Adjusting bass and treble: the continuously modulated performance of gender

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Introduction

My research into domestic labour in same sex households has prompted me to radically rethink my ideas about gender. Most work on the domestic division of labour has found that the family-household is one of the key sites for the maintenance and reproduction of the gendered division of labour and, in fact, the production of men's and women's gendered identities (Baxter 1993, Stacey 1991, Morris 1990, Delphy and Leonard 1992, Ferree 1990). As the partners in a same sex relationship are by definition of the same gender, I initially supposed I would need to find some other theoretical perspective on the dynamics of domestic labour to underpin my analysis. However, as I conducted the interviews, it seemed to me that each of the respondents performed their gender in different ways to their partner, and indeed to all the other respondents, and this seemed to involve a subtle and complex interplay of many endogenous, contextual and relational factors.

Bem's (1995) article on dismantling gender polarization by turning the volume of gender difference down or up suggested a useful analogy to portray a more nuanced understanding of this dynamic, along the lines of adjusting the bass and treble controls of a sound system – hence the continuously modulated performance of gender. Building on Connell's (1987) understanding of the multiple forms of masculinity performed by different groups of men, in this paper I wish to explore the idea that each person performs different degrees of masculinity and femininity simultaneously, in the context of different domains of social and cultural space, and in relation to other actors in that space. Finally I have used Bourdieu's ideas about habitus, field, and reflexivity to explore how people may engage with this process in a more or less conscious manner, and with differing degrees of complexity and skill. I hope in this way to contribute a slightly different perspective to the understanding of gender as performatively constituted, and perhaps also to furnish the 'social imaginary' (Taylor 2002) with some new ways to think about gender.

The 'two-and-only-twoness' of gender challenged

Recently, my friend Louise and I went out to dinner. There were just a few quiet pairs dining in the courtyard of the inner city restaurant, along with a riotous and obviously well-marinated 'hen's night' party. The Bride and her entourage then began approaching the male diners to have her photo taken kissing them – I suppose that's one way to mark your passage into lifelong monogamy. Then they began to approach us. Louise had her back to them, but I was facing them and making desperate facial grimaces to ward them off. Alas to no avail. The Bride and her younger attendants soon realised their error, and tried to drag grandma away, but grandma, who was clearly three sheets to the wind, was incensed by this young fellow's unwillingness to co-operate and roundly abused him for not being a good sport. Little did grandma know that Judith Butler had her in mind when she wrote of the 'regulatory practices of gender coherence' (1999).

" . . . *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed. The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside of the metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of Nietzsche's claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything." In an application that Nietzsche himself would not have anticipated or condoned, we might state as a corollary: There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (Butler 1999, p. 33).

My friend Louise had committed the error of not expressing a clearly coherent gender. Physically, Louise looks like what is commonly known as a 'butch dyke' (or a straight young bloke to drunken grandmothers). However, she does far more housework than her femme girlfriend who, she acknowledges, has more aptitude with power tools then she does. She works on a Council parks and gardens team where she is constantly mistaken for a bloke, but to me she is an articulate and sensitive woman friend. The gender she performs is far more complex and nuanced than her physical appearance would suggest. Nevertheless, Louise is frequently a victim of the social policing of the 'two-and-only-twoness' of gender.

In trying to address this problem, Bem initially tried to point out how minimal the differences actually are between male and female, encapsulated in the mantra she used to repeat to her own children:

"A boy is someone with a penis and testicles; a girl is someone with a clitoris, vagina and uterus; and whether you're a girl or a boy, a man or a woman, doesn't need to matter – or shouldn't anyway – until and unless you want to make a baby…" (1995. p. 330).

Finally despairing of the efficacy of this approach, she decided on a new line of attack:

". . . I propose that rather than trying to dismantle the two-and-only twoness of gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality by *eliminating* gender categories, we instead dismantle the two-and-only-twoness by *exploding* or *proliferating* gender categories. In other words, I propose that we let a thousand categories of sex/gender/desire begin to bloom in any and all fluid and permeable configurations and, through that very proliferation, that we thereby undo (or, if you prefer, that we de-privilege or de-centre or de-stabilize) the privileged status of the two-and-only-two that are currently treated as normal and natural" (Bem 1995, p330, author's italics).
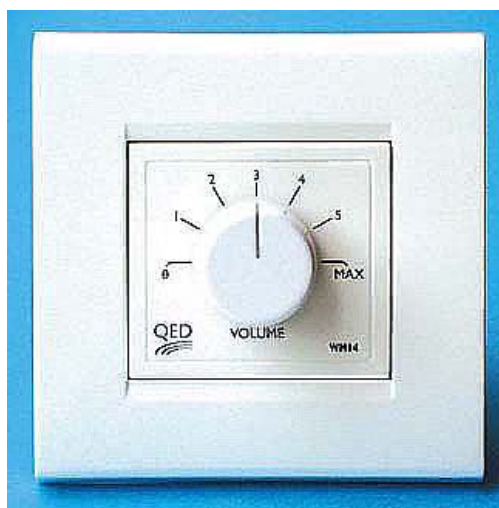
Figure 1 - volume control
http://www.futurehome.co.uk/ProdImages/wm14.jpg

In a sense, this is exactly what Connell endeavoured to do in his landmark work, *Masculinities* (1995). Connell had asserted that, in any historico-cultural context, gender is being performed by agents of different race, class or generation resulting in multiple forms of gender identity, with those that are culturally idealized, which he called 'hegemonic masculinity' and 'emphasised femininity', flanked by any number of subaltern forms (1987). The second section of the book was based on a field study where Connell interviewed a number of men and identified four different styles of masculinity. One of these styles was what he called 'A Very Straight Gay' (1995). Based on interviews with eight men connected with the gay community in Sydney, he came to the conclusion that gay masculinity was no longer "effeminate" because these men mostly did 'act like a man'. He defined this project as 'the making of a homosexual masculinity as a historically realized configuration of practice' (1995, p. 160).

This reification of a single style of gay masculinity is all the more surprising when we consider his very nuanced and contextualised understanding of gay sexuality:

> Their sexualities emerged from many-sided negotiations in multiple arenas: emotional relations in home and sexual marketplace; economic and workplace relations; authority relations and friendships. The pressures in these relationships often pushed in different directions, and they are linked in varying sequences . . . There is no general homosexual identity, any more than there is a general heterosexual identity . . ." (Connell 1995, p. 160).

Influenced by Connell, when I began my investigation of the practice of domestic labour in same sex households, I too assumed that there was an historically realized configuration of gay masculinity and lesbian femininity. However, my interviews led me to the conclusion that the lesbians and gay men in each couple were not demonstrating the same gender style as each other, and by their own accounts, the gender style I was observing was quite different from the gender styles they expressed in other contexts, such as work or sport. Building on Berk's understanding that doing housework is a way of 'doing' femininity (1985) I came to the conclusion that the gender of my research participants was 'performatively constituted', as Butler would say, in the context of the home by how they engage with domestic labour in relation to their partner. Doing Gender can thus be seen as both Contextual and Relational: Contextual in that it may vary across different domains of social and cultural space, and Relational, in that it is performed in relation to other actors in that space.

Both Bem and Connell appear to treat gender as a discrete category for each person so that however arrived at, an individual will have a characteristic gender style that remains fairly consistent for that person. This would appear to be grounded in the popular assumption that there is, indeed, a 'doer behind the deed' – a core authentic self, so that when people observe themselves behaving in ways that are not consistent with their idea of this 'self' they feel they are being insincere or inauthentic. Queer people often feel that the expression of their identity is constrained by external social factors, such as considerations of safety, or how acceptable this identity is to other people. I have come to regard the performance of gender as being continually modulated, rather like the bass and treble controls on my CD player. This brings an understanding that all performance of gender is constrained by contextual and relational factors, and that each performance is no more authentic or inauthentic than any other. Here are some examples from my own research, which I hope will illustrate why I have come to these conclusions (the names are fictional):

'Luke' and 'Scott' – two gay boys who own an apartment in a trendy inner-city suburb known as Brisbane's 'gay ghetto'. In appearance they are short, slightly built, metrosexual bordering on effeminate, with quite effeminate gestures and the gay lilt to their high voices. In some respects, they revel in their gay identity – their kids are two long-haired white pedigree cats called 'Dolce' and 'Gabbana' with their names spelt out in diamantes on red collars, and the boys' speech is littered with words like 'heinous' and 'sweetie'. However, Connell's 'very straight gay' is also much in evidence – they spend hours each day on sport and exercise, swimming, martial arts, cycling, the gym. One is managing director of a company, and misses no opportunity to refer to himself as a 'businessman' – he, in particular, tried to avoid any discussion of the minutiae of domestic labour, breezily maintaining that the cleaning lady did everything. Only diligent and strategic questioning finally revealed that he is the neat freak who has to continually nag his partner about his messiness.

'Max' and 'Dennis' are what's known as 'bears' – tall, barrel-chested, hirsute, deep, resonant voices, blokey but gentle. Both have no doubts about their masculinity, and are proud of being role-models to their young son-in-law. 'Max' has a managerial position in the community sector, and tells me no-one ever guesses that he's gay, not because he makes any attempt to hide it, but because he doesn't fit the usual gay stereotype. At home, however, it's a different matter – the guys are into interior decoration, pastry cooking, scrapbooking, visual arts, preserves – their place in a northern beachside suburb looks like a spread from 'Home Beautiful'.

'Carol' and 'Robyn' are working class lesbians who live on acreage in a regional area of South East Queensland. 'Carol' is your classic butch dyke who is often mistaken for a bloke, a horticulturalist who worked for many years as a jillaroo; 'Robyn' on the other hand is a classic femme – every time I've seen her she's been in a skirt, heels and make-up. Despite their appearance, it is Carol who has the collection of tiny fragile ornaments which Robyn refuses to clean, and who in fact does most of the housework and cooking. Carol is busy working and studying, and is very much the driving force in the relationship.

'Kris' and 'Molly' are both mid-career professionals and also live in an inner-city suburb, but asked to be interviewed at Kris's office because, as they later admitted, they didn't want me to see how messy their apartment is. Both are subtly androgynous in appearance, and both are far too absorbed in their careers, study, exercise and socialising to pay much attention to domestic labour. They also have a cleaning lady, and the rest of the chores seem to be managed in a fairly fluid fashion.

My data analysis is in its early stages, but it has rapidly become clear to me that all these people do varying degrees of masculinity and femininity at home; that the way they perform their gender is very much influenced by their interpersonal relationships

(our interviews covered previous relationships, and many described strikingly different patterns of domestic labour in those households); and that their performance of gender in other contexts, such as work, education and sport can be radically different from how they do it at home. The idea of modulating the performance of masculinity and femininity as being like adjusting the bass and treble controls of a sound system seems to me a useful way, though not the only way, to theorise this kind of gender performativity.

'Bass and treble'- modulating the performance of gender

Figure 2 - bass and treble

http://www.universal-radio.com/used/u892tone.jpg

Connell's description of sexualities could apply equally well to gender, and provides a useful description of what lies at the heart of Queer Theory. While many have applied Queer Theory to sexualities, few have explored it from a gender perspective.

> "Queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire…Resisting that model of stability – which claims heterosexuality as its origin when it is more properly its effect – queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire . . . Queer theory's debunking of stable sexes, genders and sexualities develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as **a constellation of multiple and unstable positions"**[my emphasis] (Jagose 1996, p.3).

Figure 3 – sex/gender/desire

If gender can be seen as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions, then we can perhaps see the performance of masculinity as like the bass control, and the performance of femininity as like the treble control on a sound system, where each can

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be modulated to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the equipment we have to work with, and the effect we wish to achieve. How, then, do we achieve this modulation? I would like to offer some very rudimentary and provisional thoughts on this matter.

How do we ↑ the ♀ Treble?

Physical

Breasts	"Women's" clothes
Small stature	Cosmetics
High voice	Jewelry
Not muscular	Immobile
Hairless	Weak
Minimise space you occupy	Low volume
Encumbered (handbags, high heels, impractical clothing, kids).	

Behaviours

Mothering (Nurture)	Be submissive
Be dependent	Be indecisive
No physical activity OR	Exercise, not sport
Timid	Sensitive
Art, music, dance	Housework (indoors)
Have a "female job" (e.g. nursing, teaching, child care)	

Table 1 – Turning up the Treble

How do we ↑ the ♂ Bass?

Physical

Penis	"Men's" clothes
Large stature	No Cosmetics
Deep voice	No Jewelry
Muscular	Mobile
Hairy	Strong
Take up space	Loud
Unencumbered (No handbags, high heels, impractical clothing, kids).	

Behaviours

Fight (e.g. boxing, military)	Power, authority
Earn money (breadwinner)	Make decisions
Physically active / adventurous	Brave
Aggressive / assertive	Independent
Business, manual labour	Bodybuilding, sports
Have a "male job" (e.g. truck driving, mining, CEO)	

Table 2 – Turning up the Bass

Of course this is a massive overgeneralisation and much too simplistic, but these are the kinds of attributes and behaviours that characterise 'emphasised femininity' and 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell 1987) in contemporary Australian society. The usual conceptual model of gender as a continuum, with masculinity at one end and femininity at the other, positions these practices as mutually exclusive. Seeing them instead as capable of independent modulation allows them to be performed simultaneously in relation to both social context and other people.

Let us now consider what the results of strategically modulating some of these attributes and behaviours might be.

If a male-bodied person turns his bass right up and his treble right up, he might be:

Figure 4 - Aunty Jack
The 'Hermaphrodite'

http://www.abc.net.au/news/features/img/Artsblog/aunty-jack_blog.jpg
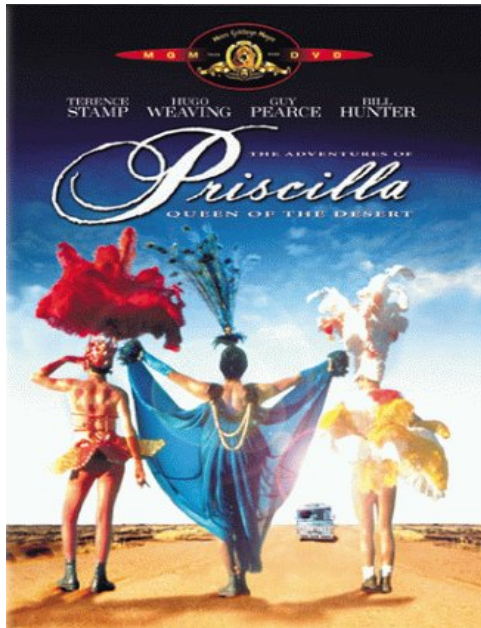
If a male-bodied person turns his bass right up and his treble right down, he might be:
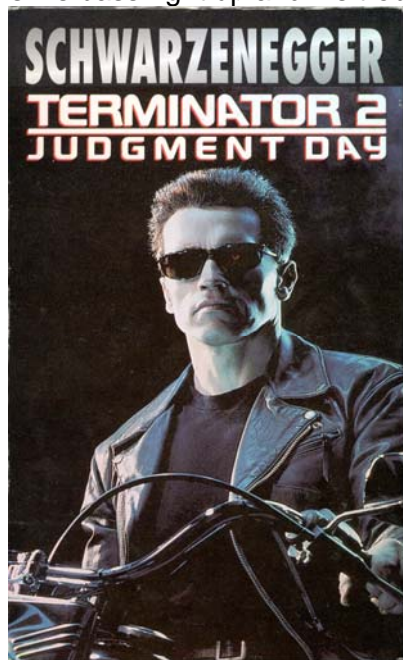
Figure 5 – Arnie
The 'Warrior', or Hegemonic Masculinity

If a male-bodied person turns his treble right up and his bass right down, he might be:

Figure 6 - Priscilla Queen of the Desert
The 'Sissy' or 'Queen'

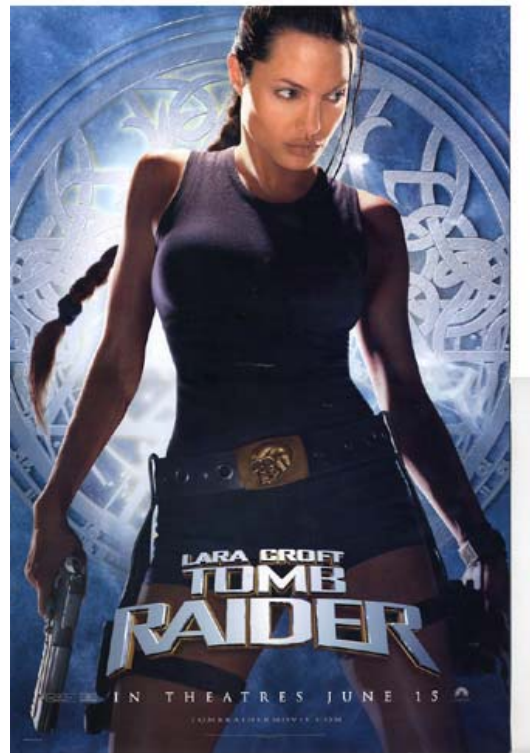If a male-bodied person turns both his bass and treble right down, he might be:

Figure 7 - The Angel Gabriel
The 'Neuter' – mystic or nerd

Jan van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece: Angel of the Annunciation*, 1432, Oil on wood, Cathedral of St Bavo, Ghent.

If a female-bodied person turns her bass right up and her treble right up, she might be:

**Figure 8 - Lara Croft
The 'Warrior Queen'**

Or if you prefer:

**Figure 9 - Margaret Thatcher
The 'Iron Lady'**

If a female-bodied person turns her bass right up and her treble right down, she might be:

Figure 10 - Helen Clark
The 'Mannish' woman

http://www.gsinstitute.org/pnnd/images/Helen_Clark.jpg

If a female-bodied person turns both her bass and treble right down, she might be:

Figure 11 - Velma from 'Scooby-Doo'
The 'Neuter' – mystic or nerd

http://www.umsl.edu/~ccj/images/velma.jpg

If a female-bodied person turns her bass right down and her treble right up, she might be:

Figure 12 - A Stepford Wife
The 'Femme' – or 'Emphasised Femininity'

Because it does not posit masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive, this model allows for people to manipulate both at the same time, and to an extent which may vary according to social context and in relation to other social actors. However, the word 'manipulate' might suggest to some the existence of a rational actor pursuing predetermined, or at least conscious, ends. This is where I believe Bourdieu's theories about the habitus and reflexivity can be particularly helpful.

Factory settings versus individual expertise – the role of habitus, field, and reflexivity

The central issue that preoccupied Bourdieu was how the actions of individuals follow regular statistical patterns without being the product of obedience to rules, norms, or conscious intention. By adopting the language of 'strategy', he sought to account for both the observed regularities of social action, and the experiential reality of free, purposeful, reasoning human actors who carry out their everyday actions practically, without full awareness of, or conscious reflection on, structures. The concept of strategy does not imply conscious choice or rational calculation, it is based on an internal sense derived from sets of dispositions that internalise in practical form what seems appropriate or possible in various situations. These sets of deeply internalised master dispositions that generate action form the habitus:

> ". . . a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53).

The habitus results from the early socialisation experiences in which external structures common to members of a social class or status group are unconsciously internalised. We might liken the habitus to the factory settings programmed into your CD player.

Figure 13 - My CD player

http://images.ciao.com/inl/images/products/normal/104/product-452104.jpg

My CD player has four settings in which the programmers have automatically adjusted the bass and treble to suit particular genres of music.

Rock

Pop

Jazz

Club

Manual

Figure 13 - My CD player's pre-set sound controls

More on the 'Manual' setting later.

Home

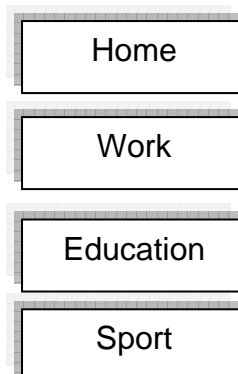| Work |
|---|

Education

Sport

Figure 14 – Some suggested fields with pre-set gender styles

Bourdieu's understanding of habitus would suggest that each of us has a gendered habitus, which is specific to domains of social and cultural space which he called

'fields'. A field is a structured system of social positions – occupied either by individuals or institutions – the nature of which defines the situation for their occupants Jenkins 1992). Of particular interest to the way we do gender is Bourdieu's concept of 'hexis'. In his work it is used to signify deportment, the manner and style in which actors 'carry themselves': stance, gait, gesture, etc. It is in bodily hexis that the idiosyncratic - the personal - combines with the systematic - the social (Bourdieu 1977). It is the mediating link between individuals' subjective worlds and the cultural world into which they are born and which they share with others.

> "Bodily hexis is political mythology realised, *em-bodied,* turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking* . . . The principles em-bodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit" (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 93-4)

For Bourdieu, the body is a mnemonic device upon and in which the very basics of culture, the practical dimensions of the habitus, are imprinted and encoded in a process which begins during early childhood. The habitus is inculcated as much, if not more, by *experience* as by explicit *teaching*. Its power derives from the thoughtlessness of habit and habituation, rather than consciously learned rules and principles. Socially competent performances are produced as a matter of routine, without explicit reference to a body of codified knowledge, and without the actors necessarily 'knowing what they are doing' in the sense of being able to adequately explain what they are doing (Jenkins 1992). The 'field' of the family, the social and cultural space of the household, in which gender is performed and produced is, furthermore, characterised for most people by compulsory heterosexuality.

The problem with compulsory heterosexuality:

$$\mathbf{XX} \ = \ ♀ \quad ♥ \quad ♂ \ = \ \mathbf{XY}$$

The female-gendered body,
on balance, has to do more
'femininity'
than the male-gendered body…

The male-gendered body,
on balance, has to do more
'masculinity'
than the female-gendered body…

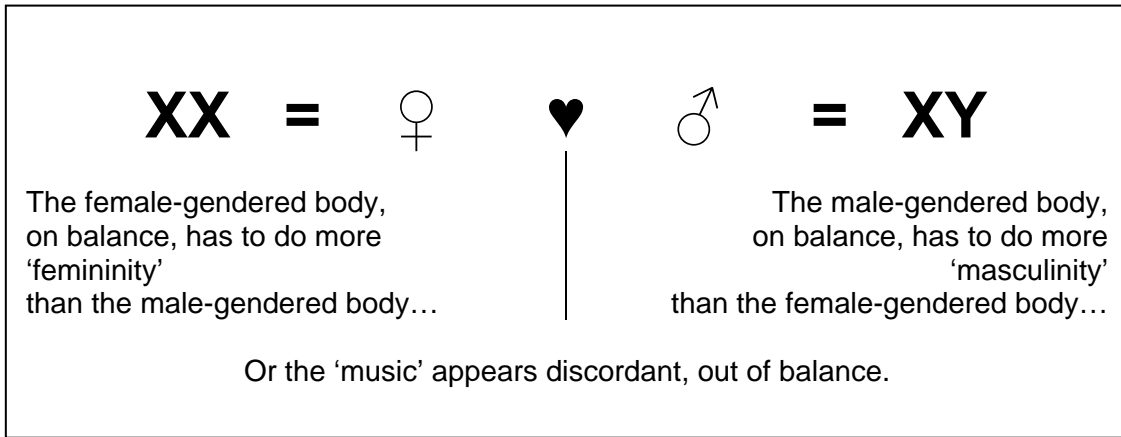Or the 'music' appears discordant, out of balance.

Table 3 – The problem with compulsory heterosexuality

So, for example, to maintain the appropriate balance in the performance of gender in a heterosexual household:

She enters the workforce	↑ bass
He earns more than her	↑ bass

But:

She starts to earn more than him	↑ bass

So:

He does less housework	↓ treble

Or

She does everything for everyone at home	↑ treble

This dynamic could help to explain the fact that, as women enter the workforce, their male partners do tend to take on a larger share of domestic labour, but when the female partner's earnings begin to exceed the male partner's, his participation in domestic labour also begins to decline (Hochschild 2003). Furthermore, the full-time employed female partners of unemployed men do more domestic labour than the full-time stay at home female partners of full-time employed men (HILDA 2001). Some recent ethnographic research with an admittedly very small sample has also revealed that the families of women in full-time employment outside the home tend to do less domestic labour than the families of women only employed part-time (Carter 2003). If doing housework can be seen as a way of doing femininity, and doing paid work can be seen as a way of doing masculinity, then both are ways of increasing bass or treble. An increase in either by one partner seems to elicit a compensating adjustment from the other partner.

***'A constellation of multiple and unstable positions': the five band graphic
equalizer – and beyond***

Figure 15 – the 5 band graphic equalizer

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To carry our analogy further, these five bands could be seen to represent the following
factors (although there are other factors that might also be appropriate):

Embodiment   Belief   Class   Ethnicity   Age   Systems

How we perform our gender, whether we turn the bass up or down, in the context of a
particular location in social and cultural space, and in relation to other actors in that
space, will involve many factors. Embodiment is a primary consideration; large breasts
or a deep voice, for example, are primary markers of gender that are difficult to hide or
compensate for. Belief systems, such as religions, may have a profound influence on
how a person does their gender. For example, some Christian sects do not permit
women to wear trousers; some religious practices do not permit men to cut their hair or
remove their beards. Even beyond formal belief systems, many people have deeply
held beliefs about the fundamental differences between the sexes, and what roles,
attitudes and behaviours are appropriate for each. Different classes typically manifest
different gender styles; upper class masculinity (as seen in the Corporate Box at the
AFL) bears little resemblance to working class masculinity (as exemplified by the
players on the field). Some ethnic groups have pronounced ideas about gender-
appropriate postures and behaviour; for example, in traditional Japanese society, girls
and boys were even trained to sleep in different positions. Age is also a factor; gender
differences are most highly pronounced in the reproductive years, and less visible in
early childhood or old age. These factors are rendered visible by personal or social
shifts that produce a disjuncture between habitus and field, which may result in
increased reflexivity on the part of the actor.

> Various theorists have suggested that identity is increasingly reflexive, and that
> contemporary individuals now have 'no choice but to choose' (Giddens) – to
> actively construct a coherent and viable sense of self-identity from the various
> means at their disposal . . . While this position has gained considerable currency
> amongst contemporary social theorists, however, it is arguably problematised by

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which, in pointing to the 'embeddedness' of our dispositions and tastes – and suggesting that these are closely related to our material circumstances or class – suggests that lifestyle and identity may continue to reflect such structural characteristics, and be less susceptible to reflexive intervention . . .

Not only does the concept of habitus not, in and of itself, preclude reflexive engagement with the self, but also certain forms of habitus may be inherently reflexive, and that the flexible or reflexive habitus may be both increasingly common and increasingly significant due to various social shifts . . . not least shifting patterns of work and employment, changing forms of community and relationship, and the impact of consumer culture . . .

In conditions of late-, high-, or reflexive modernity, endemic crises . . . can lead to a more or less constant disjunction between habitus and field. In this context reflexivity ceases to reflect a temporary lack of fit between habitus and field but itself becomes habitual, and is thus incorporated into the habitus in the form of the flexible or reflexive habitus . . .

I am not suggesting that such a reflexive habitus is demanded of us all, or that the opportunity to develop such a reflexive orientation to the social environment is equally distributed amongst different social groups. . . (Sweetman, 2003, pp. 528-549).

The experience of migration is one such social shift, where the gendered habitus of the culture of origin may not 'fit' the field of the destination culture. I suggest that queer people, as a social group, are predisposed to develop a reflexive habitus where gender is concerned, by virtue of the fact that their daily lives constitute an endemic crisis such as Sweetman describes. Because their sexual orientation dramatically ruptures what Jagose calls the "allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire" (1996, p. 3) they are continually challenged to give an account of themselves, to reflect on how they do their gender and sexuality. I suspect that people who inhabit subordinate positions within existing regimes of power, such as women, people of colour, and working class people, have always had to practice a degree of reflexivity, adapting their self-presentation to the requirements of the more powerful in order to escape sanction. Further research in this area could yield interesting insights; it might, for example, account for why females are seen to be outperforming males in contemporary education and employment which require a larger degree of reflexivity and adaptability than has hitherto been the case.

Irrespective of sexuality, ethnicity or class location, I believe that for many of us the 'factory settings' of the gendered habitus are no longer adequate or appropriate in the social and cultural spaces we find ourselves inhabiting, and in our dealings with other actors in those spaces. If our gender identity is indeed "a constellation of multiple and unstable positions" (Jagose 1996, p.3) then our management of that identity may look something like this:

Figure 16 – the mixing desk, 'a *constellation of multiple and unstable positions'*

http://users.tpg.com.au/users/hadrecs/vintage-images/mixingdesk-f.jpg

As Sweetman observed, I am not suggesting that such a reflexive habitus is demanded of us all, or that the opportunity to develop such a reflexive orientation to the social environment is equally distributed amongst all social groups (2003). However, in the way they engage with domestic labour, the gay and lesbian couples I interviewed certainly demonstrate a finely modulated performance of gender, in the context of the family-household, and in relation to their intimate partners. Further research could reveal whether they continue to modulate their performance of gender in this way in other contexts and in relation to other actors, and also whether other people who have a reflexive habitus where gender is concerned similarly modulate their performance of gender.

Conclusion

In order to dismantle the 'two-and-only-twoness' of gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality, Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1985) first advocated minimising gender difference, or turning its volume down. Later she proposed a reverse strategy, or turning the volume up, by allowing a thousand categories of sex/gender/desire to bloom in any and all fluid and permeable configurations (Bem 1985).

This still seems to be predicated on an understanding that gender identity and sexual orientation, once arrived at, are relatively stable. My interviews with lesbian and gay couples about doing domestic labour reveal that it is not only possible, but necessary, to do both masculinity and femininity at the same time. In this paper, I have tried to conceptualise this process by means of an analogy to the modulation of sound. Rather

than a simple matter of turning the volume up or down, doing gender is more like adjusting the balance between bass and treble. This brings with it an understanding that gender does not fall into discrete categories, such as 'hegemonic masculinity' or 'emphasised femininity' (Connell 1987), butch or femme. Rather each person adjusts the degree of masculinity or femininity they do in particular contexts and in relation to other people. This process has been masked in heterosexual households because one member is made primarily responsible for the performance of masculinity and one for femininity; in same-sex households, the continuously shifting and negotiated nature of this performance is made apparent. Finally, I have employed Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and reflexivity to examine how different social groups may engage with this process in very different ways.

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