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Gender Disarray

Language analog for trans

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I'm 15, running through the sheets of rain falling in downtown Portland. Through the moiré of my wet lashes, I make out puddles reflecting the electric sign of a neon cowboy. My full bladder impels me through traffic in desperation, hoping that a place to pee might materialize on the other side of SW Third Ave. A car's horn is held in caesura. Brakes squeal as they clench in anguish against their metal contact zone. The driver's voice cracks out of the window through the water, "get out of the street lady." Warm, slowly soaking, then heavy and sodden, the denim quickly turns to cold sandpaper. I peed in my jeans.

The feeling of the inverted (mis)gendering was the hot red wire, not euphoric — raw and alien. A short circuit arching to the black ground that was the misperception of my age; the driver calling me, an acned 15-year-old boy, "lady" instead of "girl" meant I had been completely misapprehended in a way that added to my cold and wet confusion. Maybe the misgendering was merely one aspect of a gross error, and it meant nothing more than through the weather someone thought a 15-year-old boy was a full-grown woman. Wires crossed for a minute in that near collision of car and kid, woman and girl and pavement...

At 23, I moved to New York because I didn't really know where to go after a big breakup. I was reading *DHALGREN* and obsessed with the way it eroticized everything chaotic. The breakdown was rhythmic, miscommunication and confusion were poetry, fear and suspense were rich with possibility. As I followed Delany's bisexual poet through a crumbling urban environment, the cracks in the city around me threatened to split like the ones in the book, the precarity in focus sharp and anticipatory. Lots of older people would see the big book in my lap and say I remember loving reading that. He writes, "You meet a new person, you go with him and suddenly you get a whole new city...you go down new streets, you see houses you never saw before, pass places you didn't even know were there. Everything changes."[1] In fracture there is openness. Sociality alters the environment. I loved the J train, because you could stand outside on this scaffold — the potential to become unlatched, bend, and collapse — and smell Broadway. The light came through the smeared windows, catching on their etched and abraded glass, which fogged up with condensation like the windows of my childhood classrooms. On the J you weren't underground. It was a pleasure to be able to see just over the buildings and into the apartments, and the sky — whether it was heavy or light that day, drying out the wet trash and paper, or making wet paper, then mulch.

In another Delany book, another poet protagonist, Rydra Wong, bestselling author in the galaxy, is less flâneuse, and more of a cryptographer-on-a-mission — though in characteristic Delany style, sexually liberated and surrounded by characters with beautiful custom body mods. Her curiosity inspires her to reluctantly accept a military assignment: decode a series of garbled, undecipherable transmissions, each intercepted only seconds before enemy terrorist attacks on military installations. *BABEL-17* is the codename for the transmissions, and, she discovers, actually an entirely new language, as well as the title of the novel. Rydra maps the mystery of this alien language using her training as a linguist and cryptographer, augmented by certain neurodivergent intellectual proclivities resulting from a childhood brain infection. Like her childhood illness, learning to use the language quite literally transforms her consciousness. At one point she wakes up captive, after being incapacitated when her ship is sabotaged and nearly destroyed. Her first thoughts are thrown into a language that is somewhere in translation, in English, but also outside of it:

> Abstract thoughts in a blue room: Nominative, genitive, elative, accusative one, accusative two, ablative, partitive, illative, instructive, abessive, adessive, inessive, essive, allative, translative, comitative. Sixteen cases to the Finnish noun. Odd, some languages get by with only singular and plural. The North American Indian languages even failed to distinguish number. Except Sioux, in which there was a plural only for animate objects. The blue room was round and warm and smooth. No way to say warm in French. There was only hot and tepid.[2]

Rydra is transformed by a language that affects her senses, her spatial orientation, her linguistic capacity, and her awareness of time, space, and bounds of self. She can anticipate others' actions so coherently and with such speed to the degree that she can read minds, and, to her annoyance, the world slows down around her. This happens performatively in Delany's writing: his writing style changes as she does. And I think so does the reader; she also changes in the reading.

Language and gender are bound up with one another.

In her book *HISTORIES OF THE TRANSGENDER CHILD*, Jules Gill-Peterson puts language acquisition at the heart of the normative conceptualization of gender. She writes about John Money, the infamous John Hopkins sexologist,

Photos courtesy of Zoey Lubitz.

1 Samuel R. Delany, *DHALGREN* (1974; reis. New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 318.
2 Samuel R. Delany, *BABEL-17 / EMPIRE STAR* (*BABEL-17* 1966; reis. New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 111.
3 Jules Gill-Peterson, *HISTORIES OF THE TRANSGENDER CHILD* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 118.

who, in collaboration with psychiatrists Joan and John Hampton "deployed an analogy to language acquisition as a form of developmental plasticity to secure their argument about how gender was formed."[3]

The analogy goes that when an baby is born, they do come pre-programmed with a native language. Infants have only the capacity for language. Therefore "gender role may be likened to a native language."[4] Like language, a "gender role" is a culturally specific social phenomenon, and is acquired. Sound familiar? Gill-Peterson shows how their work in the 1950s rested on a notion of childhood sexual "plasticity," in which the infant's sex is briefly open and mutable, and later shaped and habituated into a specific gender role. They went further: the more native in that language – that gender role – the patient becomes, the more solidified and less plastic the patient's sex becomes, and so, quite horrifically and in accordance with their program, intersex infants and children were assigned a sex surgically, prior to their acquisition and solidification of a "gender role" as defined at Hopkins. Quite radically, and to terrible effect, Money believed that a child could be sculpted — as long as they were still early enough in their development, and therefore plastic enough — to be made into either a boy or a girl.

SEXUAL PLASTICITY ECHOES

Gill-Peterson's account of American sexology, and her archaeology of the gender/sex complex, strikes me in its correction of the idea that liberatory feminist politics invented gender: rather, the concept of gender and its likeness to language was first conceived and deployed as part of a conservative medical project — ironic, given the current vulgar and repressive discourse on "gender ideology." In her words, "[a]lthough gender has come to be associated with cultural malleability and feminist political projects, as far as its conditions of emergence are concerned it is better described as a medical device mobilized to face the potential conceptual collapse of binary sex."[5] The more these scientists and clinicians studied the variously sexed aspects of the body — gonads, genitals, secondary sex characteristics, hormones, chromosomes, behaviors, psychologies, and on — the more wonky the idea of binary sex was becoming. So, while their theory of sexual plasticity echoes (or anticipates) the liberatory aspects of a queered gender fluidity (connoting performance, experimentation, and non-normativity), in its inception, gender arrives on the scene to regulate the material instability of sex under scrutiny and re-installs the arbitration of binarized sex as the distinct territory of medicine. Plasticity and the figure of the child were key to this project. As Gill-Peterson argues, "[c]hild development as a temporal form restricts plasticity to a profoundly conservative narrative, domesticating it in the service of a newly rigid sex binary."[6]

That "rigid sex binary" had me thinking about the 1991 "Gender Disarray" issue of *MOVEMENT RESEARCH PERFORMANCE JOURNAL*, and how in some weird, hard-to-stomach way, it also reveals a kind of loosening of gender that may have since become more constricted. Some of the writing, from today's outlook, evinces a cringe: provocative and probing interview questions, many exoticisms, essentialisms, transvestites and hermaphrodites in drag. The writers search for terminology not yet arbitrated. I am enthralled by the drastic difference from what I perceive as the more consolidated language for talking about gender, sex, and sexuality today. Anxiety around disarray breeds the need for bureaucratic stabilization: infographics and diagrams; trainings and workshops. "Well first of all, gender and sex are separate," rings a chorus of thousands of explainers, to the old and uninitiated, in my memory of the 2000s and 2010s. In this moment, when "Gender Disarray" might appear as a transphobic TV news headline, there is clear motive for the interest in medical and therapeutic validation of trans identity, although this tendency is hardly new. In the introduction to his book *MOBILE SUBJECTS*, Aren Z. Aizura describes his experience of seeking gender-affirming medical interventions in a highly medicalized and gate-kept context, writing, "[s]ome trans people seemed to echo or internalize the gender dysphoria clinic's logic of true transsexuality,"[7] where "true transsexuality" excludes forms of identification that exceed or confound binary gender and the standards set by clinical and medical definitions of transsexuality.

The restoration of the binary in such scenes is not only just about genderqueer and non-binary forms of identification but is also always and already a product of a medical discourse structured by white supremacy. Gill-Peterson's work also shows how Money's theory of plasticity is also fundamentally racist. According to articulated and concealed aspects of the model, whites are both more plastic as infants and more gender-differentiated as adults. In practice, this meant the exclusion of children of color from the clinic,[8] and the broader exclusion of trans people of color from medical contexts writ large.[9]

Teaching *GENDER TROUBLE* this year for the first time to my class of trans students — reading it for the first time in a long time — I think I got Jay Prosser's critique of Butler in an experiential way: Butler's semiotics leaves something out, a felt reality of gender that exceeds theory's interest in it. Jack Halberstam quotes Prosser's intervention that "there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply to be," adding that "many transsexuals do not want to represent gender artifice; they actually aspire to the real, the natural indeed the very condition that has been rejected by the queer theory of gender performance."[10] In Gender Trouble the only mention of Johns Hopkins is, tellingly, not a reference to Money's clinic, but to "Structure, Sign, and Play," the lecture given there by Jacques Derrida in 1966 that brought poststructuralism to the American academy. I am, however, still enthralled by Butler's moves, their dialectical inversion of common sense: gender is not the social superstructure to the base of sex, rather sex is as constructed as — or even constructed by — gender. In Butler's critical reversal I also read an echo (or appropriation?) of Gill-Peterson's Money, namely that gender precedes binary sex, as the map precedes the territory. Of course, collapsing the two only makes sense in explicating the antinomy. Not in terms of their aim. Butler's work on gender is a critical account of biopolitical and

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4 Gill-Peterson, 98.
5 Ibid, 119.
6 Ibid.
7 Aren Z. Aizura, "Provincializing Trans" in *MOBILE SUBJECTS: TRANSNATIONAL IMAGINARIES OF GENDER REASSIGNMENT* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 7.
8 Gill-Peterson, 80, 159-60, 197.
9 "The frequent absence of black trans and trans of color children in the clinic's archive, in particular, is not only a product of medical gatekeeping or the whiteness of transsexuality. It is also a product of a distance practiced by black trans and trans of color people from institutional medicine, which was well understood to be a dangerous and frequently violent apparatus." Gill-Peterson, 31.
10 Jack Halberstam, *IN A QUEER TIME AND PLACE: TRANSGENDER BODIES, SUBCULTURAL LIVES* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 50.

discursive structures, distributed and historical processes of subjectification; where Money's output is clinical practice that sought to capture and instrumentalize the specific normative possibilities of plasticity. As my editor Amalle Dublon wrote in a comment on a draft of this essay, "Butler's argument [...] is that the power to performatively produce a person's gender/sex is distributed widely, not located in any one person or institution. The scope, frequency, and variety of performative acts that produce gender makes gender easy to intervene in, but hard to decisively determine."

The impulse to re-naturalize sex appears in the many permutations and infights that postdate the Issue #3 of the *MOVEMENT RESEARCH PERFORMANCE JOURNAL*, the Sodom (of a previous culture war) on which this issue looks back: medical vs. political transness, truscum vs. theyfab, wrong body vs. gender as performance. I don't mean to simplify these oppositions and contradictions, and especially not to conflate Butler's work with a conservative, medicalized account of transness. Of course, for Butler, gender, sex, and sexuality are not analogous to language, but constructed through language. Where "analogy" implies the comparison of discrete things, Butler insists on a performativity that is caught up with language.

The language analogy relies on an unquestioned idea of the native language, discounting bilingualism, aphasia, indeed the arbitrariness of language understood through multilingual experience, through learning a new language, through translation. What makes a language native? The unquestioned performance of mastery in a language? Or the way one feels about the shape of language, not needing to know the rules and conventions, but feeling them? And then what becomes of this analogy if the primacy of a native language is really an affective structure, both a product of, and displaced by, historical and political exigencies or dalliance? If surgical and endocrinological intervention is occasioned by the imperative that various aspects of sex must be (or can be) made to match up with — or prior to — this acquisition of a gender role, what happens to the analogy in reverse? If gender's analog is language, what is the analog of sex?

So perhaps one thing the old language analogy does is displace the material interventions on people's bodies, conveniently excluding them from the frame for the purpose of the comparison. The scientific model of plasticity that the analogy supports also makes a set of universal and transhistorical assertions. Money's "gender roles" are sophisticated devices. As a sexological model that accounts for the arbitrariness of this language or that gender as contingent and impermanent aspects of culture, the concept of plasticity and the gender/sex binary are posited as transhistorical facts, as the new science. Imagine the Money's Hopkins lab as a space station in North America, producing strange new products to populate the recently emptied frontier and remake the territory according to a consolidated, gendered map cooked up in Baltimore.

Science fiction is defined by a kind of conceptual simple machine: something about the setting, or a technology, or some kind of other conceit or literary device makes the reality of the fictional world different from our own. Ursula Le Guin wrote that it is not predictive, but descriptive, that "you can read it, and a lot of other science fiction, as a thought-experiment. [...] let's say this or that is such and so, and see what happens [...] thought and intuition can move freely within bounds set only by the terms of the experiment, which may be very large indeed."[11] In *BABEL-17*, the thought-experiment is often understood to be the Whorf hypothesis, an application of a kind of linguistic relativism. First, Rydra determines the alien transmissions are not a simple code to be deciphered, but an entire language. As she begins internalizing and assimilating it, we learn how it feels: "Babel-17; she had felt it before with other languages, the opening, the widening, the mind forced to sudden growth. But this, this was like the sudden focusing of a lens blurry for years."[12]

I've felt something like that, the past reorganized in an instant, and then again over time: the crossover into thinking in another language, and not just realizing I was trans. Metaphors and analogies are getting mixed now. I'm thinking of when I was on a U.S. State Department-funded language education program in Himeiji, speaking very little English. I suddenly had access to an understanding, difficult to put into words; a sensitivity to cultural differences in the smallest aspects of sociality, and the untranslatability of that specificity.

11 Ursula K. Le Guin, Author's Introduction to *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS* (1969; Author's Note 1976; New York: Ace Books, 2019), 15.
12 Delany, *BABEL-17*, 113.

The thought experiment driving *BABEL-17*, however, is not so much the linguistic relativism thesis — the idea that all aspects of perception, understanding, and meaning differ, potentially vastly, depending on one's native language. Rather, it might be the fact of change. If Money's analogy of gender to language was used to articulate a scarcity of time, an expiration date beyond which the child's gender, like their native language, is sedimented, *BABEL-17* offers a different version of plasticity. Where the former reduces transition and transformation to a logic of re-assignment of intersex patients, (its treatments and interventions not available to trans people,) in the latter we see a model of re-orientation defined through the transmissibility, reception, ingestion, expression, and uncertainty of that which is non-native. Like hormones and surgeries, in Delany's novel Babel-17 was developed in a lab. The analogicity of mutation, of mutilation, cannot account for the digitality of this language virus: the body is left behind. It's a model of language originating, but not ending, in the disembodied transmission. What seemed to be some magical thing, some unknown element, turns out to be a sophisticated military technology. Language is imagined as a biological weapon, a kind of virus that enhances the people who learn it, contorting them into super soldiers. It's taken me a while to arrive, but I want to make an argument for contagion, and for mutilation. I remember the slow battleground of the culture wars centered on Clinton-era theories of influence and contagion. Video games make you violent. Weed is a gateway drug. Broken Windows. Rap music. Elves and witches. Exposure and interest beget deviant behavior. Cooked books from the culture wars and the war on drugs.

Rather than say that transition is a process of uncovering something deeper that was always there, let's say we understand transition as the capacity for change as a question of form, as a gamble or risk, as something unknown rather than known, not an epistemic question at all — am I really trans? In Delany, this happens at the level of form. It's not merely a surrealist exercise: the book performs by modulating its style, changing its voice. Le Guin's "let's say" is the "let's say" of a speech act, not merely a turn of phrase. It reminds me of what Deleuze and Guattari said about Kafka, that his works are a literary machine,

> that breaks the symbolic structure, no less than it breaks hermeneutic interpretation, the ordinary association of ideas, and the imaginary archetype [...]). We believe only in a Kafka that is neither imaginary nor symbolic. We believe only in one or more Kafka machines that are neither structure nor phantasm. We believe only in a Kafka experimentation that is without interpretation or significance and rests only on tests of experience.[13]

The reading is entering into the machine, which outputs a break in the realm of experience. It isn't symbolic or imaginary. It's not just Rydra changing, it's you, thrust into an unexpected, previously foreclosed desiring-body. Subjected to mechanical alteration, mutilated by a contagious new form. Be careful what you read.

It's kind of awkward, reading *BABEL-17* alongside *HISTORIES OF THE TRANSGENDER CHILD*. It's not necessarily an obvious pairing. I listen to an audiobook of the Delany in the car on commutes on the Taconic to my teaching job. I listen to it again when I'm driving back down to the city on 22, lost in the story, not remembering the last twenty minutes of driving, the sun setting. And then a deer. I forgot my heart until it hits as the high beams illuminate two dots at the corner of my right eye; and in the same instant, at the edge of the strange shape flooded with halogen light, its body frailed by winter, gray in the night. The neck extends down, holding its skull and teeth, covered in flesh and quills of hair, touching the grass delicately. Each green blade has its own shadow. I see the crumpled side panel of my car. A handful of hairs plucked by converging metal sheets, years ago, where the deer hit headlong, eyes closed, sending the Chevette into full rotation across three lanes of traffic just outside Cleveland, Ohio. Another thought: I remember my surrender. I remember the first snow last year, covering the back road. The disembodied crash. My car without traction, no way to turn or slow, mounting the snowy berm, small twigs sticking up, almost making it to some white fence before turning over. I'm okay. I'm going seventy miles an hour.

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David Loxton and Fred Barzyk, *LATHE OF HEAVEN* (film stills), WNET, 1980.

13 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *KAFKA: TOWARD A MINOR LITERATURE*, trans. Dana Polan (1975; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 7.