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GENDER IN REAL TIME: POWER AND TRANSIENCE IN A VISUAL AGE

By Kath Weston (Routledge 2002)

Reviewed by David Hennessee

According to Kath Weston, “a certain lassitude now seems to afflict the study of gender” (1). Weston prescribes a remedy for this affliction: academic gender studies should focus more on the temporal and less on the visual. Easier said than done, for two reasons. First, ever since publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), gender studies has been enamored of performance theory—a mode of analysis examining how stylized, repeated bodily performances produce the effect of inherent gender rather than merely reflect a gender that precedes performance. Critical work following this premise necessarily focuses on representation, surfaces, and visual presentation. Second, Weston suggests that it’s no accident that we live in an age that privileges the visual over the temporal. Globalized late capitalism maintains its hegemony by mystifying temporal processes, thereby removing them from historical context and closing off possibilities of critique, not to mention change. Performance theory, with its focus on the visual, buys into this mystification and therefore has reached a critical impasse. To regain its edge and more importantly, its political relevance, gender studies should think more carefully about time. Weston’s new book boldly proposes to show us how.

It does and it doesn’t. Weston’s theories and ethnographies are at times compelling, but other times they come up short. For example, Chapter Three, “Do Clothes Make the Woman: Performing In and Out of Industrial Time” provides detailed description and interpretation of an all-lesbian “Prom Nite” dance in

1985 San Francisco. This event could easily be analyzed through performance theory: at “Prom Nite,” members of a stigmatized group appropriate the signifiers of normative gender in order to parody them and expose gender as a construct. Yet as Weston’s fieldwork at the dance shows, this explanation doesn’t account for the complexities of lesbian identities in relation to butch/femme embodiments. For instance, while some women at “Prom Nite” did see their gender play as politically subversive, many saw themselves toying with gender for mere entertainment, some for sexual stimulation, and some saw butch/femme roles as reflecting their essential identities. For most of these prom-goers, the significance of their butch/femme gender play varied with time and context. Moreover, performance theory is unable to explain how an event like “Prom Nite” appropriates and reworks older versions of lesbian butch/femme. The arguments of this chapter are convincing, if not entirely original (a point to which I will return).

Similarly strong is Chapter Four, “The Ghosts of Gender Past: Time Claims, Memory, and Modernity.” Here Weston describes the life and times of her godmother, a lesbian “career woman” of the 1930s-50s. Through her story, Weston shows how generations of women have staked their claims to modernity by thinking of their lives in opposition to older styles of femininity. As Weston writes, “Gender constructs develop in and through people’s understandings of the way that relationships were gendered before they ever arrived on the scene,” resulting in “ossification” of social relations, past and present (93-94). This process not only oversimplifies the past; it also obscures the ways that gender and late capitalism reinforce one another. That is, a “new” gendered identity is presented as the successor of an “old” one, and to achieve the former, one need only buy the right “new” clothes, see the best “new” shows, dance at the hottest “new” clubs, etc.

This chapter also contains an intriguing analysis of a figure Weston identifies as “The Old Butch at the Bar.” From the 1970s on, this woman haunts stories of lesbian bar culture, sitting motionless at the bar, surly, bitter, fat, working class, probably alcoholic. At least, this is how young “modern” lesbians see her. Weston argues that the Old Butch functions as repository of their fantasies of what it meant to be a dyke “back then,” and so the Old Butch allows younger lesbians to construct their identities as “liberated” and “modern.”

Less convincing is Chapter Two, “Unsexed: A Zero Concept for Gender Studies.” Here Weston gives a rather drawn-out history of the concept of zero, and then proposes the idea of “unsexed” to name “those transitory moments

when gender 'zeros out'" (55). As she writes, "Unsexed is the 'it' before the 'she,' the 'what' before the 'dyke,' the 'huh' before the 'butch,' the 'chola' the 'society lady,' or the 'watch out, a weird guy in boots'" (28). Weston makes her case for the importance of "unsexed" more through assertion than evidence, so the concept's political and analytical efficacy remains vague. For example, it's unclear how moments of "zero gender" reconfigure understandings of gender per se, since as Weston notes, "Unsexed never lasts. Ambiguity resolves back into certainty, doubt into gendered absolutes" (28).

Despite certain weaknesses, *Gender in Real Time* is an engaging and entertaining read. Weston's writing is a rare combination of hip cleverness and cogent analysis. Witty and vivacious, her book sparkles in a field plagued by jargon-logged and deliberately byzantine prose. Yet stylish and savvy as it is, this book falls down in substance. For example, one is left wondering how Weston's approach to time differs in practice from Frederic Jameson's famous and widely followed exhortation: "Always historicize." As a result, Weston's use of scientific concepts of temporality (wormholes, "spacetime," and Darwinian evolution) comes off as rhetorical flourish instead of theoretical underpinning. A more serious flaw is that Weston claims to be charting new territory that, in fact, has long been visited. Almost since its inception, Judith Butler-inspired performance theory has come under attack as ahistorical and unconcerned with social context. Moreover, Marxist critics (Donald Morton, for example) have noticed that theories of gender as performance are complicit with late capitalism.

While Weston promises rather more than she delivers, one can't help but admire the passion emanating from this book. Those of us who do gender studies should listen to Weston's valuable reminder not to get blinded by the glamorous visuals all around us, living as we do in a time of packaged high-visibility queer media darlings (e.g. *Will and Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, Ellen Degeneres, Graham Norton). Rather, Weston demands that we make our work speak to the real historical conditions of being queer. And Weston reminds us why we should do so: "What's at issue? The prospects for equality, the work to which we give our days, passion, rage, friendship, survival, resource distribution, memory's wagers. What's at stake? Our theories, our relationships, and sometimes our very lives" (xiii). 