

Author's Statement: "This argument essay analyzes how gender is performed onto bodies by the dominant white heteropatriarchy as a means of controlling its subjects."

Your Gender, Hand it Over: Imposing Gender Categories as a Means of Control

Introduction

Gender is a nebulous concept with concrete implications. Many use the word "gender" as a synonym for "sex" (Serano 24), and therefore define it based on what genitals a human has at birth. However, there are many other usages of the word "gender" such as describing "a person's gender identity... their gender expression and gender roles... or the privileges, assumptions, expectations, and restrictions they face due to the sex others perceive them to be," (Serano 25). The key part of this interpretation of gender is that it is socially constructed. And this is how I will use the term "gender" in this essay, as a particular set of categories understood to divide people by identities historically equated with genitals in the dominant white heteropatriarchy of western culture and assign to them a set of characteristics and an evaluation of their purpose and/or value.

Since there is nothing inherently concrete or objective about gender, it is entirely performative. This means that gender is a product of the interpretations of peoples' actions. Contrary to popular assumptions, this performance is not only performed by the gendered subject. Riki Anne Wilchins says to David Valentine on this subject:

We are right back into gender as performativity, but also as something which is performed on your body by the audience as well as an "identity" performed *by* you. I think this is something you might want to draw out further: the politics. How do our bodies point out that these [anthropological] discourses are not about

identity, even genitals, but about political operations (220, underlining added by me).

Wilchins makes the vital point that as much as someone can identify as any gender, gender is also constantly imposed, or “performed on” all of us (220). This can be as quick and habitual as assuming someone’s pronouns based on their appearance or as intentional and structural as creating mandatory legal categories of gender. All of these examples function on the assumption that a finite number of genders (typically two) exist and can be differentiated. These ideas are then “performed on” (Wilchins 220) all members of society, creating what we know as our gender identities. For this to work, this conception of gender has to be ingrained into the minds of new subjects from birth in addition to actively working to eliminate those who do not conform to the dominant conception of gender that the white heteropatriarchal society upholds and *performs*. The rigid categories and labels of this project demonstrate that the purpose of upholding this rigid male/female gender binary is for the dominant white heteropatriarchy to maintain control of its subjects.

Building Gender on a Clean Slate

Social scientists have defined them [children] as recipients, bodies acted upon by adults and the surrounding culture. Adults have "the status of full social actors," while children are "incomplete, adults-in-the-making," (Fausto-Sterling 249).

This incompleteness is removed through parenting and teaching. Children by their nature are blank slates upon which society can reproduce itself. As such, they can be taught what gender norms are by white heteropatriarchal society and they, we, typically absorb it without much resistance. Children are told how to dress and talk and behave based on what they are told their gender is. Babies even have their bodies physically altered to conform to the way the heteropatriarchy associates biology with the male/female binary. In this way, gender is

“performed on” (Wilchins 220) children both in how they are made to perceive/interact with the world and how they are made to have certain bodies.

Children are not born understanding gender. That would be impossible given the fact that gender is socially constructed. However, they learn about gender quite quickly. Anne Fausto-Sterling describes a study by Sandra Bem that determined that “Children younger than three had a hard time labeling the naked children as a boy or a girl, but successfully used social clues—clothes and hairstyles—to classify the dressed ones,” (248). This is not surprising given the fact that children are constantly bombarded with gender-based social clues. Neela Ghoshal noted that her children were exposed to the performance of the gender binary from a young age by observing older children go to school in their “thoroughly gendered uniforms: skirts for the girls and trousers and ties for the boys,” (90). This is an example of gender being “performed on” (Wilchins 220) kids via required clothing and it definitely sinks in. Ghoshal notes the following interaction that she observed in her child’s class:

When Chi was twenty months old and started preschool, I accompanied him for the first few days and observed while a teacher, reading to the children, pointed to pictures and asked questions... “And who is this petting the cat? Is it a boy or a girl?” “A girl,” one child ventured, finger jabbing towards the isosceles trapezoid meant to represent a skirt on the illustration. “That’s right!” exclaimed the teacher, pleased with her charges’ increasing ability to identify and name things (87).

By requiring/encouraging certain behaviors, like girls wearing skirts, each subsequent generation is taught how to embody gender norms to the satisfaction of those in power. Those children who stray from the norms are reprimanded. For example, “[Chi] picks up a bubble dispenser featuring... Anna and Elsa. “No no no! That one is for girls,” says the clerk in a near panic,” (Ghoshal 96). This is another instance of “perform[ing gender] on” someone (Wilchins 220) by assuming their gender based on appearance, and then attempting to regulate their likes and

behavior. The acquisition and understanding of gender in children is, thus, more than simply learning. It is being forced into a lifestyle and way of thinking. But, beyond gendered clothes and toys, gender can be forcibly “performed on[to]” kids (Wilchins 220) in more drastic ways as well.

Many people believe that “the stigma faced by children with atypical genitalia could be prevented by the... assignment of the infant to a sex and surgical alteration of the genitals to remove any hint of ambiguity,” (Williams 456). Such surgeries are known as intersex genital mutilation and it is done with the intent of making an infant’s genitals appear “cosmetically ‘normal’ as either vaginas or penises,” (Valentine, “One Percent” 216). Although intersex infants start in a state of sexual ambiguity by the standards of the white heteropatriarchy, “parents [are] assured that the assigned sex [is] the ‘real’ sex even when this could not be truly ascertained,” (Williams 456). Thus we see that unnaturally constructed genitals that conform to the expected binary are privileged as “real” over natural, uncommon genitals. And yet, things like breast implants are considered fake, precisely because they are artificially constructed. As such, the project of “perform[ing gender] on” bodies (Wilchins 220) is held over natural bodies. This social construct is presented as more “real” than how people are born, despite the rhetoric from those who support the male/female binary that those are the only two “real” genders. Victims are never given the chance to decide what is “real” for them. Instead, “it is the observer’s experience—the experience of the physicians or the parents—that drives the treatment of intersex conditions,” (Williams 458). These observers enforce the dominant white heteropatriarchy’s ideals, taking it upon themselves to eliminate the intersex bodies that violate and challenge its facade of universality and truth. Thus, each generation of children can be

raised oblivious to the diversity of bodies that exist and entrenched in the belief that the male/female binary is the one and true organization of gendered subjects.

Erasing Other Gender Systems

Once those in power have created their definition of proper gender categories, those categories must be defended. Like the drive to eliminate intersex bodies, the white heteropatriarchy needs to eliminate other gender structures to maintain the dominance of their system. This duality of eliminating deviant individuals and ideas is key to maintaining control of subjects within the white heteropatriarchal conception of gender. One strategy for eliminating competing gender systems is labeling and isolating supposedly deviant gender structures and identities in order to facilitate their destruction. By attempting to eliminate all other structures of gender, the white heteropatriarchy can validate its right to existence and dominance as the only remaining candidate. Much in the way a state eliminates its political opponents, the white heteropatriarchy eliminates opposing societal structures so that it can maintain ideological and practical hegemony.

Since gender is socially produced, it follows that the communities one is in impacts how one labels themselves. David Valentine interviewed many feminine people assigned male at birth. He notes that whether the interviewees identified as transgender was largely based on “their contact with those formalized contexts of community- support groups, social service agencies, clinics, and so on- which employ the understandings of ‘gay’ and ‘transgender’,” (Valentine, *Imagining Transgender* 118). Those with less contact were likely to use a variety of words simultaneously to explain their identities such as “drag queen”, “woman”, “gay”, “man”, etc (Valentine, *Imagining Transgender* 114-5). Those who did access these services were more

likely to identify as “transgender” because most of the agencies providing services to these people used that vocabulary (Valentine, *Imagining Transgender* 118). This is because those agencies understand gender in a way that's different from how these peoples' home communities do. Valentine notes that the way these people identify are interpreted as non-sensical “because we are interpreting them within a theoretical framework which cannot make sense of them unless they are dismissed as false consciousness or a lack of education,” (*Imagining Transgender* 128). This dismissal is an act of “perform[ing gender] on” another (Wilchins 220), as is telling someone they are transgender and not something else. These programs force or lead people to identify/understand themselves in certain ways, eradicating what are viewed as incorrect expressions of gender. They say “you can get health care, but only if you identify how I tell you to.” Thus, these non-normatively gendered people are separated out and prevented from accessing vital resources, which can eventually lead to their death, unless they decide to conform and identify as the resource providers tell them to.

The settler colonialist gendercide of third and fourth-gender Native Americans is another, more explicitly violent, example of how gender is used politically to divide and exterminate those who have non-normative genders in the eyes of the colonizer. When the Spanish colonizers saw people who were assigned male at birth but who “dressed as women and had sex with... men,” they called them the “joya” (Miranda 260-1). The immediate impact of this was setting apart the joya as a separate and devious class of people, making it easier to justify their murder and forced assimilation. Miranda writes, “Renaming both human beings and their own names for people or objects in their world is a political act of dominance,” (260). Here we can see the utilization of gender norms as power. By performing the category of joya onto these people, the colonizers established dominance over the joya themselves, as well as over their

tribes. They then proceeded to brutally murder (Miranda 257) and forcefully regender the joya under threat of shame and punishment (Miranda 264-5), all to facilitate the project of Native extermination. This continues in the present as Two-Spirit individuals (a modern term that would be inclusive of the joya) are forced into choosing normative terms for their sexuality such as gay, lesbian, transgender, etc. But these words do not and cannot “fully define a Two-Spirited person, because those labels are based on an almost exclusively sexual paradigm inherited from a nonindigenous colonizing culture,” (Miranda 277). Therefore the colonizer, in their genocidal project of settler colonialism, continues to force Native sexual and gendered identities into white heteropatriarchal boxes so that they can make Two-Spirit individuals legible and, thus, make the individual and the culture eradicable.

Conclusion

Be it teaching the gender binary to children, surgically altering the genitals of intersex infants, forcing people to use certain labels for themselves in order to access resources, or using labels to facilitate cultural genocide of those with different understandings of gender, the project of “perform[ing gender] on” others (Wilchins 220), specifically white heteropatriarchy’s male/female gender binary, is necessarily violent. Sometimes that violence is as explicit as murder, but sometimes it is as subtle as access to community resources or humiliation. Children can be threatened with violence at the hands of family or community members for not living as the gender the world believes that they are. Or they can be subtly compelled to conform through bullying or emotional manipulation. Intersex infants are forced to undergo nonconsensual operations that mutilate their bodies. People who do not conform to the male/female binary are forced to accept specific labels or be denied food, safer sex products, medical care, etc. Indigenous people are murdered, abused, and forced into assimilation by their colonizers for

having developed a different societal conception of gender. The thing about using violence is that it inspires unique fear in subjects about the repercussions of not conforming. This is because the dominant white heteropatriarchy does not just want to punish those who do not conform to its gender binary, it aims to eliminate such people. So, more than simply fearing violent repercussions, transgressors of the male/female binary fear for their existence; their ability to be a living human and their ability to be outside of the male/female binary.

The existential fear that the white heteropatriarchy inspires gives them control over all gendered subjects. That is, everyone. Achieving the perfect gender is impossible. Since gender is a constructed concept that has no scientific backing, there is no way that someone can fulfill every expected aspect of “their” gender. As such, all people are compelled to change their behavior to fit the norms. This reveals that, ultimately, “perform[ing gender] on” others (Wilchins 220) is a method of political control. It is control over how people act, speak, think, identify, view the world, etc. By constantly policing the gender of its subjects, the white heteropatriarchy squashes resistance both practically, through the death of non-conformists and opponents, and ideologically, by raising generations who believe in only the male/female binary and erasing all other conceptions of gender. The basis of the male-female gender binary then supports other forms of discrimination inherent in the white heteropatriarchy: white supremacy, anti-queerness, and misogyny. Though it may seem like an innocuous and natural part of life, the male/female gender binary has extensive, horrific consequences that have been constructed by those in power to better control the subjects of white heteropatriarchal society. Its goal is for us all, as gendered subjects, to pose less resistance to its dominance and believe in its facade of naturalness and innocence.

Works Cited

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the Body : Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. 1st ed., Basic Books, 2000.

Ghoshal, Neela. "Colouring Outside the Binary: Challenging the Imposition of Gender Binaries on Toddlers." *Feminist Parenting: Perspectives from Africa and Beyond*, edited by Rama Salla Dieng and Andrea O'Reilly, Demeter Press, Bradford; Ontario, 2020, pp. 87–98. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv11vcfbp.9. Accessed 11 Dec. 2020.

Miranda, Deborah A., (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation, Chumash). "Extermination of the Jocas: Gendercide in Spanish California." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 16 no. 1, 2010, p. 253-284.

Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Seal Press, 2009.

Valentine, David. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Duke University Press, 2007.

Valentine, David, and Riki Anne Wilchins. "One Percent on the Burn Chart: Gender, Genitals, and Hermaphrodites with Attitude." *Social Text*, no. 52/53, 1997, pp. 215–222.

Williams, Nina. "The Imposition of Gender: Psychoanalytic Encounters with Genital Atypicality." *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2002, pp. 455-474. *ProQuest*, <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu/docview/614379800?pq-origsite=primo&accountid=14963>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2020.

