1 | GENDER DISINTEGRATION: PERFORMANCE, CONTEXT AND THE BODY

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In her *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1989: 267). With these words, de Beauvoir famously distinguished sex from gender. One may be born with a particular biological makeup, but it is socialisation that forms and regulates identity. In the following paragraphs, I will first explore the theory by which gender emerges as a social production, before considering how such an understanding leads to the problem of gender disintegration. I will then entertain Linda Alcoff's hermeneutics as a response to this problematic. By understanding perception to be shaped by the body, relative to context, I will conclude that Alcoff's hermeneutics is able to resolve the problem of gender disintegration.

Gender performativity is a concept attributed to contemporary philosopher Judith Butler, who defines gender as the effect, rather than the cause, of our actions and performances (1990: preface xv). For Butler, the female gender is the result of habitual action that produces the appearance of an anterior femininity. The

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performance that is itself responsible for the creation of gender is apprehended, instead, as its effect. Consider the observations of ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel seeks to suspend indefinitely the belief in the reality of "normal women", and consider instead how individuals *produce* that reality for others (1967: 122).[2] In other words, he suspends sex as a given, focusing instead on how genders are produced. With Butler's performative theory in mind, Garfinkel turns to Agnes, the female-bodied, penis-endowed nineteen year-old who identifies as a woman. Because of her penis, Agnes must consciously present herself in a way that ensures no one will question the reality of her femalehood. We learn that Agnes produces the reality of her gender for those around her by considering how to act in any given social context: which interests to take up, in which fashion to speak, how to behave, walk, sit, eat, converse, and so on. In consciously deliberating her actions, Agnes is, Garfinkel concludes, performing her gender (1967: 119). Through this performance, she constructs the reality of her femininity for those around her. Performative theory maintains that there is no objective female gender. Rather, the female gender emerges out of a performance of particular actions. Agnes seems to perform these actions as if reading them from a script.

For performative theory, gender is the effect of the actions of an un-gendered subject. But, not all of a subject's actions may help constitute her gender. If we consider the endless multiplicity of a given subject's performances, (the way a person acts at work may differ from the way she acts at home or school) coupled with the observation that while some actions may constitute the production of one's gender, others may figure in the production of different identities entirely. We find ourselves in the midst of the problem of gender disintegration. In short: to say that gender has disintegrated is to say that it no longer retains any significance. Gender is one identity-constituting factor among several; as such, its significance is either wholly illusory or too difficult to separate out from other factors to remain meaningful. For example: is Agnes's love for cookbooks part of her gender performance or does it arise out of the multiple other identities

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2 A gesture borrowed from Husserlian phenomenology: to properly investigate the contents of consciousness, Husserl first bracketed belief in the external world.

she may assume at a given time? At work, Agnes might like to converse about politics. Is she doing so because of an academic interest in political science, a capitalistic interest in economics, or a friendly inclination to engage others in compelling debate? It becomes increasingly difficult to apprehend and classify performance when we consider the intersection of gender (performativity) with other identity-constituting factors such as race, class, and upbringing. If all that stands between men and women is habitual action in accordance with a gender that exists only as an effect of those actions themselves, and the significance of any particular set of actions is not easily recognisable, then, what kind of foundation can feminism claim for itself? Gender must, therefore, be regrounded in the subject prior to performance if it is to retain its significance for feminism. Let us now turn to Linda Alcoff and her conception of a bodily hermeneutic.

Alcoff's understanding of hermeneutics picks up on Gadamer's concept of understanding through horizons, a theory in which a person's horizons are constituted by her or his culture, history, upbringing and social role (1975: 301). Alcoff defines a person's horizons as "the framing assumptions we bring with us to perception and understanding, the congealed experiences that become premises by which we strive to make sense of the world" (2006: 95). We develop these "framing assumptions" through socialisation, picking up on the language and presuppositions of those who socialise us. It is through this socialisation that we form our horizons, and thereby our horizonal understanding of the world around us. To better understand how a person's horizons affect their perceptions and understanding, Alcoff offers the examples of a queen and her servant (2006: 96). The queen, upon looking into her castle's dining area, sees a long elegant table suitable for entertaining many guests and accommodating many feasts. Her servant, however, looks upon the same table and sees only a nightmare to clean, an offensively large receptacle for dirt and dust. The queen and the servant interpret the same object (the same dining table) differently; they perceive and understand it through different horizons, framed by different assumptions.

Their antithetical perceptions, claims Alcoff, are constituted by the way they were socialised. Raised in royalty, the Queen knows only of feasts and parties, whereas the servant, raised in poverty, knows only of housework and practicality. Thus, their

differing horizons lead them to differing perceptions, a concept which Gadamer proposes serves to highlight the difference in understanding between individuals.

To this traditional hermeneutical understanding, which limits a person's horizons to their culture, history, upbringing and social roles, Alcoff adds the body as a horizonal constituting agent and concept (2006: 102). It is through the addition of the body that I posit Alcoff as a response to Butler. If gender emerges out of social performance, and Gadamer's hermeneutics posit the constitution of horizons by strictly social means, then taken apart from socialisation, gender is still rendered meaningless. What we need, then, is a more fundamental understanding of gender if we are to keep it from collapsing in its intersection with other horizonal-constituting agents (e.g., race, class, upbringing, etc.). In bringing the *body* to hermeneutics, Alcoff gives us exactly this: a primordial conception of gender (that is, one that thinks gender anterior to socialisation). For Alcoff, the way we move and function, bodily speaking, helps constitute our horizonal interpretation of the world around us. We apply terms derived from bodily experience to the things we encounter. For example, we say that the stocks are falling, like a body through space, when they are fundamentally only decreasing incrementally in number or percentage. Contrarily, when they are rising in value, we speak as if they have physically jumped. We are not merely neutral subjects faced with a social world, but rather *embodied* subjects; thus, "bodily experiences establish horizons just as traditions and cultures do" (2006: 102).

Of course, bodily experiences include concepts more complex than merely jumping or falling. The female body includes the experience of lactation and pregnancy, whereas the male body does not. Consequently, Alcoff believes these inherent differences reflect a "perceptual orientation and a conceptual mapping that determines value, relevance, and imaginable possibilities"(2006: 107). Just as the servant and Queen, possessing different horizons, are unable to perceive the same dining table, a girl learning of her ability to bear children will be able to imagine different possibilities, dangers and threats than a boy learning he will never have to. Our very embodiment, then, helps constitute the horizons we use to understand the world: nursing, childbirth and rape form the horizons of a female as a direct result of her body.

It is in here where we can locate gender. However, Alcoff does not deny that gender intersects with other identity-constituting factors such as race, and class. So, she allows that the gender of different women may constitute their horizons in different ways, just as one woman may interpret the possibility of childbearing as the highest calling of the human condition, whereas another may interpret it as an oppressive agent serving only to trap women in imminent existence.[3] Nonetheless, Alcoff insists that the possibility itself has a bearing on a woman's horizons, even given its intersection with other factors. Indeed, thought in this way, horizons are gendered and therefore able to provide a basis for solidarity among women.

To understand horizons better, Gadamer proposes that we can look more closely at our reading of the texts that orient our horizonal understandings (1975: 294). The constitution of one's horizons is a circular process: our understanding of who we are depends on the contexts in which we live and act, and, our understanding of how we live and act in those contexts depends, in turn, upon our understanding of who we are. Yet, we live and act in many contexts: in a family, as part of a society, in a career, for a cause, and so on. Thus, we can tell different stories of who we are depending on which context we choose to speak from. Gender, as a way of understanding who we are, is bound to context; it is never acontextual. This is the fundamental contribution of Alcoffian hermeneutics to the problem of gender disintegration. The way we understand gender is inextricable from the context through which we choose to view it. Therefore, there can be no gender *as such*; no objective womanhood or femininity. But, given the context of traditional familial roles, we can point to a more definite understanding of the significance of one's gender.*For example, there are certain roles fulfilled by a sister in a traditional Christian household, by virtue of her being female (that is, a sister).* Given the context of walking alone, late at night, a subject's body constitutes the way they construct the experience. That is, a woman with a vagina is more likely to fear sexual assault, and will therefore, meet the walk home with anxiety (her body determines her social experience). Therefore, context be-

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3 Simone de Beauvoir theorised that traditional female gender roles such as housework and child-raising doomed women to an existence devoid of transcendence, and therefore, freedom: *imminence*.

comes a lens through which we can approach gender, and as contexts change, (as lenses are replaced) gender begins to change and appear differently. Likewise, just as with a camera without a lens, there is no picture, so without a context, there is no gender.

Further, the aforementioned is complicated by the fact that context itself is also subject to interpretation. Our understanding of a female as a woman, then, will depend upon our understanding of the context in which femalehood is a part. Given the context of sexual reproduction, for example, the way we understand a female in terms of her sexual reproductive capacity is dependent on how we understand sexual reproduction itself. For Judith Butler, sexual reproduction is a "compulsory heterosexuality".[4] A female is a female in terms of sexual reproduction, insofar as she is capable of contributing an egg, and incubating a fetus. Moreover, as was outlined above, textual understanding is a circular affair, and so, if we can know a female as a child-bearer in terms of sexual reproduction, we can only know sexual reproduction in terms of its parts; namely: the female child-bearer and the male sperm-provider. Thus, just as the child-bearer is inextricable from the reproductive context, so the reproductive context is inextricable from the child-bearer. In short, sex becomes meaningless outside of such a relation. So, not only is such a gender-understanding derived from sex, but such a sex-understanding is, too, derived from gender. Consequently, taken apart from context, gender disintegrates.

Does this mean we have come full circle, have we undermined our own enterprise, refuted our own position? No, for we have brought the term *context* to the formula of disintegration. That gender becomes meaningless outside of context need not be negative. Consider the notion that apart from context, *everything* disintegrates; or more properly, that we can only come to know anything relative to its respective context. If this proposition can be coherently entertained, then gender becomes just as stable as anything else. This is not as radical as it sounds, and is not without its benefits. In terms of a medical context, we should consider people as patients and not as females or males, just as we would think it absurd to consider them either as cell-phone enthusiasts

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4 This means to think in terms of those body parts significant in the act of sexual reproduction.

or techno-luddites when ordering an organ-donor list.[5] Further, the introduction of context to gender relieves feminism of its tendency to homogenise women as inherently oppressed: as victims, not of history, but of nature itself.[6] By contextualising gender, we can do away with such essentialism, for even the most staunchly radical feminist will grant that in the context of finding work as a baby-sitter, women are not inhibited by their oppression, they are not oppressed at all. This crucial insight allows us to consolidate and refocus the feminist project. By addressing the particular contexts within which female oppression operates, we can begin to work more productively and effectively as feminists.

In short, if Alcoffian hermeneutics is to curb the threat of gender disintegration, we must hold that context *grounds* meaning.[7] This is to say that gender means different things in different contexts; apart from context, it means nothing at all. Thus, to give meaning to gender, we must first situate it. Far from demolishing gender, we have instead only contextualised it. Or perhaps it was a contextual notion to begin with. Perhaps performative theory only plucked gender from context, thereby emptying it of its significance. By reading Alcoff against Butler, perhaps we have only returned gender to its original home, granted it back its original meaning. Perhaps there truly is "nothing outside the text" (1976: 158-9).[8]

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5 This is to say that identity itself is always-already contextual. For example: in a familial context, I might be a disobedient son whose every move incites suspicion, while in an academic context, I might be a worthy student whose every comment demands attention. Thus, to speak of my disobedience *already implies* some specific context.

6 In other words, that women are victims not merely *historically*, but rather *naturally*.

7 Refer to the camera-lens metaphor presented above.

8 This is to say, of course, that there is nothing outside of discursive context, concerning gender. If it is to be present at all, it must be so within a context. Outside of that "text", there is *nothing*.

[2] Beauvoir, Simone de. 1989. *The Second Sex*. Vintage: New York.

[3] Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge Press: New York.

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