

Reading questions March 20

Some reminders and working definitions:

- “Sex” can be (controversially) defined as sexual difference; male and female; a biological distinction.
- “Gender” can be (controversially) defined as social role; culturally or historically specific structure of power relations; masculinity and femininity in all their forms, at the level of the individual or society.
- “Transgender”: someone whose gender does not map to their sex, or who crosses or blurs the lines between (among?) genders.
- “Queer” is used in these essays to indicate both a general strangeness, deviance, or vector of nonconformity; and as a term reclaimed from its more recent history as a homophobic insult, to indicate anyone whose sexuality does not line up with dominant social norms.

NB: a couple of times Salamon uses her own neologism [new term] *homoerratic*. This is a pun on “homoerotic,” which means “sexual desire directed toward (or between) people of the same sex.” When the *homoerotic* really goes *queer*, it becomes *homoerratic*!

Gayle Salamon, “Boys of the Lex: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality”

1. Look carefully at the two photos that Salamon “reads” in her opening paragraphs. What do you see? What does *she* see?
2. Here is Salamon’s thesis statement: “I would suggest that this calendar, as an artifact of queer sexual culture, offers a corrective to one of the more persistent critiques in gender, and especially transgender, studies: that queer theory, with its valorization of flux, instability, and all things postmodern, ignores or minimizes the implications of gender as it is lived in ‘real life.’ This call for a return to ‘real’ gender, as opposed to gender as it is merely ‘theorized,’ draws a distinction between gender as it is conceptualized and gender as it is lived, where the latter is thought to somehow expose the former as either hopelessly utopian conjecture or — worse — bent on dissolving the ‘reality’ of gender as it is embodied. This division, which posits the materiality of the body as a stable ground against the wild proliferations of a supposedly disembodied and disengaged theorizing, has the effect of flattening out ‘theory’ to the point of caricature” [577-8].
3. What is “social construction” (the real answer to this starts at p. 581) and what three objections does Salamon think transgender writers have raised to it (they are outlined on pp. 577-81)?
4. 582 ff. Salamon is a phenomenologist by training. What does she think phenomenology can explain about bodies, and how does her reference to Foucault fit into that picture?
5. Salamon is critical of a model in which transgender people are “wilful agents”—people who decide what gender they are going to be, especially where this decision is construed as a linguistic one (“I’m a woman”). Her critiques of Green and Hausman are central to this point. Explain.

6. On pages 591-594 Salamon offers a really nice summary of Husserl's phenomenological project, and how Merleau-Ponty both takes it up and revises it. On p. 593 she says, "the operation of the phenomenological reduction produces a body strikingly similar to the 'real' body proposed by some trans theorists in its isolation from historicity and lack of situatedness within a social world, but that body differs in two important respects." What are they?

Sara Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology"

1. Ahmed's guiding question is a very grand one: "What would it mean for queer studies if we were to pose the question of the orientation of sexual orientation as a phenomenological question?" Based on your reading of the first few pages of the article, what do you think Ahmed is trying to get at in posing this question?

2. Ahmed talks at length about how "the objects that we direct our attention toward reveal the direction we have taken in life." For her this is both phenomenological (think of Leder's analysis of the nullpoint) and political (what examples does she invoke?). Can you think of your own examples of objects that you either foreground or background (spatially and temporally) that tell you something about the direction of your life?

3. "We could say that history 'happens' in the very repetition of gestures" [553]. What does Ahmed mean, and how is this claim related to Foucault's analysis of docile bodies?

4. "In the case of sexual orientation, it is not then simply that we have it. To become straight means not only that we have to turn toward the objects given to us by heterosexual culture but also that we must turn away from objects that take us off this line" [554]. What widely held understanding of "sexual orientation" is Ahmed challenging here? What alternative does she develop? If she's right that sexual orientation is a process, a developmental trajectory that involves turning toward some [love] objects, people, expectations, life events, and so on, how has your *orientation* evolved? How have you chosen these paths, and how have you been nudged or pushed onto them?βπ