

A Glimpse of Aggressive Gender

In some ways, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* by Kate Bornstein is radical in my eyes for its views on gender because—I must admit—I find some of Bornstein’s discussions hard to wrap my head around. This difficulty of interpretation is probably due to the fact that her viewpoints are so novel to me, so intriguing for their unique, direct analysis of gender and how it is interwoven in seen and unseen ways of life. She brings up many great questions about gender—which do not have easy, short, or possibly any final answers—about various subjects that (for the most part, before this class) I took for granted. What Stacey Waite—author of the chapbook *Love Poem to Androgyny*—said in class recently in regards to her mother, as “running on automatic,” I believe partially pertains to me. I “run on automatic” throughout my daily life barely thinking about gender except when I notice that someone is not following so-called “gender rules,” or when I am accused by someone of not following my own set of gender rules.

These gender rules accompanied me ever since I was young and had a—science-textbook-reinforced—belief that the differences between men and women were straightforward and primarily biologically based. I assumed that a “man” has a penis, testes, a deeper voice, a more muscular build, and more facial hair and that a “woman” has a vagina, (developed) wider hips, (developed) breasts, a higher voice, and less facial hair. Bornstein, however, rattles my faith in the gender binary as biologically based with the words:

Most folks would define a man by the presence of a penis or some form of a penis. Some would define a woman by the presence of a vagina or some form of a vagina. It's not that simple though. I know several women in San Francisco who have penises. Many wonderful men in my life have vaginas. And there are quite a few people whose genitals fall somewhere between penises and vaginas. What are they?
(56)

My answer to Bornstein is simply: "I have no idea." But she brings up a very good question: what is one's gender truly based on? Bornstein does a good job of theorizing multiple alternatives on which gender could possibly be based, but for seemingly each one that she suggests, she discovers a difficulty, a complication to basing gender on this or that. For example, Bornstein reflects:

Are you a woman because you can bear children? Because you bleed every month? Many women are born without this potential, and every woman ceases to possess that capability after menopause—do women cease being women? Does a necessary hysterectomy equal a gender change? (56-57)

These questions are odd for me because my own mother has had a hysterectomy and it feels strange to think of that surgery as a "gender change," but I understand the point that Bornstein is making. I could legitimately imagine someone trying to define a woman as someone capable of producing offspring.

But, even with these biological gray areas of gender in mind, it is hard for me to completely eliminate my assumption of gender as clear-cut and black and white

because it has been culturally-reinforced for years in various ways: different gendered hair styles (short for men, long for women), different gendered ways of dressing (pants vs. dresses; blouses vs. button-ups), and different gendered culturally acceptable forms of behavior. By different culturally acceptable forms of behavior, I mean—for instance—the habit of many of the boys in my elementary school to play football during recess or gym. How many times were they playing football because they actually deep down enjoyed it? How many times did they play it because it was what they thought, they perceived, or they were told was expected of them culturally as *boys*?

As a boy in elementary school—for whom one of the quickest ways to send me daydreaming was to start discussing sports and the latest *game*—I must admit that I do have a strong interest in attacking gender's influence on one's culturally acceptable forms of behavior. In fact, I have seemed to always have a slight aversion to the male gender-stereotype of revering sports (with the recent exception of hockey, an interest inspired semi-ironically by my girlfriend). One of my closest friends throughout elementary school and high school, Alex, seemed to share some of this aversion (or at least was able to identify it within me), and we eventually had an inside joke that “the sports season never ends,” because at the lunch table and in classrooms, a seemingly large chunk of “male” to “male” discussion appeared to circle seasonally throughout the school year from basketball to football to baseball and *repeat*.

Part of the reason that I never questioned gender may have been that regardless of all of the conditioning that I received (at school for instance) to think

of gender as black and white, I did not have many—hardly any in fact—instances where I ran into gender haziness. In fact, until meeting Stacey Waite, I had never (knowingly) come into person-to-person contact with someone who does not neatly fit the binary gender system on even a supposed-“purely” biological level (Waite was born with XY chromosomes and, to be direct, a vagina). So besides myself not fitting in with some of the gender stereotypical behaviors for boys (football), for the most part I fit (and others around me) pretty easily into biological and cultural “norms” of gender. I did, however, receive some teasing during elementary school for having a “feminine” high-pitched voice. The teasing sometimes leads me to be dissatisfied with the sound of my own voice when I hear it played back to me on recordings such as phone voicemails because then I am actively checking to see if it sounds feminine; and it also led to a disappointed feeling when I would answer the phone and be from time to time mistaken for my mom or sister rather than one of my older brothers or dad. This teasing is a perfect example relating to Bornstein’s discussion of “humiliation:”

Humiliation is a whip of the defenders of gender. Humiliation is sanctioned at virtually every level of the culture: people can laugh at a transgendered person; but when there’s no fear of being humiliated for one’s portrayal of gender, there’s less opportunity for the culture to exert control. (88)

Even though this passage refers specifically to “laughing at” and shaming transgendered people for not portraying a binary gender, Bornstein seems to imply that the gender weapon of humiliation is relevant and used at “virtually every level

of the culture” in an attempt for gender defenders to uphold the gender binary by a reign of fear. Now, I clearly have little to no influence over the way my voice sounds, but nonetheless, I became aware of humiliation as “a whip of the defenders of gender” from a fairly young age. Even though I can only still remember the teasing vaguely, the lash of the whip still stings. Perhaps the teasing and my resulting self-consciousness served as a warning that made me want to stay away from dissecting gender. On the other hand, I believe that I was unaware to the complexities of gender due to my naïveté and inexperience—my eight-grade class had thirty-two people in it, including me, so being sheltered may have played a role. Of course, I was not entirely sheltered and naïve, and in the course of daily life, I had heard of drag queens, transvestites, and of sex change operations, but I could never keep straight what was what or really even understood what the word “transgender” meant. Moreover, maybe I never wanted to delve to deep into any grayness of gender because I can still remember the embarrassment and disgrace of whenever I felt the lash of the gender defenders. Perhaps, thanks in part due to my inexperience and reluctance to feel the whip, my situation is kind of a twist of Bornstein’s in which she does not have a clear definition of what a man or woman is and I do not have a clear definition of what anything outside the binary is.

But why do we as a society still (for the most part) support the gender binary system even when we have specific cases of gender ambiguity that reveal that the system is flawed and seems to be simply an oversimplification? Part of the reasoning may be that on the whole, most (or some) people seem to have an urge to understand and organize their world and as such, they might find generalized

categories an easy way to simplify the process of understanding. Or perhaps, it is because many more people than just myself are afraid and wince whenever they perceive that they may have stepped beyond the invisible, perceived borders of the gender binary (or even simply beyond the perceived borders of a specific gender), and fearing humiliation, they try to keep well within the borders of “Gender.” But humiliation is not the only tool that is used to enforce the gender borders as Bornstein illuminates in the chapter entitled, “Send in the Clowns,”

We’re taught to pay attention to the humiliation, because it can be enforced by violence, the other whip of the system. Violence against transgendered people makes freedom from the fear of humiliation tricky to say the least. So you have some choices: you can get real good at hiding, or you can get beat up. You can commit suicide—or you learn how to laugh. There are actually quite a few opportunities to laugh, but fear keeps us from looking at those opportunities. (88-89)

Violence against those who travel beyond gender borders is a sad reality, which—as Stacey Waite clearly exemplifies by her experience of being threatened at a rest-stop and possibly other experiences that she did not divulge—has a sting worse than the whip of humiliation. I am not quite sure how to laugh at such a serious matter, but this gender enforcement through violence seems to be not just limited to transgendered people as violence towards gays, lesbians, and bisexual people can also be explained as “gender enforcement:”

The reason for exclusion by the dominant culture of both homosexuality and gender ambiguity has less to do, I think, with

sexual orientation than it does with gender role. When a gay man is bashed on the street, it's unlikely that the bashers are thinking of the gay man butt-fucking anyone or in fact being butt-fucked. It has little to do with imagining that man sucking cock. It has a lot to do with seeing that man violate the rules of gender in this culture. (104)

Bornstein makes an excellent point here that made me realize that the gays who are probably most likely to be “bashed” (or even men and women who are most likely to be perceived as gay) are probably those who openly cross the perceived gender lines. Good evidence of this is the likely fact that gay men who may engage in homosexual sexual activity and yet still for the most part follow perceived gender borders and act as “manly men” are probably not very likely to encounter any, or hardly any, gay-bashing. As the brother of a self-identified gay brother and lesbian sister who sometimes cross gender borders (and as someone, myself, who does not enjoy being humiliated or receiving abuse), I have a vested interest in questioning the gender binary at the very least for the sake of sparing some of my siblings from the whips of humiliation and violence. So perhaps similar to situations such as the press in China and Russia, people may oftentimes self-censor (restrain) themselves from crossing the line—the hard to decide where exactly it is—gender border.

And the implications of the resilience of the gender binary even in the midst of this ambiguity of gender? Well, I cannot help but feel suspicious of the authenticity of gender and the resulting influence that many people allow it to have over how they act and represent themselves, merely so that one can be more of a “man” or a “woman,” two loaded words with two varying definitions that as

Bornstein articulates are “held up by groups and individuals for their own purposes” (57). Perhaps I should be suspicious of anyone’s definition of a man or a particular gender and look for why they have stock in that definition. Bornstein seems to suggest the idea of “power” as the reason that some men may support the binary:

In the either/or gender class system that we call male and female, the structure of one-up, one-down fulfills the requisite for a power imbalance. It became clear that the reason that the bipolar gender system continues to exist, and is actively and tenaciously held in place, is that the bi-polar gender system is primarily a venue for the playing out of a power game. It’s an arena in which roughly half the people in the world can have power over the other half. (107)

A “power game” and “class system” is definitely visible in light of the women’s movement of the past century with the rise of feminism and women gaining more power such as the right to vote. Beyond being an arena, the viewpoint of the gender binary as being resilient due to power can be related to the gender binary being enforced and perpetuated by the whips of violence and humiliation because as Bornstein equates in “Gender, Class, and Power,” male power is essentially “male privilege” which “is, in a word, violence” (108). This viewpoint of the gender system as self-reinforcing due to its inherent violence and the resulting gender-censoring seems to be cyclical: violence from the gender system reinforces gender-censoring which reinforces the gender binary and etc. Maybe a way out of this cycle is education (and perhaps laws protecting people’s right to be gender ambiguous)

about the true uncertainty of gender, which may lead people to accept and protect instead of fighting gender ambiguity.

Works Cited

Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. 1st ed. New York: Vintage, 1995. [pages] Print

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**“A Glimpse of Aggressive Gender” by Mark Pelusi won second prize
in the University of Pittsburgh’s
2009-10 Composition Program Writing Contest**

Judges’ Commentary on “A Glimpse of Aggressive Gender”