

Chapter Two: Methodologies of Butler, Case, and Torr

Introduction

Cheryl Kilodavis discovered one day at home that her five year old son Dyson was attracted to objects that were beautiful, pink, and glamorous. When she picked Dyson up from Day Care, she noticed that he had gained unwanted public attention for wearing pink high heels and a red sequin dress. Dyson was becoming the subject of scrutiny from his peers and teachers at school for dressing up as a girl. This lead Kilodavis to write the picture book *My Princess Boy* in summer 2010 as a teaching tool for instructors, summer camp counselors, day care providers, and leaders of after school programs to confront the issues of bullying while promoting tolerance (Italie). Kilodavis narrates why her son enjoys dressing up, how wonderful he is, and how he feels if someone taunts him for buying items meant for the opposite gender. She notes that “when he buys girl things, [people] laugh at him and then they laugh at me. It hurts us both” (Kilodavis 11). She pleads to her readers to love and accept her “princess boy” for who he is. Kilodavis dedicates the book to all of the princess boys of the world by thanking them for teaching her how to appreciate their uniqueness (Kilodavis 1). Her simple request for tolerance of her son’s discovery and observation of his gender identity raises questions with society’s cultural views of gender and sexuality. How do the signifiers reinforce patriarchal and ideological images and representations of gender

and sexuality? Can signifiers be used to further investigate and deconstruct these fixed codes and signs related to gender and sexuality?

In this chapter, I will examine a number of observations and theories from various scholars to help examine the problems attached to categorization and limitations set upon sexuality and gender identity in western society. From the analysis of Judith Butler, Sue-Ellen Case, and Diane Torr, semiotics will be applied to investigate how signs and codes for gender and sexuality can be utilized to question ideological viewpoints and push the boundaries of possible identities.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* describes and explains that gender is confined to strict cultural constructions based on ideological perspectives. Essentially, she argues that there is no middle room for multiple gender identities because society's interpretation of gender is tied to biological sex (Butler 6). She offers a tool though to provoke this line of thinking by stating that gender is performative because it is based on expression (Butler 25). In this case, gender is not viewed as a biological marker, but as an individual identity that is uniquely available to every person.

Though Butler begins to combat the problematic restrictions placed upon gender and sexuality, Sue-Ellen Case notes that semiotics can help break down the codes and signs attached to the identities that are restricted by a dominant gender. She theorizes that a questioning of the signs of gender lead to the deconstruction of the connection and alliance between semiotics and patriarchal ideology (Case 114).

As Butler identifies the problem at large, and Case reveals and explains how the deconstruction of the semiotics and ideology can happen, performance artist Diane Torr pushes the issue the furthest by having the opposite sex study the behavioral patterns of the dominant gender identity. By exploring the inner codes and signs of the dominant gender identity (the straight male), Torr has given women the tools through “Man for Day” Workshops to comprehend and question the perception of identities based on gender and sexuality.

Butler: The Problems Placed Upon Gender and Sexuality

The first site of the problem is two tightly maintained and controlled gender identities: heterosexual male and heterosexual female. These identities reinforce an ideological belief of heteronormativity, where a person is culturally assigned one of these two constructions, making it impossible for any consideration of another gender identity. Judith Butler supports this notion in her book *Gender Trouble*. She establishes the problem by observing that gender intersects with a number of other aspects of class, race, sexuality, and ethnicity that are discursively enforced identities in society (Butler 3). Therefore, according to Butler, “it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler 3). With gender heavily tied to other components of cultural identities, there is a limited opportunity to question how patriarchal ideology confines gender into tightly controlled binaries. Furthermore, Butler maintains the belief that

gender is related to sex, causing gender to be mirrored with sex and be restricted by sex (Butler 6). In terms of semiotics, gender is a sign that is influenced by a culture to represent patriarchal ideology through codes that convey the images and presence of straight male and female gender.

With restrictions placed upon gender constructions, the heterosexual male identity becomes established as the cultural norm. To maintain this apparent platform of power and normativity, masculinity is applied culturally to suppress femininity because it is not masculine. Butler further demonstrates that dialectical appropriation [ownership and control of the language], and suppression of “Other” is one of many tactics of expanding and rationalizing the masculinist domain (Butler 14). If Butler’s observation of how gender constructions are maintained is viewed through semiotics, then certain signs and codes dominate over another set that are perceived as “Other,” (in this case, femininity) which helps expand the platform of the straight male gender identity, pushing away any alternatives.

As gender is restricted by patriarchal ideology from creating and promoting multiple gender identities, sexuality suffers from the same problem, but the situation and circumstances of its restrictions differ. Biologically men and women have different sexual organs and functions, which are automatically categorized into binaries of sex. With two separate categories, the sexuality of both sexes have a cultural problem that is similarly placed upon gender identity. Butler explains that “If sexuality is culturally

constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before,' 'outside,' or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility" (Butler 30).

The power relations that Butler refers to exist in patriarchal ideology, which limits the opportunities for other identities to be recognized, causing a struggle between female and male sexuality. The struggle is acknowledged by Butler as phallic relations of power, which are constructed by "male identified" sexuality that helps realign and redistribute identification within sexuality (Butler 30). If male sexuality is signified as phallic relations of power, then it constitutes a meaning that male sexuality has power and domination over female sexuality. But another way to illustrate this situation is to create a signifier for Phallus (male) and Other (female) based on this line of ideological thought. To support this notion, Butler comments that "To 'be' the Phallus is to be the 'signifier' of the desire of the Other and *to appear* as this signifier" (Butler 44). Basically, "Other" now becomes a signifier that reflects and represents desire for heteronormative male sexuality.

So are the signs and codes of gender completely regulated from opening up the possibilities of different sets of gender identity and sexuality? There may be a way to disrupt this notion of strict gender identities through a different application of signifiers. According to Butler, gender can open up to multiple identities in terms of divergences and convergences without being obedient to a definitional norm (Butler

16). If more identities are allowed, more signifiers will surely follow and attach themselves to those identities because the construction of identities, and the signifiers of those identities, feed off each other.

The best way to investigate this belief is through performance, meaning that a performance of a gender is used to challenge or change the signifiers related to heteronormative gender identity and sexuality. Butler asserts a similar belief by assessing that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 25). Here, gender is re-imagined as a performance that is dictated by expressions. Since signifiers (along with expressions) and the construction of identities influence each other, the expressions that create a performance of a gender introduces new signifiers for that construction, and vice versa. Furthermore, when a new signifier emerges and changes that identity, it can be modified because of cultural and economically based ideas. For example, the image of the straight male in a business suit wearing a tie (a.k.a. power tie) signifies dominance. With the tie placed in the front of the chest, the straight male here also uses his tie to communicate that his gender is of a high economic and social status. He reinforces the high rank status of his gender by keeping his tie and chest centralized, which signifies the importance of his gender construction. In contrast, the image of a young man wearing low-ride jeans and holding a gun signifies that he is from a lower social and economic rank.

Sue-Ellen Case: Using Semiotics to Deconstruct Gender Constructions

While there is the potential for creating new signifiers and codes to explore multiple identities based on gender and sexuality, it is equally applicable to apply semiotics as a tool to expose the issues surrounding the restrictions placed upon gender and sexuality. For example, while Butler reveals and explains the problems gender and sexuality experience through patriarchal ideology and how these elements influence semiotics, Sue-Ellen Case argues that semiotics can be utilized to pinpoint the problems of gender and sexuality represented in society. Identifying the issues surrounding sexuality and gender can lead to a deconstruction of the cultural codes that are dominant in society. Case explains that once cultural feminists started to break down dominant culture codes that imposed sexualization of women, new discoveries were utilized “in semiotics and reception theory to deconstruct the alliance between sign systems and the patriarchal order” (Case 114). With this process of breaking down the dominant cultural codes, new findings lead to a separation of sign systems and the patriarchal order, which removes the chance of a patriarchal order or ideology from directly influencing the sign system. Here, the method of directly questioning the semiotics of gender and sexuality may begin to help solve the problem in addition to Butler’s theory of investigating sexuality and gender through performance and expressions.