

Chelsea Brimstin  
Philosophy 2077G  
Professor Epp  
March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017

## Defining Gender: A Way to Subvert Gendered Systems of Power

### INTRODUCTION

This essay sets out to explore the implications of different definitions of gender by answering the following question:

“Does gender, as Julia Serano argues, lie “in the perceptions and interpretations of others” (Serano 193), or is it interactional work, as described by Candice West and Don Zimmerman? Can we reconcile these two arguments? If so, how? Further, how would this definition align with Zachary Nataf’s idea of gender non-conformity?”

This question relates the definition of gender to whether or not it is necessary and how it lines up against gender non-conformity.

Gender inscribes patriarchal understandings of ways to interact with and interpret others. Furthermore, it is an oppressive system that categorizes people in order to assign dominance and subordination to certain bodies based on the projections of one’s assumptions about masculinity and femininity. This question is vital because gender cannot be critiqued or subverted without being properly defined.

According to Nataf, in his article “Whatever I Feel,” individuals and societies should accept “gender non-conformity” and people should be allowed to choose how to shape and inhabit their bodies and their genders to “mix the best of all for everyone” (Nataf 40-41). Putting this question into perspective, Nataf aims to make gender non-conformity public knowledge, encourage gender fluidity and equality, and rally for gender irrelevance.

If gender is speculative, as described by Serano in “Dismantling Cissexual Privilege,” then in order to subvert the dynamics of power, we must critique cissexual privilege and stop projecting assumptions about gender onto other people’s behaviours and bodies. On the other hand, if gender is interactional work, as West and Zimmerman assert in “Doing Gender,” then in order to challenge the distribution of dominance and subordination, we must either refuse to engage in this interactional work or engage in it in ways that cannot be categorized. Furthermore, the definition of gender may validate or invalidate Nataf’s idea of the necessity of gender non-conformity. If it validates it, then, like Nataf asserts, in order to subvert the power distribution between genders, we must make gender non-conformity public knowledge, and ultimately get rid of gender altogether. Thus, in order to move past disciplinary powers that prescribe social hierarchies, we must first define gender and then find ways to destabilize that definition.

#### GENDER AS SPECULATIVE

If gender is purely speculative, as Serano’s article suggests, then this implies that gender as an “act” is also purely passive, and gendering another person is the only act that requires any sort of work. This problematizes the idea that one has any control whatsoever over their perceived gender. Under this definition, in order to ensure that we will constantly be properly gendered, we have to completely revolutionize the current institution of gender. In a sense this aligns with Nataf’s assertion that gender non-conformity is the first step to subverting the oppressive system. However, Serano’s definition does not align with the assertion that the best route to subverting patriarchal standards of power and privilege is to work towards making gender irrelevant. Furthermore, Serano’s solution to regaining power over our observed identities is to take

her own definition of gender and redefine it one individual at a time until the entire institution has been changed; this is extremely long term, if not slightly unrealistic.

#### GENDER AS INTERACTIONAL WORK

On the other hand, if gender is interactional work, as West and Zimmerman suggest, then all behaviour we engage in is at risk of gender assessment. Essentially, everything we do is categorized, even if it does not undoubtedly fit into one category. In fact, West and Zimmerman completely disregard the fluidity of gender, as they assume that everyone fits into a pre-constructed male-female dialectic. This does not mean that their definition does not have the resources for us to engage in interactional work in ways that allow non-binary genders to emerge. However, even if it does have those resources, this definition is still problematic because it disregards the fact that someone can identify as masculine in some situations, and feminine or non-binary in others. Additionally, someone may be categorized differently based on the people who are assessing their gendered acts. Compartmentalizing people into gender roles based on their actions results in misgendering and erasure. This reinforces cissexual privilege because it gives authenticity to binary gender roles and disregards alternative gender identities such as trans\*, non-binary, and two-spirited people. If we assume this definition to be true and subvert gender by engaging in this interactional work in non-traditional ways, then West and Zimmerman's assertions align with Nataf's goal of gender non-conformity. If we subvert this definition by refusing to engage in this interactional work, then, like Nataf, their assertions encourage of a world without gender.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since there are problematic aspects of both definitions, perhaps there is some way to reconcile the progressive features of each one to make the most accurate possible definition of gender. Then there would be an efficient and successful way to subvert patriarchal systems of dominance and subordination, and challenge cissexual privilege and assumption. If there is such a definition, then we could use that definition to subvert the power dynamic of gender and, in fact, aim for a world gender as Nataf does. If it is not possible to reconcile these two definitions, we should not embrace gender non-conformity, but encourage it since gender cannot be accurately defined. “Perhaps it will help pave the way to greater gender equality – or better still, irrelevance.” (Nataf).

## REVIEW NOTES

First of all, this essay was an expansion of another assignment where we had to pose a question based on two readings and then explain why that question is important and what the implications of it are. So, my first step in revising was to make it more accessible to people who do not know the context of the assignment. Thus, I changed the structure and content of the introduction. I then split the essay up into sections to make it more structured as well.

I then edited based on feedback from my professor, which was as follows: “Very nice use of Serano, Nataf, and West and Zimmerman together in a way that shows a sophisticated understanding of what it at stake and what the issues are. Well done. Be careful to be clear, earlier on, that you understand both parts of Nataf’s thesis - right now, that only becomes clear later on. To improve the assignment, link what is effectively a discussion of fluidity to Nataf’s earlier thesis about “mixing the best of both” and

combining different elements of various genders in ways that subvert binary gender systems. That is, draw more directly on that first thesis as a way to critique both West and Zimmerman and Serano. Very good that you consider more than one possible answer. Overall, very well done.”

## Works Cited

Nataf, Zachary. "Transgender." *News Internationalist Magazine* 5 Apr 1998. Web.

Serano, Julia. "Dismantling Cissexual Privilege." *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Seal Press: 2007, Berkley California.

Zimmerman, Don and West, Candice. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society* 1.2 (1987): 125—151. Web.