CHAPTER SIX

Gender as a Soft Assembly

Part 1: Gender’s Multidimensionality.

Introduction

It is a sunny winter day and the men and woman sitting in my office manage to look both relaxed and intense. There are moments of laughter, occasional jets of excitement, and from time to time experiences of intense conflict. I am leading a discussion of a book by Ann Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body (2000). Drawing on history, biology and feminism, Fausto-Sterling shows both the fierceness and the falseness of the constructions of polarized sexed bodies. While we are accustomed to considering the variegations of gender experience, we tend to hold on to the sexed body as a more solid phenomenon organized irreducibly as a dichotomy.

Within psychoanalysis and clinical theory, the capacity to think of gender bent to various psychic functions is very indebted to the groundbreaking work of Coates (1994; 1005; 2000) on the way a child’s gender could come to carry and express complex residues of attachment histories, trauma across generations and crises in parental stability. Coates’ work revealed the often staggering
solutions to which a child might craft gender identity. Gender, in effect, becomes a conscious and unconscious solution to problems that could be familial, systemic and intrapsychic.

In search of the same kind of complexity, Fausto Sterling is gently but firmly, prying loose the fierce, anxious grip we keep upon the ‘concrete’ materiality of sexed bodies. Fausto-Sterling reports on the strange and historically longstanding legal and medical preoccupations with keeping genitals in an orderly and tidy binary. These are as much obsessions as preoccupations, she argues, powered more by cultural anxieties and the demand for social regulation than by medical necessity, anatomical accuracy or patient care.

Rather notoriously, Fausto-Sterling drew on the biological literature to propose a five sex not a two sex system, designed to make space for varieties of anatomy and anomaly. The religious right went predictably berserk. But so do we in the study group. Technically, I am the teacher in this group but with this topic, we are all subjects and objects of scrutiny. Over the weeks, I feel we are like the brightly colored chips in a child’s kaleidoscope, connecting and spinning off, reflecting quietly or exploding with color and movement. We notice that even this
revolutionary five category system still centers on male and female, though there are more permutations. Someone thinks that the turmoil and fuss over breaking open the two gender system is finally all about social control. Someone else connects this matter of control to the mad contradictions in the arguments against same-sex marriage. Through the strange logic of conservative ideologies same-sex unions are thought to undermine the institution. How’s that? It will somehow destabilize marriage if more people want to marry? What is revealed when you press on this paradox is the not so hidden agendas of patriarchy and reproduction as marriage’s substrate.

For all the creative play in contemporary gender arrangements, it certainly seems that sexual difference and heterosexuality, defined and soldered together at an absolutely concrete level, are still carrying fierce cultural controls. It is this interaction or competition of hegemonic, cultural stereotypes of gender and personal meanings that has compelled the work of Nancy Chodorow (1999) and Lynne Layton (1998), among others. Deconstructing the entrenched binaries of oedipal and pre-oedipal constructions has also been at the heart of Benjamin’s most recent work (1998). Binaries are not to be overthrown by analyzed, as Benjamin unpacks the underlying
male imaginaries in psychoanalytic accounts of sexual subjectivity, opting for inclusion and difference in a subtle tension of multi-gendered identifications.

For many different reasons we do and we don’t want to give up polarities of gender and gendered bodies. Some of us like the performance. Some of us believe in the deep visceral cellular truth of a gender. Within one individual life there can be great pleasure in gender as a deeply inhabited experience and there can be experiences of gender that feel alienated and false, hollow and coerced. Some of us feel shamed and pathologized by an outsider status. That shame can feel very dug into our psyches. Some of us feel enlivened by the outlaw transgressive space, loving that space for its potential for deep individuality and freedom.

Fausto-Sterling was interested in opening new category spaces, new understandings so that intersex persons, persons with some variety of anatomical anomalies or ambiguities, would be imaginable and imaginably coherent. Yet paradoxically, beginning with the limenal, marginal categories of identity, a new and expanded space has been opened for every gendered, sexed being. Fausto-Sterling taps into the deep human need to feel coherent, the relief in being mirror-able to oneself and others. This need to feel recognizable lives alongside a need to be known as
personally unique. This tension between uniqueness and cultural recognition or salience lives in all of us\textsuperscript{ii}.

Even as some of us could be happily delighted with the paraphernalia and feathers of gender, we discovered that deep down we hold many different ideas of how body and mind link up. For some of us, seeing sex and/or gender as more continuous than dichotomous feels liberating. For others gender as a continuity threatens the rich texture in gender differences. But for some gender markings are simply not so crucial. If gender has the dimension of ‘saturation’ we can see that we vary a lot in how saturated the colors of gender are for any of us. For so many reasons, including the ways members of our study group differed in age, sexual life, history of attachments and character, we varied a lot in how much we wanted to play with gender and how angry we felt at the presence (real and imagined) of the gender police.

What are the limits of gender fluidity? How is gender fluidity limited by constraints on body fluidity? True, when you begin to narrate differently about the body, many imaginative shifts in consciousness and body awareness can emerge. Speech practices and gender practices inform and inflame each other. But what happens to fluidity when the analyst gets pregnant or ill or old? How are these material
states both imaginatively and yet also concretely experienced?

A pregnant patient wishes that some days she could leave her belly in the waiting room so that all our experience that precedes and also continues through the pregnancy could be foremost. But on other days, she lives imaginatively in a space where there are three of us in the room, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict. The alternating of concrete experiences and fantasy is striking. The facticity of the body matters and it does not matter. Dean and Dyess trace out distinct registers of the body. In only some of these registers does gender matters (or mutters, as Dean has also argued).

One of the students articulates his reservations about body and speech with the following anecdote. Monique Wittig, cultural and queer theorist, is quoted as saying “I have no vagina.” In what sense could that be so? Is it that she has no vagina or no ‘vagina.’ Wittig may be contesting the way bodies are claimed by cultures and by signification. She is refusing cultural meaning not occluding her body. Another student tentatively offers up William James. Perhaps you only have a ‘vagina’ if there is cash value in that concept. Hmm...Pragmatic vaginas.
I tell the group the story in Ursula Le Guin's (1995) wonderful sci-fi novel The Left Hand of Darkness. In that novel, one of Le Guin's creative inspirations concerns sex. Sex can occur in this invented universe only when people come into a rather unique form of estrus. In those times, when a couple feels drawn together their genitals morph into some elaborated form. One time you might feminize, another time masculine genitals could appear. 'Oooh, a surprise. How interesting' says one person in the group. Another shudders. And since we are now exploring fantasy we try to wonder again about the limits of gender-morphing: male fantasies of interiority, female fantasies of thrusting in. A man in the group and the women without children think about the possibility/impossibility of knowing the experience of breastfeeding. How susceptible is the body to fantasy? How resilient?

In Sexing the Body, Fausto-Sterling pays attention to several lines of argument. She notices the way gender meanings as social and cultural phenomena subtly and seamlessly enter science and thus the 'construction' of sexed bodies. She argues that bodies, even in science let alone in personal life and in culture, resonate and are shaped by many forces of meaning making. Gender polarity moves from the culture via science and biological
investigations and then subtly and inexorably moves back into cultural reifications. Then a reified sexed body comes to explain and underpin gender dichotomies. This might be an example of the hermeneutic circle where explanations and meanings move from parts to wholes. But it is also a vicious cycle that mystifies the social agenda that takes root in and through the scientific and medical inquiry.

For example, she takes up the history of experimentation and discovery of hormones, often the markers for bed-rock sex differences. She argues that the incontrovertible effect of hormones on tissue is both generic and sex-specific. Yet what evolved in the scientific/medical understanding was an actually inaccurate sharp segregation of hormones by gender. The effect of hormones is better thought of as a general property of growth induction in that many hormonal effects impact on both genders. The default to a tight causal link between hormone and gender serves to underwrite strictly bounded, biologically based gender differences. A better way to model this would be to draw on systems theory and see the impact of hormone on tissue and structures as shaped by and emergent in context.

Fausto-Sterling is analyzing the role of science and medicine in a process political theorists name
'interpellation.' (Althusser, ) The culture, through various intermediaries (parent, teacher, police), steps forward and addresses the individual and in so doing claims and tries to constitute the person in a particular social or familial order. The common metaphoric scene is the policeman who yells out "Hey you'. You, the one addressed, startle and feel guiltily discovered (Zizek, 19 ). This example of being constituted by being named is replicated in a million little tendrils of two-person experiences on the way to becoming an individual within a complex, multi-layer, multi-dimensional system. Getting and maintaining a gendered body and a gender is one of these interpellations, working at both a verbal and non-verbal level. We cannot exactly refuse these categories, though they are assimilated, consciously and unconsciously, in highly unique ways in any individual.

As Fausto-Sterling moves back and forth among the roles of scientist, historian, and cultural critic, she makes a big playground with dark corners and light ones, and our group expands and inhabits multiplicities, singularities, polarities, fluidities. We mix and match among a number of identifications and subject positions: gender players, gender police and gender outlaws. The room throbs with our work, our energy, and our anxieties as we
struggle to hold a complexity along many dimensions. For some gender theory is fun, liberating play, for some it is life and death, and from time to time for all of us it is both. We struggle with utopian and dystopian models.

While we struggle with these theories and ideas we are also having a struggle with words. We must notice the inheritance of ancient ways of construing gender, the primary process gunk that adheres to our language and our categories. Our words for body parts, for gendered life, for kinship relations do not circulate simply and abstractly in the symbolic sphere. This is a point Mitchell drew from his reading of Loewald, the mix of primary and secondary process, of fantasy and reality that appears in our conceptual language.

The idea that category terms draw from our affective lives, our delights, our shames and our uncertainties, our somatic experience and our cultural and interpersonal experience is very much part of the new thinking about speech and language (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999; Litowitz, 2002; Olds, 2002). The dilemma of unconscious meanings and archaic personal and social history barnacled to our ways of speaking about sex and gender has been very much the project of queer theory (Butler, Corbett, Magee and Miller). We are placed at the center of a paradox. Of
course, when we pay attention to the complexity of our clinical and our personal experience we put in question the generic and the abstract. But the uniqueness of our particular life worlds always also bears the undertow of archaic forms of stereotype and phobic hatreds.

There is always some danger in the tight close-grained clinical and personal focus, as we privilege the clinical over the theoretical. Within the consulting room and within personal life we need to be very opened up to gender play. But we must also pay attention to the culture as it surrounds the clinical setting and permeates consulting rooms, bodies and minds. Playgrounds and prisons often have guards. Rules carry many their attendant shames, anxieties and guilts and are joined in a very combustable interaction with gendered and sexed experience. In fact, gendered experiences may radically code and color affective states. Dimen (2001) has been attending to the regulatory practices in psychoanalytic theory and clinical listening as they implant in conscious and unconscious life. A word like perversion, she notes, tells you what to think not what to do.

**Gender as a Soft Assembly**

As I listen to the way we play gender and play with genders and the way gender and desires play us, the
application of the principles of chaos theory or nonlinear
dynamic systems theory, to use Esther Thelen’s preferred
term, seems increasingly apt. Gender systems come in multi­
dimensional forms, interlocking at the level of history,
family, sub-culture and person. I find it increasingly
useful to think of gender as ‘softly assembled’, more
wetware than hardware. I want to see that gender and sexual
identity might be constructed of variable, locally
particular subcomponents with much potential for distinct
constellations and organizations.

This view of sexuality and gender is not new to
psychoanalysis. An emergent and potentially novel
interrelation of gender and desire is always one reading of
Freud’s in the Three Essays (1905). This idea has been core
to some classical analytic theories, particularly the
French world (Laplanche, 1990). At the same I think it fair
to claim that more elaborated implications of this point of
view have been developed in psychoanalysis in the work of
1998) and Lynne Layton (1998), Ruth Stein (and in culture
studies by Eve Sedgwick (1990). These theorists, strongly
influenced by post modernism, keep an eye on the sources of
distortion and social construction within any theory.
Together these theorists expand the conception of both the
forms and functions of sexuality. Sexuality expresses and contains multiple functions: self regulation, interpersonal regulation, distancing or bridging. Sex may seem like the conditions for safety or the occasion of powerful and deliberation destabilizations. Sexual life may be in the service of courting excitement or danger or sealing off such states. Forms and functions of desire thus do not have an obvious or unremarkable relationship to gender.

Psychoanalytic feminism has been one tendency that exploits this kind of multi-functional analysis for gender as well as desire. The assemblage of gendered experience in sexual life is contingent and emergent, not pre-programmed. Desire and gender may be set up antagonistically or feel seamlessly enmeshed and obvious. Gender will be softly assembled as body state, affective experience, ways of talking and thinking, and ways of loving or hating. Gender and desire would only come into their unique and particular forms in context, widely construed. As such, gender and sex are inseparable from the interpersonal fields in which they are embedded.

To use a spatial metaphor this would expand on like Waddington’s model of an epigenetic landscape, a mountain down which many pathways of water flow. The local conditions shape and effect the pathways, the flow and its
forces. Large tectonic forces (like the culture) have impact as well. Beginning at a common source, the endpoint is unpredictably but describably different. Landscape is an interestingly ambiguous term. The epigenetic landscape described the locally emergent variations in an individual’s development. But these variations emerged from variations in the contextual constraints within which the individual grows. These contextual constraints are both within the individual and within the larger systems in which the individual is embedded. Embededness is the phenomenon that makes for both patterns and unique solutions.

a. Gender’s multi-dimensionality

If gender is to be softly assembled, perhaps the first question is, assembled with what? What features of experience might come into this construction? And while compiling lists of the components we have to keep in mind the key principles of chaos theory: the emergent nature of a system, the focus on process not structure, and the multiple pathways in most developmental processes. This model of creative and constructive dynamic interaction of constitution and environment looks with a new lens at the thick descriptions of gendered and sexual life with which our field is brimming. We behold not one story but many.
There have been some interesting candidate systemizations. Lewes (19, in imagining a variety of pathways through oedipal thickets and obstacle courses, draws up a list that includes object choice, forms of attachment/identification, and polarities of passive or active. This expanded systemization was Lewes' corrective to the normative forms of oedipal crisis and resolution that privileged one form of being and one form of desiring. Chodorow (1992) used this analysis to put in question heterosexuality, to suggest that even the most orthodox 'natural' sexuality could have a soft assembly. Perhaps compromise formation, per se, is a kind of soft assembly.

To the list of processes Lewes and Chodorow organize one would want to add sex of subject and the individual's unconscious fantasy in regard to the gender of all participants in sexual life. Additionally, from the work of Dimen, Elise, Sedgewick, and others one would want to expand our understanding of the functions and forms of sexual desire. In these hands, sexuality is evolving from a simple drive or a simple drive tethered to reproduction into a variety of human and interpersonal functions. Sexual experience lives in dissociation. Sex can be used to enable or shore up splits in the self and fragmentation. Sexual practices can be interpersonal glue or powerful
intrapsychic fortressing. Sexual life and anxiety can be powerfully interwoven to protect the individual from impingements, from loneliness and abandonment fears, and from fragmentation.

N. Klein (1990) proposes a multidimensionality for homosexuality that one might easily expand to encompass many sexualities. He identifies attraction, lifestyle, fantasy, emotional preference, social preference and self-identification. It is no accident that many of these reframes of gender and desire, this move to multiplicity and multivariate pathways, have come from queer theory, albeit a queer theory inflected through psychoanalysis. Being on the margins, feeling deeply and personally the wounds of normative categorizing of identity, gives a unique perspective that can help deconstruct those categories. It was the inadequacy and the necessity (political or personal) of categorical public identities that produced queer theory out of the practices of liberation and identity politics.⁴

These features outlined by Lewes, N. Klein, Chodorow and others concern the child's elaborated and multiply gendered relation to sexual life. Another aspect of gender's soft assembly would take up the question of identifications. Drawing on Schafer's (1968) taxonomy we
could add incorporative, projective, and introjective identifications to our list of the modes of internalization of our experience of the gender of another person and how that person mirrors and construes our gender. To draw on the unique interpretation of introjection and incorporation developed by Abraham and Torok, we could look for the melancholic, sequestered incorporative features of gender or for the wider, more fluidly libidinized internalizations of gender identity. For some, gender may live as a traumatic encapsulation, for others a seamless ego syntonic state imbricated in many self states and experiences.

Judith Butler has pursued this line of thought in proposing that gender has, inevitably, a melancholic structure. Gender will always contain and express disavowed loves lived as identifications. The elements of desire in this identification remain lost to awareness. One of the values of Schafer's account of internalization is that it becomes possible to see more nuanced ways that partial identifications are lived out, as incorporations, an introjections or as more seamlessly internalized aspects of self. Schafer did not explore the intersubjective dimension to these processes, but his expansion of the concept of internalization, together with work like that of Mitrani or Alvarez opens up a picture of a manifold self, with levels
of integration of self and other and with a permeability of inside and outside.

Seeing the complex possibilities of use of the other, we can pay attention to the permeability of exteriority and interiority. Genders, like minds, may be distributed across persons (Olds, 2000). This distribution takes different forms. Personally lived gender may require externally braced recognition from others. For some, gender sculpting may require severe and stark disavowals of whatever feels ego-dystonic. Part of the contemporary deconstruction of masculine identifications has focused on this as an aspect of normative gender development: masculinity as the shearing away of any maternal identification, indeed any signs of softness, gentleness or receptivity.\(^i\)

Chaos theory applied to gender and gender development would address the kinds of components that might make up anyone’s gender, the kinds of variability in the pathway to that end state, and the functions of gender both in situ and in interaction. Looked at in long shot, a person’s gender might look unremarkably simple or single valenced. In psychoanalysis terms like ‘core’ or ‘primary’ are asked to do somewhat contradictory services: to hold a continuity of body and mind, to describe summaries of experience, but sometimes inexorably to be bedrock. Observed as surface and
style and self presentation, many regularities of pattern and form might prevail as gender. Corbett (2001) has written about the contradictory pull for tradition and convention on the one hand and recognition of uniqueness on the other. The rich stews of gender life, even its more lurid and cartoony aspects, both conscious and fantastical can make an individual feel recognizable, comprehensible, coherent. But such summary experiences cannot fully encompass gender complexity. It is this paradox that chaos theory addresses as it maintains the tension between regularity of pattern and variation.

Coherence, including gender coherence, is one of those 'necessary fictions' in psychic life and often a requirement of our theories. From various sources cultural, psychoanalytical and personal, tolerance for and interest in incoherences is on the rise (Butler, Dimen, Layton, Fairchild and Stack, Fausto-Sterling). From a more molecular, fine grained, experience-near vantage point, the forms of one’s gender would be quite variable depending on the task at hand, the context, and the individual’s life history and experiences.

Becoming gendered would be like learning to walk. Or, to re-use a metaphor of Gerald Edelman’s, becoming gendered would be like buying a suit. While an ideal and perfectly
specified suit can be ordered and made up, most of us buy clothing already available, and it is a 'good enough' compromise of needs, historical conditions, and our life circumstances. Our solutions satisfy loose constraints and the fit between individual and environment is ad hoc not optimal. Edelman used this analogy to describe the workings of a biological system, antibody production. I think gender might be another such suit. Suits, like languages, are both general and specific, public and private. Suits, like skins, face outward and inward. They are modes of fortressing the self and ways of connecting to others. And like our wardrobes, individuals may vary significantly in many suits, what is mixed and matched, what is seasonal what is enduring. Genders, like suits, can be uniforms, costumes or skins.

b. Gender and desires without a pre-determined outcome.

In this theory there can be robust ongoing patterns of interaction that arise in the earliest experiences but are not outcomes predicted from some point of origin. Rather for any child there will be a kind of motivational landscape that begins with minimal initial biases that evolve into a rich, unique, and individualized set of dynamic possibilities.
It is right here that one can see the rich potential for chaos theory in relation to sex and gender. By minimal initial biases, Ghent, Thelen, Elman and others intend subtle simple capacities not yet loaded with motivational thrust or cultural signification for the child. Almost immediately two things happen. First, in a very few iterations, the behavior and capacity and potential for meaning become exceedingly complex. Secondly, the cultural, familial, interpersonal surround of the infant makes meaning from the beginning. Parents draw their experience of their infant and growing child through the multiple and particular lens or lenses of gender that matter to them. Culture, historical epoch, family and personal dynamics all contribute to the structure of these lenses, becoming part of the context in which emergent gender(s) are softly assembled.

Ghent's work on motivation identifies three elements in Edelman's model\textsuperscript{vii}: 1) initial values or biases, 2) recategorization and reentry of experience to make for unique and complex internal processes and 3) a system of mapping. The boundaries and contours and contents of experiences will be both variable and unique to any individual in context. Ghent also makes the point that at the experiential level, the building up of 'categorization
on value' and mapping will draw on affects, anxieties, and bodily states.

I think there could be a productive interaction between this way of modeling the evolution of motivational systems and the psychoanalytic work on the emergence of desire in the context of maternal or parental sexuality (Laplanche, 1987, 2002; Stein, Green, 1995, 1997). From a chaos theory standpoint, Laplanche's concept of maternal enigmatic seduction is a kind of Lewinian field theory, with desire in the child emerging from an experience of being desired, an experience that is only partially metabolizable. Desire as an increasingly agentic lived experience of the child emerges from an intersubjective context. The complexity of these phenomena, putting in play the question of whose desire lives in whom, destabilizes any easy self/other distinction.

It is important from this perspective that gender does not in its initial forms predict its endpoint. One can easily retrospectively trace the emerging complex and multi-dimensional experiences/attractors through which genderedness is expressed but the beginnings are both interpersonally worked and simple. When Beebe and Lachman outline the very complex, multi-modal, interactive
capacities of children in the first year of life (2002) they speak of levels of organization for phenomena like gender. Within the pre-verbal register there are sensory and conceptual representations, not yet coded symbolically as gendered, but cohering around some ongoing agentic experience. These experiences would then be creatively re-mapped when speech comes on line and when the imaginative and symbolic representations of gender are elaborated between parent and child and within the child.

But within the dyad, there is an already elaborated interlocutor, whose fantasies and expectations of gender are part of the inevitable projective material through which the child is seen. There is a rich, partially unconscious, elaborated soup of meaning enveloping in any child, what Corbett describes as an early relational excess. These meanings, uniquely and idiosyncratically organized into semantic attractors or gender attractors evolve for the child. And the child’s contribution? For this, it seems the expanded view of infant capacity, seen through the lens of nonlinear dynamic systems theory is crucial. The power of this perspective is that complexity is built very quickly out of simple ‘primitives. Laplanche names this very simply as ‘initial somatic receptivity’ (p. 52), sounding very like Ghent or Edelmann.
Laplanche’s account of the complex relation of infantile and adult sexuality centers on paradox, nonlinearity (nachtraglichkeit, that is the strange reverberations across time through which present events restructure past ones) and intersubjective experience (enigmatic seduction). "When it comes to his sexuality, man is subject to the greatest of paradoxes: what is acquired through the drives precedes what is innate and instinctual, in such a ways that, at the time it emerges, instinctual sexuality, which is adaptive, finds the 'seat already taken', as it were, by infantile drives, already and always present in the unconscious". With some emendations, I think the same case could be made for gender. In this formulation, Laplanche means by drive a matter quite different from instinct, experiences that are contingent and variable and non-adaptive. What he is termed infantile sexuality is both objected related and private. And while the object is imaginary, a crucial term for his perspective, we might note that imaginary objects lean on real objects and that this goes in both directions. Parent and child live out co-created experience in multiple registers, real imaginary and symbolic.

Laplanche’s idea of drive is quite close to the chaos theory model of an open system, transgressing homeostasis
to be endlessly replenishable. And for Laplanche one powerful force in the construction of evolving 'desires' is the complex, always partially unconscious parental reveries (desires, constructions, imaginings) in which the child is held from the beginning. It is this complex match and mismatch between infant and parent capacities that gives the child an inevitable surplus of enjoyment, affect, anxiety. Another crucial aspect of this model is the retrospective reorganization, the appearance of new organizations that reshape the past, nachtraglichkeit. Complex, non-contingent, unpredictable patterns of aim and object lead to the reconstruction of an imaginary origin.

Lori, lived in such a strange, nonlinear grip of reverberating traumas (Harris, 1998). An early serious injury that left scars and disfigurement was both perpetuated and augmented by an ongoing sequence of reparative surgeries. These sequenced injuries became enmeshed with and elaborated around matters of gender. Stoic defences designed to obliterate painful memory by performing painful rituals became woven into ideas of feminine maintenance and body regimens. Later in her development, Lori's deepening understanding of her parent's marriage, her mother's depression and alienation and humiliated state organize around these traumas. Femininity
is organized as shameful, disfigured, painful and gendered
life is reworked as mastery over pain and control over need
and impulse. The earliest induction into this series - an
accident quite unrelated to gender per se, lived on in
procedural forms of knowing and being, the original event
amplified retrospectively by the terrible routines of
rehabilitation. The haunting presence of this nonlinearly
worked but powerful pattern would be manifested in the
summer months (the seasonal site of post-accident surgery)
when Lori inevitably engaged in the most strenuous and
dangerous practices, courting disfigurement as she
attempted to master pain's resurgent memories.

Any developmental story, like Lori's starts with
initial biases in responsiveness, parental fantasy, life
events, landscapes of various kinds that are then subject
to repeated retroactive reorganization. Finally a
construction is cobbled together in multi-modal
organizations, with multiple time lines and constructed
meanings that can accrue to matters of gender and to
sexuality. Lori, was quite phobic about penetration. Sex,
surgery, original assaults (in her case, by an animal),
family dynamics all get uniquely self-assembled. How, in
any child's experience, gender and sexuality are interwoven
makes for another unique constructive developmental narrative.

What gender is the child imagined to be in any particular family? What does gender mean, in fantasy and in conscious perception, to that child’s family and significant others? What is the meaning of having or being a gender for parent and for child? Coates work on gender dysphoria and Goldner’s work on the communications about gender in families with spousal violence show us how complex these questions can actually be. How do gender meanings get linked to sexual intentions, infantile or otherwise? And how will these parental fantasies or phobic anxieties about a child’s gender and desires be creatively assimilated by the child?

Turning to gender development, one would see gender constructed via re-entry and remapping upon initial experiences and capacities that do no more than orient the infant, perhaps toward food, warmth, and contact. Yet, quite soon within this system of encircling landscapes, gender will come to be some kind of attractor, some kind of organization in which such seemingly simple matters of food, warmth and contact may (though not necessarily) come to have unique ‘gendered’ meanings and affect states, initially and in more articulated forms for the adults,
subsequently and in layers of meaning and signification for the child.

Gender, from this point of view, may come to be overlapping with systems of memory, language, representation, and thought as well as somatic state, motoric experience, and ultimately complex experience of shared and unshared identities, sanctioned and forbidden desires. The assembly of ways of being and feeling gendered and the overlap of such being and feeling with modes of desire or modes of thought or modes of interaction will be unique and emergent, not preset. For each child these overlapping organizations will map differently and within each system, the attractors through which gender organizations are maintained and reproduced will be shared by individuals in the larger family or cultural system but also be differentiated and unique. The molar-level gender identity of a child may look to be shared and comparable to that of a parent or significant other, but the micro-organization will be more variably assembled.

**Attractors and Dynamic Landscapes**

In looking at gender development and sexuality from the perspective of chaos theory, I will concentrate on the crucial concept of attractors and dynamic landscapes. As
always in the chaos theory perspective, it is hard to hold onto theoretical constructs that really privilege movement and process over structure. This approach treats individual experience as unfolding and self-organizing and changing through multidimensional phase spaces and moving along multiple time scales. Terms like 'basins', 'valleys', 'eddies in a moving stream' are conjured up, perhaps as what Alicia Juarerro calls 'theory-constitute metaphors' to convey the organization of patterns that have global coherence and micro-variation. Attractors, as we shall see, can be described in different ways. But despite all the concretization of image, it is important to note that these attractors are moving patterned phenomena, which in living systems may be susceptible to both slow or radical transformations.

Attractors is the term given to the particular quality or form of a system. Attractors are not exactly things or shapes or reified structures. They are more appropriately thought of as processes, expressing some features of a system or sub-system. Attractors are capable of different degrees of motility and change. As any system self organizes some preferred patterns will emerge. It is to these patterns that the term attractor is applied. Stuart Kaufman developed the image of lake and basins, with a
variety of trajectories flowing into some steadying repository. This image was a means for grasping the relative mix of stability and variation in any such state. Piers (in press) has described a variety of attractors, each describing distinct forms of experience. A fixed pendulum would be a rigid attractor with distinct quite change resistant qualities. Piers (2000) has analyzed character along these lines equating pathology with rigidity.

Thelen also uses the image of an attractor as a basin between two hills. Depending on the slope and depth of the valley, an object will be trapped and immobilized in the valley or susceptible to bounces and shifts in terrain. The most intriguing attractor state in chaos theory is the so-called strange attractor, a system always on the edge of deterministic chaos, a state that can be dis-equilibrated and reorganized in unexpected ways.

Recently Piers evoked another lovely image for attractors. Imagine the charred ash of a fire. It is a sign that a system has formed, emerged. Transformed. Attractors don't exactly drive a system, they are the outcome of activities of systems in perturbation and movement. Gender, by this light, would not be a reified thing, or an engine
for growth and outcome but the residue of various complex processes.

Gender, both as a cultural system and as a lived experience could be described as some type of attractor, systematic patterns with a number of different forms: steady collector, homeostatic system, periodic or limit cycle, or more fractal, unpredictable conditions. The kind of rigid gender complementarity Benjamin notices as a site of failed mutual recognition would be a kind of periodic, limit cycle attractor with the patterns organizing rather rigidly around two distinct polarities, a kind of pendulum effect. We might see the culturally derived gender system (inside and outside individuals) as a pendulum organizing itself around two distinct spaces.

Alternatively gender, in moments of historical change or more local micro developmental change, may operate more like a fractal and disequilibrating pattern, the more volatile strange attractors. The states are variously susceptible to change. Perturbations, from many sources inside and outside a system, can destabilize a state depending on its internal characteristics.

What chaos theory introduces into the schemas and structures of gender is the intriguing distinction between self-similar (strange attractor) and self-same (periodic).
In self-similar repetitions some subtle variation is always in play. In self-same repetitions, the system moves inevitably towards increasing rigidity and stasis. This kind of variation in clinical experience can arise in the gendered experience of the analysand and perhaps inevitably in the gender system that arises in the dyad. One might think of certain gender polarities as kinds of clinical impasses, systems shut down and unavailable for novelty or change. Partners in a dyadic system caught in transference or countertransference impasses live out a self-same polarity.

As a number of writers have noted (Dimen, Goldner, Elise, Flax) gender polarities seem to exert complex pressures that organize and trap other polarities; active/passive, receptive/penetrating; soft/hard. The gender attractor, both in the larger cultural system and as a lived experience in the individual, may then pattern a number of experiences and ways of being that become gendered by virtue of being caught in the particular attractor basin or valley for any individual. Gender attractors both constrain how the individual experiences gender and these attractors also reflect the constraints under which the system is organized. This makes of gender both pattern and emergence.
Strange attractors show the greatest potential for transformation and change. Such attractors will be useful in modeling gender development but also in modeling the kinds of shifts in gender state that can occur within one individual. Strange attractors capture both the multiplicity of gender experience and the inherent potential for change. Kaufman puts great importance in a phenomena he terms 'the edge of chaos'. "Life exists at the edge of chaos", a fulcrum point between too much random noise and perturbations and on the other hand too much rigidity. Chaotic systems, Kaufman points out in his model network, are highly sensitive to small shifts. Small shifts can cascade into unpredictable but orderly novel patterns. This is Kaufman's felicitously phrased 'order for free'

Pattern emerges but out of uniquely forming clusters that operate from constraints but also in random and unpredictable ways. In this model, gender would have both generic properties and unique manifestations. Gender would be highly individualized given the local constraints (family and individual experience) but gender would also draw on the larger macro-systems in which it is also embedded.

This account of gender(s) functioning and developing as kinds of interacting attractors might describe a lot of
radical discontinuity and state changes, not only ones involving gender. It is in Phillip Bromberg's (1999) work that one can find many highly nuanced clinical examples of these kind of state shifts, shifts that are both within and between people. Or, one might think of Cooper's work on the interplay of the experience of old and new objects. Certainly Pizer, whose interest is in negotiated paradox has deployed the concept of fractal states to model negotiated change. Here I think the concept of quantitative change that can unpredictably involve a qualitative reorganization might be interesting to apply to those moments in experience in which either being in gender or being comfortable in gender can shift in an instant. Too much affect - perhaps in particular aggressive affect for women and vulnerability or tenderness in men- may be the motility in the system that disequilibrates an attractor state and institutes a phase shift. Humour too, the eruption of laughter and jokes may be the light touch that sets a state in motion. And of course, misapplied, affect and humor can lead to shutdown and rigidity. Cognitive developmentalists modeling the emergence of representation speak of 'semantic attractors' (Elman, 1995) This conception seems to me to be quite well related to the work of Lakoff and Johnson on embodied cognition. Semantic
attractor space will be multi-modal and multidimensional and could include affect states, bodily experience and action schemas all bound together with categories of meaning that are uniquely configured for any individual.

Charles, whose gender theories and ideals I have described earlier, could be seen to have a very particular set of semantic attractors with which he thinks about and experiences gender. Men are calm, urbane, free from worries, rich, golf-playing, comfortable in their skins, unsentimental. Woman are depressed, homebound if not bed-bound, often crazy under their simple attractive surfaces, narcissistic all feelingful but never with him.

Our lived experience sometimes confirms and sometimes violates these patterns. Our different, more related interactions, my attunement to his feelings and fears starts to destabilize this attractor system. And as living and vital experiences enter the system, we get moments like the edge of chaos, moments when the brittle too cartoony rigidity of the gender attractors starts to crumble. Charles gender attractors seem unusually brittle and he knows this mirrors something he sensed within his family, that the polite orderly surfaces concealed tension and contradiction. The father, such an attractive ‘sport’ was alcoholic, womanizing, quite indifferent to others and to
any ideas of rules. I often think that Charles' gender system is held so rigidly because in way the family was without rules or consequences. Gender strictness for Charles functions in lieu of the more usual forms the superego might take. Goldner has addressed these functions of gender orthodoxy as extreme and rigid structures that bind anxiety in couples with histories of violence (Goldner,)

When Charles own anxieties and needs well up, he cannot so easily hold to the simple oscillating periodicity of his gender patterns. A moment at the edge of chaos when the systems connections and interconnections may organize in novel ways. If Charles is needy and depressed, is he a woman, is he like mother, has he crossed the semantic divide that has both sustained and constrained him.

Gerald Fogel (1998) has been tracing such moments of change and reorganization in the living of masculinity in certain patients whose terror of feminization has kept them in a regimen of phallic monism that cripples even as it fortresses. In his model of post-oedipal experience, gender would be a kind of strange attractor, bisexual, more flexible and fluid, yet not without pattern and order.

In thinking about gender as softly assembled, as a strange attractor, or as any kind of attractor system, I
want to stress the complex multiplicity of these phenomena. There are interlocking but distinct gender systems in larger and in smaller sub-cultures. Gender as a system must change and evolve in history. Fausto Sterling has traced the complex interactions between institutions, forms of science and forms of cultural life through which our ideas and constructions of sex and gender are made. Historical and personal change must move in complex interactions. The developmentalists using chaos theory have become very interested in the interaction between micro and macro levels of movement. Some aspects of gendering have very long shelf lives, others seem very transient.

Along with the uniqueness of particular gender attractors in the individual, we can see how gendered life facilitates or inhibits interactions and interpersonal relatedness. Gender systems between individuals can get entrained in rigid or in flexible ways. This has been very deeply worked on by Jessica Benjamin. Systems co-evolve (Palumbo, Figarardo) and systems are nested in hierarchies.

Conclusion:

Our study group discussions are set at a powerful and volatile moment of intersecting systems. Each of us is poised as readers and receivers of cultural, institutional and personal messages as to the meaning of gender.
Thirdness functions in our group, as anchor, sometimes as superego, sometimes as a temporary bridge for reflective activity. This situation is replicated in the clinical setting where all the multiple, interacting schemes and systems of gender and sexuality mix and match within the clinical dyad.

Clinical and theoretical writing sits also in its particular historical moment, reworking the past, breaking open systems and transforming understanding. Nonlinear dynamic systems theory, as a model of an open system or more modestly as a 'theory-constituting, metaphor' opens any dyadic system into more interlocking and embedded systems. This requires various degrees of self-consciousness and ongoing reflection to keep process and dynamic change from defaulting into reification. Gender may be softly assembled but it is also a work in progress.

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i This five part organization distinguishes males and females and then includes various forms of hermaphroditic structures, delightfully called herms, merms and ferms (Fausto Sterling, 2000, p. 48).
ii This tension is at the heart of all of Benjamin's work on intersubjectivity and the pressure to move beyond gender complementarity. It is also at base in the theorization of a relation to otherness in Levinas and others.
iii Laplanche on sublimation
iv See Butler and Layton, Butler and Dean for extended discussions of the place of identity politics, essences, social construction and theories of subjectivity.
I occlude here the debates involving Butler, Benjamin, Layton and others as to the role of agency in Butler’s model. As Benjamin argues, the passionate attachment, disavowals and splits in Butler’s model of homosexual development require some extra-discursive motivated self, even as there remain important distinctions between self and subjectivity.

This critique of normative masculinity began with the work of Dinnerstein (1976) and is elaborated in the work of Teresa Brennan (19)

Edelman’s term here ‘values’ does not use the conventional meaning of that term, only to describe subtle functional changes in neural cell assemblies that in short order become highly complex and unpredictably so. Re-entrant remapping as a process has some affinity to the dual action of assimilation-accommodation in Piaget’s theory where the evolving internal scheme reconfigures action and reaction and interaction.

Widlocher and his co-authors debate the question of what is transmitted, what we may adultomorphize, what is re-mapped as desire and how these experiences are lived in object relations and in child fantasy.

The terms reentry and re-mapping come from Edelman’s theory of neuronal group selection. He has described the assumptions of these theory very simply as 3 steps. First, there is a dynamic (and highly variable) process of selection and organization at the level of neuroanatomy. This selection is constrained by environmental and species conditions. Secondly, through experience in real time, particular functional circuits are ‘carved out’ (199, p. 83). This secondary repertory he thinks of as the formation of memory. Then, in a process which for Edelman has the potential to connect physiology to psychology, brain maps formed in the first two steps in the process come into unique interactions via a process he calls re-entry. Re-entry allows for novel coordinations, parallel processing. Karmiloff Smith draws on this process in thinking about symbolic representation. Her model representational redescription – a phase model not a stage model – describes the gradually and quite idiosyncratic, context-sensitive, reorganization of information through procedural to more explicitly symbolic forms. This process is emergent, on-line and occurs in real time.

I am thinking of gender both in its symbolic and pre-symbolic forms as a forming categorization along these