disappear – appeared temporarily to double it, but this too was an illusion.

The analyses by Collier and Yanagisako and by Errington marked one of the points of entry of neo-Foucauldian thinking into anthropology. Both sets of argument rested on the idea that sex, and not just gender, was socially constructed, or rather that some aspect of sex was so constructed because the problem of what to do about the residual category of sex (lower case) remained, namely the inconvenient fact that people have bodies that are present in a differentiated binary form. However, once we allow for a distinction between sexed bodies – sex (lower case), the cultural construction of those sexed bodies – Sex (upper case) and gender – the cultural construction of sex (lower case), we might ask what is gender that Sex (upper case) – the cultural construction of sexed bodies – is not? To put it more simply: what is the difference between “a socially constructed sex” and “a social construction of sex”? There are answers one can give to this question. We could say that Sex (upper case) is the cultural construction of sexed bodies, while gender is about the sexual division of labour, cosmological beliefs and symbolic valuations. This would be fine except that these two domains of human social life are not readily separable from each other, and there is therefore considerable confusion about where the boundary should lie between sex and gender. One possible way to handle this confusion is just to get rid of Errington’s intermediate category Sex (upper case), and go back to talking about the relationship between sex and gender, that is between sexed bodies and cultural representations.

In such discussions as these, sex appears and disappears; it is different from gender and it is not different from gender. Women are no longer just women, and men are no longer just men. But then do not forget that this debate is taking place in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and this is the era of Michael Jackson, Boy George, Prince and Madonna: neither sex nor gender are stable any more!

The idea that sex itself might be ambiguous, that the natural facts of sexed bodies might be comprehensible and persuasive only as cultural constructions raises the interesting question of whether sex classification is enough to determine gender categorization. Anthropology’s early work on third genders and transsexuals had always suggested that it is not, but in the 1980s and early 1990s the impact of praxis theory in anthropology gave particular emphasis to the idea that gender assignments and categories are not fixed, but have in some sense to be constructed in practice,

to be performed.<sup>2</sup> This theoretical framework took something from Turner's earlier work on performance and symbols, but it was reinvigorated by ideas from well outside the discipline.

In effect, gender became reconceptualized not as something you were, but as something you did. What encouraged "a man to do what a man's gotta do" was discourse. A version of radical social constructivism was distilled from Austin's speech-act theory, Foucauldian analysis and a rag-bag of ill-digested ideas about post-modernism and deconstruction. The result was a provocative rethinking of the relationship between sex and gender: where formerly gender had been conceived as the cultural elaboration of a sex that preceded it, now gender became the discursive origin of sex. Sex became understood as the product of a regulatory discourse on gender in which the surfaces of bodies are differentially marked and charged with signification.

### **Gender trouble?**

The inversion of the relationship between sex and gender had been suggested by a number of theorists before Judith Butler published her famous book *Gender Trouble* (1990), but when this inversion is referred to in the contemporary literature Butler is most often cited as its point of origin. Butler's argument once again raises the instability of the analytic categories sex and gender: "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (Butler, 1990: 7). Butler's point is that gender is the effect of a set of regulatory practices that seek to render gender identity uniform through the imposition of a compulsory heterosexuality (Butler, 1990: 31). In this way gender is seen as central to a process of becoming, of acquiring an identity, of structuring one's subjectivity, and can no longer be thought of as a structure of fixed relations. This process of becoming explains Butler's emphasis on performance, on what she calls gender performativity: "If there is something right in De Beauvoir's claim that one is not born but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (Butler, 1990: 33).

---

<sup>2</sup> The importance of practice theory in the field of gender studies continues; see, for example, Connell (1997), who develops a notion of "body-reflexive practice". Recent theories of gender that stress performance often also emphasize embodiment, and thus draw on an amalgam of phenomenology and practice theory.

However, it is not only that the regulatory practices that construct the categories woman and man are open to resignification – as well as the gender identities feminine and masculine – but that they can never be complete. Thus, gender performativity as a theory is not only concerned with how one enacts a gender within a specific set of regulatory practices, but is particularly focused on the disjunction between the exclusive categories of the sex/gender system and the actuality of ambiguity and multiplicity in the way gender is enacted and subjectivities are formed. Butler argues that the “disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain” (Butler, 1990: 135). This false stabilization conceals the discontinuities within heterosexual, bisexual, gay and lesbian practices and identities: “where gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender” (Butler, 1990: 135-6).

The categories of gender through which Western sex/gender systems naturalize sex difference are always ideal constructions, and no individuals will ever find an exact correspondence between their experience of their body and their gender and these ideal constructions. The theory of performativity thus offers the possibility of reworking gender, of shifting its meanings through the repetition of performance, of challenging and possibly subverting the normative constructions of the sex/gender system. The fascination of the possibility of resistance accounts for much of the contemporary appeal of this theory, and as such the theory of gender performativity suffers from the same general problem that afflicts all theories of resistance in the social sciences. More seriously, as Rosalind Morris has pointed out (Morris, 1995: 571), ambiguity as a concept has been elevated far above its explanatory potential – just like the concept of resistance in fact – and is held in many analyses to function as a kind of originary moment. A number of contemporary accounts of gender in anthropology suffer from this problem, where ambiguity is now the very grounds for sex and gender difference, a kind of pre-discursive, pre-ontological condition (Morris, 1995: 570). The idea that ambiguity is the basis of gender difference – in so far as it has a basis – has found ready acceptance in much recent ethnography which seeks to demonstrate that sexed bodies, sexual practices and gender identities do not necessarily go together. Recent work in Brazil, Thailand, Samoa and the Philippines, much of which has been greatly influenced by gay and lesbian anthropology (Weston, 1993a), all provide good examples (e.g. Johnson, 1997; Cornwall, 1994; Jackson, 1996; Parker, 1991; Kulick, 1998; Mageo, 1992).

### **Does gender exist?**

The theory of gender performativity as developed outside anthropology has close links with a body of work on sexuality and sexual practice that is generally referred to as queer theory (cf. Graham, 1998). If the 1980s and early 1990s abolished sex, as the millennium approaches the race is on to abolish gender. If feminists and anthropologists had already raised the question of the indeterminate boundary between sex and gender, asking what was the difference between a socially constructed sex and a social construction of sex, developments in more recent feminist theory and queer theory have suggested that there is no need for a concept of gender at all. There are a number of strands to these arguments.

The first of these draws on the reconceptualization of gender as process rather than as category, the focus on the “doing” of gender rather than the “being” of it developed in performative theory and elsewhere. Queer theory emphasizes that gender is not the issue, but rather the way you live your sexuality, the way you enact a sexual identity. The result is a focus on sexual practice and sexuality, albeit one that draws on radical constructivist and neo-Foucauldian approaches to sexed identities by emphasizing their discursive construction. The fulcrum of much queer theory is sexual difference understood as sexual variety or different sexual practices (Abelove et al., 1993; Rubin, 1994; De Lauretis, 1991). This work emphasizes that genitals, sexual practice, sexual identities and sexual desire do not necessarily fit together in any conventional sense or rather that conventions can and should be subverted. Queer theory thus provides a problematic status for sex and for gender.

Sex appears to be coterminous with sexuality understood as sexual practices and sexual identities, and since what is in focus is the subversion of any necessity for the effects of the physically sexed body, some aspect of sex is conveniently pushed out of sight. The same aspect of sex that was lost in previous theoretical formulations: the fact that people have bodies that are present in a differentiated binary form. Queer theory also manages, however, to wish away gender since it has inherited the lessons of recent feminist theory where sex and gender can no longer be properly distinguished. The result is either that sex is “always already gender” or alternatively a rather specious argument is advanced where queer theory gets to do sex understood as sexuality and feminism gets to do gender understood as the social roles of women and men. All this might be less confusing if feminist theorists had not already claimed that they were doing sex understood as gender. The issue, of course, is not really a theoretical one, but rather a kind of territorial war waged over the sexed body (Butler, 1994).

The origins of this dispute lie, as ever, in kinship metaphorically understood, by which I mean in intimacy and shared substance. Butler’s original emphasis on the

potentially disruptive effects of gender performativity, on its capacity for subversion and resistance drew on theories of drag and camp to bolster the notions of both performance and resistance on which her theory depends. In fact, *Gender Trouble* ends on quite a clarion note, with the suggestion that the parodic repetition of gender can be used to subvert institutionalized gender identities (Butler, 1990: 146-7). The interpretation of drag and camp as mimetic forms of gender identity that serve only to reveal the imitative nature of the institutionalized heterosexual identities they seek to subvert provided performance theory with the crucial examples of gender performance and instability it needed.<sup>3</sup> This was particularly the case since Butler's theory of sex as the effect of the regulatory discourses on gender depended on an assumption that such discourses work by seeking to impose a compulsory heterosexuality. Thus in the great hall of mirrors in which we are now confined, feminist theory and queer theory – at least in some of their manifestations – are parodic repetitions of each other.

Anthropological work on sexuality and on gay and lesbian identities has a slightly different position. It certainly draws on feminist and gay and lesbian theory developed outside the discipline, but it has resolutely refused to confuse sex, sexuality and gender (Weston, 1993a; 1993b; 1998). In fact, it is in the gaps between these terms that anthropologists work to demonstrate that dominant Western assumptions about the interrelations between these terms are sometimes inappropriate for studying sex/gender systems cross-culturally – hence the continuing importance of, for example, work on Thailand, where we are being asked to consider systems that contain three sexes and four sexualities (Morris, 1994; Jackson, 1996). Anthropology's saving grace here is its commitment to empiricism. This allows it to document the perceptions and practices of individuals and the relationship of those perceptions and practices to dominant and subdominant views about sex, gender and sexuality.<sup>4</sup> The relentless process of contextualization that is the basis of anthropological methodology and interpretation works against any tendency to privilege parody over convention. Although it could be argued that anthropological accounts, if anything, still have a tendency to privilege culture as against human agency and therefore downplay the potentially subversive effects of individualized practices (Weston, 1993a; Graham, 1998).

Butler has certainly been criticized on the grounds that the theory she puts forward in *Gender Trouble* proposes a view of agency that is far too voluntaristic. This is a pervasive misreading, but one so prevalent that Butler was forced to

---

<sup>3</sup> See also Newton, 1979; Garber, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> This is as true of the anthropologist, of course, as it is of those who are the subjects of anthropological enquiry, see Lewin, 1991; Kulick and Wilson, 1995.



address it directly in *Bodies that Matter* (1993); not only to counter her critics (e.g. Copjec, 1994), but also her supporters who regularly read her work as supporting voluntaristic and philosophically essentialist accounts of agency and subjectivity. Butler perhaps opens herself to misreadings of this kind because she does emphasize parody and hyperbole, as if parody would free us all from the regulatory norms of gender, and as if we could choose when and how we engage in hyperbole (Walker, 1995: 72), the sort of approach that says “I’m coming out of the closet today with my new gender identity on”.

The available anthropological data actually suggests that most people do not find their gender identities particularly fluid or open to choice, and this applies as much to those people who are seemingly resisting gender norms as it does to those who are apparently accepting them. In terms of anthropological analysis, this point needs some theoretical and critical elaboration because of the problematic relationship that academic and popular theories of gender, sex and sexuality have to anthropological work itself.

This is a relationship that has a history. In the 1970s anthropology was very largely responsible for providing the data on which the theory of the distinction between sex and gender could be based, as discussed above. Anthropology has continued to play a pivotal role in providing evidence of third genders, transsexualism and transgenering (Weston, 1993a). This evidence has not always come from “other cultures”: gay and lesbian anthropology has often been based on work in Europe and the Americas (e.g. Herdt, 1992). But anthropologists do not and cannot police the boundaries of their own knowledge, and so it is unsurprising to find that people around the world wanting to build and live alternative sexualities, identities and genders are aware of anthropological data and theory in the specific form in which it has entered the domain of popular culture. Even if people are not aware of the anthropological data directly, they are aware of the theories, practices and consumption items that make up gay and lesbian culture, and these cultures have long made use of a form of anthropology. In other words, anthropology – often unwittingly – has a long history of providing the evidence for the exotic and the alternative.

In studying contemporary gender and sexuality, anthropologists are increasingly aware of the impact on so-called traditional sex/gender systems of the media, international tourism, music and dance forms, club culture and a whole range of other influences. New forms of sexuality and of gender identity are taking shape, and it might be easier to characterize this as a process of “Westernisation” or “trade in exports” were it not for the fact that so-called Western gay and lesbian culture and other forms of popular culture have long depended on influences from non-Western sources. Anthropologists, particularly those who are part of gay and lesbian

culture themselves, are thus in an interesting position when studying alternative genders and sexualities and engaging in a process of “us” and “them” comparison (cf. Kulick and Wilson, 1995; Newton, 1993). It is important to recall here that anthropological comparison necessarily revolves around a fictive version of Euro-American culture, and thus this problem exists for all anthropologists regardless of their specific cultural backgrounds. The point then is that the study of gender and sexuality is as much about “the study of ourselves through the detour of the other” as any other aspect of anthropology, except that it is even more obvious that the boundary between self and other is an unstable one in some respects. We should be critically aware that the writing of contemporary ethnography on sex, gender and sexuality is just as much about performing gender as are the cultural practices and perceptions that such ethnography seeks to describe (Morris, 1995: 574).

### **Bodies and the art of identity**

One curious fact of the Western or Euro-American discourse on sexuality is its link to the production of identity and subjectivity. The degree to which, and the form in which, this link works in other contexts is I think a matter for empirical study. However, what becomes apparent not only within feminist and queer theory, but also in terms of certain forms of popular culture around the world, is a strange paradox. The paradox is the way in which ambiguity and fluidity in sexuality and gender are used to form the basis for identity politics: what is shifting provides the grounds for what is fixed. This paradox is instructive for what it reveals about some of the more problematic assumptions of gender performativity. Performative theory argues that it is possible to destabilize the regulatory discourses on sex and gender through repetition and the mimicking of gender categorizations, as well as through alternative practices that bring into question the interlinkages between bodies, sexual practices and identities on which the sex/gender system depends. What becomes absolutely crucial in this theory, but usually remains remarkably undertheorized, is the use and the management of the body as a mechanism for the construction and management of identity. This has the extraordinary effect of collapsing the form of identity and the form of the body. This privileging of the body at the very moment when sexualities and identities are said to be fluid and ambiguous begs various questions.

Many contemporary cultures, including Euro-American culture, are obsessed with body modification. I would like to turn to a brief consideration of body performance art and body modification because they do furnish us with an example of a set of discursive practices concerned with bodies and identities, and one which

apparently raises the issue of voluntaristic choice in an alarming fashion. Body modification and body performance art are also examples of a particular kind of relationship between anthropology and popular culture.

Fakir Musafar is the founder of the “Modern Primitive Society” and is widely regarded as the guru of “body-piercers, waist-cinchers and lobestretchers all over the world. Early in life, Musafar succumbed to a fascination with distorting his own body, only to realise as he matured and researched, that he was tapping into an ancient tradition shared by numerous cultures” (Mullen, 1997: 20). A recent discussion of Musafar’s body practices, and those of a number of others, made reference to the practices of the Maoris, the Eskimos, the Kraimbit of Papua New Guinea, the Ndebele, the sadhus of Hindu tradition and Native Americans as sources of inspiration. Not all performers are concerned, of course, with exotic data and theory. Sebastian Vittorini, the Wasp Boy, acknowledges Musafar as an initial inspiration, but claims that he is just a masochist experimenting with his body, and that he likes to have an audience. However, other practitioners do use bowdlerized – and sometimes racialized – bits of anthropology as the rationale for their own and others’ practices and experiences. Alex Binnie, one of London’s top tattoo artists, explains:

Traditional societies have used all types of body modification as part of the rites of passage. It’s a transitional point in their lives, and it’s important that they remember the lessons they’re learning. One way of making that stick is to permanently inscribe it on their bodies... If you think getting a tattoo is painful, you should look at what Aboriginal scarring is like, or look at circumcision rites in Africa. What we do is light-weight.

*(Mullen, 1997: 21-2)*

The appeal to anthropology and to traditional cultures is partly a fascination with the exotic, partly a desire for authenticity and origins, and possibly part of a larger search for ritual. Ron Athey is a former Pentecostal preacher turned queer body artist. “He speaks in tongues, whilst dressed as Miss Velma – the white-haired evangelist of his Californian childhood – he pierces his scalp with fourteen-inch lumbar needles to form a crown of thorns, and crucifies himself with meat hooks through his arms” (Palmer, 1996: 8). However, not all artists are making direct appeals to religious symbolism, even though the audience may take a different view. The Italian artist Franko B explicitly distances himself from Christian symbolism: “I don’t want to be a cheap Jesus”. However, his latest performance at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1996 involved standing naked while he bled profusely from stigmata-like wounds on his elbows. The pools of blood on the floor, the outstretched arms and the beatific pose all invoked Christian religious imagery (Palmer, 1996: 8). Franko B’s other performances have involved cutting words – such as “protect me” – into his flesh, and his current project entails opening up a

vein in his arm, inserting a valve to control the bleeding, and then letting blood flow out around his white, painted, foetally crouched body. When you think you can take no more, his assistants hang him upside down by his ankles and more blood pours out (Mullen, 1997: 29).

Commentators on such performances often interpret them, as do some artists, as attempts to transcend the body. Such interpretations are perhaps inspired by the religious and spiritual images and rationalizations with which some performances are redolent. However, not all performers appeal directly to the spiritual: Franko B says "My main thing is to try to make the unbearable bearable" (Palmer, 1996: 8). But what is the unbearable? Perhaps it is just his terrifying performance art, and it is the audience who are dealing with the unbearable. A kind of parody on Oscar Wilde's famous comment on a less than successful evening: "great show, pity about the audience". Or perhaps the unbearable is something in Franko himself. "I was brought up to be ashamed of my body. I use blood, urine and shit as a metaphor because this is what I am". The literalization of the body as self is a rather dramatic example of collapsing the form of identity into the form of the body.

Working up identities, creating difference is certainly a theme in the explanations not only of body performance artists, but also in those of body modifiers. Kate is into body decoration and tattooing: "It's not that I'm insecure about my body. It's just a way of making you like certain bits of yourself better. And anyway, skin's very boring. If we all got naked and shaved all our hair off we'd all look alike. This is one way of ensuring that you're completely different" (Mullen, 1997: 26).

If body art and body modification is about anything it would seem to be about the stabilization of personal identity rather than its destabilization: perhaps the point is that it is both. But the degree to which it is genuinely subversive seems to me to be very questionable. The horrific is not necessarily subversive: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was actually a great morality tale. It may also be true in relation to bodies, sexualities and genders that setting out to be subversive is not enough to effect subversion, and may have the opposite effect. The body, despite the fact that it is a physical entity, is not enough on which to build a personal or social identity. It is not and could never be completely stable as an origin point for an identity. Body performance art makes this very clear as each return to the body forces a further search for the perfected body, the one that most evidently provides the grounds for a chosen identity. This accounts, perhaps, for the need not only to modify the body, but also to technologize it. The anxiety is that a kind of obsolescence threatens the natural body in this period of late capitalism. Steve Hayworth, a body-modifier and amateur surgeon from California, has successfully implanted a metal plate in a man's head, into which can be screwed a variety of accessories, functional and decorative (Mullen, 1997: 29).

All forms of technology are, of course, prosthetic and, this accounts, in part, for their symbolic role in the construction and mediation of identity, particularly gender identity. Stelarc is a body performance artist who extends his body with technological additions: "Death, he claims, is an outmoded evolutionary strategy. If the body can be redesigned in a modular fashion, then technically there would be no reason for death. The body need no longer be repaired, but could simply have parts replaced. The body must become immortal to adapt" (Palmer, 1996: 9). The goal would appear to be one of perfecting the body to sustain self-identity through time, to outmanoeuvre death and conserve identity. As more traditional ways of grounding identity slip away, some would appear to cling more tenaciously to the body as the one remaining source of a self-authorized existence. But this body cannot be the natural body; it must be one more stable, more perfected, and that means one more consciously fashioned.

The issue here is one about representation, and the relationship of the body not just to language, but to forms of representation that both exceed and cannot be reduced to words. Orlan is a body performance artist who has had at least nine plastic surgery operations. These operations are carried out under local anaesthetic, while Orlan chats to her audience and reads aloud from the writings of Julia Kristeva and Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni. These performances are beamed live by satellite to galleries around the world, and some are available on the Internet and on CD-ROM. Orlan has recently released a CD-ROM called *This is my body... This is my software*. "I have given my body to art", she declares. "After my death, I won't give it to science therefore, but to a museum. There, mummified, it will be the centre-piece of an interactive video installation" (Palmer, 1996: 9). Orlan, like Stelarc, intends to stay with us, her dead body representing her in communication with the living through interactive video technology. There have been many ways of course to seek for immortality and for life after death, but Orlan's work is particularly revealing of the relationship between the body and self-identity, and thus between the body and representation. Orlan's body is a representation, it is a work of art. This literalization is revealed by the fact that Orlan uses bits of her flesh in 3D artworks and has stated her intention to do so until there is nothing left of her (Mullen, 1997: 31). How this is to be reconciled with being mummified for posterity remains unclear! However, Madonna is reported to have decorated her apartment with "a small perspex box containing a Shylockian morsel of flesh freshly liposuctioned from Orlan's artistic posterior" (Palmer, 1996: 7).

Orlan's work reminds us, if we needed reminding, that the body cannot take any form without being subjected to representation. The human body is never just a natural body, but always has imaginary and symbolic dimensions. This symbolized body is necessary not only for a sense of self, but for relations with oneself and with

others. It is symbolism that brings us into being, and hence the necessary for bodies to be brought into relation with representation and with language. This is not just another way of saying that bodies are socially constructed, but is rather to say that the very experience of embodiment entails a confrontation with the imaginary and the symbolic. One way to demonstrate this is to consider the question of transsexualism – now often referred to by the preferred term transgenering – which provides another example of an effort to transform identity through the modification of the body. The important point here is that there is a great difference between thinking of an individual as a subject and thinking of them as a patient.<sup>5</sup> The confusion in the case of transsexuals can be expressed as imagining that someone is seeking an anatomical change when what they are really after is a different embodiment. This is another way of saying that the confusion is between a naturally sexed body and lived sexual difference (Shepherdson, 1994: 171). There is a paradox here, since the frequent claim by those seeking sex change operations, that they are individuals “trapped in the wrong body” and should have the right to choose what is right for them, can imply a step beyond the real of embodiment to a fantasy body that would be completely under the subject’s control, fully socially constructed (p. 172).

Catherine Millot in her book *Horsexe* discusses the clinical problem of how to decide which individuals would benefit from surgery and which would not (see Shepherdson, 1994). She distinguishes between a group who are oriented towards sexual difference, that is towards identification with “a man” or “a woman”, with all the ambiguity, uncertainty and symbolic mobility this implies, and a second group who are oriented towards a fantasy of “otherness” that amounts to the elimination of sexual difference because it is a fantasy of replacement, the acquisition of a sex that would not be uncertain. Those who belong to the latter group seek to eliminate the symbolic ambiguity that accompanies sexual difference, and to replace it with the certainty of a perfected body. They are not so much demanding to occupy the position of the “other sex” as a position outside sex, a perfection attributed to the other and then sought for oneself (Shepherdson, 1994: 175-7). This perfection is, of course, a sex that is complete, that lacks nothing. Such perfection is well expressed by one client:

Genetic women cannot claim to possess the courage, compassion and breadth of vision acquired during the transsexual experience. Free from the burdens of menstruation and procreation, transsexuals are clearly superior to genetic women. The future is theirs: in the year 2000, when the world is exhausting its energies on the task of feeding six billion souls, procreation will no longer be held to be an asset.

(cited in *Shepherdson, 1994: 177*)

---

<sup>5</sup> I base my discussion here on Charles Shepherdson’s analysis (1994), and I am grateful to him for his insights in this area.

Once again, as the millennium approaches, the race would appear to be on to abolish gender, an abolition prefigured as taking place through the replacement of the “natural” woman.

It seems clear that however we are to understand transsexualism, transsexuals are not necessarily examples, as has been argued, of the ultimate freedom, the very embodiment of the malleability of gender. The discussion above helps to make some sense of one of Orlan’s most famous statements where she characterizes herself as a “woman-to-woman transsexual”. This comment may have been tongue-in-cheek, but it is extremely revealing (Stone, 1996: 47). Plastic surgery is about the refiguration of the face and body. Orlan chooses the images towards which this refiguration is directed from Old Master paintings. She is adding images of women to herself, while simultaneously becoming the flesh made image. Just as the male transsexual may be seeking not to become a woman, but to become *The Woman*, the perfected sex that is complete and thus denies sexual difference, Orlan may be seeking something of the same completion (Adams, 1996: 58). There is clearly an element of this in any desire to be surgically altered, but it does raise the question of whether body performance artists, and others who perform operations on their bodies and identities, are really subverting sexual difference and gender, or just becoming locked into a deadly embrace with them.

### **Sexual difference and the art of love**

It has been suggested that body performance art and body modification are just extreme forms of a culture’s obsession with how to ground identity and enter into relations with oneself and with others. A way of trying to control the symbolic and the forms of symbolic exchange in a world where most intersubjective relations are mediated as much by the exchange of goods as words. These forms of body modification and transformation make the body into a product, a commodity, but one over which the subject has a degree of control. Shakespeare’s long rumination on this theme was *The Merchant of Venice*. The body comes in not necessarily when words fail, but when they get hard to control as Leader argues (Leader, 1997). It is interesting in this regard to recall the debt that the theory of gender performativity has to Austin’s work on speech acts. What defines a speech act is that it does something by saying something, a situation is created out of words, something is effected. All speech is in fact a form of doing, but what is interesting about explicit performatives is the way they often tie identity of the individual to the act of speaking. This is particularly true of pledges, promises, vows and the like. However, words may not be enough: as Shylock found out, there may be a need to ground

promises in the forfeits of the flesh (see Leader, 1997).<sup>6</sup>

When is a man's word good enough and when does it have to be supported by a pound of flesh? Gender performativity is about acts of doing, many of which may not be linguistic; but proponents of the theory sometimes forget that an individual's relation to gender, sexuality, sex and the body is through the symbolic. They thus forget something, that Judith Butler does not, that gender performativity is not all in the realm of consciousness. Butler is explicit about the impact of psychoanalytic theory on her own thinking. The very notion of the unconscious introduces the idea that a subject is never at one with their consciousness, that subjectivity does not coincide with consciousness. Gender performativity could thus never be just a matter of conscious wishes and desires. To parody Marx, we may construct our own making. What we do not control is our relation to the symbolic, to language.

It is language that brings women and men into relation with each other. This relation is both social and symbolic, but proponents of gender performativity and of other forms of radical social constructionism and voluntarism often seem to discuss sexuality, sex and gender as if they were wholly in the domain of the individual, as if they were not intersubjective, not in fact relational. Sexual relations have a fascinating connection to speech acts, and especially to those that are about promises and pledges: "I promise never to leave you" (Leader, 1997: 1). Such promises can be problematic since promising love, as Leader has pointed out, can often mean that its end is in sight (Leader, 1997: 8). The fact that commitment is a problem reveals how important language is in mediating the relationship between being female and being male.

Getting married is a problem for lots of people. In the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* much is made of the anxiety of getting married. Charles, played by Hugh Grant, is perennially late for everyone else's weddings and as a best man he is more of a liability than a facilitator. He manages to turn up on time for his own wedding, but then fails to go through with it because he's fallen in love with a beautiful woman called Carrie. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* is about the problem of the relation between the sexes, and this problem is revealed to us through a problem about speech (Leader, 1997: 69-73). In the opening sequence of the film, only two words are spoken – both refer to sexual acts – and their repetition signals a problem about a relation to the world. This sense of not being quite at one with the world is part of the character played by Hugh Grant. When he sits down beside an elderly gentleman at the wedding feast and says "My name's Charles", the old man replies

---

<sup>6</sup> I base my comments about promises on Darian Leader's (1997) brilliant analysis, and draw directly on his analysis of the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* to develop my own arguments. His insights have profoundly influenced my own thinking in this section.



“Don’t be ridiculous, Charles died twenty years ago”. “It must be a different Charles”, replies Grant. The old man is furious with exasperation: “Are you telling me I don’t know my own brother?!” Charles’s mishaps continue and they are almost all about problems of naming, misapprehensions and misunderstandings.

It is Gareth, the jovial, larger than life figure with the dreadful waist-coats, who reveals the mediating role of language in establishing relations between the sexes. During one of the weddings, he opines that he has now discovered the reason why couples get married: “They run out of conversation. They can’t think of a single thing to say to each other... Then the chap thinks of a way out of the dead-lock and have something to talk about for the rest of their lives”. Charles’s problems with language are indicative of the fact that he cannot establish proper relationships with the opposite sex. When Charles pursues Carrie and confronts her on the embankment, he tries to tell her “in the words of David Cassidy” that he loves her and is then unable to finish the sentence. When it comes to making a commitment, he cannot use his own words. His inability to establish a relationship is reflected in the dumbness of his brother who has to intervene on Charles’s wedding day to say, in sign language, that he thinks the groom loves somebody else. Charles cannot speak for himself. When Charles finally commits himself to Carrie, he says. “Will you agree not to marry me?” Even after she says “Yes”, he hedges his bets: “and is not agreeing to marry me something you think you could do for the rest of your life?” (Leader, 1997: 70).

Relations between members of the opposite sex are problematic for almost all the characters in the film: Fiona who loves Charles, but he does not know it; duck-face whom Charles abandons at the altar; Carrie with her endless list of boyfriends; the aristocrat whose only secure object of love is his labrador and so on. These relations are explicitly contrasted with bonds between men, not only Charles’s love for his brother, but also the hidden marriage of Gareth and Matthew that accounts for the purpose of the funeral in the film (Leader, 1997: 72). As Charles reveals when he notes that the group of friends had never realized that “two of us were to all intents and purposes married”. Love relations between men are signalled in a whole variety of contexts throughout the film, but never made explicit until the funeral scene. After the funeral Charles has a further revelation: “There is such a thing as a perfect match. If we can’t be like Gareth and Matthew, then maybe we should just let it go. Some of us are not going to get married”. It is love between men that represents the perfect match, and it is for this reason that love relations between members of the opposite sex are so fraught, if not impossible. What has to be given up for these love relations to work is the idea of the perfect match, the complete relation of likeness embodied in the relation between men. What has to be acknowledged is sexual difference and the role the symbolic, of language, in medi-

ating that relation. There is nothing natural – in the biologically reductionist way we usually understand that word – about sex or sexual relations or sexuality or gender.

## **Conclusion**

Voluntaristic interpretations of gender performativity work on the assumption that if sex is made up then it can be unmade (Copjec, 1994). In other words, they reduce sexual difference to a construct of historically variable discursive practices, and reject the idea there is anything constant about sexual difference. This rejection is an absolute one because the terms of the sex/gender debate in all its various forms revolve around the question of nature versus culture, essentialism versus construction, substance versus signification. A number of writers, who are often referred to as sexual difference theorists, reject the terms of these polarities and point out that it was Freud who eschewed the limitations of these alternatives, arguing that neither anatomy nor convention could account for the existence of sex (Copjec, 1994). Lacan went further and argued that our sexed being is not a biological phenomenon because to come into being it has to pass through language, that is to take up a position in relation to representation. Sexual difference in this sense is produced in language, in the realm of the symbolic. Feminist critics who are wary of psychoanalysis have challenged this view claiming that it removes gender from actual social relations and posits sexual difference as something foundational, outside history and impervious to change. The same critics have also pointed out that psychoanalytic theory privileges sexual difference over other important axes of difference crucial for the construction of identity, such as race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and so on.

This disagreement is, of course, just another version of the set of binary polarities that underpin the sex/gender debate. But the main intellectual issue is how to reconcile theories that prefer unconscious desire to wilful choice, the unchanging structures of linguistic difference to discursive playfulness, the register of the symbolic to that of the social? The answer is not to give up on the sex/gender debate, not to try to define absolutely the boundary between sex and gender or that between sexuality and gender or between sex and sexuality. The boundary between sex and gender may be unstable, but that does not mean that they can be collapsed into each other. We may be able to enter into multiple constructions of gender and sexuality; we may be able to play with our gender identities and our sexual practices and resist dominant social constructions, but we should not confuse the instability of sexual signifiers with the imminent disappearance of women and men themselves, as we know them physically, symbolically and socially. Bodies are the site where subjects are morphologically and socially constructed, they mark the intersection of the social

and the symbolic; each subject's relation with his or her body is both material and imaginary. Sexed bodies cannot be comprehended either by arguing that all of sex is socially constructed or by arguing that there is a part of sex that remains outside social construction. Sex, gender and sexuality are the product of a set of interactions with material and symbolic conditions mediated through language and representation. We need to bring into connection and manage as a complex relation a radical materialism and a radical social constructionism. This is what the sex/gender debate allows us to do. In a sense we need to manage the sex/gender debate as we live our lives, that is as a complex relation between a radical materialism and a radical social constructionism. The sex/gender debate is particularly fraught because we do use our embodied selves as a point of reference even in the most abstract theoretical discussions, and there are in fact very good reasons why this should be the case. A parody perhaps on Diderot's comment that "There is always is a little bit of testicle at the bottom of our most sublime ideals".

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ABELOVE, H.; M. BARALE, AND D. HALPERIN, eds. (1993). *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- ADAMS, P. (1996). "Operation Orlan", in *Orlan*, ed. S. Wilson, M. Onfray, A.-R. Stone, S. François, and P. Adams. London: Blackdog Publishing.
- BELO, J. (1949). *Bali: Rangda and Barong*. Monographs of the American Ethnological Society no. 16. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- BUTLER, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge.
- BUTLER, J. (1994). "Against Proper Objects", *Differences* 6 (2-3): 1-26.
- CONNELL, R. (1997). "New Directions in Gender Theory, Masculinity Research, and Gender Politics", *Ethnos* 61(3-4): 157-76.
- COPJEC, J. (1994). *Supposing the Subject*. London: Verso.
- CORNWALL, A. (1994). "Gendered Identities and Gender Ambiguity among Travestis in Salvador, Brazil", in *Dislocating Masculinities: Comparative Ethnographies*. ed. A. Cornwall and N. Lindisfarne. London: Routledge.
- DE LAURETIS, T. (1991). "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities: An Introduction", *Differences* 3(2): iii-xviii.
- ERRINGTON, S. (1990). "Recasting Sex, Gender and Power: A Theoretical and Regional Overview", in *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia*, ed. J. Atkinson and S. Errington. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- GARBER, M. (1992). *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. London: Routledge.
- GRAHAM, M. (1998). "Follow the Yellow Brick Road: An Anthropological Outing in Queer Space", *Ethnos* 63(1): 102-32.
- HAWKESWORTH, M. (1997). "Confounding Gender", *Signs* 22(3): 649-85.
- HERDT, G., ed. (1992) *Gay Culture in America: Essays from the Field*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- JACKSON, P. (1996). "Kathoeys <Gay> <Man>: The Historical Emergence of Gay Male Identity in Thailand", in *Sites of Desire/Economies of Pleasure: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. L. Manderson and M. Jolly. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- JOHNSON, M. (1997). *Beauty and Power: Transgendering and Cultural Transformation in the Southern Philippines*. Oxford: Berg.
- KULICK, D. (1998). *Travesti: Sex, Gender and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- KULICK, D., AND M. WILSON, eds. (1995). *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*. London: Routledge.
- LEADER, D. (1997). *Promises Lovers Make When It Gets Late*. London: Faber and Faber.
- LEWIN, E. (1993). "Writing Lesbian and Gay Culture: What the Natives have to Say for Themselves", *American Ethnologist* 18(4): 786-91.
- MAGEO, J. (1992). "Male Transvestism and Cultural Change in Samoa", *American Ethnologist* 19(3): 443-59.
- MILLOT, C. (1990). *Horsexe: Essay on Transexuality*. New York: Autonomedia.
- MOORE, H. L. (1988). *Feminism and Anthropology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- MORRIS, R. (1994). "Three Sexes and Four Sexualities: Redressing the Discourses on Sex and Gender in Contemporary Thailand", *Position 2* (1): 15-43.
- MORRIS, R. (1995). "All Made up: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 567-92.
- MULLEN, L. (1997). "The Cutting Edge", *Time Out* 10-17 December: 20-31.
- NEWTON, E. (1979). *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- NEWTON, E. (1993). "My Informant's Best Dress: The Erotic Equation in Fieldwork", *Cultural Anthropology* 8(1): 3-23.
- PALMER, J. (1996). "Extremes of Consciousness", *Artists Newsletter* August: 7-9.
- PARKER, R. (1991). *Bodies, Pleasures and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- RUBIN, G. (1994). "Sexual Traffic", *Differences* 6(2-3): 62-99.
- SHEPHERDSON, C. (1994). "The Role of Gender and the Imperative of Sex", in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. J. Copjec. London: Verso.
- STONE, A.-R. (1996). "Speaking of the Medium: Marshall McLuhan Interviews", in *Orlan*, ed. S. Wilson, M. Onfray, A.-R. Stone, S. François, and P. Adams. London: Blackdog Publishing.
- TURNER, V. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- TURNER, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- WALKER, L. (1995). "More than Just Skin Deep: Fem(me)jinity and the Subversion of Identity", *Gender, Place and Culture* 2(1): 71-6.
- WESTON, K. (1993a). "Lesbian/Gay Studies in the House of Anthropology", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22: 339-67.
- WESTON, K. (1993b). "Do Clothes Make the Woman?: Gender, Performance Theory and Lesbian Eroticism", *Genders* 17(2): 1-21.
- WESTON, K. (1998). *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science*. London: Routledge.
- YANAGISAKO, S., AND J. COLLIER (1987). "Toward a Unified Analysis of Gender and Kinship", in *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis*, ed. J. Collier and S. Yanagisako. Stanford: Stanford University Press.