Mary Klages: Queer Theory

Queer theory is a brand-new branch of study; it has only been named as an area since about 1991. It grew out of gay/lesbian studies, a discipline which itself is very new, existing in any kind of organized form only since about the mid-1980s. Gay/lesbian studies, in turn, grew out of feminist studies and feminist theory. Let me tell you a little about this history.

Feminist theory, in the mid- to late 1970s, looked at gender as a system of signs, or signifiers, assigned to sexually dimorphic bodies, which served to differentiate the social roles and meanings those bodies could have. Feminist theory thus argued that gender was a social construct, something designed and implemented and perpetuated by social organizations and structures, rather than something merely "true," something innate to the ways bodies worked on a biological level. In so doing, feminist theory made two very important contributions. The first is that feminist theory separated the social from the biological, insisting that we see a difference between what is the product of human ideas, hence something mutable and changeable, and what is the product of biology, hence something (relatively) stable and unchangeable. The second contribution is related to the first: by separating the social and the biological, the constructed and the innate, feminist theory insisted that gender was not something "essential" to an individual's identity.

The humanist idea of identity, or self, focuses on the notion that your identity is unique to you, that who you are is the product of some core self, some unchangeable aspects or markers that are at the heart and center of "you." These aspects usually include sex (I am male or female), gender (I am masculine or feminine), sexuality (I am heterosexual or homosexual), religious beliefs (I am Christian, Jewish, Buddhist), and nationality (I am American, Russian, Vietnamese)--in fact, any statement you make that starts with "I am" and is followed by a noun without an article (I am _____) is probably a statement about your core sense of identity. Within humanist thought, these core aspects of identity are considered to be "essences," things that are unchangeable and unchanging, things that make you who you are under all circumstances, no matter what happens to you. This concept of an essential self separates "self" from everything outside of self--not just "other," but also all historical events, all things that do change and shift. You might think of the humanist notion of essential selfhood in survivalist terms: the self exists inside an armored shelter, where nothing that happens in the outside world can touch it. Oh, the self might feel jarred or shaken by explosions in the outside world, which rattle the doors of the shelter, but it cannot be substantially changed by what happens outside. (It can, however, be destroyed. But those are the only options--the essential self can exist in an unchanging state or be wiped out, but nothing in between).

Feminist theory, by challenging the idea that gender was part of this essential self, caused a "rupture," a break, that revealed the constructedness of this supposedly natural self. From this rupture came the poststructuralist idea of selfhood as a constructed idea, something not "naturally" produced by bodies or by birth. Selfhood, in poststructuralist theory, becomes "subjecthood" or "subjectivity." The switch in terms is a recognition that, first of all, human identity is shaped by language, by becoming a subject in language. The shift from "self" to "subject" also marks the idea that subjects are the product of signs, or signifiers, which make up our ideas of identity. Selves are stable and essential; subjects are constructed, hence provisional, shifting, changing, always able to be redefined or reconstructed. Selves, in this sense, are like signifiers within a rigid system, whose meanings are fixed; subjects, by contrast, are like signifiers in a system with more play, more multiplicity of meaning.

Once feminist theory had helped to rupture the humanist idea of stable or essential selfhood, and specifically the idea of stable or essential gender identity, and replaced it with the poststructuralist idea of gender identity as a set of shifting signifiers, other forms of theory began to question other "essentialist" notions of identity, for example ideas of race as innate, essential, or biological came under scrutiny. Similarly, ideas about sexuality as an innate or essentialist category also became open to reformulation. This is where gay/lesbian studies, as a discipline and as the academic arm of a political movement, began, in the early to mid 1980s.

It is, perhaps, more difficult than with gender to see sexuality as socially constructed, rather than as biological. When we look around, we see "gender bending" happening in lots of arenas--Michael Jackson, Boy George, RuPaul, and Dennis Rodman, to name only a few examples, bend the idea of gender roles as essential, and as determined by sex (males are masculine, females are feminine) through their unique combinations of what used to be called masculine and feminine styles. In fact, we can see gender roles and gender signifiers shifting daily: how many women, ten years ago, had visible tattoos, for instance, and how many men would sport visible piercings, in ears or other body parts? Thinking of these changes (and you can come up with your own examples of flexible or shifting gender constructs), it's relatively easy to see gender as a system of signifiers.

Sexuality is harder, though, in part because of the way our culture has always taught us to think about sexuality. While gender may be a matter of style of dress, sexuality seems to be about biology, about how bodies operate on a basic level. Our culture tends to define sexuality in two ways: in terms of animal instincts, of behaviors programmed by hormones or by seasonal cycles, over which our free will has no control, and in terms of moral and ethical choices, of behaviors that are coded as either good or evil, moral or immoral, and over which we are supposed to have complete (or almost complete) rigid control. In the first way of thinking about sexuality, sexual responses are almost purely biological: we respond sexually to what is coded in our genes and hormones, and this is almost always defined in terms of reproductive behavior. (This viewpoint comes from evolutionary thought, where it is the duty of each member of the species to try to preserve and pass on her or his particular genetic makeup). This is the view that says we can understand human sexual behavior by understanding animal sexual behavior.

The problem with this first view is that human sexuality doesn't work like animal sexuality. If it did, all the females would come into heat at certain cycles, and all the males would frantically try to hump them during these cycles; all sexual activity would be geared toward reproduction, and sexual activity in both sexes would occur only during these periods of heat. Obviously, human sexuality works differently. In fact, human sexuality looks very little like animal sexuality in any regard. We are (I think, and correct me if I'm wrong) the only species that can copulate more or less at will, without regard to fertility or hormonal cycles, and that alone separates sexual behavior from reproduction for human beings. We also have an enormous repertoire of sexual behaviors and activities, only some of which are linked to reproduction, which further separates the two categories. And--most importantly--human sexual behavior is about pleasure, and about pleasure mediated by all kinds of cultural categories.

Yes, we could argue about forms of animal sexuality and how they do or do not model human sexuality--my anecdotes about my dog humping my leg certainly raise questions about animal sexual behavior as not being linked solely to reproduction--but the point is that linking human

sexuality to animal sexuality serves to construct sexuality in particular ways. If you see humans largely as animals, then you also see human sexuality as largely reproductive in nature, in essence--and thus any behavior not linked to reproduction becomes "unnatural." Which leads us to the second way our culture defines sexuality: in terms of morality, in terms of right and wrong behaviors.

Western cultural ideas about sexuality come from lots of places--from science (and particularly from the evolutionary view of sexuality as an animalistic instinctive behavior), from religion, from politics, and from economics, for example. [A side note: these categories of sexual codification are investigated by Michel Foucault in his series entitled The History of Sexuality. Examples of sexuality being defined by politics and economics occur when nations or other social organizations worry about population control, and urge people not to reproduce--or even require abortions or birth control or sterilization to ensure that; a counterexample of sexuality defined by politics and economics would be in countries or subgroups who urge members to produce lots of children, so that that group will have a greater population than some other group].

These ideas about sexuality often take the form of moral statements about what forms of sexuality are right, or good, or moral, and which are wrong, bad, and immoral. These categories have shifted over time, which is another way of arguing that definitions of sexuality are not "essential" or timeless or innate, but rather are social constructs, things that can change and be manipulated. Certainly we've seen such changes in the past ten years, not just in relation to homosexuality and heterosexuality, but in relation to ideas of safe sex and the prevention of sexually transmitted disease: in today's culture, (in some circles) an immoral sex act might be one that doesn't include a condom or other form of barrier, rather than one that merely isn't involved in a reproductive activity.

In previous generations, as in current times, these ways of defining sexuality (through biology, religion, politics, and economics) have produced clear-cut categories of what is right and wrong, usually categories linked to ideas about reproduction and family life. This is what Gayle Rubin in her article “Thinking Sex” is discussing, in the diagrams she presents on pp. 13 and 14. She shows ideas about sexuality as structured in--you guessed it-- binary oppositions, where one side of the pair is positive, good, moral, right, and the other side is negative, bad, immoral, and wrong.

Rubin is arguing for the deconstruction of all these binary oppositions; she is, in fact, arguing for the complete separation of all forms of sexual behavior from any kind of moral judgment. And this is where lots of people have a hard time agreeing with her (or with other sexuality radicals). Doesn't it seem that some kinds of sexual behavior SHOULD be wrong? What about sex that hurts someone else, sex that is not consensual, sex between someone with lots of power and someone with no power? These objections show two things: one is that sexual behavior, in human culture, is almost always about something more than just pleasure and/or reproduction: it's often (like my dog humping my leg) about forms of power and dominance. The other thing these objections show is how powerful the links are between sexual activities and notions of morality. And the link comes, in part, from defining sexuality as part of IDENTITY, rather than just as an activity which one might engage in. Hence, if you have genital sexual contact with someone of the same sex, you are not just having homosexual sex, you ARE a homosexual. And that identity then is linked to a moral judgment about both homosexual acts and homosexual identities.

Gay/lesbian studies--which is in part where Gayle Rubin's article comes from--looks at the kinds of social structures and social constructs which define our ideas about sexuality as act and sexuality as identity. As an academic field, gay/lesbian studies look at how notions of homosexuality have historically been defined--and of course, in doing so, look also at how its binary opposite, heterosexuality, has been defined. Gay/lesbian studies also looks at how various cultures, or various time periods, have enforced ideas about what kinds of sexuality are normal and which are abnormal, which are moral and which are immoral. Watkins' article, on how homosexual bodies get depicted in the age of AIDS, is centered in this kind of theory, in looking at how ideas of norms and deviations from the norm are created and then shifted, and what cultural function such ideas and images serve.

Watkins' article, in looking at the meanings of images of gay men with AIDS and how those images work to reinforce ideas about homosexuality as an abnormal, deviant, and bad category might be claimed as part of gay/lesbian literary criticism. Gay/lesbian literary criticism, a subset of gay/lesbian studies, looks at images of sexuality, and ideas of normative and deviant behavior, in a number of ways: by finding gay/lesbian authors whose sexuality has been masked or erased in history and biography; by looking at texts by gay/lesbian authors to discover particular literary themes, techniques, and perspectives which come from being a homosexual in a heterosexual world; by looking at texts--by gay or straight authors--which depict homosexuality and heterosexuality, or which focus on sexuality as a constructed (rather than essential) concept; and by looking at how literary texts (by gay or straight authors) operate in conjunction with non-literary texts to provide a culture with ways to think about sexuality.

Gay/lesbian studies, as a political form of academics, also challenges the notion of normative sexualities. As Rubin's article suggests, once you set up a category labeled "normal," you automatically set up its opposite, a category labeled "deviant," and the specific acts or identities which fill those categories then get linked to other forms of social practices and methods of social control. When you do something your culture labels deviant, you are liable to be punished for it: by being arrested, by being shamed, made to feel dirty, by losing your job, your license, your loved ones, your self-respect, your health insurance. Gay/lesbian studies, like feminist studies, works to understand how these categories of normal and deviant are constructed, how they operate, how they are enforced, in order to intervene into changing or ending them.

Which brings me--finally--to queer theory. Queer theory emerges from gay/lesbian studies' attention to the social construction of categories of normative and deviant sexual behavior. But while gay/lesbian studies, as the name implies, focused largely on questions of homosexuality, queer theory expands its realm of investigation. Queer theory looks at, and studies, and has a political critique of, anything that falls into normative and deviant categories, particularly sexual activities and identities. The word "queer", as it appears in the dictionary, has a primary meaning of "odd," "peculiar," "out of the ordinary." Queer theory concerns itself with any and all forms of sexuality that are "queer" in this sense--and then, by extension, with the normative behaviors and identities which define what is "queer" (by being their binary opposites). Thus queer theory expands the scope of its analysis to all kinds of behaviors, including those which are gender-bending as well as those which involve "queer" non-normative forms of sexuality. Queer theory insists that all sexual behaviors, all concepts linking sexual behaviors to sexual identities, and all categories of normative and deviant sexualities, are social constructs, sets of signifiers which create certain types of social meaning. Queer theory follows feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies in rejecting the idea

that sexuality is an essentialist category, something determined by biology or judged by eternal standards of morality and truth. For queer theorists, sexuality is a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interact to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment, and which then operate under the rubric of what is "natural," "essential," "biological," or "god-given."

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