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Gender in Psychoanalytic Space (review)

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Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society, Volume 8,  
Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 168-170 (Review)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/psy.2003.0024>



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pushes psychotherapy (and hopefully psychoanalysis) to the cusp of something new. Perhaps in the reminders of the way that psychological processes always happen between others, that is, in the social sphere, psychotherapists can begin to think of their work in political and moral terms. Once this begins to happen, perhaps new configurations of the self can be constructed within psychotherapeutic communities. While we are muddling our way through the shift from psychotherapy as “objective,” “asocial,” and individualized into new ways of practicing therapeutically, Cushman’s analysis stands as a guidepost for us along the way.

—Ronald W. Wright

**Dimen, Muriel and Virginia Goldner, eds. *Gender in Psychoanalytic Space*. New York: Other P, 2002.**

*Gender in Psychoanalytic Space*, a new collection of essays edited by Muriel Dimen and Virginia Goldner, can be read as a mystery novel asking the important question of what happened to gender in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Beginning with Judith Butler’s important work on melancholia and gender identifications, this book shows how complicated and vexing the issues surrounding gender and identity have become in the post-modern period, where feminist theory meets post-structuralist accounts of subjectivity and queer notions of sexuality. For Butler strongly argues

that post-oedipal gender identifications can only be derived from a prior foreclosure of homosexual object-choices. Moreover, these primary homosexual desires are never completely denied, and thus they continue to haunt the development of every gendered subject.

The haunting of gendered identity by the queering of pre-oedipal object relations serves as a latent, recurring theme throughout these collected essays. For example, this notion of homosexual category destabilization pushes Ken Corbett, in the essay following Butler’s, to declare that in order to avoid gender confusion, analysts have often tried to force male homosexuality into a heterosexual binary equating passivity with femininity and masculinity with activity (22). By turning to the actual experience of male homosexuals in analysis, Corbett shows how certain subjects live the deconstruction of gender binaries on a daily basis. Thus, even as society—and many psychoanalysts—continue to react to gender blurring by re-instating modern binary constructions, actual clinical experience shows how reductive these gender categories can be.

The first chapters indicate in a very subtle manner that the cultural recognition of homosexual desire in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is one of the key driving forces behind the postmodern challenge of modern notions of identity, gender, sexuality, and cultural ideology. Furthermore, both of these essays use Freud’s theories of homosexuality to destabilize Freud’s own modernist project of reinstating older

gender divisions. This ambivalent use of Freud’s theories spreads throughout the entire collection and serves to mime the problematic nature of gender itself. For gender is considered to be a constructed cultural category that shapes every person’s real experience of his or her core identity. By merging together the modern notion of gender as a biological essence and the postmodern notion of gender as a social construction, many of these authors end up making the ironic argument that experience itself is constructed, while constructions only come into being by being lived and performed in real life situations. In this combination of constructed experiences and experienced constructions, we see how the actual lived practice of psychoanalysis is always already experienced as a theoretical construction haunted by the disavowed identification with Freud and his theory of gender development.

This paradoxical haunting by Freud and gender is evident in Virginia Goldner’s chapter “Toward a Critical Relational Theory of Gender.” In her critical return to Freud, she declares that this modern thinker “collapsed the distinctions between biological sex, sexuality, and gender, deriving in sequence, heterosexuality and gender polarity, from the anatomical differences” (66). Yet, although Goldner and many other contributors condemn Freud for confusing biological sex and constructed gender identifications, they obsessively return to Freud’s conceptual vocabulary concerning gender and

sexuality. In many ways, Freud is in this work a language everyone speaks and rejects at the same time; likewise, gender is a necessary category that seems to have no sufficient ground or basis. The center of this book is thus concentrated on two elements (Freud and Gender) that most of the contributors problematize yet utilize.

This ironic use of Freud and gender does not devalue the importance of this collection. In fact, many of these essays use this problematic center of postmodern experience to generate important arguments concerning how we live and analyze gender in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For example, Adrienne Harris's contribution centering on Freud's case of the "young homosexual" posits that we might want to think of gender as a contradictory core experience that often transforms under our own very eyes (113). Moreover, Harris proposes that this more open theory of gender will allow us understand the cultural power shaping this aspect of identity at the same time we see how our personal relation to gender can change over time (113). Yet, don't Freud's theories and case studies themselves continually make this point by showing the social attempts to impose rigid gender distinctions coupled with the subjective challenges to these imposed orders? Perhaps what this collection highlights is the great contribution to postmodern thought and feminist theories that Freud's formulation of psychoanalysis has helped to produce.

One of the responses to the

question of what happened to gender in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is therefore: Freud. Another answer that shows up constantly in this collection is the growing cultural visibility of both homosexuality and homophobia. Of course, these two answers are linked, since psychoanalysis—for better or worse—was one of the first cultural domains to deal with same-sex desire in a serious and open manner. In fact, Freud used the notion of homosexuality to explain everything from narcissism to psychosis to social guilt to artistic sublimation, and all of these Freudian conceptions are sprinkled throughout this work. For instance, Lewis Aron's "The Internalized Primal Scene" looks at Freud's notion of psychic bisexuality and the primal scene to rethink the role played by homosexual desire in all subjects. One of Aron's central points is that pre-oedipal and post-oedipal interpretations of the parents' sexual relationship persist in the subject's unconscious, and thus the development of gender identification is not linear (131). In this temporal confusion, the past and the present co-exist in a paradoxical manner. Like a science fiction film, the future of gender identity is made out of the re-interpretation of the past by the present.

This interesting temporal structure of gender identification is reflected in the postmodern notion that people enact past stereotypical representations of gender performances in order to locate in the present a core sense of lived gender identity. By combining past cultural constructions with

present lived experiences, gender becomes a paradoxical psychic space. In fact, this paradoxical nature of identity results in the generation in this collection of a whole series of self-conflicting terms: Adrienne Harris calls gender a "necessary fiction," Jessica Benjamin names it a "real performance," and Virginia Goldner labels gender a "false truth." I would like to suggest that this production of paradoxical terms to describe gender points to the impossible but needed effort to merge symbolic representations with real experiences. Furthermore, the impossibility of this project is displayed in the temporal reversals where people experience their own identities through the memory of socially constructed categories.

Temporal reversals, paradoxical terminology, and conceptual hauntings threaten to turn psychoanalytic space into a new form of science fiction, where fantasy and reality are merged through the projection of past social construction into a future lived in the present. In fact, the various attempts of these authors to base their theoretical claims in clinical examples often show how we can only speak about real clinical cases by turning to pre-existing universal theories and formations. For example, in Donna Bassin's discussion of two cases concerning gender identification, it is unclear whether it is the patient or the analyst who experiences her identity through such psychoanalytic stereotypes as an "intrusive Other," "narcissistic blow," "unconscious wish," "projection of aggressiveness," etc. I

am not faulting the writers of this collection here for this tendency to use psychoanalytic terminology to describe a patient's experiences, but I do think the field of psychoanalysis has to analyze the role played by psychoanalytic terms in our experience and description of our patients' lives. We need to ponder how the power of Freudian psychoanalytic language haunts us in our attempts to capture in the present past clinical experiences. Moreover, this volume also asks us to question our tendency to use old modernist psychoanalytic conceptions of gender to describe changing postmodern gender relations.

Lynne Layton brings this conflict between modern and postmodern versions of subjectivity, gender, and psychoanalysis to the foreground in her contribution. Layton effectively argues that feminists, postmodernists, and clinicians often use the same words to mean very different things. For instance, the postmodern (or Lacanian) usage of the term subject often indicates the way human beings are shaped and controlled by external cultural and linguistic forces, while this same term may mean something quite different for object relation theorists who tend to downplay social forces in order to highlight the subjective aspects of personal relations and histories (287). Layton also indicates that many academics equate psychoanalysis with Freud and Lacan, while Anglo-American analysts tend to ignore the influence of postmodern theory by clinging to more traditional notions of sub-

jectivity (286). By differentiating between the postmodern Lacanian subject and the relational self, Layton argues for a more complex and multi-leveled consideration of gendered subjectivity.

Layton also asks the important question of what kind of subject is produced by psychoanalysis (290). In other words, she follows Foucault's post-structuralist notion of cultural subjection to examine how psychoanalytic theories tend to shape different conceptions of subjectivity that are in turn enacted and lived by psychoanalytic patients. In this conjunction of cultural determination and subjective enactment, we find the true nodal point of this collection: Not only do people embody and perform scripted gender constructs, but, patients also tend to enact the psychoanalytic concepts favored by their analysts.

Throughout this review, I have intentionally used terms like "scripted," "performance," "acting," and "science fiction" to indicate the ways the drama of gender construction has often combined elements of film and psychoanalysis. One reason for this media version of subjectivity can be located in Nancy Chodorow's claim in this volume that "an individual, personal creation and a projective emotional and fantasy animation of cultural categories create the meaning of gender and gender identity for any individual" (237). According to this theory, we are all human film projectors animating our gendered cultural scripts through our own emotional and historical filters. Or like method

actors trying to make a scripted dialogue come alive, we are constantly seeking to make our gender quotations appear to be original. The great strength of this book is that it takes many common psychoanalytic and feminist concepts and animates them by projecting them through the lenses of personal experience and cultural constructs.

—Robert Samuels

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**Susan Fairfield, Lynne Layton, and Carolyn Stack, eds. *Bringing the Plague: Toward a Postmodern Psychoanalysis*. New York: Other P, 2002.**

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As readers of *JPCS* are of course aware, *Bringing the Plague's* title alludes to a comment attributed to Freud as he and Jung approached the United States: "Little do they know we are bringing the plague." What I found surprising about this familiar allusion is the editors' explicit desire to plague psychoanalysis with postmodernism, when the most recent tendency of so much work in the humanities has been precisely the reverse.<sup>1</sup> Both my surprise and the absence of any reference to this humanistic work by the contributors indicate how pressing is the need for a book like *Bringing the Plague*, one that allows relational clinicians and theorists the opportunity to grapple publicly with concepts and interpretive strategies that at times echo those of the humanities. The editors close their intro-