

Gender Disidentification: The Perils of the Post-Gender Condition

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As I get older, I am more and more tempted to think that students who disagree with me are just wrong. Clearly this is not a fully educational approach, but, particularly in the area of gender, I have increasingly encountered young women of high school or college age who distance themselves from their gender in ways that seem to me definitely wrong, and even foolhardy. This has been particularly striking in public high school discussions of sexual harassment, where young women do more than argue against feminist worries on the subject; they argue against their membership in the category of gender. While they do not deny that they are women exactly, they do deny a need to worry about gender-related bias, ostensibly because they are “not that kind of girl,” that is, the kind of girl who is not capable of defending herself or thwarting socialization. Given recent *New York Times* coverage of the death of feminism (again), these young women’s general “disidentification” with gender makes a certain kind of sense in what they perceive as a post-gender world. I contend however that they are just wrong to do so, because the world is not post-gender. I want to distinguish the strategy of “disidentification” from other possible interpretations (or misinterpretations) of identity. While I will argue that these young women neither suffer from false consciousness nor achieve full transgression, their strategy of “disidentification” does appear to fall somewhere beyond, but still in sight of, these other two dynamics of identity.

While I do take seriously the extent to which relations to gender change generationally and contextually, curricular and legal attempts to address gender inequity are also partially behind young women’s tendency to disidentify. For instance, there has been much criticism of sexual harassment laws of late, not because they raise murky issues of “he said, she said,” but because laws and their judicial interpretation have moved sexual harassment as a concept away from the larger problems of gender inequity. As Vicki Schultz has argued, courts have tied themselves up in the language of relationships, sexual attraction, and rebuff, and largely ignored the social forces behind these micro-examples.¹ Curricula and school law have also contributed to this by tending to single out personal miscommunication and prosecute sexual relationships between students and teachers as the paradigmatic case of sexual harassment. The harder case, the persistence of gender inequity throughout social and institutional relations, is largely left unlitigated because, of course, laws require individual cases for disputes to take place. The easiest individual cases for plaintiffs to win involve age-inappropriate interpersonal sexual relationships. While these relationships may indeed be problematic, their prosecution reinforces the stereotype of sexual harassment as a problem of individuals. That young women then view sexual harassment and problematic gender relations as something they can avoid through refusal of identity does make sense within this context. But the tactics of these young women raise other questions about

identity, questions that have been central to feminist attempts to explain antifeminism and poststructural attempts to refigure identity as something that can be transgressed for political gain.

As we try to bring poststructural concerns about identity into our teaching we run the risk of encountering students who, whether through liberal individualism or postfeminism feel that the old problems of identity are no longer theirs. As one colleague in women's studies used to say, "I spend the first half of the term teaching them that they are women and the second half of the term deconstructing that identity." Attempting to deconstruct identity without first putting identity in place runs the risk of reinstalling liberal individualism when students, who are unused to viewing themselves as part of an identity category, refuse to consider themselves part of a category that describes their social identity. By social identity, I mean the categories by which other people recognize these very identity-refusing students. I want to argue that these students are in something of a bind. To refuse to identify with a category does not change how they are potentially perceived by others. Ignoring the social aspects of identity does open "disidentification" to the charge of false consciousness. Clearly, identity does still have meaning to social institutions and a variety of interlocutors these students will encounter. They may be interpellated by their identity, whether they closely identify with it or not. Still I do want to give credence to disidentification as a strategy, though I will suggest a number of shortcomings later. Disidentification does remind us that identity categories are shifting and contested, and it may be that disidentification is the beginning of critically refiguring one's relationship to one's identity. It does seem to involve reading cultural codes constraining identity and refusing to participate in them. Before turning to possibilities, though, I want to distinguish disidentification, from false consciousness and then I will take up the question of disidentification's potential peril and transgressive potential.

FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE AUTHORITY OF EXPERIENCE

While not all definitions of false consciousness may be in sync, false consciousness implies that someone may be blinded by ideology and not realize the truth about herself or her situation. In other words, people who succumb to false consciousness are blissfully (or not so blissfully) unaware of the problems they face. Another more Foucauldian version of false consciousness is also a useful way to look at disidentification. It is not just that people are blinded by ideology, but they have been so fully interpellated by it that even in moments of crisis, in which the categories of common understandings of the world are in motion, and in conflict, subjects misunderstand their own general interests and become complicit in the preservation of ideologies that operate to restrain them, or to limit them. That is to say, it is not just a problem of blindness, but a problem of the structural complicities that blindness leads to. The charge of false consciousness has been a problem for feminism particularly, because if we value women, we have to value their experiences.² Catharine MacKinnon discusses this problem in a lengthy footnote, worth going over in some detail. She contends that feminism faces a problem when it attempts to account for women who are not feminists. This desire to distance themselves from what they perceive to be "feminist" may be part of why young

women disidentify from their gender in discussions of sexual harassment or sexual abuse. There are also other reasons: for instance, the version of gender presented is not consonant with their own experience of gender. I will return to this issue later. For now, I want to grapple with how the problem of false consciousness is wrapped up in a problem of experience and knowledge.

MacKinnon contends that feminism raises the problem of “authority of interpretation.”³ How do feminists hold that patriarchy is limiting to women and at the same time account for why some women support patriarchy? She says that feminists have generally answered this in two ways. First, feminists who take for themselves a greater weight of authority contend that women who support patriarchy are victims of false consciousness. MacKinnon dismisses the view that feminism is superior to antifeminism merely because feminism is critical of women’s situation, noting that such a view relies on agreement that women are oppressed. Antifeminists do not agree with this claim and contend that they occupy a critical position, with as much weight of critical authority as feminists. Their lens of criticism is simply turned toward feminism not anti-feminism because they do not accept feminism’s claim that women are oppressed. MacKinnon contends that the second feminist response to the problem of antifeminist women is not any better. These feminists accept any woman’s version of her experience, based on the presumption that all women are free to frame their experiences as they see fit. In addition, the claim that every woman or man can give a full and free interpretation of his or her experience, does not account for different interpretations of the same experience or conflicts in interpretation itself. MacKinnon contends this approach “tends to assume that women, as we are, have power and are free in exactly the ways feminism, substantively, has found we are not.”⁴ In order to sort out this problem of false consciousness, then, we have to sort out the problem of experience and authority of interpretation.

Joan Scott attempts this in her article, “The Evidence of Experience,” in which she contends that in our haste to dismantle objectivity, we have instead installed the primacy of “experience” without insisting that experience’s claim to authority is in need of critical work. Scott argues:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject... becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured — about language (or discourse) and history — are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.⁵

I think students have taken up this turn toward experience in the way they situate their claims as “just my opinion” and the way they mark out the limits of their understanding as “well, person x just doesn’t have the same experiences as I do and I will never understand.” This is, of course, the very worry conservatives have about multiculturalism, namely, that it will install relativism. The preceding student claims, however, are not evidence of a multicultural relativism, as these claims make one’s own identity entirely individualistic, divorced from social forces and history, just as Scott warns against. It is, indeed, a relativism more likely borne of an

individualism disinterested in others that makes the identity of others a thing of inscrutable categories. In the end, students wind up thinking they are themselves capable of anything but that other people are trapped by their categories.

These decontextualized notions of identity raise some problems Barbara Houston points to in her discussion of the shortcomings of gender-free education. Houston warns that misperception of gender fairness is often present in attempts to install gender-free approaches to education. She points to the problem of judging girls as doing less well than boys “even when they do as well as or better than boys at the same activity.” In this case, what students’ experience is that girls are not as valuable even when they perform tasks as well or better. Without examining male systems of valuation, Houston warns, we are furthermore in danger of presuming the current system of merit to be itself gender-free. Houston further notes that students misperceive teacher attention to be disproportionately directed at girls even when girls received only 34% of the attention. In this case, students’ experience of what was “fair” was in fact biased, based as it was in a male-dominant ideal. Houston contends that “our own existing perceptual frameworks are themselves too gender-biased to provide reliable guides as to whether or not our approaches are actually gender-free.”⁶ Following Jane Roland Martin, Houston advocates a “gender-sensitive strategy” which would encourage questions like: “Is gender operative here? How is gender operative? What other effects do our strategies for eliminating gender bias have?”⁷

OUTSIDE TRANSGRESSING

These are questions that have been taken up less optimistically by feminist post-structuralist theorists who also wonder how we problematically reinstall normative subjectivity even as we attempt progressive feminist politics. MacKinnon and Houston see the intransigence of gender as a force organizing social relations, while poststructuralists see the limitations of identity as a political starting point. Critiques of identity have pointed to shortcomings in the degree of agency possible in a subject position too closely connected to its own subjugation. The degree to which one can avoid this aspect of subjectivity is debatable, however. Some theorists have contended that the subject can only be wrestled out of its constraining aspects by active transgression of identity acts, boundaries, and expectations. Judith Butler, for instance, claims that only by subverting the expected codes and actions of identity can subjects highlight and begin to disengage the normalizing aspects of subjectivity.⁸ Indeed, because subjectivity is constructed through repetitions that inevitably fail, subjectivity inevitably swerves from its original position to something new. The question remains: To what degree is this something new any less bound up in the problematics of identity? Importantly, agency lies in the ability to understand the context and codes of identity, as well as to productively refuse them.

Wendy Brown contends that identity groups that seek their freedom on the basis of an identity that has been normalized by power tie their struggle closely back into the very institutions that constrain their activity in the first place.⁹ My contention that disidentification fails to transgress is based on the appearance it gives of tying students back into an individualist subjectivity, wherein they are responsible for

their actions, as if constraining social forces and reigning conceptions of subjectivity were not even present. And yet I think these students start from within an understanding of social forces. That is, their refusal of identity occurs in the context of understanding how identity has been central in the constitution of subjectivity. In this sense then, they are attempting to transgress from within an understanding of culture, but they do so by attempting to remove themselves from its force. Neither Butler nor Brown, of course, argues that we can get outside of this normalizing power, but both essentially argue that there are better and worse ways to live under normalizing power. The better way, if one can push the normative content, is to understand the codes of power, not to do without them or move outside of ideology to where the air is fresher and the milk cheaper, but to work and rework the codes of power more responsibly and more relationally.

Brown does argue against identity politics in a way that is similar to the way students distance themselves from gender, though they are binding themselves to liberal individuality, not gender. She contends that identity politics is bound in a resentment that encourages its advocates to demand recognition and protection because of their weakness. Because so much of identity politics binds its political claims to its sense of injury, its advocates cannot embrace power without losing the ground of their critique. In other words, a politics based on resentment is a politics grounded in injury, trapped by its own project and unable to find a way out of its original problem. This means that identity politics, or any politics based on injury, derives its power from its pain. Even in the midst of agitating to have that pain relieved it cannot explicitly embrace power without losing its reason for being. As a result, Brown argues, identity politics cannot move beyond its current situation to a fuller sense of “futurity” that would be reflected in political projects that attempt to “fight for a world rather than conduct process on the existing one.”¹⁰ While I disagree that identity politics is as bounded as Brown claims, her argument and student disidentifications do push feminism and critical pedagogy to watch for the problems of emphasizing dangers without pointing to possibilities for change. Here I think a stronger sense of relationality in identity is necessary to make “the personal political.” The personal is not intrinsically political, and perhaps the supposition that it is intrinsically political is a case of a persistently bad misreading, but the personal becomes political as relations are formed over questions of identity. These articulations of identity are in play through politics, which gives rise to the original meaning of “the personal is political” as it is used in feminist politics, consciousness raising, and organizing. Brown, I think, mistakes the political purpose of identity politics and argues that identity politics’ concentration on the question “Who am I?” should rather be shifted to “What do I want for us?” It is my contention, however, that these two questions are not easily separated. Public assertions of identity, as well as educational discussions of identity, can be an invitation to mutual consideration of political projects that attempt to name both injury and identity as issues for deliberation and contestation. The problem with disidentification is that it potentially shuts down the conversation on identity by simply refusing to engage the category of gender, as if history and social forces are so easily kept at bay.

Before I engage in worry over this, I do want to point out the positive potential in transgressing categories that have become too constraining, through acts of reinterpreting identity that I do not take to be disidentification. The distinction I want to make between the two is that transgressing does understand the situated meaning of the categories of identity and does not insist that they disappear. Indeed, transgressing requires an understanding of the persistence of the categories that are transgressed and presumes that one needs an audience and that one's audience will understand the transgression. In other words, transgression plays within codes that are understood to be social and historical. Disidentification, in contrast, is a refusal of history.

The history of feminism is replete with conflict over whose definition of gender will rule the day, conflicts most often raised when white, middle-class gender displays itself as unmodified gender. Indeed students argue that what adults see as sexual harassment, they see as playful sexuality, that "real" adults mistakenly equate sex play among younger people as necessarily dangerous precisely because the people involved are so young.¹¹ This may also be a moment when African American female students attempt to deflect teacher criticism of the behavior of young African American men in class, insisting on their own ability to handle themselves with young men.¹² Thus, these young women are saying that the version of gender offered by some educators is weaker than the version of gender they live. In addition, well in keeping with much criticism of white feminism from women of color, the version of female victimization that appears to be offered in anti-sexual harassment education lacks a sense of cross-gender relationality and thus a lack of racial solidarity. These tactics of insisting on a fuller understanding of the interplay of age and responsibility, race and gender, are each useful additions to an understanding of the swirl of identity relations in any interaction. Indeed, these stances toward identity do much to heighten a sense of agency and responsibility in interaction.

PERILS AWAIT THOSE WHO LIVE OUTSIDE OF HISTORY

Unfortunately, not all young people are as able to control their relations as the above examples would suggest. A recent report from the American Association of University Women indicates that sexual harassment in public schools is widespread. In a survey of 1,632 students, 85% of girls and 76% of boys reported "unwanted and unwelcomed sexual behavior that interfered with their lives." African American boys were more likely to be harassed than whites or Hispanics, while white girls were more likely to be harassed than African American or Hispanic girls. Despite the relatively close percentages of sexual harassment across gender, the effects of the harassment varied strongly along gender lines. Girls reported significantly greater negative effects, such as not wanting to attend school and not wanting to talk in class. In addition to girls' negative responses being higher than boys', there was a larger percentage of negative responses among African American and Hispanic girls than among white girls. Girls were also up to three times more likely to report that harassment affected their ability to pay attention and to get good grades. Girls were also twice as likely to feel embarrassed than boys and up to three times as likely to feel less self-confident or to feel self-conscious. Boys, on the other hand, were twice as likely to report that sexual harassment made them feel more popular.

African American boys were most likely to be harassed in a physical manner, either by touch or by having their clothes pulled down. The vast majority of students, 86%, when asked which form of harassment would bother them the most, reported that being called gay was the worst. Boys were twice as likely as girls to be the focus of anti-gay taunts.¹³ Thus, it is clear from the AAUW report that sexual harassment needs to be addressed within a context of a broad range of bias-related issues that highlight the social and relational aspects of identity, rather than ignoring them.

My argument is that the refusal of the salience of gender in the lives of all students, then, is mistaken. The specifics of what is entailed in the category of gender does need to be widened and discussed, but the category itself has not disappeared. Students who contend that they are transgressing expected boundaries of gender behavior by refusing gender are thus missing the play of power that encourages them to view themselves as unmarked, liberal subjects. These tactics of disidentification are themselves tied to normalizing power; that is, these disidentificatory practices fail to engender agency. I am thinking here particularly of the response of young women in high school who acknowledge that they have been the targets of unwanted sexual attention given on the basis of a perception of their gender, but who disidentify themselves with the targets of sexual harassment. That is, they equate victimhood with femaleness and claim for themselves an identity outside of that circuit. The problems with this form of disidentification are at least twofold.

First, by acknowledging that harassment has taken place, but removing themselves conceptually from it in an attempt to transgress the limits of gender in their lives, the women who adopt this stance of disidentification neglect to attend to the consequences it has on their social, emotional, and educational outcomes. To a certain degree, then, they deny the gendered aspects of their selves that opened them to sexual harassment and are thus unable to address the harassment as a condition of their gender. The potential here is that rather than seeing sexual harassment within a social context, they tend to blame the negative impact of sexual harassment on their own personal shortcomings. As Pauline Bart and Patricia O'Brien have noted, in the context of sexual assault, the ability of women to understand themselves as victims of a gender-related crime, rather than individually culpable for what happened to them, helps them to fight back during the assault and helps them through the recovery process after the assault.¹⁴ Thus an understanding of one's gender identity, in this instance, helps one to gain a sense of agency at the time of an attack and to retain one's sense of agency afterward. The young women in high school who disidentify do so to avoid having to conceive of themselves as open to harassment or assault. They evince a high degree of confidence in their status as a person deserving respect, rather than a woman living in a context of potential danger. In order to avoid being a gendered victim, then, they become individualized and isolated victims, worthy of blame for their own victimhood, rather than situated in a context where, the experience of harassment and violence is increasingly prevalent.

The second problem of this disidentification is that it prevents women from connecting with other young women with similar experiences. These young women

also tend to lack compassion toward other young women who experience sexual harassment, dating violence, or sexual assault, because to express support means that they too identify with the gender of the person so injured. In addition, many are inclined to blame the victim of sexual harassment rather than see sexual harassment in its social context.¹⁵ This means that young women note that some young women may be the victims of gender-related harassment, but characterize this experience as the personal failure of those victims, thereby reinforcing their own imagined distance from a quality that would open them to harassment and reinforce their distance from people who might well need their support. Thus neither victim nor non-victim has a way to connect with the other that can enhance her perception of their potential interchangeability, and this leaves them without a basis for solidarity. Disidentification with their gender leaves them with little way to approach a world that sees them as gendered, despite their own reluctance to accept gendered identities. What each of these problems with disidentification underscores is that young women do understand what gender is, they do not form their identity outside of gender but rather against it. But rather than undertaking a critical stance toward gender relations, and thus opening discussions of what gender could and should mean, they sidestep the identification and locate themselves as individuals outside of social forces. The productive refusal of identity, rather than subverting codes of power, reinstalls these girls back into a genderless, ahistorical individuality.

Since peer support is crucial to many young adults in crisis, and peer education can be a helpful route in addressing potentially sensitive topics, it is therefore important to reconnect these young women to one another. It is also crucially important that young men be connected to the project of eliminating sexual harassment and assault, not only because they are likely to be the perpetrators, but also because they are likely to be victims as well. Despite their relatively better outcomes when sexually harassed, young men still need to be considered in discussions (indeed, they too deal with sexual harassment as something that necessarily disidentifies them with masculinity, since to be a victim is to fail to be a man). The point here is to move an individualistic response to harassment into the realm of a political and social critique. This means that anti-harassment education needs to move beyond an individualistic model of explanation to an historicized and politicized interrogation of the various forms of violence in contemporary social interactions.

1. Vicki Schultz, "Reconceptualizing Sexual Harassment," *Yale Law Journal* 107, no. 6 (1998): 1683-805. The point is not to trivialize the personal as disconnected from the social and political, but to warn that the personal is not the only context for sexual harassment.

2. Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence," in *Feminist Legal Theory: Readings in Law and Gender*, ed. Katharine T. Bartlett and Rosanne Kennedy (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), 181-200.

3. *Ibid.*, 196, fn. 5.

4. *Ibid.*, 197, fn. 5. We will sidestep the fact that her next move in this essay is to distinguish between liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and radical feminism (which is "true" feminism).

5. Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 399-400.

6. Barbara Houston, "Should Public Education be Gender Free?" in *The Education Feminism Reader*, ed. Lynda Stone (New York: Routledge, 1994), 127-28.
7. *Ibid.*, 131.
8. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
9. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Later Modernity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).
10. *Ibid.*, 48.
11. Umbreen Qadeer, coordinator, Eliminating Violence Through Education, Urbana, Ill., personal communication, 14 May 1998.
12. *Ibid.*
13. American Association of University Women, *Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America's Schools* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of University Women Educational Foundation, 1993).
14. Pauline B. Bart and Patricia H. O'Brien, "Stopping Rape: Effective Avoidance Strategies" in *Feminist Frontiers III*, ed. Laurel Richardson and Verta Taylor (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 413-23.
15. Debbie Nelson, director, Eliminating Violence Through Education, Urbana, Ill., personal communication, 25 Aug. 1997.