Rethinking Gender Borders: The Role of Puberty in Creating a Universalist Model of Gender Identity

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Abstract:
Judith Halberstam argues that “part of the motivation of a transgender discourse is to produce ... “universalist” models of gender identity in which all gender identities fall under scrutiny rather than simply the unorthodox ones” (1998, 162). According to Halberstam, the current biological understanding of gender is insufficient and, with the aim of shifting away from this understanding toward the ‘universalist model’ Halberstam describes, here I will discuss how to apply transgender conceptualizations of gender transitivity to all gender identities. Specifically, I will argue that redefining puberty as a time of both sexual and gender development provides a unique framework for the development and acceptance of diverse genders. Society commonly acknowledges puberty as a major milestone in a person’s sexual maturation, both physically and emotionally, but I suggest that by broadening our understanding of puberty as a time of gender development as well, we can create a space for genders beyond the standardized man/woman binary. In this way, unique forms of gender expression can develop without stigma and so-called “deviant” genders will no longer bear the brunt of gender discourse.

In our society, there exist men and women. This seemingly incontrovertible fact has long been held as the natural and obvious truth of the matter, and the borders of gender appear clearly delineated in this model. However, as new trans-identities emerge and scholarship improves in the field of gender studies, this truth must be called into question. In her article “Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum,” Judith Halberstam argues that “part of the motivation of a transgender discourse is to produce ... “universalist” models of gender identity in which all gender identities fall under scrutiny rather than simply the unorthodox ones” (1998, 162). According to Halberstam, gender identities outside of the traditional man/woman binary are too often the objects of negative scrutiny when, in reality, it is society’s current biological understanding of gender, in which gender is inextricably linked to sex, that is insufficient. Therefore, in an effort to envision the ‘universalist model’ that Halberstam describes, in the following pages, I will discuss how to apply transgender
conceptualizations of gender transitivity and agency to all identities, orthodox and unorthodox alike. Specifically, my project is to examine the usefulness of reinterpreting puberty as a time of both sexual and gender development, creating a space for the development of diverse genders beyond the standardized man/woman binary.

In her article, Halberstam examines the tensions that exist between butch and FTM masculinities,1 with the view of discovering how these tensions can be negotiated to create a space for a coalition of identity politics. Butch and FTM identities both find a place in transgender discourse, but because they do not align neatly with either each other or with traditional notions of masculinity, they often bear the brunt of conflicting gender theories. In other words, because these identities are not easily understood and defined, those who identify as butch or FTM are stigmatized by those who defend the need to maintain society’s traditional gender borders. Throughout her discussion of different variations of butch and FTM masculinities, Halberstam draws attention to society’s propensity to medicalize, allegorize, and scrutinize “deviant” genders2; in response to this, she proposes that, by broadening the scope of our understanding of the borders of gender, society could create a “universalist” model that acknowledges and accounts for diverse identities equally.

However, one obstacle to such a universalist model of gender is the continued social fixation on the body as the foundation of gender intelligibility. Popular discourse persists in framing gender deviance as a question of having the “right” or “wrong” body, and a subject’s quest to find a new “home” in the appropriate (male or female) embodiment. Halberstam critiques trans-theorist Jay Prosser, for example, for his characterization of “home” as “the place in which one finally settles into the comfort of one’s true and authentic gender... Prosser’s cartography of gender relies on a belief in the two territories of male and female, divided by a flesh border” (Halberstam 1998, 163-4). However, this biological understanding of gender fails to recognize the limitations of the body as a stable site for gender formation.

Halberstam points to Leslie Feinberg’s work “Stone Butch Blues” to support her claim that many subjects, not only transsexual ones, do not feel completely comfortable or at home in their bodies. It seems that the allegory itself is flawed; discussions of “borders” and “home” impose strict limitations on gender expression, denying any sort of personal agency or freedom to people who may not feel truly at ease in the gender assigned to them. The social metaphor of a body as a “home”

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1 FTM refers to female-to-male transsexuals.

2 Popular gender discourse often labels genders outside of the man/woman binary, such as transsexuals, butches, and transgendered folk, as “deviant.” However, the term “deviant” has largely negative connotations and takes place in a broader discourse that seeks to preserve the standard gender binary, making it a problematic term.
FOOTNOTES

mistakenly invokes a tradition of comfort and unconditional acceptance – home is a good thing, right? – but in fact completely negates and erases the transitive nature of many people's gender. It creates a false dichotomy wherein maleness and femaleness are natural and positive identities and nothing else outside of them can or should exist. By acknowledging that perhaps there is no such thing as a “right” body onto which a pre-defined gender can be superimposed, we open a space to explore the idea that, as Halberstam says, “many, if not most, sexual and gender identities involve some degree of movement” (1998, 147). In other words, the male/female and man/woman binaries do not necessarily have the permanence and immutability we tend to attribute to them.

This understanding of “movement” as a universal human experience offers us an opportunity to shift our focus away from the transitive nature of “deviant” gender identities to all forms of gender expression, both normative and non-normative. I propose that Halberstam’s concept of gender transitivity (“movement”) echoes strongly with the experience of puberty, another universal human experience, and gender theorists should take steps to explore how the experience of gender construction ties in with the experience of sexual maturation. Presently, puberty is understood as transitive, but only insofar as it is a time of flourishing sexuality and sexual development. The development of a specific and distinct gender is rarely regarded as its own process, but rather as a natural by-product of sexual maturation. As the butch-FTM border wars demonstrate, however, the connections between gender and sexuality are complex, intricate and not necessarily causal. Butchness and MTF transsexuality, for instance, can both be considered as variations of femaleness but develop from different sexes, showing us that the formation of a certain kind of sex does not necessarily lead to the predictable formation of a particular gender. Recasting puberty as a transitory period of both sexual and gender development could revolutionize our understanding of the relationship between sex and gender and the so-called “borders” of each.

Let me, by way of illustration, turn to the example Halberstam discusses of Fredd, a nine-year old transsexual boy. As Halberstam points out, the fact that “Fredd is young and indeed preadolescent allows him to articulate his transsexualism very differently from many adult transsexuals. He is passing into manhood not from one adult body to another but from an almost pregendered body in to a fully gendered male body” (1998, 165). His pre-pubertal body allows for a degree of social freedom that an adult body does not because the secondary sexual characteristics that society so strongly associates with gender have not yet appeared. He has neither breasts nor a deep voice, facial

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3 Fredd was born biologically female but self-identified from an early age as masculine-identified.
hair or a period. None of the traditional gender indicators have marked his body, making his transition less obviously deviant.

Fredd’s experience of puberty involves the marked development of a unique gender identity, an identity that, according to our current biological understanding of gender, does not align with his body. His insistence that his physical characteristics do not reflect his personal gender identity and his assumption of a new name and form of gender expression demonstrate a sort of creative act whereby gender is freely constructed, rather than generically assigned on the basis of the body. My proposal is that by revaluing puberty as an opportunity for gender creation, rather than a process with a predetermined outcome, we can learn to characterize transitions across the standard man/woman gender binary not as a pathologized form of “border crossing,” but instead as simply one facet in an indefinite number of gender variations. In this way, the social freedom to explore one’s gendered self noted by Halberstam in Fredd’s “pregendered body” could become open to all individuals as reach puberty.

One could argue that puberty already has a latent gender function that manifests itself as a hyper-awareness of what constitutes appropriate behaviour for men and women; the gendered nature of the clothing we wear, the types of activities in which we engage, and the very way in which we come to understand our subjectivity all seem to gain extra significance at the approach of adolescence and puberty. It would be no great leap, therefore, to openly acknowledge this function and begin to open it up to individual interpretation. Drawing attention to, and even cultivating, the importance of this period in an individual’s gender development creates a space for, as Halberstam puts it, “other formulations of gender and body, right body, and right gender to provide children such as Fredd ... with futures and bodies that seem habitable” (1998, 177). I conclude that by recasting puberty as a universal space for gender construction as well as sexual development, trans-bodies would no longer have to bear the brunt of tensions within gender discourse; instead, society could shift its focus to all forms of gender expression and the myriad of different possible genders could be explored, allowing people to develop more fully in all their infinite variability and specificity.
WORKS CITED