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### **We Are Who We Say We Are: Categorical Destabilization in a Transnational World**

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**We Are Who We Say We Are**  
*Categorical Destabilization in a Transnational World*

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**Matthew Parrella**

There is a problem with ‘the self’, but we are not the problem. Hegemonic understandings of the self are a hurried delivery on a one-lane road, set to be navigated into a dead end. Steal fences confine these passages on both sides and abruptly converge to stop the asphalt from stretching any farther – we are intended to arrive promptly to a destination and remain on site. When self-discovery is the final goal, language which offers absolutes is the most welcomed; however, if the appeal of this language is its constant, internal, and purified qualities, then it might falsely assure its speaker of their own internal stagnancy. Instead of eroding the use of language altogether, the capacity of both language and its users to transform might improve a framework for theorizing the self and breaking through the fence. Gender-sexuality and identity are increasingly associated with a stable essence of the self in reactionary movements, and as this integrity becomes disturbed within western feminist scholarship, so does the legitimacy of their categories. As the opportunity arrives to reimagine a path to self-understanding beyond the tidy pavement, these categories should be complicated rather than abolished. Gender-sexuality and identity must untether.

The presence of gender-sexuality is not inherently negative because, as a cultural product, it can continue to be sculpted and redefined—the existence of categories in the first place is not wrong. The problem lies in the purifying language which positions the nature of categories in opposition to one another rather than acknowledging the relationality among them, as well as the engraved permanence of those categories’ meanings over time (Amin, 2022). To appropriate the words of Amin in his article “We Are all Nonbinary”, gender-sexuality categories should not be dismissed for their “contamination” (p. 117) with other labels via relational dynamics, but they should be prized for it. A more honest utility of language would try to embrace the new, the old, the present, and the fictive definitions of categories together. Indeed, one could imagine language holding multiple meanings simultaneously, with little

attention wasted on whether a definition will change in an instant or continue to resonate in minds for years. Amin, however, would challenge this looseness of definitions.

When Amin (2022) concludes that students and scholars must develop “robust trans politics and discourse *without* gender identity” (p. 118), he rightfully implies the need to decondition a common, however ill-guided, drive toward an inner essence; however, he fails to justify why an alternative mobilization toward an identity-avoidant future is any better. Here, Amin problematizes the term “gender identity”, which is often used to house a falsely essentialized gender category. Clearly, the conception of “gender identity” does not include sex acts, which Gayle Rubin problematizes in her article “Thinking Sex” in response to the historical avoidance of sexuality in earlier feminist literature. Rubin (1984) offers a critique of fixed sexual identities when she evaluates the phenomenon of “erotic speciation” in a discussion of New Guinean conceptualizations of homosexual acts by demonstrating that, for some societies within the region, homosexual acts were regarded as “obligatory” and “masculine” (p. 155). Even in her own example of sexual acts being unbound from a consistent or essential gender by exemplifying sex in its many manifestations, sex was still marked in relation to maleness, revealing that surely there is a significant (and perhaps inseparable) interplay between gender and sex.

Therefore, as Amin (2022) proposes, “gender-sexuality” (p. 107) is one such term which more effectively implies this interplay. Still, whether this language of identity is applied to one’s sexual behavior, gender experience, or disassociation with a gender binary, the contemporary definitions of gender-sexuality categories do not accurately describe their respective topic. In other words, in the following normative categories, *heterosexual* does not accurately describe different-gender eroticism, *cisgender* does not accurately describe a euphoria for one’s assigned gender, and *binary* does not accurately describe a self which epitomizes a gender binary category (Amin, 2022). These labels, Amin clarifies, are impoverished of meaning because they are only defined as opposites to non-normative labels like homosexual, transgender, and nonbinary respectively. If their normative conceptualization only arose as afterthoughts to the labelling of non-normative categories, then the existence of normative categories

(and by extension, any language which is currently designed to describe *any* binary) is confined to fantasy, not reality. When Amin speculates that “no one is binary” (Amin, 2022), maybe he does not literally suggest that everyone is secretly nonbinary, as the title of his article suggests. Instead, he should be interpreted as an advocate for the relativity of categories because “contamination [between categories] is the companion of categorization” (Amin, 2022, p. 117)—any attempt to define one’s opposite reveals their proximity to it.

To Amin, “nonbinary” itself is an example of one binary extreme and, therefore, is also fantasy – no person can realize themselves in reality at any end of a binary because of the relationality between categories, suggesting that all people are between binaries. Amin might be mistaken when he assumes that categories themselves are to blame for this binary way of thinking. If categories were inherently built upon lies (in the sense that they are historical constructions rather than innate ‘truths’), then in order to move away from the instability of *fantasy*, it would be necessary to relinquish all existing gender-sexuality language and start fresh “*without*” it (Amin, 2022, p. 118). When all categories are expected to forever remain opposites, they only represent fantasies.

Moving beyond gender-sexuality and identity is not only impractical—given that it would erase the language which is required to speak to political movements of LGBTQ+, or otherwise non-normative, rights—it would also erase the existence of non-normative people by ruling that no one can possibly be affected by the fantasy of binary. In her chapter “Toward a Critical Relational Theory of Gender”, psychoanalyst Virginia Goldner (1991) echoes the abolitionist ethos that was more recently complicated by Amin. When she advocates for a future without gender identity categories, Goldner questions that:

If there is a developmental, theoretical, or cultural goal toward which to aspire, why should it be the ‘hegemony of one, consciously coherent, sex-appropriate view of oneself’, as opposed to the capacity to ‘tolerate the ambiguity and instability of these profoundly personal and ideologically charged categories of experience’ (Goldner, 1991, p. 258).

Under the beliefs which guide Goldner's analysis, a hypothetical person who desires to change their genitals would presumably be shunned on the basis that this urge is a result of patriarchal and heteronormative contaminations, which presumably would have been done away with already if Goldner's ideology was realized. This interpretation, like Amin's conclusion of what must be done with identity categories, is misguided because it similarly equates the destabilization of identity permanence and essence with a deconstruction of categorical validity in societies which have developed their own label networks. To imagine why this erasure of language for categories and desires is so harmful in a culture where gender-sexuality and its precipitating emotions are deeply embedded in the historical fabric, it is useful to consider an inverted scenario.

In Suriname, working class Afro-Surinamese women are encouraged to attend to their sexual desires without contemplating the gender of their sexual partner (Wekker, 1991). In her chapter "What's Identity Got to Do with It?", Gloria Wekker (1991) examines the practice of "mati" (p. 121), which refers to sex acts in which desire is prioritized, even if one's eroticism is directed towards a woman or a man in any particular moment. Any gender pattern among one's sexual partners is not important because the "mati work" (p. 121) is considered an action to be performed within a culture where sexuality is not neatly categorized as it is in the West (Wekker 1991). Based on Wekker's research, a Western eye must take care to consciously avoid transposing its own vision of sexuality where it does not exist. It would be inaccurate to define mati workers under "bisexual", "pansexual", "lesbian", or any other Western category because these labels are products of Western culture, and attached to them are binary fantasies which have, potentially, not once been imagined by the mati workers that Wekker portrays. Thus, the creation of these categories in a non-Western culture is wrong because Western categorical binaries have never been woven into the non-Western culture to begin with. By inverting this statement, perhaps Wekker's article could equally suggest that the destruction of categories in a Western culture is wrong precisely because categorical binaries are undeniably embedded within the histories of the West.

Evidently, advocacy for a future without categories is not just unsympathetic to non-normative groups like transgender individuals who find comfort in categories, it is also wrong because it supposes that the contaminations from the Western past can (or even should) be universally forgotten. Fantasies of binary should not be forbidden. They should be celebrated and reimagined. What should rightfully be questioned is the prescription of categories as static, attainable essences, not the category itself. Moving forward, a more productive resolution to this problem of prescription would be to destabilize and retheorize categories as both individual and relational experiences, and in either case, as inherently transforming and multiplicitous. Identity might soon be disassociated with internal constancy because the self's capacity to grow implicates that, for as long as a person lives, socializes, and learns, their experience and expressions of the self might veer far from a singular "self-state" (Goldner, 1991, p. 259). In light of its instability, identity might be better understood if it were described in similar terms to emotions – something felt and experienced to be true of the self, but only for a fleeting moment.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* categorizes "identity" as a noun and defines it as "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is", which reveals the potential for the self to be centered in the present, not tied down by one's past nor anticipated for one's future (OED, n.d.). To a significant degree, the word's part of speech correlates with a potential permanence. It would also be negligent to ignore that the state of being what something "is" can be acutely *permanent*—likewise, for many people who refer to their identity as something persisting, the "identity" term retains and communicates that underlying feeling. Still, that does not mean that the term can only connote permanence. As "is" claims persistence of quality, so it must be granted an alternative space to represent and express the self with intentional impermanence. Ultimately, the term "is" (which resides within the definition of a noun) is a verb in the present tense, something being performed *currently*. Therefore, the definition of "identity" holds within itself an inherent presence, potentially distinct from the past and future. By avoiding language which cements over time one's emotions, behaviors, and desires, categories might be freed of their attachments to opposites and binaries without erasing the history and reality of binary thinking and corresponding

sociopolitical structures. Thus, the relationality between and within categories might be strengthened enough to not only “*decenter*” (p.249), but *recenter* the focus of categories onto the situational dynamics between people.

To point out the faults of Kadji Amin’s theorization and Virginia Goldner’s psychoanalysis is not to refute all or even most ideas expressed by their work; however, in recognizing that their work lapses in the precision of its troubleshooting, the gaps in their arguments might be supplemented by the research of sociologist Mieke Thomeer and her team. In “The Gender-as-Relational Approach for Theorizing About Romantic Relationships of Sexual and Gender Minority Mid- to Later-Life Adults”, Thomeer’s team modified a study of age using a “Gender As Relational” (GAR) approach in order to develop a gerontologically relevant theorization about the “romantic shifts” which often accompany “changing gender dynamics” (Thomeer et al., 2020). They found that, between “cisgender-member different sex” couples and “sexual and gender minority (SGM) couples”, noteworthy differences in the emotional dynamics between the former and latter couple groups were not simply a case of “opposite” (normative) dynamics and “muted” (non-normative) dynamics (Thomeer et al., 2020). While they noticed this pattern to some degree, it was not essentialized or declared significant enough to represent a universal truth about relationality. “Gender-related attitudes, presentations, and beliefs” instead yielded more insightful patterns of relational dynamics, suggesting that it was not inherent categorical differences which distinguished gender-sexuality populations (Thomeer et al., 2020). Indeed, a more theoretically, psychoanalytically, and scientifically relevant perspective pays attention to that which is most temporary and inessential: “attitudes, presentations, and beliefs” (Thomeer et al., 2020).

With this proposed framework which attempts to validate the language of categories for their transforming, relative, and inessential capacities, Judith Butler’s performativity theory might best epitomize the common anxieties about an entirely fluid perspective of categories. In their chapter “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” from *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Butler stresses the issue of how, in a world where gender can be reduced to “the effects of *drag*” (p. 318), anyone could

possibly delineate the boundaries between categories on the grounds of how they are “retrospectively and performatively produced fabrications”, in which “gender itself [is] inevitable” (Butler, 1993, p. 318). Here, it might be most useful to draw a conclusion from a hypothetical scenario: If two people were to somehow converge at a point of exact sameness of behavior, attitude, emotion, and knowledge, how might it be possible for them to fabricate different categorical language to describe themselves? For example, if two people were to voluntarily use he/him pronouns, shop mostly in the men’s clothing department, and use the men’s bathroom, and if in all other ways their experiences aligned exactly in a singular moment, how could it be possible for one person to use the label “man” and for the other not to?

Perhaps, categorical language like “man” is so relative, multiplicitous, and transforming that its meaning must necessarily be understood, for both hypothetical individuals, in different ways because, despite the individuals’ temporary convergence in a particular moment, they must have had different pasts which color their present experiences differently. To answer Butler’s (1993) question with their own language, the most important differences between people are not the categories they experience at a moment but the “retrospective” (p. 318) histories which lead a temporarily identical “performance” (p. 318) to hold different and relative meanings for both people.

As gender-sexuality and identity undergo a re-evaluation with increasingly diverse and abundant spectators, the problem might at last be agreed upon – the consistency promised by existing categories has been too destabilized to accept any longer. Unfortunately, a new era of binaries has arisen as scholars attempt to resolve it; as it stands, they must choose to either name *everything*, or name *nothing*. As Amin has warned, the act of naming everything does not necessarily escape the current pitfalls of naming – that by which the construction of new and equally permanent categories will only serve to fantasize new and equally ‘false’ opposites. Yet, to name nothing would erase any language that seeks to interrelate the most important situational dynamics among people and their histories. Maybe, with gender-sexuality and identity being reconsidered for their capacity to describe the fleeting feelings of the self, language – the strongest tool for both political organization and radical theorization – could itself be rewritten, so that the

summit of self-realization might only be brought from fantasy to reality by forever contaminating, transforming, and reinventing emotional language of the self.

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