

Disruptions of Desire: From Androgynes to Genderqueer

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Much recent work on desire examines the ambiguities of identity and activity, demonstrating that desire is a complex phenomenon that uneasily negotiates norms, causes disruptions, and produces unforeseeable complications. This essay returns to an earlier text that traces the vacillation between desire for the familiar and desire for new possibilities in order to show not only that the new moves in theory around desire and sexuality return to old themes, but that older texts can help examine new forms of identity, community, and association that maintain tensions between belonging and innovation. This is a particularly important task given the common assumption that desire and sexuality are selfish aims. As I hope will be clear from this discussion of the *Symposium*, there is much to be gained if desire is considered the founding move in ethics and social organization, a reconceptualization that points desire away from solely selfish, individual concerns and toward just, collective possibility.

Most commentary on Plato's *Symposium* gives Diotima the final word on desire as a force that needs to be sublimated from physical expression to contemplation. For educators, Diotima's account of the progression of desire from bodies to ideas has provided a way to think about the motivations inherent in learning. This tradition of conceptualizing bodily desire as only legitimate in its role as midwife to contemplation has had a chilling effect on thinking about what can be learned and experienced through embodied desire. A discussion of desire that moves us away from real bodies engaged in worldly activities does a serious disservice to the productive work of desire to enable recognition of differences and engage in embodied relations with others. I return to Aristophanes' story of the androgynes to argue that desire impels a consideration of the potentials and confusions of the future, not through contemplation but through living, thinking, and acting with others. In Aristophanes' story, desire enables action in the world and in particular bodies; desire enables relationships of difference, particularity, and possibility. I examine key criticisms of Aristophanes' story and counter claims that his account of desire is nostalgic and backward looking. Part of this trend toward removing the disruptions of desire can be found in James Garrison's suggestion that desire moves toward harmony, an endpoint I argue is premature. I then turn to Luce Irigaray's claims that the spark of desire works through heterosexual difference and in contrast, I offer a more complex account of the play of difference. Finally, I argue that public school students creating new forms of sexual identity and association, like genderqueer, provide us with a way to think through the embodied movement toward futurity that desire motivates and remind us of the central place of desire in education.

While desire, especially sexual desire, is often seen as pitted against reason and learning, there is a long philosophical tradition that understands desire as part of learning. Reconsidering the place of desire or eros in the educational task is

especially important now that faith-based programs are being passed off as sex education and educational research is increasingly moving away from the complications of living in actual bodies and participating in actual relations with others. Desire, especially bodily desire, gets short shrift in all of these conversations. Particularly when sexuality is framed by curricula, desire functions as an impulse that will not listen to reason, the action of hormones, or the selfishness of pleasure over responsibility. But if we look more closely at how desire is disruptive, makes distinctions, binds communities, and stimulates learning, I think we see that desire functions to provide the energy to create and examine new possibilities. Most importantly, desire moves toward a futurity rooted in the world, in work, in politics, and in actual physical and emotional relations among people. As such desire is the bridge between what is and what might be, disrupting stale patterns and creating new formations.

FROM THE POSSIBILITIES OF IMMORTALITY TO THE POSSIBILITIES OF FUTURITY

I focus on Aristophanes' story of the androgynes from the *Symposium* because it gives an account of the various ways that disruptions of desire move androgynes into a future-oriented society. To recap, the androgynes were originally two headed beings who could move either by walking or by cartwheels and who reproduced like cicadas. Extremely prideful, they attacked the gods. The gods were reluctant to kill them because the androgynes provided the gods with sacrifices, so Zeus decided to punish them by splitting them in half, making them weaker, doubling their number, and thus also making them more profitable to the gods. Zeus had Apollo rearrange their heads and heal their wounds, keeping the navel to remind them of punishment. As the androgynes were overwhelmed by grief for their missing halves, the halves clung together and died. Zeus took pity on them and moved their reproductive organs to the front. For male/female couples, this meant the consolation of reproduction; for male/male couples, this meant they could have sex and then go about the business of life, in other words, work and politics.¹ In his more detailed discussion of male/male couples, Aristophanes opines that they are the highest form of manhood because they engage in public life. As Paul Ludwig argues, the implication is that they are not tied by family loyalty or driven by nepotism; that is, they have disrupted the traditions of the paterfamilias so they can focus all their energies on the needs of the city, as well as enjoy bodily eros.² These male/male couples experience the intensity of desire among themselves for one another, not for their offspring. Rather than moving their gaze inward to their own households, the male/male couples experience desire that moves them into the social and political world, and thus they are inclined toward its improvement. As Stanley Rosen says of Aristophanes' story of the androgynes, "there can be no doubt that his whole speech is intended as a defense of political justice and peace," though clearly the gender bias is difficult to overlook.³

Aristophanes' speech traces three major ways of thinking about desire. The first desire the androgynes attempt to satisfy is ambition, which motivates them to attempt to overthrow the gods. This first desire is grounded in an attempt for certainty and control through the exercise of power. Their second desire is nostalgic: they attempt to return to their pre-split condition and fail. They die. Their third

attempt at desire is the one this essay will focus on; the recognition that desire is not desire for a return, but a movement toward possibility. As Rosen explains the dynamic of Aristophanes' story, in contrast to the logos of Socrates' story, "in mythos [practiced by Aristophanes] the divine descends to man...Aristophanes is concerned with the cosmos for the sake of the human body."⁴ In this reversal of Diotima's story, then, Aristophanes suggests that attempts to control heaven are eventually given up in an attempt to improve earthly existence. One of the first disruptions that desire enacts, then, is the ambition not only for power, but also for immortality. The thwarted attempt at immortality installs in the androgynes an understanding of themselves as resolutely mortal, living in finitude, and thus needing to make considered judgments and choices within that constraint. Luc Brisson argues that Aristophanes' story is similar to many cosmologies that begin with indistinct and immortal beings, and that within these beings in which "contraries coincide," where there is no distinction between life and death or male and female, the opening act of distinction — the end of immortality or the recognition of gender difference — often marks a shift from faith that godlike figures will order society to understanding that human beings are responsible for making judgments, laws, and political systems. As he puts it,

The only way [cosmologies] can represent the origin of the universe, and that of the human and animal worlds, is as a state of indistinction in which all contraries coincide, in particular the male and the female. Out of this state there emerge, painfully and slowly, like so many breaks and rents, the distinctions that govern reality as we know it in our daily experience.⁵

Thus the splitting of the androgynes, a consequence of their desire for power, is the necessary start to making distinctions and thus making judgments.

The second desire the androgynes have is the nostalgic attempt at reattachment. This attempt to recapture the past is no less formidable than the assault on the gods, as the split androgynes are left with a desire that continually motivates them, but does not offer satisfaction. This homeward desire of the androgynes is as deadly as their direct attempt at immortality. In their attempt to restore a form of harmonious reattachment that is now impossible, they die. This stage in the story raises the split between desire and satisfaction. There is no satisfaction of desire in the story because the split androgynes cannot ever reattach themselves; they can only try. As Plato has Aristophanes explain it, the desire motivating the split androgynes is a desire "attempting to weld together two beings into one."⁶ Desire can only attempt what cannot happen; the androgynes cannot reattach once they are split. Their actions appear backward looking, but they are in fact dealing with a new contingency.

Kenneth Dover has argued that Aristophanes is the interlocutor taken most seriously by Socrates because Aristophanes, like Socrates, gives a defense of eros "for its own sake."⁷ Further, Dover argues that Aristophanes is "a target for Diotima's fire," because Aristophanes stresses "the particular and the familiar."⁸ That is, by drawing on a commonplace form of romanticism, Aristophanes gives the audience of the *Symposium* a place to recognize its own familiar and homey beliefs about desire before Diotima shifts the focus of desire to spirituality and the Good. In Dover's account of the *Symposium*, it is Diotima that moves the discussion of desire toward futurity and Aristophanes who roots desire in familiarity. But Dover

misses, I think, the way in which the other half of the now split androgyne is not fully familiar and is not a homelike figure. After the split, there are no more “halves”; there are only beings who try to find their other half but cannot. Even if people might agree to have Hephaestus reattach them to their other halves, that is impossible.⁹ After the split, eros is a thing of the world, not a condition in which the gods can intervene. Eros provides no completion, only a pull to connect to another actual living being whose tasks are worldly. As Ludwig points out, focusing on the male/male couple, Aristophanes argues that these are the people in the world who work, whose focus is not on procreation but rather on creating a state, engaging in actual labor.¹⁰ Rosen argues, “by making Eros fundamentally sexual, Aristophanes illustrates two inseparable principles of his teaching. Human striving, whether for truth or fame, is essentially physical: the psyche is defined by and depends on the body.”¹¹ Because desire is rooted in the body, with all its contingencies and puzzles, this new desire eludes concrete and stable possibilities, instead offering lovers “riddles.”¹² Where the androgyne had had the hope of certain compatibility and home, the lovers in the embodied world can only work through change, difference, and uncertainty.

To a very large extent, then, desire cannot attain a stable goal. As a paradox that has an aim but no attainable object, desire, like all paradoxes, strives to counter ignorance, to solve the riddles posed by lovers. Even in its failure to fully understand others, desire continues. Because desire is about what comes next and about the possibilities of other people and their shifting potentials, it is a concept that ties us physically as well as intellectually to others. Where Socrates decries desire as the nail that keeps the soul attached to the body, Aristophanes celebrates the relationship between physicality and social bonds.

While desire may structure our attempts at recognition of and relations with others, desire also maintains a tension about the limits of such knowledge. Like the inability of the androgynes to reattach, interest sparked by desire motivates the attempt to know another better. But while this encourages an act of close reading of the other, the force of desire also obscures one’s view. While that is potentially frustrating, the gap between attempted understanding and unknowability are also part of desire’s allure. Desire presses toward recognition, but also maintains the power of secrecy and discretion. Desire’s puzzles show that there are qualities in others that are not discernable or that need to remain opaque in order to remain tantalizing and productive. Desire, then, contains an element of secrecy, producing as much as it attempts to hide. These complications of desire and secrecy encourage nuanced forms of reading and thinking. As Sissela Bok points out, secrecy “be-speaks discernment, the ability to make distinctions, to sort out and draw lines: a capacity that underlies not only secrecy but all thinking, all intention and choice.”¹³ What we discern is not just the value of what is held secret, but the inability to fully grasp the secret. Even as we run up against the limits of secrecy, the fact of those limits draw us further in.

But whether desire is bound up in practices to become known or to remain in some way hidden, desire is about possibility, about what might be. This relationship between desire and futurity is also central to Judith Butler’s description:

Unsatisfied desire is an absence that circumscribes the kind of presence by which it might relinquish itself as absence. Insofar as it posits itself as a determinate emptiness, i.e., as empty of some specific object or Other, it is itself a kind of presence: it is “the presence of an absence of reality” (*IH 134*); in effect, this absence “knows” what is missing. It is the tacit knowledge of *anticipation*. The anticipation of fulfillment gives rise to the concrete experience of futurity. Desire thus reveals the essential temporality of human beings.¹⁴

For Butler, this means that the subject, who is constituted through desire, is also uncertain: “Desire in the form of anticipation (the negation of the present, the desire for the not-yet) reveals the ambiguous “place” of subjectivity, as neither here nor there, but spanning both; anticipation discloses subjectivity as a being projected into time and as a being who projects time.”¹⁵

DESIRE FOR HARMONY

Desire’s disruptions are not appealing to everyone attempting to relegitimate desire in education. Garrison’s advocacy for desire is, for instance, much more interested in desire’s worldliness than its destabilizing force. In *Dewey and Eros*, Garrison examines the place of desire in education, contrasting John Dewey’s attention to practical reason and worldly concerns with Plato’s argument, through Diotima, that desire is best when it is unchanging and rooted in the Forms. Garrison points out that Dewey argues, “‘more passions,’ not fewer is the answer.”¹⁶ Garrison castigates those of us who will not admit “the practical moral value of the ‘relatively stable.’” He argues that “only an academic could ever fall in love with constant deconstruction” and that such an approach “lacks the commitment, hard work, discipline, and above all faith necessary to sustain the struggle to actualize a valued end-in-view and obtain positive freedom through right action.”¹⁷ In his turn back to faith, Garrison comes closer to rehabilitating Diotima as a worldly figure than emphasizing that embodied, contingent differences generate the quality of desire that pushes us toward constant reconsideration of our place in the world, our relations with others, and our bodily experience of connection. Much as I understand that Garrison’s Dewey-inflected faith is different from Diotima’s, his suspicion of disruption and call for harmony tame desire too much.¹⁸ I agree with Garrison’s criticism of Diotima and yet my own argument pushes beyond Dewey and back to Aristophanes’ earthly — and often earthy — attention to bodies. Garrison argues that Dewey’s interest in flux and practical reasoning show that his account of desire is rooted in activity in the world and ultimately closely tied with growth.¹⁹ But Garrison also notes that Dewey sees desire as moving toward harmony. As Dewey puts it, “Desire for restoration of the union converts mere emotion into interest in objects as conditions of realization of harmony.”²⁰

As compelling as Garrison’s argument and use of Dewey to counter Diotima are, I want to hold to the more disruptive actions of desire, ones that do not “restore harmony to the chaotic situation.”²¹ Further, I disagree with Garrison that no one can live in deconstructive instability, most of us attempting to negotiate the normative constraints on sexuality and gender are constantly involved in intentional deconstruction of norms and swept along by the inadvertent subversions of meaning internal to the workings of language. Garrison’s desire for harmony before examining the dangers of installing it prematurely, or before considering the productive

value of disruption, strikes me as more dangerous than living in disruption for its own sake. The story of the androgynes points to the dangers inherent in nostalgic longing for reconnection and premature harmony. This potentially harmonious act of reconnection would have stopped their action in the world and keep them in thrall to one singular other — in fact, it is arguably the very drive for harmony that killed the first generation of split androgynes. While it may appear that disruption creates a difficult context for shared life, it is, in fact, the context for shared life. Differences and future possibilities continually disrupt whatever plans for harmony we might have, and disruptions keep us moving toward productive innovation and learning from others.

HETERODIFFERENCE

Some theorists have argued that these possibilities of desire are rooted not in the chaos of diverse sexual and gendered meanings, but in the tension between male and female. Brisson argues, like Irigaray, that understanding male and female as distinctly separate and different is a founding distinction for other differences in meaning that, in turn, lead to more elaborate cultural and political structures and judgments. For Irigaray, the love between men and women provides the tension of difference that reinstalls the divine in daily life through the daimonistic function of love that disrupts stability and produces the space of possibility. She is less interested in Aristophanes' link between desire and worldly politics and possibility, instead seeing that possibility in one particular form of physical love. Irigaray argues that Diotima's story is most compelling when examining the divine tension of sexual difference between men and women. She contends that Diotima argues that love

is the existence or the in-stance of that which stands *between*, that which makes possible the passage between ignorance and knowledge. Between knowledge and reality, there is an intermediary that allows for the encounter and the transmutation or transvaluation between the two. Diotima's dialectic is in at least *four terms*: the here, the two poles of the encounter, and the beyond — but a beyond that never abolishes the here. And so on, indefinitely. The mediator is never abolished in an infallible knowledge. Everything is always in movement, in a state of becoming. And the mediator of all this is, among other things, or exemplarily, *love*. Never fulfilled, always becoming.²²

Irigaray argues that the “becoming” of desire relies on sexual difference, on the age-old sense that men and women are distinctly different and that between them is an interval. That interval is the space of difference between genders and thus the space of desire and possibility.²³

Here she freights too much into sexual difference that is defined as difference between men and women. Within and among genders — as well as other forms of difference — there is enough tension, enough provocation, and enough longing to provide the antagonism and yearning for the space between. Irigaray finds political interactions to be mundane and without the “daimonic mediumistic function” of eros,²⁴ and here, too, I think she is mistaken. Because she has too quickly made eros into a heterosexual sex act, she neglects to see how desire structures, enables, and provides obstacles to social engagements and the creation of political groups and maintains the tensions of any coupling, including not only the difference of gender in heterosexuality, but difference in general. Moving the space of possibility back

to the heterosexual couple, Irigaray neglects the possibilities of desire to enable energetic and educative political life.

CHAOTIC IDENTITIES AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Desire destabilizes previously held ideas about the containedness of the self and even, as Deborah Britzman points out, has the potential to dissolve certainties of identity.²⁵ New forms of complex sexual difference, often not tracking along the lines of traditional gender distinctions, show that the difference that sparks the intensity Irigaray describes need not be rooted in the traditions of gender and that political organizing need not tend away from the deconstruction Garrison warns against in order to be productive. In this concluding section, I turn to observations of sexual minority youth in public schools to show that their innovations in gender and sexuality are a new splitting of the androgyne, pointing to new possibilities for organizing for more just communities within the contingencies and disruptions of desire. These are groups deeply committed to improving their school communities and to educating themselves about the complications of desire. Central to their task of organizing against homophobia is a collective reconsideration of the limits of gender and sexual identities, limits that they link to how their bodies are perceived by others and how the space of school seems intent on perpetuating those limits.

In visiting one gay-straight alliance (GSA) whose existence was being challenged by the central administration, I was struck by the students' constant use of the word "passion" to describe their attachment to the group and to the idea that they would not change their name from gay-straight alliance to something less obvious like the "Rainbow club" or the social justice club. They did not want to be put in a position of unintentionally remaining secret; they wanted the public face and were well aware that publicity meant challenge. They also knew that they were more complicated than the simple words "gay-straight" could explain and struggled for language to represent that difference as well.

Other students have argued that they want not only more public space in their schools, but a broader range of sexual or gender possibilities to be represented or to be acknowledged as not fully representable. Some describe themselves as "genderqueer," an identity that combines sexual minority status with gender critique, others describe themselves as transgender, arguing that the confines of traditional gender distinctions are insufficient to represent their complex presentations of bodies, activities, and identities, including forms of identity that may split from the body in which they are born to the body in which they live more comfortably. Still others describe themselves as queer heterosexuals, energetically critiquing the gender norms that usually structure heterosexuality. Each of these examples shows new ways that desire motivates new splits from convention and opens new possibilities for reorganizing political life as well as thinking about key concepts that structure meaning. As much as these new sexual and gender formations may appear to bring chaos to traditional understandings of gender, they act as distinctions that underscore critical shortcomings in those categories. In other words, as much as Brisson argues that gender difference brings organization to chaos

and thus enables judgment, the critiques embodied in genderqueer, transgender, and queer heterosexual formations enable judgments on gender itself. Gender norms become the chaos out of which new formations and distinctions emerge, but these are differences that are concerned with the exclusions they may themselves produce. Students engaged in discussion around gender norms quickly find themselves not only concerned that their own innovations be respected, but that they themselves need to counter the exclusions that they unintentionally visit upon others. Caution about potential exclusions as well as the kind of careful reading of social interactions that all queer people engage in underscore the subtle observations and judgment that the secrecies around desire occasion. Students read one another carefully for indications of gender or sexual dissidence and complexity, and they speculate together on signs they see on the bodies and in the gestures of others.

For some genderqueer youth, the limitations of concepts are the struggle that defines their lives and leaves them open to panicked and nostalgic violence that demands a return to stability. Increasingly we are learning that the intersection of race and complex gender and sexual identity magnify confusion and hatred as perpetrators of violence find their assumptions about the meanings of identity troubled by the presentation of other possibilities. Challenging gender and sexual norms is no small personal matter, then, but rather calls into question the reliance on categories that appear to provide people with a certain sense of the world. The kind of chaos that indiscernible sexual and gender identity generates does help provide critique and possibility, but it also highlights the power-related stakes in maintaining gender binaries and hence gender hierarchies.

Aristophanes' myth marks a founding moment for gender, sexuality, and politics, showing how the chaos of early being became organized into recognizable genders and sexualities and how social organization is enabled by those varieties of identities and attractions. His androgynes set out initial multiple possibilities for sexual identity and suggest that engagement in politics ought to be part of the processes of desire. The new complications of desire created by contemporary sexual minority youth trouble the distinctions that have previously stabilized forms of judgment by adding a chaotic sense to categories that may have previously helped to structure understandings about normality, community, and possibility. Rather than hinging on a simple binary sexual difference, these groups play off myriad identities and recombinations. Some of these interactions raise difficult distinctions among experiences and identities and others illuminate unexpected similarities, but all occur in a framing context of antagonistic and provocative desire intent on organizing to improve schools and communities. Desire infuses their projects; sexual desire for particular others overlaps with desire for political action.

Students comfortably combine very specific discussions of their own desire with plans to organize political space and alliance across differences. They move easily from political discussions, to small group expressions of physical affection, to even smaller group intimate talks. Especially around topics that involve bodies and desires, the groups become excited at the prospect of talking through ideas and pushing their own comfort levels further. As much as they aim toward justice, they

seem quite suspicious of harmony and, in many ways, much more comfortable with difference. Their ideas become urgent because they are so closely tied not only to ideas about school climate but about physical, relational possibilities that their group talk and action open up. As Aristophanes' story reminds us, desire is a social act, an embodied phenomenon, and a way to organize politics. These new formations of gender and sexuality are a continuity of his story. Motivated by desire for possibilities, students move back and forth into social relations with others, looking for reflections, confirmations, and disruptions as they rework the meanings of categories that no longer provide stable meanings. Desire poses the puzzles of these knowledges and relations, and students work to keep them productively tangled and disruptive.

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1. While Aristophanes acknowledges female/female couples, he has no comment other than to characterize them as "lewd."
 2. Paul Ludwig, "Politics and Eros in Aristophanes' Speech: *Symposium* 191E–192A and the Comedies," *American Journal of Philology* 117 (1996), 547. I understand, of course, that this formulation is problematic in its presumption of a male ideal and its disparaging account of family relations as only about the acquisition of power. While it may be a stretch here, Aristophanes might also be understood to be giving an ancient version of "the personal is political."
 3. Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 121, n. 5.
 4. *Ibid.*, 137–8.
 5. Luc Brisson, *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 114.
 6. Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin, 1988), 191c, 62.
 7. Ludwig, "Politics and Eros in Aristophanes' Speech," 547.
 8. K.J. Dover, "Aristophanes' Speech in Plato's Symposium," *The Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 86 (1966), 50.
 9. Plato *Symposium* 192e, 63.
 10. Paul Ludwig, "Eros and Law in the *Symposium*," (2005), <http://olincenter.uchicago.edu/ludwig.htm>.
 11. Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, 140.
 12. *Ibid.*, 151.
 13. Sisella Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 6.
 14. Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 72.
 15. *Ibid.*, 73.
 16. John Dewey, quoted in James Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995), 94.
 17. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, 51.
 18. By invoking faith, I mean to argue against Diotima's version of heaven-aimed desire.
 19. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, 29.
 20. Dewey, quoted in Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, 16.
 21. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, 16.
 22. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), 21.

23. Ibid., 7–8.

24. Ibid., 29–30.

25. Deborah P. Britzman, “Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Reading Straight,” *Educational Theory* 45, no. 2 (1995), 151–65.