

The End of Gender

A Psychological Autopsy

Shari L. Thurer

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For everyone on the gender continuum

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PREFACE

Let's face it, sexuality has changed—all sorts of deviations have been “outed”—but theories about them haven't caught up. They have arrested in moth-eaten bias—the conviction that there are two, and only two, normal versions of gender. Biologists are still apt to look for the origins of homosexuality in lesions or biochemical abnormalities, as if gay and straight sex were absolutes; and the former were a faulty version of the latter. Psychologists still try to “fix” sissy boys, as if effeminacy were bad. Behaviorists continue to blame sexual nonconformity on poor parental shaping, and psychoanalysts persist in regarding transgendered individuals as character disordered.

Yet, even as scientists, psychological theorists, and practitioners display archaic prejudice, there are other theorists of sexuality—those that hail from the realm of French cultural theory—who leapfrog 180 degrees away from hierarchical thinking, who view all sexuality as okay. But while postmodernists, the French-inflected theorists, are politically correct, they sometimes lack common sense and are insensitive to people in pain. Here we have two hyper-educated, presumably reasonable groups of people with opposing viewpoints, neither of which is sufficient for explaining erotic desire. You would think they would cross-pollinate ideas and build a better theory. The problem is they do not talk to each other. While they grapple with similar topics, they barely cross-reference. Their jargon is mutually impenetrable. It is as if they are speaking in tongues.

I wrote this book as an antidote to this Tower of Babel. My intent was to synthesize and critique the various theories about sexual orientation and gender identity. I focused on psychoanalytic theory and post-modern gender theory, but included biology, evolution, data-based psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, and linguistics, as well as inferences from art, literature, and pop culture. These disciplines can

never entirely cohere because there are vast differences among them about what constitutes evidence and truth. Nevertheless, they do suggest ways that psychoanalytic theory—my home—might be modernized, or “postmodernized,” to shed light on our “new” reality.

Here is a road map of my intellectual journey. [Chapter 1](#) overviews the demise of binary sex/gender categories and introduces postmodern gender theory (aka “queer theory”) as a possible way of sorting out some of the contradictions in our understanding of sexuality. [Chapter 2](#) takes a closer look at postmodernism and the cultural landscape, zeroing in on recent queer history, and culminating in a case description in which I incorporate some postmodern ideas. In [Chapter 3](#), I critique some of the premises employed in the “harder” sciences—neurophysiology, genetics, hormonal studies, anatomy—as well as some of the “softer” ones—data-based psychology, anthropology, sociology, and evolution. [Chapter 4](#) is a history of queer theory, from its origins in feminism, gay theory, and French philosophy, to its status today in literature, arts, and philosophy departments. In [Chapter 5](#), I review psychoanalytic theory, incorporating some ideas from postmodern gender theory. By using queer theory in selective ways—by smashing the binary—psychoanalytic therapists might be able to make their brilliant insights about the unconscious relevant to the twenty-first century.

1

PSYCHOANALYSIS MEETS POSTMODERN SEX

“We’re born naked, and the rest is drag.”¹

Drag queen RuPaul

Once there were only two genders: male and female. Males, typically, were the big hairy ones who left the toilet seat up. Females were the smaller, less hairy ones who put the toilet seat down. They had eyes only for each other. It was easy to tell them apart. These days it’s not so easy. Men sport ponytails and earrings and teach nursery school; women flaunt their tattoos and biceps and smoke cigars. Everywhere we look—on television, at the movies, in glossy magazines, in self-help books—we see not two genders, but something more like a crossbreed, a point on a continuum. There she (he? it?) is in a Pepsi commercial, ogling the sculpted torso of a male construction worker, appropriating the macho gaze with uncanny ease. There he (she? it?) is again in the TV hit *The Sopranos*, where Mafia boss Tony talks about—of all things—his feelings to a female psychiatrist; and there he (she? it?) is yet again in my own psychotherapy consulting room, this time in the form of a male college football player neurotically obsessed with dieting, a preoccupation that used to be exclusively a girl thing. With the turn of the millennium we have sequined female ice skaters who beat up their opponents and pumped-up male opera divas who sing soprano. The genders are leaking into each other. And these are just the most obvious examples.

The demise of discrete gender categories goes deeper, well beyond the relaxation of fixed gender codes for roles and behaviors. Not only is each sex playing with each other's toys, wearing each other's clothes, and adopting each other's neuroses—each is usurping the other's lovers. In many circles it is no longer expected that sexual preference be for the opposite gender. Men are openly attracted to men, and women to women. Homosexuality has become downright reputable. Same-sex commitment ceremonies are now routinely announced in the *New York Times*, and Massachusetts recently tentatively legalized gay marriage. In 2000 Vermont allowed gay couples to form civil unions, and in 2003 The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed gay privacy and opened the way to a revolution in family life. Indeed, there are so many gay characters on prime time that their presence no longer feels sensational, it merely shows that television programming is catching up with real life. When both the daughter of the conservative Republican vice president and the wily winner of TV's first *Survivor* (mother of all "reality" television and de facto barometer of mainstream taste) are unabashedly "out," we can only assume that a homosexual is a person one might conceivably want to be.

If the new visibility of homosexuality derails our conception of orderly gender arrangements, then the new visibility of bisexuality amounts to an intellectual train wreck. The obvious ease with which so many folks are switching sexual scripts seems to defy an eternal verity, that we are either straight or gay, attracted to men or women—but never both. Apparently, a person's sexual orientation may not be fixed after all. In a few ZIP codes, one's erotic preference for a person of a certain gender has become as malleable as one's hairdo, and about as serious. The necessity for a permanent and exclusive sexual orientation seems to have become obsolete.

Joining the list of gender archaisms may soon be the requirement that a gender identity cohere with your genitals. These days it's not unusual to be one gender on the Internet and another in bed. All attributes once considered specific to a particular sex, including the very feeling of being either male or female, are now, for some, up for grabs, and may yo-yo back and forth. Gender-bending is the new beat of pop stars, Olympic athletes, fashionistas, perfume makers, and young intellectuals, many of whom have taken to flaunting a self-styled potpourri of male and female characteristics. Regarding attributes like gender role, identity, and sexual preference, we're apparently more smorgasbord than *menu fixe*.

The contemporary art world has been supplying the visuals for what the whole culture is obsessing about. Recent installations at the

Pompidou, the Guggenheim, and the Brooklyn Museum are chock full of randomly situated penises and vaginas. Trends in fashion and cosmetics—boxer shorts (with a fly!) for women, hair coloring for men—reinforce the gender blur. Obviously, marketers have discovered the allure of androgyny. We are bombarded with advertisements featuring partially nude models of ambiguous sex curiously draped and intertwined—but who desires whom?—juxtaposed against consumer goods. Images like these, which once might have evoked disgust, instead produce an inclination to shop. Presumably, deviance sells. In a radical reversal of sensibility, that which used to cause some folks to lose their lunch—the depiction of so-called perversion—now pushes product. Here is an idea worth pondering.

Let me disentangle some of the nomenclature. The term “sex” refers specifically to a person’s anatomy or to an erotic act, like sexual intercourse. In up-to-date social science usage, sex is distinguished from “gender,” the latter of which refers to the social expectations for a person’s sex. “Gender identity” or “sexual identity,” an individual’s sense of being a gendered self, is not always congruent with society’s expectations for that individual’s biological sex, and neither is sexual orientation. Complicating the matter is the fact that a person’s anatomy may be ambiguous, and so may a so-called erotic act. Recall the infamous oral-genital encounter between Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton: Clinton steadfastly refused to call it sex.

These terms seem positively precise when compared to the newly minted vocabulary used to describe our changing sex/gender reality. Prominent in this new gender-speak is “gender-bender,” which is an inclusive term referring to all gender nonconformists, from female body-builders to the straight male lovers of men who cross-dress—anybody who defies gender expectations. The term “queer” is synonymous with gender-bender but is sometimes used politically, and therefore may include so-called normal individuals and, indeed, anyone, as long as they are willing to label themselves queer and are openly doubtful about the existence of a hardwired gender and/or sex binary.

Among the diverse people living under the big gender-bender tent are “transgenders,” those folks whose mental gender does not synchronize with their congenital anatomy. In other words, transgenders’ physical bodies aren’t consonant with their disposition. These individuals feel they were truly meant to be a different anatomical sex and/or they wish to engage in cross-gender behavior at least some of the time. Transgenders include in their midst, but are not limited to, “transvestites” (cross-dressers or practitioners of drag); “transsexuals” (those

who medically “correct” their genitals to match their gender identity); and “intersexuals” (people with various physical conditions in which the genital or reproductive organs do not fit into the standard category of male and female).

The prevalence of gender-bending broadly conceived is not trivial. Statistics are slippery things, but the most comprehensive study done in the United States so far indicates that 9 percent of the women and 10 percent of the men surveyed reported homosexual behavior, desire, or identity since turning age 18.² The incidence would be about half if you counted only those men who sleep exclusively with men and women who sleep exclusively with women on a regular basis and admit it to a survey taker. Comparably reliable statistics do not exist in this country for the percentage of people who yearn for, seek, or undergo a sex change. In the Netherlands, where accurate records are maintained, it was found that that 1 in 30,400 persons born female and 1 in 11,900 persons born male had taken hormones to change their sex.³ The Dutch data are a decade old and probably represent a conservative estimate of prevalence today.

Individuals under the tent may be gay, straight, bisexual, or asexual, regardless of the shape of their genitals. In fact, about one third of male-to-female transgenders, including post-operative transsexuals, go on loving women—hardly the most parsimonious route to get a woman if we presume that most women prefer to have sex with people with penises. Obviously, these particular transgenders’ wish was not to be conventional women, but to be lesbians.⁴ Their basic identity is female and gay, not male and heterosexual. Contrary to the simplicities of everyday thinking, a person’s physical body, gender identity, and sexual orientation are not necessarily yoked together but may vary somewhat independently of each other and over time. Yet they remain incorrectly yoked together in the public mind, which stubbornly wants to pigeonhole a person as either permanently male or female, replete with attendant clichéd attributes. (This tendency to obsessively compartmentalize gender has been hilariously parodied by Pat in TV’s *Saturday Night Live*, whose deliberate sexual ambiguity irresistibly frustrated all onlookers.) As advances in medical technology and hormone replacement enable future generations to fashion their own sex/gender as they wish, the boundaries between categories will become vaguer and vaguer. So will nomenclature.

The current conspicuousness of gender-bending is part of a global cultural shift in thinking about gender deviants: that they are, like, say, left-handers, a very ordinary minority. While not quite welcomed in

polite society, gender-benders are gaining respectability. Once ghettoized in the seedy venues of the demimonde, cross-dressers such as Dame Edna or Eddie Izzard have become fixtures of the mainstream. Drag is now the current entertainment of choice for upscale Bar Mitzvahs and Broadway shows (e.g., the current hit *Hairspray*). Publicly voiced acceptance of gender nonconformity is still rare, but there has been an observable positive tilt in the media, exemplified by a 1995 account in the venerable *New Yorker* of a well-known cross-dressing businessman in Nashville. This popular Tennessee Republican had a habit of showing up with his wife at restaurants wearing a tuxedo jacket, along with a skirt and high heels. Apparently, no one seemed to mind.⁵

These days, even flaming transgenders like RuPaul are not automatically reviled, let alone jailed or forced to undergo a “cure.” The arrival of the twenty-first century has been accompanied by a rise in queers’ approval rating as well as a rise in gender-bending as a subject of intense academic interest. In only one year (2002), transgenderism was seriously explored in a historical study published by the Harvard University Press (*How Sex Changed*), a collection of thoughtful essays by novelist/psychotherapist Amy Bloom (*Normal*), and a critically acclaimed novel by Jeffrey Eugenides (*Middlesex*).⁶ Two years before, Hilary Swank won the Academy Award for her realistic portrayal of true-life murder victim Brandon Teena, a female-to-male transgender, in *Boys Don’t Cry*. Unlike Hollywood’s typical depiction of a transgender individual, Teena was not presented as repugnant or outrageous, but as sympathetic and gentle; it was his brutal murderers who were repugnant and outrageous.

Transgenders like Teena are becoming so apparent, so bourgeois, that they are actually organizing to demand political equality. Far from flouting norms, they are creating new ones, like the acceptance of themselves into the natural order of things. A few are lobbying for the right to marry or adopt children, requests that hardly signal a wish to tweak bourgeois convention but rather a wish to join it. Herein lies a new market niche for etiquette books. Such was the conclusion of a clever *New Yorker* staff writer who had fruitlessly perused existing etiquette guides in search of a recommendation for appropriate attire for a member of a wedding who happened to be in between sexes at that moment.⁷ Recently, when an NPR radio researcher asked male-to-female transgender teens in Los Angeles what they wanted most in the world, he found them to be, well, just like their “biologically correct” female adolescent counterparts. Their responses: “a cute steady boyfriend”; or, if the transgender teen’s orientation happened to be lesbian, “a girlfriend.”⁸

The law is trying to keep up with the new social reality. Most states now permit transsexual persons to change their drivers licenses and birth certificates to conform to their new status. In 1977, the New York Supreme Court ruled that Renee Richards, a transsexual, could play in women's tennis tournaments despite being genetically male. So, except for the fact of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation, queers may not be so queer after all, at least in the human, if not the numerical, sense. Their increased exposure has shown them to be pretty much indistinguishable from everybody else. They crave ordinary lifestyles. They are not freaks. Maybe it's "normal" to be queer.

Many twenty-somethings think so. What was perverse for baby boomers has become mainstream for their offspring, who have been surfacing in my practice over the last decade—such as the male college student who realizes he is bisexual but, after a brief period of adjustment, shrugs his shoulders and plans to get on with an otherwise mundane life. Bisexual young women are so common on college campuses as to merit their own acronym: l.u.g. = lesbian until graduation. In the current atmosphere, it's practically obligatory for a new TV ensemble show aimed at the youth demographic to offer a gender-blending character. Take the lyrics of a pop song by the band Astrid (used in a 2001 Target commercial)—“Are you a boy or a girl? Either way you rock my world!” These lyrics tend to puzzle an over-forty cohort but are entirely obvious to one that is under thirty. They resonate with contemporary youths' sensibility.

Indeed, the routine paraphernalia of today's young people—their zines, online “handles,” comics, underwear, haircuts, body decoration, ornaments, icons, and so on—can be aggressively androgynous. If we were to seriously consider the implications of these artifacts instead of casually dismissing them as the ritual rebellious stuff of youth, we would realize that they confound our habits of gender typecasting, which reinforces our need to rethink our habits. To be sure, there is a lot of sex going on among young adults, probably as much or more than their predecessors, but, unlike that of their predecessors, their sexual activity may not involve the convergence of a penis with a vagina. I am not suggesting that erotic desire is not alive and well, but that it is not necessarily deployed in the way it used to be. For a whole generation, the meltdown of gender categories is a given and not a problem. We are witnessing the end of gender, or at least the end of gender in the way it has been customarily defined.

But it's funny about gender categories. Even as we notice the fineness of the line between the sexes—we'd have to have been asleep for the last thirty years not to—we just don't get it. We're mired in doublethink.

Most of us are gender fundamentalists, believing that gender and sexual orientation come in two, and only two, varieties. Even those who profess tolerance for all manner of sexual behavior construe the blending of gender as a trend, a trivial phenomenon that goes on only in New York or San Francisco, in the movies, or among people in arty professions—certainly not among people who drive SUVs and own suburban real estate. We stubbornly resist acknowledging the implications of the obvious: that if gender and sexual orientations are continuums (as many claim to think), then we shouldn't be quite so surprised when biological females indulge in "potty" humor and make rude noises or when biological males wish to wear open-toed stilettos. It should follow that those kinds of behaviors would be somewhat expectable, not shocking or morally tainted. Yet to many folks, even to those who proclaim the opposite, gender-bending remains disturbing and outrageous, equivalent to mucking around in swampy waters. There is a serious disconnect going on between our thinking and our believing. In their hearts, many otherwise intelligent people cling to a rigid sex/gender paradigm.

We have only to look at pop sensibility—at sitcom-style girl-bonding; at the allegedly hardwired "boys will be boys" mentality that excuses activities such as those of Bill Clinton and the NFL; or at the frightened, triumphalist rage of a certain strain of women's rock music—to realize the insidious reach of this segregationist mentality. Take humor: Caricaturing sexual genres is a veritable staple of stand-up comedy, of greeting cards, of comic novels like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and of the joke spam that clogs our computers. In typical e-list fodder, every configuration of human coupling is assigned a blatantly stereotypic trademark conflict. For straights, it's the Venus/Mars thing, the gist of which goes something like this: men are aggressive, competitive, selfish boors; women are their moral superior and also their dupes. They speak in different languages. Gay men, on the other hand, are said to complain that they can't find a good man with whom to settle down. Sex for them is as impersonal as going to the gym. Lesbians' problematic issues are—to wit—the "urge to merge" and "lesbian bed death" (the so-called tendency for lesbians to lose sexual interest in their partner even as they sustain an emotional bond). And "bis" wonder if they exist, as does everyone else (buttressed, no doubt, by the heterosexual disclosures in 2001 of once-bisexual icon, actress Anne Heche). Sexual humor like this depends for its effect on an apartheid-like mentality that presumes discrete, inviolable boundaries between genders and sexual orientations. Good fences make good neighbors. Without boundaries, there would be no group identity, no exclusivity, no sense of superiority, nor,

importantly, tribal behavior of which to make fun. To be sure, the joke teller, like the rest of us, is unaware of this presumption. The belief in neat, binary divisions of gender and orientation is so ordinary, so internalized, and so implicit, that, like air, it is not noticed.

Of course, popular thinking, not being subject to the demands of conceptual rigor, may well accommodate two diametrically opposing ideas without noticing a contradiction, especially if it has no impetus to do otherwise. A pop mentality has a notoriously high tolerance for cognitive dissonance. With regard to gender categories, most people manage to live quite comfortably with a tidy illusion of duality because the great majority of people are content with their sexual orientation and biological sex. They take them for granted and assume everyone else does too. At the heart of their belief may be a kind of hubris, albeit an inadvertent one: the conviction that their own inclinations are ordinary for everyone, that if they prefer heterosexual sex, then it's normal to prefer heterosexual sex. Their perspective is limited to their own reflection in the mirror. Or perhaps some people are victims of their own thought police; that is, they are so threatened by any awareness of sexual or gender deviance that they banish it from consciousness.

But science, with its imprimatur of truth and objectivity, is supposed to be immune to common prejudice. Presumably, it adheres to a higher standard—the uncompromising belief in only what can be seen, measured, and proven in randomized, double-blind tests. Yet it, too, has fallen prey to the assumption of discrete gender categories, thereby lending that notion undue intellectual respectability. The field of evolutionary psychology (viewed as a science by some) is a case in point. Basking in the reflected glory of exciting new advances in genetics and molecular biology, this discipline is receiving especially widespread press at the moment, along with anything to do with chromosomes, heredity, or the human genome. But while recent studies in genetics may have resulted in new cancer treatments, better forensic evidence, and disease-resistant crops, those in evolutionary psychology seem to have revived an interest in an exclusively biological explanation for virtually all human actions or feelings, including depression, homosexuality, religion, and consciousness. Never mind our soul, spirit, imagination, or the subterranean forces swirling around in our psyche—the very qualities that make us human. Typical of evolutionary psychologists' thinking is their Neo-Darwinian rationale for rape—that men rape women because sexual assault is favored by natural selection to give sexually dispossessed males the chance to have children. The implication is that men can't help it: it's encoded in their DNA. Blame your genes, they seem to be saying. (But a biological explanation

undermines social and political reform: genes are impervious to legislation). It is rarely pointed out that these researchers may be offering skimpy evidence, misconceiving how genetics works, and/or employing circular reasoning; that is, committing the tautological error of assuming in their research design that which they are attempting to explain, namely, sex/gender difference.⁹

Alas, it is in psychology, the field from which I hail, that this line of thinking receives its fullest elaboration. Developmental and educational psychologists, in particular, have razed forests with their publication of empirical evidence describing differences between gays and straights, males and females. Even though many researchers explicitly caution that they are talking about socialized characteristics, their accounts have a way of slipping into essentialism, that is, biological inevitability. Quite apart from their contents, the sheer quantity of data about difference, in and of itself, stacks the deck against a perception of similarity. Most researchers are looking for difference (not sameness) and are therefore apt to find it and exaggerate its importance—like looking for distinguishing characteristics in identical twins, discovering a mole or two, and concluding that the twins are not identical. They deduce too much from too little. The way these studies have been designed obscures the fact that gender and sexual orientation may be continuums. We too readily infer from them that men and women (and likewise, homosexuals and heterosexuals) are members of completely dissimilar categories, not variations of a common category—that they are essentially different, not fundamentally the same. Never mind the fact that, genetically speaking, every human being on the planet is 99.9 percent identical.

Even more demoralizing to me is the realization that the specialty of psychological practice in which I was trained, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, derived from the very theory that took sex out of the closet, is one that has done much until recently to keep it in (all but straight sex, that is). Originally revolutionary, the *agent provocateur* of the avant-garde (who took dream life very seriously), psychoanalysis was literally mind altering and antibourgeois. Psychoanalysts and creative types used to have an affinity for each other. Art and therapy circles seriously overlapped. The Hogarth Press, founded by the bohemian writers and thinkers known as Bloomsbury, for example, was the first publisher of Freud in English. Anaïs Nin, famous for her scandalous diaries, was analyzed by Otto Rank. Salvador Dali, for whom eccentricity was a stock in trade, painted the dream sequences reported by the psychiatric patient in Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. And lay analyst Lou Andreas-Salome was the intimate of both philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and poet

Rainer Maria Rilke. The list goes on. Visual artists like Rene Magritte and Man Ray and modernist authors like James Joyce and William Faulkner purposely tapped into the swirling taboo thoughts and impulses of the unconscious; and architect Richard Neutra, like Freud, blurred the lines between exterior and interior. Intellectual incest reigned. Artists and psychoanalysts were mutually attracted allies in the cultural revolution.

But that was the art/psychoanalytic scene of the first half of the last century. Psychoanalysis has calcified over the years into a theory that, until ten years ago, had been interpreted as sanctioning one, and only one, line of human development—that which leads to the heterosexual marital bed. It no longer smashes the status quo. Even today the theory is less reflective of the once-scandalous thinking of its founders than the conservative sexual politics of its heyday, the “I Like Ike” years. Accordingly, it is now most often understood as presupposing two complementary genders, each of which has an appropriate role and distinctive proclivities, ergo the gender binary and, in poet Adrienne Rich’s words, “compulsory heterosexuality.” The myopia of this view might not have been so damaging had parochial mid-century psychoanalytic thinking held less sway over the collective imagination. At the time, it powerfully influenced social science, education, child rearing practices, and the law, as well as the psychotherapy business itself and the very formation of psychiatric diagnostic categories. With its enormous prestige, it served to define what was healthy, good, and right, and deviant sexuality did not qualify. Queer inclinations were deemed pathological. In the decades that followed, these ideas hardened. Ironically, what was once a liberating paradigm shift had itself become a repressive one. Today’s artists are more likely to take Prozac or do yoga than engage in orthodox psychoanalysis or look to it for inspiration.

Aroused from its moral and conceptual torpor by the women’s movement and the sexual revolution, society at large became more sensitive to issues of gender and sexuality in the late sixties, but many psychoanalysts kept their heads stubbornly buried in the sand. Oblivious to the bias in their own backyard, few managed to notice that their gay clients were no sicker than the rest of the population. Or if they did, they did not broadcast their thoughts. For too long psychoanalysts and other psychoanalytically trained therapists maintained a fastidious distance from the second half of the twentieth century. They were well behind the bell curve in dealing sensibly with these issues. It took them twenty years longer to okay homosexuality than even garden variety psychiatrists, who themselves had lagged behind mainstream culture

when, in 1973, they finally removed the eighty-one words describing homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), thereby making it normal to be gay. By the early '80s, most research psychologists, following the lead of psychiatry, had purged homophobic bias from their methodology, but the psychoanalytic institutes remained oblivious.¹⁰ During this time, non-heterosexuals were considered untreatable and were denied access to psychoanalytic training. I should add that "gender identity disorder" is still categorized as a pathological condition in the 1994 DSM, continuing the psychiatric habit of masquerading a social judgment as a medical fact. But on a positive note, its inclusion in the DSM does facilitate financial reimbursement by insurance companies for pricey gender reassignment procedures.

It is currently common among analysts to minimize their dark legacy with regard to gender nonconformity or to assign it to a far distant past. Their ideas may have been calamitous to many people, but why dwell on your mistakes? Other analysts, perhaps out of professional courtesy, have muted their criticism. These are difficult times for psychoanalysts. Besieged by managed care and a vogue for quick-fix biological treatments, they are necessarily more preoccupied with self-preservation than in delivering a *mea culpa* or repairing theory at the behest of a stigmatized minority. I suspect their resistance is driven less by homophobia than by being otherwise engaged. But their reluctance to publicly acknowledge the full measure of their past error serves to compound it for those tarnished. It also amounts to self-serving historical revisionism. You merely have to glance at psychoanalytic journals of only a few years ago to find homosexuals described as overly narcissistic, perverted, arrested in their development, and/or incapable of mature love. It is hypocritical of psychoanalysts, the consummate debunkers of self-delusion, to hesitate to grapple with their own closeted skeletons or to proceed in critiquing their ideas so quietly that the world at large is unaware.

To be sure, there is a small groundswell of analysts working to revise theory to accommodate modern sexual reality; committees have formed, a few journals have been created dedicated specifically to sex/gender issues, and works representing different points of view have been added to the canon. But most of the people doing the talking and writing are gay themselves (and/or living in New York or San Francisco), and they are mostly talking to each other.¹¹ "Lesbigay" analysts counsel each other to keep a low profile. "Queer" issues, they warn, are still political hot potatoes in a number of psychoanalytic circles, some of which are stuck in a time warp. As a result, psychoanalytic theory, despite its enormous

potential for understanding human nature, has practically arrested in its usefulness for explaining gender identity and desire.

The gap between theory and reality puts psychoanalytically oriented therapists like me in a no-win situation: to summarily eschew theory would oblige us to wing it, to proceed in performing psychotherapy without a roadmap, to discard much of which we know in our bones to be true. It reduces our method to chaos. But, alternatively, to selectively partake of theory when convenient, to unsystematically pick and choose, and to employ psychology models as we do garden tools such as spades and shears, employing or discarding them based on their usefulness (the *modus operandi* of most seasoned therapists), renders us prone to bias and arrogance. It strikes me as lazy, sloppy, subjective—too dismissive of our potential for finding coherence.

Yet, to do otherwise, to wholly embrace the theory without criticism, would force us to falsely conclude that gender nonconformity is less than optimal, if not outright sick. We are in a conceptual mess. As specialists in human behavior, we are in the unenviable position of being expected to shed light on a subject about which we know very little. Obviously this lack of understanding limits our effectiveness as caretakers. Granted, we probably get closer to an understanding of peoples' experiences of sexual preferences and gender identity than other professionals (if for no other reason than we have the luxury of time to pay scrupulous attention to what clients say). Yet we can no more explain why certain persons are queer (or not) than why they may prefer Indian food over Thai. Many of us are doing a lot more guesswork than we let on. We simply do not yet comprehend the causal chain of events or variables that lead to sexual orientation or gender identity. Neither do neurologists, evolutionists, behavioral psychologists, geneticists, or anyone else in the scientific or social science disciplines. There is a story here that we are all missing.

But there may be a glimmer of hope in a recent intellectual movement that has been taking place in the arts and humanities—postmodern gender theory, known sardonically (and probably to its detriment) as “queer theory.” Queer theory is effusive about precisely those subjects in which psychoanalysis is tongue-tied: the modern sexual scene. The fingerprints of these maverick scholars are all over the place these days in fields like philosophy, literature, anthropology, film theory, or cultural studies. In fact, the literature pouring forth from this hybrid young discipline is so voluminous that it practically constitutes its own publishing niche, although its readership tends to be limited to itself. In academic circles, these scholars are known as the “lit-crit” crowd,