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Synthesis 1

The Social Enactment of Homo/Hetero/Human-Normativty

Queer theory introduces a framework for examining critically our philosophical, political, and social climate in ways that effect true excitement about being in the academic community. In particular, it promotes aspects of poststructuralist ideology and applies it to a practical paradigm, challenging the very notions of what we consider “normal.” Although we have examined a rich cross-section of texts addressing a myriad of characteristics of the theory, the combination of Judith Halberstam’s “Gender” and Eve Sedgwick’s “Introduction: Axiomatic” from *Epistemology of the Closet* are particularly engaging to me as I consider the ways that I can apply queer theoretical concepts in my literature and composition classrooms with specific goals in mind. Halberstam’s description of radical theorists’ call for the end of gender (119) coupled with Sedgwick’s first axiom that “People are different from each other” (22) are useful in applying a new teleology to a classroom setting. The former may not be feasible, at least not in the immediate future, but the latter can be applied to this idea of ending gender in the context in which we know it. Gender, like human beings, is multiplicitous, and its performativity and permutations are fluid as well as contextual.

Implicit and often explicit messages regarding professors “having agendas” come to mind as a cautionary issue; however, in my mind one of the roles of the professor is to challenge students to think differently and self-reflexively, to “know thyself” as the Ancient Greek Oracle ordered. Therefore, it is completely appropriate in a classroom devoted to writing and reading that students would exploring gender identity rhetorically. By first examining Halberstam’s discussion of gender, followed by framing Sedgwick’s aims in her introduction and axiomatic one, we can apply these precepts to envision a classroom that attempts to connect both hetero AND homo normativity as a new paradigm.

Halberstam defines usefully John Money’s 1955 definition of gender: “the social enactment of sex roles” (117). Separate from biological genetic endowment of “male” or “female,” gender indicates knowledge production, as long seated and *seemingly* biologically ingrained as it may be. However, in order for paradigm shifts to occur within a deeply indoctrinated milieu, we must somehow disengage from what Halberstam notes is a “seemingly neutral analysis” but is actually “male oriented” exposing the “false universalization of male subjectivity” (116). These deeply ingrained gender roles, challenged as they have been by drag queens and other non-heteronormative gender enactments, are also viewed by some gender theorists as a “socio-biological process…every bit as rigid and immutable as genetic code” (Halberstam 117). Thus, the cultural codes already in place by the patriarchy may not be altered drastically; however, these codes can, I argue, be more flexible and fluid.

With the emergence of queer theory and a widening of the interdisciplinary umbrella within academe, the classic heteronormative codes of “male” and “female” have been particularly challenged over the past twenty years. Halberstam cites numerous categories in which queer studies scholars have contributed to the conversation, including women’s labor in “new phases of capitalism” (Enloe 1989; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998), race scholars who have “trace very specific histories of gender formation in relation to racial projects that attribute gender and sexual pathology to oppressed groups”, including how “black femininity has often been represented as vexed by the idealization of white femininity on the one hand and cultural stereotyping of black women as strong, physical, and tough on the other hand” (Hammonds 1997), and those “seeking to denaturalize cultural conceptions of manhood” (Bederman 1995; Sinha 1995; Harper 1996) (117-118). Bringing stereotypical codes to light, these scholars have aided in the acknowledgment of their repressive characteristics, and recognition of their existence and identifying a polemical system may allow for social change.

Despite the identification of these binary codes, Halberstam also notes that even within the non-heteronormative milieu, these encoded perceptions of normative masculinity and femininity are still reinforced. She notes that “In recent years, cultural work dedicated to shifting and rearticulating the signifying field of gender has been ongoing in queer and trans-gender subculture” but that drag king acts “more often depend upon the sedimented and earnest investments made by dyke and trans-performers in their masculinities” (118). One question comes to mind: are these performances actually perpetuating the constricting and oppressive characteristics of gender? Does exposure to traditional gender definitions of masculine and feminine, even in the context of parody, actually promote them?

This somewhat troubling question is one of many possible avenues to explore in the classroom. For example, what would a complete paradigm shift in gender construction actually look like? What are the signifying systems for male and female, and how can these characteristics be altered to allow for greater acceptance of and empathy for those who experience sexuality and gender in different ways? What are the heteronorms, and how do we knowingly (or unknowingly) continue to perpetuate them, even if we say we are against them?

Although I am digressing somewhat, I will share a personal anecdote that sheds light on the millennial generation’s view on heteronormativity. A friend and I were sharing lunch at a fast food restaurant. Both of us are watching our spending, so he suggested that only one of us get a soda and the other could have the refill. I said that it was a great idea, and he then told me about how when he suggested it to another male friend, he refused to do so because it would “make it look like we were gay.” It did not surprise me that this person would be paranoid about appearing gay, as homosexuality still, despite what seems to be a more progressive culture, carries a clear stigma. What did surprise me was that this individual associated sharing a cup with someone of the same sex and gender as performing homosexuality. No wonder so many people are wary of coming out of the closet, even in 2013 in America. In my classroom, I hope to engage a dialogue about such assumptions and attitudes to allow students greater self-and other-reflexivity. If students claim that they are NOT homophobic, they should not proscribe to such judgments about simple acts such as sharing a cup or even minding if someone else perceives them as being homosexual if they were not.

Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* examines in a more general and abstract sense similar forms of knowledge production described in the anecdote above, including the “endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century” (1). Throughout her introduction and beginning chapters, Sedgwick lays bare the problematics of gender binaries while continuing the discursive tradition of Foucault. She does so by linking the notion of “closetedness” as a “performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (3). Therefore, the performativity of homosexual identity is reinforced through silence as well as through naming. Sedgwick reinforces Foucault’s view that “there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things….There is not one but many silences, and they are all an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucualt 27). Thus, the reinforcement of gender binaries can actually occur in a silence or a speech act, although the silence can also be viewed as an act of resistance or even of self-preservation.

What I find most relevant here is the idea that these silences and their corresponding reinforcement of hierarchies and binaries OR their claiming of greater power and resistance are contextual, just as gender performativity is also contextual and dependent on each individual. Sedgwick sets herself apart throughout “Axiomatics” by resisting generalization. Problematic with any theory, queer or otherwise, is this tendency to generalize populations in the name of intellectual inquiry and social change; one simply cannot get away from drawing conclusions based upon inductive reasoning. Perhaps this is the problem with western metaphysical thinking also, and queer theory does, through the examination of such binaries, attempt to call them into question. Yet, they still exist: closet or no closet? Queer or straight? Heterosexual or homosexual? In naming the binaries, the binaries are reinforced. For example, Sedgwick points to the “chronic modern crisis of homo/heterosexual definition [which] has affected our culture through its ineffaceable marking particularly of the categories secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public…in/out, cognition/paranoia…” (11). Sedgwick does, like Foucault, point to the problem with heteronormative axiomatics and even, through the general binaries described above, the possibility of homonormative axiomatics. Taken together, can two systems of gender axiomatics be reconciled, assimilated, integrated? Sedgwick does not answer definitively, but at least the concepts are placed into the discourse.

Sedgwick’s first axiom struck me as particularly pragmatic when approaching human behavior: “People are different from each other” (22). Again, she points to the subject of binaries and our very human tendency to want to assume a gestalt approach to identity rather than one that is contextual and fluid. Moreover, the “even people who share all or most of our own positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species” (22). Sedgwick is arguing that just as we each assume multiple familial and personal identities, so can we possess multiple sexual identities and permutations of those identities based upon context. Within the same sexual orientation alone, she argues, there are multiple forms of sexual acts, fetishes, identities. Most interestingly, she accounts for characteristics such as: “Even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people; For some people, sexuality provides a needed space of heightened discovery and cognitive hyperstimulation. For others, sexuality provides a needed space of routinized habituation and cognitive hiatus” (25). These are just two examples from Sedgwick’s list of fourteen erudite and realistic categories that individuals may fall within when considering sexual identity. Here Sedgwick keeps to her overall thesis that in approaching an accurate epistemology regarding sex and gender, one which considers both the minoritizing and the universalizing view, applying a simple axiomatic of difference to the more challenging notion of *differance.*

The title of this synthesis addresses this same notion: How can homonormativity AND heteronormativity become the norm? The question alone may seem simplistic and rather naiive in construction, for the complex interplay of power, repression, and projection of longstanding cultural and historical practices are deeply embedded within the framework of our continuing patriarchal, masculine, heterosexual reality. However, I don’t think that it is naive to say that I can begin to effect change or the possibility of change within my students. This change can come in the form of a “gender journal,” an ongoing, informal text whereby students analyze both heteronormativity and homonormativity in a multiplicity of contexts: the Literature we read, life observations, informal texts, social media, and all and any other forms of media. The millennial generation may in fact be more exposed to gender and sexual identities than any other due to the ubiquity of pornography and other visual media. This exposure alone may be perpetuating binaries in a more insidious way even though many young people that I have encountered present as extremely open-minded.

As mentioned previously, awareness is the beginning of self-change, and self-change may lead to collective social change. At the least, the exploration of these issues of gender and sexuality in the context of safe writing and a safe space of discussion may lead an individual to a space of individual power. Indeed, this is a positive. It is something that I strive for in my students: to know themselves in deeper and more enriching ways.

Works Cited

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