4

Gender Fluidity

The very subject of women is no longer understood
in stable or abiding terms.

—JUDITH BUTLER[1]

Parents often expect that the first pronouncement about their newborn will announce the child's sex. However, there are times when the newborn's body is not easily characterized as male or female. Indeed, statistics show that the external genitalia in at least 1 in 2000 babies are ambiguous or difficult to classify.[2] In other cases, the results from prenatal genetic testing do not match the phenotype of the newborn baby, as when a child has the genetic code for one gender but the physiological appearance of the other. At other times the genotype itself is ambiguous, neither XX nor XY. When all is taken into account, careful studies of medical literature demonstrate that the sex is ambiguous in as many as 1 in 100 newborns.[3]

1. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 4.

2. See Dreger, *Hermaphrodites,* 41–43.

3. See ibid., 42. Importantly, Dreger notes "In conclusion, it is not possible to provide with any great certainty a statistic of the frequency of births in which the child's sex falls into question. . . . such a statistic is always necessarily culture specific. It varies with gene-pool isolation and environmental influences. It also varies according to what, in a given culture, counts as acceptable variations of malehood or femalehood as opposed to forms considered sexually ambiguous."

In still other situations, babies who were labeled one sex at birth begin to develop the physical characteristics of the opposite gender as they mature. Also, some adults are surprised to discover during a medical exam that their bodies have hormonal balances, genetic traits, or internal organs that do not correspond to the medical definition of the sex they believed themselves to be. In addition, there are a number of people who find that they psychologically do not identify with their sex as biologically defined. And of course, as the earlier chapters have suggested, there are many people who find the categories of sex and gender too constrictive to explain their own talents and desires. With all of these situations in mind, a new theory of sex and gender called *queer theory* began in the 1990s.

This chapter is an exploration of what *queer theory* and its theory of *gender fluidity* say about being a woman. In contrast to all the previous theories, queer theorists deny that there is any essential, natural, or static definition of the word "woman" psychologically, spiritually, or even biologically. However, queer theorists would deny that the word "woman" is meaningless or unimportant. Rather, queer theorists analyze language and culture in order to investigate what it means to act or perform as a woman in society. Queer analysis exposes the constructed nature of the definition of woman in order to highlight both what is helpful and what is problematic in the contemporary definition. This theory is used by many feminists who wish to critique and disturb society's understanding of what it means to be a woman in order to better recognize and care for all individuals.

What Is Gender Fluidity and What Is Queer Theory?

Gender is defined as the classification of male or female that includes social, psychological, emotional, and intellectual characteristics. *Fluidity* is a term that suggests that a category is in the process of change and that individuals who belong to the category may flow in and out of that categorization. *Gender fluidity* is the theory that claims the categories of gender are fluid. Importantly, according to this theory, biological sex is as fluid as gender. This means that the biological categories of male and female are human constructs not natural constructs. The way medicine and science constructs biological sex depends on how culture has already constructed gender. In Western culture much of the categorization of both sex and gender comes from cultural ideas about sexuality and sexual attraction. A theory of gender fluidity insists that all of these categories need to be continually

engaged and re-thought in order to most accurately account for the variety of human life experiences. Moreover, a theory of gender fluidity suggests that individuals flow in and out of sex and gender categories. For example, this theory accepts the possibility that a baby with the biological sex of male might develop into a biologically female person. This theory also considers the possibility that a baby with the biological sex of male might perform as a gendered male or as a gendered female at different points in its life. This theory also insists that sexual desire is also fluid. An individual's sexual desire may or may not follow the rules of heterosexuality.

Queer is an adjective that describes anything odd or strange. In the twentieth century, the word queer was often used as a slur against homosexuals. In order to re-appropriate that term, gender theorists as well as individuals in popular culture have begun to use the word *queer* to denote concepts, characteristics, or bodies that transgress or defy the boundaries which are considered to mark the male from the female and vice versa. The use of the word *queer* as a verb means to take a word, concept, category, or story and use it to disturb the boundaries between male and female.

Queer theory at its most fundamental level is theory that takes into account all those bodies, ideas, and ways of life that do not fit the gender binary and, thus, are considered *queer. Queer theorists* analyze the concepts of sex and gender in order to expose them as fluid concepts with permeable boundaries. The theory has philosophical, scientific, and sociological roots. The theory's interdisciplinary nature lends it a vigorous intellectual and popular force.

Queer Theory and the History of Philosophy

There are deep philosophical roots to queer theory in post-Enlightenment philosophy. In order to understand queer theory, it is helpful to have some introduction to these roots. Philosophically, queer theory espouses a view of gender and sex as radically inessential. This theory of gender suggests that not only is gender a cultural construct as the existentialist theory of gender asserts, but that, also, sex and sexuality are constructs. This theory claims that culture and language have created the constructs of the gender/sex binary. The words, "masculinity," "maleness," "femininity," and "femaleness" are names that are meaningful only in the context of specific languages and cultures. This view stands opposed to any theory of natural law that claims sex is part of the natural world. Rather than looking at nature in order to

understand the natural structures of sex, queer theory insists that language, not nature, created sex. This theory is indebted to the dominant Western philosophical traditions that followed the Enlightenment: the nineteenth to twenty-first-century philosophical systems of idealism, phenomenology, existentialism, analytic philosophy, and deconstructionism. These modes of thought highly influenced the main architects of queer theory.

The philosophical innovations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are varied and complex. Here is only a brief synopsis in order that the reader might be better orientated towards the advent of queer theory. Throughout the late eighteenth and the whole of the nineteenth century there arose a philosophical movement counter to the Enlightenment's assurance that reason and experience could lead interested individuals to uncover the truth of nature. This post-Enlightenment thinking is sometimes categorized as the earliest beginning of *postmodernism*. Postmodernism is the period of philosophy after the modern period. The first thinkers in this very early postmodern movement were influenced by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who suggested that a human observer cannot see the world as it really is but only as the individual's mind sees the world. While Kant had declared that there was a *noumenal* world, or a world that exists in and for itself, he made it clear that a human observer only had access to the world of her experience, the *phenomenal* world. His philosophical work amounted to a philosophical revolution, the Kantian revolution. European philosophers after Kant had to acquiesce that human access to the truth about nature is unavoidably limited. This view that humans see the world according to the categories created in their minds led philosophical *idealists* to suggest that reality, at least as far as human beings know it, is a construction of the mind. *Idealists* suggest that the world human beings experience is the immaterial world of ideas that exists in the mind. Thus, the nineteenth-century idealists claimed that philosophers ought to study the structures of the mind rather than attempt to access the inaccessible structures of reality.

Idealism influenced the creation of three new strains of philosophy: *phenomenology*, *existentialism*, and *analytic philosophy*. First, the *phenomenologists* maintained that phenomena, or appearances, should be the object of philosophical inquiry. These philosophers insisted on studying the experiences of human beings rather than any reality beyond experience, as such reality is inaccessible. This was the approach of philosopher Edith Stein, who was discussed in the first chapter. As many philosophers

began to be most interested in ideas and experience, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *existentialists* reminded readers that human beings and their experiences in the world are always changing. Thus, existentialists asserted that both individuals and their ideas are constantly becoming something new rather than remaining fixed. Existentialists denied the existence of fixed essences and emphasized the possibilities of freedom. This theory grounded the gender existentialists discussed in the previous chapter. Phenomenology and existentialism were prominent across the continent of Europe, especially in Germany, Scandinavia, and France. At the same time a different response to idealism arose in Austria and England, that of *analytic philosophy*. Analytic philosophers claimed the project of philosophy ought to focus on analyzing human language in order to gain clarity about human experience of the world. To conclude, most of these types of thinkers hoped to find some access to truth. Many phenomenologists hoped that their studies would reveal the underlying structure of reality. Many existentialists trusted that an individual could use their theories to discover an authentic way of life. And most analytic philosophers believed that underlying language there were fixed realities that the human mind could discover. Yet, all three types of thinkers were influenced by idealism's view that human access to truth, reality, and nature was limited by the human mind.

A key thinker in the early twentieth century, the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, had an important role to play in this philosophical history. Wittgenstein insisted that philosophers needed to admit that they had no reason to believe that human ideas, experiences, or language correlated to any real truths. Wittgenstein argued that philosophers who wished to get clear about language could solve linguistic problems but not philosophical problems. For example, a philosopher who wished to understand the true nature of "pain" by examining how the word is used in English would be ignoring the fact that the word "pain" was an invention of language, not nature. Thus, the philosopher could only get clear about how speakers of a particular language use the word "pain" and could not gain access to what pain truly is. Indeed, Wittgenstein suggested that there may be no true reality under the word at all. This radical *nominalism*, the view that names are human constructs that may or may not correspond to real essences, led many later twentieth-century scholars across the disciplines to adopt *deconstructionism*, the project of analyzing the way language is used in order to de-construct the categories that once appeared fixed. The

project of many thinkers, thus, became to free readers from constrained thinking rather than to discover truths.

Queer theory inherits this philosophical viewpoint. Unlike most of the thinkers discussed in the first three chapters, queer theorists do not try to get clear about the true nature of women. Rather they suggest that the concept of woman is a constantly changing cultural idea. These thinkers deny that there is any actual real nature of woman that exists separately from human language and thought. Contrary to gender essentialists, queer theorists deny the possibility of discovering a true natural essence of women. Contrary to first and second wave feminists they also deny the possibility of uncovering or freeing an authentic un-gendered mind through the use of reason or self-analysis. But the queer theorist does have a goal. Queer theory raises questions and creates new ideas in order to compel the reader to analyze and de-construct what gender and sex mean in culture. After this deconstruction of culture's ideas, queer theorists advocate inventing new concepts about gender that are more inclusive and useful than the previous ones.

Queer Theory and the History of Science

Queer theory is also indebted to the scientific revolutions of the twentieth century. Evidence collected by geologists and biologists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries led to the acceptance of a worldview that mountains, valleys, and species are not fixed but fluid. Evidence gathered by chemists and physicists led to a worldview that the smallest building blocks of the cosmos do not obey the linear laws of mathematics suggested by Isaac Newton. The new theories that were adopted led to the acceptance by many scientists of *scientific anti-realism*, a theory that scientific theories are human constructs biased by the culture of the scientific community.

Werner Heisenberg, an Austrian physicist, was one of the first physicists to assert that the role of the scientist cannot be to describe the world as she thinks it really is but simply to provide useful mathematical models that describe the behavior of the objects of human observation.[4]

4. See Cox and Forshaw, *Quantum Universe,* 12–13. "In July of 1925, Heisenberg published a paper . . . and ushered in an entirely new approach to physics. . . . Heisenberg is saying that the underlying mathematics of quantum theory need not correspond to anything with which we are familiar. The job of quantum theory should be to predict directly observable things. . . . It should not be expected to provide some kind of satisfying mental pictures for the internal workings of the atom, . . . In one fell swoop, Heisenberg

Importantly, this new way of thinking about the role of the physicist allowed for a number of breakthroughs in physics that would not have been possible had scientists been constrained by the attempt to describe the real behavior of particles. Quantum physicists have discovered that quantum particles do not behave in ways that seem realistic or even logically possible. The revolutionary new ideas of quantum mechanics led to new debates between *scientific realism* and *scientific anti-realism,* debates between those who consider science the enterprise of discovering natural laws that describe reality and those who consider science the enterprise of creating theories that describe what humans observe. In response to these debates, the physicist Thomas Kuhn wrote the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962. This groundbreaking work asserted that scientific theory is a construction of human minds that becomes the lens through which scientists and the general public view the world. As an example one might consider Galileo's discovery of the moons of Jupiter, which is often considered a key discovery by which Galileo "proved" that not all celestial bodies orbit the Earth. Kuhn's theory proposed that Galileo discovered the moons of Jupiter only because he already knew about the heliocentric theory of Copernicus. Because Galileo had read Copernicus he was open to the possibility that all objects in space do not orbit the earth. Because he was open to the idea, he was able to see Jupiter's moons as Jupiter's satellites. Before Galileo could use a telescope to look in the night sky, he needed a reason to do so. Moreover, even the moons being present in Galileo's field of vision was not enough. Galileo needed a theory in his mind that would allow him to see the moons. Indeed, after Galileo's work was widely published, many new discoveries were suddenly made. The theory opened the door to the observation. Kuhn's point is that a new theory changes the way the world appears to scientists and eventually the public. Evidence is only seen if a new theory allows one to see it.

This view of science is deeply embedded in queer theory. One of the foundational thinkers of queer theory, Donna Haraway, began and continues her career in biology. Her doctoral thesis explored the way linguistic metaphors determined the design of scientific experiments. She used empirical evidence to prove that the language use of a scientist affects the empirical evidence the scientist is able to see. This means that scientists are often limited in their pursuit of knowledge by their language and cultural

removed the conceit that the workings of Nature should necessarily accord with common sense." See Heisenberg, "Über quantentheoretische."

bias. Furthermore, scientists, also have the power to construct bias as they create categories and collect empirical evidence that is used to cement those categories. This is seen in the way eighteenth-century Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus created the modern taxonomy of animals as mammals, reptiles, fish, birds, and amphibians. This is also seen, according to Haraway, in the way medical doctors named and created sex categories as a binary of male and female.

Queer Theory and Sociology

Finally, the philosophical and scientific revolutions after the Enlightenment are reflected in sociological trends. Simultaneously in philosophy, science, and culture there arose a skepticism concerning fixed essences and values that were once believed to come from nature or the Divine. Throughout Western culture from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century, popular belief claims truth is a cultural construct. However, sociologists note that cultural constructs can have authority within their culture. Indeed, they dictate the way individuals in a culture think and behave. Often times there appears a *hegemony* of thought in a culture, a way of thinking that is so dominant that it is difficult to see the way of thought as a construct rather than a fixed truth.

As a marked example, the queer theorist Judith Butler notes that while many people in Western culture today accept a diversity of ideas about the Divine, these same people are incapable of accepting a diversity of ideas about sex and gender. She asserts that there exists in Western culture a *hegemony* about sex and gender. Trained to see fixed gender ideals, individuals see these stereotypes as essential and real. The individuals then force themselves and their friends and relatives to behave according to the stereotypes. Thus, the acceptance of the stereotypes actually creates what looks like empirical evidence that the stereotypes are true. Yet, these ideas and the evidence that substantiates them are constantly changing according to queer theory. This can be seen in the inconsistency of the societal standards of masculine and feminine. Queer theory suggests that changes in society demonstrate that sex is a construct not a natural structure. Yet, queer thinkers acknowledge that sex is a construct that has great authority in Western culture.

Queer theory has developed from philosophical, scientific, and sociological trends in the last two centuries. Importantly queer theorists suggest

that the way people think and talk about sexuality, sex, and gender affects how people see the world and how people act in the world. Thus, the way people think actually changes the world. Thus, to suggest that gender roles no longer function as they once did does not simply mean that people have changed their minds. Rather, this suggests that sexuality, gender, and sex are actually different in the twenty-first century than ever before. Queer theorists both desire to help expose the way gender and sex fluctuate and to encourage a consciousness about sex and gender that exposes diversity and creates value for that diversity.

Thinking Woman: Donna Haraway

> Once upon a time, in the 1970s, the author was a proper, US socialist-feminist, white, female, hominid, biologist, who became a historian of science to write about modern Western accounts of monkeys, apes, and women. . . . But . . . she has turned into a multiply marked cyborg feminist.[5]

Biography

Donna Haraway, scientist and philosopher, is considered one of the main architects of queer theory, along with philosopher Judith Butler and literary theorist Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick. Donna Haraway was born in 1944 in Denver, Colorado. Her Colorado upbringing included exposure to Native American sensibilities, symbolism, and culture. She also claims that she was deeply influenced by her Roman Catholic upbringing. She says about Roman Catholicism, "I learned it. I studied it. It is deep in my bones."[6] When she voiced questions about her faith at age twelve, her priest urged her to read Thomas Aquinas. While she claims that she did not understand Aquinas's words, her relationship with her priests introduced her to the theological framework of Catholicism, "the theological tradition that focuses on unnameableness."[7] She claims this was powerful to her as a child, especially "the idea that if you seriously are trying to deal with something that is infinite, you should not attach a noun to it, because then you have

5. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, Women,* 1.
6. Haraway, "An Interview with Donna Haraway," *Donna Haraway Reader,* 334.
7. Ibid.

fixed and set limits to that which is limitless."[8] After high school, she studied philosophy and theology at the Fondation Teilhard de Chardin in Paris on a Fulbright Scholarship. While Haraway claimed in 1999 to be "a committed atheist and anti-Catholic, anyway at some level," she continues to see the Catholic theological tradition as part of her "very deep inheritance."[9]

When Haraway returned from Paris, she enrolled at Colorado College where she triple-majored in zoology, philosophy, and literature. She went on to study at Yale University where she received her PhD in biology with a dissertation on the use of language and metaphor in experimental biology. Interested in interdisciplinary work, she taught both science and women's studies at the University of Hawaii from 1971–74. She moved to John Hopkins University in 1974 and taught for six years in the Department of the History of Science. In 1980 she moved to the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she is a professor in the History of Consciousness Program. She has also taught as Professor of Feminism and Technoscience at the European Graduate School.

Haraway has written several important and influential works on gender, on human nature and on the philosophy of science. Particularly, she is known for groundbreaking work in feminism, primatology, and philosophy of technology. The link between the three is seen in her *Cyborg Manifesto,* an essay she began in response to a call for articles on the future of socialist feminism by *the Socialist Review* in 1983. This essay discusses ways in which categories are constructed by scientists and by culture. Specifically, Haraway speaks of how women are constructed like cyborgs. Often these constructions have been done to serve patriarchy and capitalism, according to Haraway. However, she opens the possibility that these constructions could be re-constructed to benefit individuals giving them increased pleasure and increased responsibility in their lives. The radical idea that human beings are actually cyborgs, beings who have transgressed the boundaries of nature, has become a revolutionary philosophical concept. Haraway has continued to deconstruct philosophical concepts of "nature," "woman," "sex," "dominance" and "human nature" in her many essays and books such as *Primate Visions* (1989), *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), *Modest_Witness @ Second_Millennium.FemaleMan © _Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience* (1997), and *The Donna Haraway Reader* (2004).

8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

Donna Haraway's Theory of Woman as Cyborg

> I want my writing to be read as an orthopedic practice for learning how to remold kin links to help make a kinder and unfamiliar world.[10]

Donna Haraway's major philosophical innovation is her articulation that the boundaries between the natural and the artificial are themselves artificial. There is no natural versus artificial world, according to Haraway, no human nature versus human artifice, no natural woman versus female construct. In her view all of nature is artificially constructed, and all construction is part of nature. Every woman is a cyborg.

Haraway's view is rooted in her philosophy of science. She repudiates the view that science can discover the truth about nature. She believes that science is a construct.[11] With empirical evidence and philosophical argument, she demonstrates that this is true in her own field of primatology where she has witnessed many scientists who believed that they were able to uncover certain knowledge of human nature by studying apes. Haraway insists that a scientist who wishes to get beyond her bias when looking at a primate is attempting an impossible project. The scientist is affecting the primate by her observation and influencing the primate. Moreover, the primate is influencing the other primates, the surrounding environment, and the observer herself. All of this is affecting the scientist who is, of course, looking through a lens formed by her own experiences and language. There is no natural world for the human observer to observe, there is only the observed world in relationship with the observer. Failure to acknowledge this leads scientists to report data without contextualizing that data in terms of the type of experiments done and the bias of the scientist herself.

As just one example of many, Haraway speaks of the famous experiments done by Harry Harlow with rhesus monkeys that "proved" the need for primates, including humans, to have an intimate loving physical relationship with their mothers. Haraway explains first the cultural bias of Harlow, who was open about his ambivalence towards working wives and mothers who "threaten to displace the American man in science and

10. Haraway, "Introduction," *Donna Haraway Reader,* 2.

11. For a full explanation of Donna Haraway's understanding of humanist scientific anti-realism see chapter 4: "In the Beginning was the Word; The Genesis of Biological Theory," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women,* 70–80.

industry."[12] Haraway recounts the experiments themselves. She explains ways in which the results of the experiments may have been skewed by what might be called the sadism of Harlow's experiment, especially the artificial insemination of the female monkeys on what Harlow named "the rape rack" and some of the constructions of the metal surrogate "mother" that froze, spiked, shook, or shocked the infant monkeys that clung to it. Neither the biological mothers nor the infant rhesus monkeys were in a neutral or natural environment. They were in an artificially constructed environment that could be described as one of terror. However, the effect of the environment was not considered significant in altering the infants' ability to thrive without their mothers. Indeed, these experiments have been used in a great variety of arguments as proof of the need for a warm, caring, and gentle mother for all primate infants, including human infants. The experiment's bias and method certainly does not mean that the opposite of its conclusions are proven. Haraway does not mean to suggest that infants do not need loving support, but she does wish to point out how this experiment by Harlow does not prove the natural need of a specific type of mother as Harlow claimed.[13] Importantly, Harlow's failure to observe and report on real natural motherhood is not simply because of his particular bias or experimental design. Haraway insists there is a bias in every human scientist who seeks to uncover a truth of natural motherhood or even human nature. Scientists see what they observe. The observed is always an artificial construction of the mind of the observer.

Haraway's scientific background significantly affects her views about human beings and women. Haraway insists that the human being is a construction with no clear boundary between the natural and the artificial. Haraway explains that "we are chimeras, theorized, and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs."[14] Pacemakers, implants, hormone patches, medications, vitamin supplements, and other technologies exist, literally, inside human bodies. Piped music, flashing billboards, and ringing cell phones are taken in through the senses and become part of the neurological structure of the mind. There is no human being that is not vitally formed by technology.

This, too, is true of female human beings. The woman, even more than the general human being, is a cyborg according to Haraway. Many

12. Harlow and Mears, *Human Model*, 125; quoted in Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 236.
13. See "Metaphors into Hardware," in Haraway, *Primate Visions,* 231–44.
14. Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," *Donna Haraway Reader*, 10.

contemporary feminists, influenced by gender existentialism, have articulated the need for women to uncover what is essential to womanhood and what is culturally imposed upon them. But Haraway believes that these feminists are creating a false dichotomy. Contemporary people, whether they are classified as men or women, have all taken technology and biotechnology into their bodies, both consciously and un-consciously. Some women consciously take female hormone therapy to restore their natural balance, albeit artificially. Other women unknowingly ingest hormones in the milk they drink and meat they eat. Some women consciously use hair-dyes, make-up, and surgery to create an appearance that they believe is more natural. Others unconsciously use diet and exercise to conform to an image they do not even realize they desire. Some women use medical technology to live longer lives, to conceive more or fewer children, and to ease specific pains. Other women are denied access to this technology because of the conditions imposed by the companies for which they work or the governments under which they live. Haraway insists both sets of women live according to artificial technologies, boundaries, or standards. Yet, too, both sets of women are natural women. Haraway does not simply ask feminists to consider that all women are artificially constructed, but also to consider that all "artificial" construction is part of nature.

> If the world exists for us as "nature," this designates a kind of relationship, an achievement among many actors, not all of them human, not all of them organic, not all of them technological. In its scientific embodiments as well as in other forms, nature is made, but not entirely by humans; it is a co-construction among humans and non-humans.[15]

Haraway thinks the best philosophical solution to the question of "What is a natural woman?" is in admitting that there "is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic."[16] Further, she insists that seeking the "natural law" is a philosophical error that "misses most of reality, probably always, but certainly now."[17] For Haraway, there is no distinction between the artificial and natural.

15. Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters," *Donna Haraway Reader*, 66.
16. Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," *Donna Haraway Reader*, 35.
17. Ibid., 39.