

Editors' Note, *Genders* Future Tense: "The Prime Task"

By Karen Jacobos and Judith Roth

"Gender explodes, is blown up, comes apart, and goes to pieces, but also expands, in the way that a song, a video, or a hash tag blows up, captures attention, and extends its reach in terms of audience and impact." — Ellen Rooney

"It seems to me that if one is talking about the prime task, since there is no discursive continuity among women, the prime task is situational anti-sexism and the recognition of the heterogeneity of the field, instead of positing some kind of woman's subject, women's figure." — Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

We break into this new era of *Genders* with both expansions and a prime task. We have revised our editorial policy to include more work in the fields belonging to the broad reach of the arts and humanities. "In the way that a song, a video, or a hash tag blows up, captures attention, and extends its reach in terms of audience and impact," as Ellen Rooney declares in her essay "The Biggest Thing Is, It's the End of Gender in Society," (in this issue), genders pervade cultural and political forms, offering an almost infinite range of questions, practices, and opportunities for consideration. At the same time, the "prime task" as Gayatri Spivak situates it, is still with us in the heterogeneity that characterizes all efforts to allay "situational anti-sexism."

A journal such as *Genders*, which might promulgate such heterogeneity in the form critical, analytical, philosophical and even personal works, offers a platform from which a divergent range of interrogations, approaches, interventions, and observations might circulate and contribute to, inform, and benefit from larger conversations among interested critics, thinkers, writers, and activists. Academics often wonder whether what they do has any effect on the policies, practices and opinions of the larger world—whether academic thought, writing, and teaching can effect or even inflect changes in ways of thinking and acting that help foster intellectual, social, cultural and political change. Writing that raises questions, opens up new avenues of inquiry, and incites critical thought helps produce new conversations, insights, and ways of thinking about intellectual work that make their way into other sites of action and modes of thinking. This is always beyond mere corrective reminders or expiation; critical work is about using what we know and the many perspectives that contribute to the conversation to envision issues more acutely, ask better questions, and find more incisive ways to think about old problems. It is striking how many of the articles published here turn to questions of the resilience, re-framing, or re-use of terms whose dense histories anchor them to genders' pasts while creatively, even counterintuitively, enabling fresh iterations that inaugurate genders' possible futures. Jonathan Dollimore's essay aptly articulates the ways in which "dominant formations can reconstitute themselves

around the same contradictions which destabilize them”; the essays collected here in “*Genders Future Tense*” suggest that formations at the margins may also generate such fruitful paradoxes.

In her essay in this issue, “The Biggest Thing Is, It’s the End of Gender in Society,” Ellen Rooney embarks from the assertion quoted above, both interrogating and reaching towards a more disparate, yet operational set of gender discourses—and more important, reading practices—that might help marshal and deploy gender’s range of divergent, inconsonant, and often down-right chaotic terrains and discourses. As she notes in her opening paragraph, “Feminism and its competing discourses of gender have never been merely disciplinary, but it seems to me, as to many other observers, that the category or concept of gender now has an extra-disciplinary life that in some respects dwarfs both its disciplinary and interdisciplinary modes of existence, and this puts intellectual and political pressure on all of the instantiations of the conflicting figurations of “gender.” Focusing on practices of reading, Rooney works through various possibilities for engaging gender’s heterogeneity, characterized, as she suggests, by “An unevenly globalizing feminism, woman and women, and, therefore, the problem of subjectivity; situations, fields, discourse, figures, and, consequently, representation and two of its entailments, the (im)possibility of “continuity” and the play of “heterogeneity.” Offering five “Propositions” that Rooney hopes will expose “fault lines” or “points of contact and movement that have the potential to yield surprise” both within disciplinary assumptions and beyond in the broad sets of discourses on gender, Rooney’s essay examines the various assumptions that ground readings of multiple versions of gender.

Rooney’s exploration of the prismatic world of gender assumptions, tactics, sites of operation, and conceptions leads her to hypothesize “that symptomatic reading, the form of critique that is itself most attuned to the inevitable shifting of political and intellectual terrain and thus is the most plastic of reading practices, is more rather than less crucial in a period of conceptual and practical upheaval, when concepts, representations, and practices of gender are the subject of such radically incompatible claims and revisions, emerging in unequivocally competing problematics.” While Rooney explores the possibilities of reading in the context of a broadly diversified realm figured by her five “Propositions,” she also introduces multiple modes of thinking around texts that invite a plethora of questions, tactics, and issues circulating in and through the terrains feminist thinkers may deem as gender, but which, as Rooney suggests, may ultimately have few assumptions in common.

The range of Rooney’s five “Propositions” also, felicitously, aligns with many of the essays included in this issue, many of which in their own approaches take up one or more of the reading propositions Rooney deploys. The seven previously unpublished essays appearing in this first issue of *Genders’* new line, offer an explosive range of queries, insights, explorations, and suggestive “shards.” These essays all, in one way or another, engage with gender’s heterogeneity on many

fronts. Just as Rooney's interrogation of gender's multiple modes scrutinizes what is at stake in each of the five "Propositions," so, too, do other essays engage simultaneously in both a kind of reading and a set of queries around the meanings of genders themselves. Rounding out the issue is a reprise of Jonathan Dollimore's "The Cultural Politics of Perversion: Augustine, Shakespeare, Freud, Foucault," which in arguing for the centrality of perversion to culture offers another mode of analysis that enlarges and enables the interrelation of heterogeneous categories and ways of thinking.

Both Lisa L. Moore's argument for the continued utility of the term (and concept) "lesbian" in "The Future of Lesbian Genders," and Maria Ochoa's examination of the long history of oppressions against "translatinas" in "Los Huecos Negros: Cannibalism, Sodomy, and the Failure of Modernity in Tierra Firme," take up aspects of Rooney's first "proposition:" "Gender as an infinitely useful category of historical analysis (after Joan Scott)." Moore's essay reads the genderings of the "masculine" speaker of the sonnet or the lesbian lover or the transgender lover through a history of such positionings from Charlotte Clarke's 1755 memoir of her experiences as "Mr. Brown," to Radclyffe hall's *The Well of Loneliness* to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, to the work of Sandy Stone and Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*. Moore's reading of this history of the sonnet's abject voice combines the insights of more traditional lesbian scholarship with the newer insights of feminist, trans-, and women of color to rework the notion of the lesbian as a more capacious, but still sexual site of reading. This re-worked site of the lesbian reader, she suggests, produces a "lesbian reading of the pleading, abject masculine speaker of the sonnet and the powerful she-lord whom he addresses" which "make available butch and transgender subject positions, female masculinities that endow the sonnet with a queer anamorphism that disfigures rather than figures the norm."

Maria Ochoa also deploys history as a useful category of analysis, while also showing the rifts and problems with that very history. Taking as her subject "the multiple and overlapping forms of power that shape translatina lives," Ochoa centers gender in relation to the concept of the "coloniality of power" which offers a more complex understanding of the layerings of power beyond simple accumulation within a binary set of historical circumstances. Focusing on the territory known through colonial history as "Tierra Firme" (which later became the Americas), Ochoa also deploys the metaphor of the "black hole" from astrophysics as a way to understand the "limits of Western intelligibility" in relation to the historical violence visited upon the *huecos negros* of Caracas. Posing this continued violence upon translatinas in relation to the 16th century massacre of trans people by Vasco Núñez de Balboa and his party and working with insights from Jonathan Goldberg and Valerie Hammonds, Ochoa traces the history of recountings of this massacre which ultimately link violence to cross-dressing, sodomy and cannibalism. Ochoa understands this historical trauma as a persistently communicated example of a Western misapprehension that translates into continued violence. History informs the "coloniality of power," as she concludes: "This is why we have to use time travel as a historical method. Colonial violence functions through a quantum logic,

bewildering a Newtonian physics of force with its dazzling displays of excess on sites and bodies—a toxic combination of the distribution of life chances and the space of death.”

Rachel Lee’s “Test Subjects: Experimental Labor through an Intersectional, Feminist, and Science and Technology Studies Frame” addresses Rooney’s second “proposition:” “Gender has not run out of steam (after Bruno Latour)” in showing the ways thinking through genders expands to permit like inclusiveness for other modes of categorization. Instead of limiting the tactics of gender critiques to the realm of the human, Lee’s reading of Larissa Lai’s poem, “Ham,” critiques and reads the history of notions of “intersectionality” as a way to ponder the inclusion of species and viruses. Tracing various encounters of texts, test subjects (such as NASA’s chimpanzee explorers, Ham and Enos), and biological intimacies, Lee concludes that her “claim here is that precisely through a deep engagement with complexly entangled relations among race, species, gender, reproductive and clinical labor, and biopolitics (the extension and enhancement of some lives and populations through the depletion and foreclosure of the lives of other populations), feminist scholars must continue to ask other questions that reflect upon a multitude of coercive intimacies of which we are a part. Lee’s essay demonstrates how gender has indeed not run out of steam as its insights offer new ways to understand a larger realm of relations.

In “Shall We Gender? Where? Who? When?: Feminist Reflections on Gender and Arendt’s Theory of Action,” Ewa Plonowska Ziarek indeed demonstrates what happens when anti-feminists deploy concepts of gender to limit rather than expand or protect gender rights, privileges, freedoms, or even concepts. Taking up Rooney’s third “Proposition:” “Gender critique is not critique (after Christopher Castiglia),” Ziarek’s essay demonstrates the ways ambiguity and multiplicity have been deployed as ways to detach feminism and gender as categories and programs for political action in Poland. For Ziarek, critique—showing, for example, the ways categories have been turned against themselves—is not enough, as Poland’s anti-feminist and pro-family programs have demonstrated. “The disastrous effect of this socialist ‘liberation’ of women without women,” Ziarek notes, “is the delegitimation of gender as a meaningful category of political struggle, collective self-definition, or analysis of personal experience.” In addition, she notes, conceptual exclusions limit the field of fruitful thought as well: “The erasure of Eastern-European women and feminism in transnational feminist studies limits the theoretical and historical analysis of gender and class, on the one hand, and troubles the First/Third World, Global North/Global South, West/non-West divisions, on the other hand.” Thinking though Hannah Arendt’s political theory of action in relation to the ways concepts of gender may be turned against feminism, Ziarek concludes, “Contesting the distinction between theory and practice, feminist thinking about the future of gender in the gap between no longer and not yet is indeed an intersubjective experiment to “gain experience in how to think” and how to act, and does not “contain prescriptions on what to think.” It is the task of feminist criticism to insert this agonistic interval again and again whenever thinking or action seem to

exhaust themselves or to repeat comfortable conclusions.”

Ziarek’s conclusion again raises the perpetual question of the political efficacy of critique and of modes of reading culture to discern the very changes Ziarek advocates. Jorie Lagerwey, Julia Leyda, and Diane Negra offer one example of how reading gender offers insight into slow cultural changes. Taking up, thus, Rooney’s fourth “Proposition:” “What is it to read gender? (after Louis Althusser),” their essay, “Female-Centered Television in an Age of Precarity,” traces shifts in representations of female characters featured in what they call “quality television” programming, primarily in the United States. Noting changes in the ways working women are situated by such programming, the essay shows “that the interdependent affective ecologies of austerity, precarity, and financialization now distinctly inflect Anglo-American female-centered television” and that “feminisms of privilege operate in complex ways as feints to reinforce and repurpose class and race hegemonies.” Specifically, the essay notes that after 2008, such “series manifest less sentimental emotional logics,” and “familial relationships also frequently take on negative overtones, “ while paternal figures “are fully embedded in these women’s work and personal lives.” The essay concludes that these shifts tend to focus away from “collectivity across class and race borders;” and instead “Iconic figures of the new celebrity feminism leverage a de-collectivized and in many ways perverse version of the movement for gender equality to make a virtue of neoliberal, individualized female overcoming.”

Nadia Ellis beautifully captures what is at stake in Rooney’s fifth “proposition:” “Gender has a plastic action upon the real (after Monique Wittig)” in her contribution, “Splay: Moving From Incursion in New Orleans and Kingston.” Studying the effects of the delimitations of diaspora through Nathaniel Mackey’s celebrations of black aesthetic practices, Ellis thinks “diaspora through sound and movement at once, to be interested, in particular, in diasporic articulations that evince “a rickety fit of parts,” and to see contemporary black aesthetic practices in spatial-temporal relations with longer histories of violence . . .” Seeing cultural curtailment incited by diaspora as a catalyst for innovation, Ellis examines the joyous inventiveness of queer and female subjects in Kingston and New Orleans, “which is to say, by bodies that have, like the city spaces in which they reside, been read as problematically hybrid, out-of-step, and available for violent incursion.” In “focusing on queer and trans New Orleans bounce performers whose work to indicate the spatial politics of post-Katrina black New Orleans is aligned with the queer politics of their embodied performances,” Ellis offers an extended definition of Wittig’s “plastics” at stake in Rooney’s last “Proposition.”

If Rooney’s essay maps one way of engaging with genders’ heterogeneous, divergent, but potentially productive discourses, Jonathan Dollimore’s “The Cultural Politics of Perversion: Augustine, Shakespeare, Freud, Foucault” from 1990 masterfully enacts the ways combinations of Rooney’s “propositions” enable productive readings that, in turning from both norms and notions of rectitude, catalyze re-visions of what we have taken for granted. This incites both rethinking of

old assumptions and new visions of how we might read, think, critique, and act, that are still vibrant after 25 years.

The possibility of these new visions is the ambition of the new *Genders*.
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