

Exploring Gender: Lizard Radio

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I imagine a society where gender is graded. Where you are given a score on how well you do at being a boy or a girl. We, of course, live in such a society. If you lack athletic ability or an interest in sports, you are not very good at being a boy. If you don't smile enough, you are not very good at being a girl. A lack of affiliation or identification with gender scripts creates degrees of unfreedom, creating spaces where people cannot be themselves. Gender becomes difficult to untangle without critiquing internalized identities and tearing down what can feel like the fabric of our society. Pat Schmatz's novel *Lizard Radio*¹ introduces readers to a dystopian world where society relies upon an explicit system of gender quantized in a way that is both distinct and familiar to our own.

In this paper, by using excerpts from the novel as epigrams and juxtaposing them with an academic discourse around gender, I will demonstrate the power of speculative fiction in creating a distance from our own norms and allowing us to examine gender constructs unburdened from our lived reality. By stepping into the world of *Lizard Radio*, we can step

¹ Pat Schmatz, *Lizard Radio* (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2015)

out of our world and grapple with how the social constructs of gender limit an individual's ability to live as simply themselves.

In the novel, the reader explores themes of gender, gender expression, sexuality, and the ultimate question of who gets to define who we are through the experiences of its protagonist Kivali Kerwin, a fifteen-year-old who comes to be known as "Lizard". In this gender-rigid society, children at a young age are given gender tests meant to identify them as male or female. Mid-range children, like the protagonist, are classified as neither male nor female, and are forced to choose a gender for which they may undergo physical transition. Kivali is a female, mid-range "bender" who decides not to physically transition, a decision she has made by the time she is ten. After gender selection, the government requires children to attend post-decision gender training, where they receive instruction on the behaviors and societal norms expected of their assigned or chosen gender.

The novel unfolds at CropCamp, a government-run agricultural trade program that is meant to be the last phase of youth education. CropCamp is intended to prepare children to enter adulthood and become active, "controlled" participants in society. The camp is heavily structured, and the participants are monitored with strict gender rules and group conformity. Throughout the experience, Kivali struggles to find herself, exploring gender identity and sexuality in a society that forces her to pick a gender, a role, and a direction.

Kivali's world provides colorful and concrete examples, grounding often abstract discussions of gender. In what follows, I will survey some current definitions of gender, sex, and sexuality, and their relationship with each other, in order to provide a framework through which contemporary gender ideologies operate. In so doing, I will raise the following questions: How do these definitions inform expected gender roles and behaviors, and in turn structure societal interactions? How do these gendered expectations translate into individual harm and, ultimately, unfreedom? I conclude by presenting proposed theories around how individuals and society might create "gender trouble" and challenge the gender binary.

Defining Gender

A little girl asked if I was a boy or a girl, and I said, "I'm a lizard." Sheila hugged me so hard, she almost broke my neck, but then she said, "Next time, say girl".²

Gender is a highly contested, ever-changing term. The definition and use of this term has evolved throughout the last several decades as scholars sought to understand and define the

² Ibid., 45.

differences between men and women. In his introduction to *Genders*, David Glover traces the history of the term from its origins in the early 1960s, when “gender” was initially used to refer to the social and cultural aspects of sexual difference.³ Sex and gender are two terms that are intimately connected and are often used interchangeably. According to gender historian Joan Scott, gender is simply “a social category imposed on a sexed body.”⁴ Sex, on the other hand, is a biological categorization of an individual as male or female based on reproductive potential. This is an essentialist definition, meant to imply that there is only a binary conception of sex, based on one's essence as male or female determined by the presence of specific reproductive organs. In her essay *The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough*, Fausto-Sterling opposes this essentialist definition by defining the intersex body. She defines three additional sexes--herm, merm, and ferm--and argues that sex has many different possibilities.⁵ The addition of these three intersex categories further breaks down the binary model and suggests that sex is ultimately a social construct because it is determined by cultural beliefs that underpin scientific categorization.

Gender has also been used to describe any non-biological based differences.⁶ West and Zimmerman define gender as something individuals “do” based on their sex categorization (e.g., biological male or female).⁷ Moreover, “gender activities emerge from and bolster claims to membership in a sex category.”⁸ Judith Butler goes one step further and posits that it is not possible to simply be a person; one must be a ‘male person’ or a ‘female person’. She contends that persons can only become intelligible by “becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility”.⁹ Gender, Butler argues, is a series of repetitive “performances” that over time give the appearance of a stable gender identity, and that performing within well-known rules of gender is necessary for personhood.

Even though gender is defined as something individuals “do” or “perform,” for much of western society, gender characteristics are considered innate or based on rigid sexual categorization. Such essentialist beliefs reinforce a heteronormative model of sex and

³ David Glover and Cora Kaplan, *Genders* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁴ Joan Wallach Scott. *Gender and the Politics of History rev. ed.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

⁵ Anne Fausto-Sterling, “The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough,” *The Sciences* 33, no.2 (1993): 21.

⁶ Chrisler, J.C. and Lamer, S.A. “Gender, Definitions of”. In *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, ed. A. Wong, M. Wickramasinghe, R. Hoogland and N.A. Naples, (2016).

⁷ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman. “Doing Gender.” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): doi:www.jstor.org/stable/189945

⁸ *Ibid.*,127.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1989), 122.

gender that constructs boundaries and limits on who gets to be included in normative society.

Sexuality is also closely tied to both gender and sex. Initially, sexuality was thought to be linked to a person's sex and their ability to reproduce based on the presence of anatomical reproductive organs. However, modern sexual sciences have recognized that one's sexual desire cannot be deduced solely from empiric anatomical observations. Unbound from sexed dimorphism, sexuality increasingly refers to an individual's sexual feelings or sexual preferences, which can manifest themselves in a variety of ways across a broad spectrum.

It's what you're supposed to do here – meet the opposite sex under controlled conditions and form unions. SayFree Radio is always talking about how stable camp-formed couples are, and how they either beat the low fertility rates or provide stable homes for adopted Blight babies.¹⁰

Presumptions about sexuality are tethered to cultural beliefs and definitions of sex. In contrast with the evolving definition, predominant heteronormative beliefs about sexuality remain tied to an individual's sexual categorization, creating a model where heterosexuality is the only accepted norm; deviations from the norm, such as homosexuality, are thus rejected. Sexuality also gets linked to presumptions about gender appearance and performance. In same-sex relationships, for example, stereotypes are often formed around an individual's gender presentation, with the assumption that one person in that relationship must present as more masculine and the other as more feminine. Betraying the extent to which societal assumptions of gender and sexuality are rooted in biological sex, this alignment of sex and gender "masks" homosexuality. That is, feminine lesbians and masculine gay men are not as readily stereotyped as homosexual.

Back around decision time, they warned us about midrange benders becoming samers. Especially if they don't T. I was only ten. I didn't like boys or girls. I didn't much like anyone. I planned to be asolo, like Sheila or Korm. Never thought for a second what that might mean. What I'd miss.

I can't be a samer. It's bad enough being a bender. I won't be a samer, too. I just won't.¹¹

Gender Essentialism and Social Construction

Gender essentialism is an ideology that arises from a rigid perspective that sees gender as a set of essential, pre-determined qualities based on one's sexual categorization. The underlying premise of essentialism is that the characteristics, traits, norms, and behaviors considered appropriate for women and men, respectively, directly correspond to their

¹⁰ Schmatz, *Lizard Radio*, 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

sex. Assuming that sex is inherently natural, gender then emerges as an essence linked to one's sexual categorization, implying that differences between men and women result from nature. In this formulation, all behaviors are a result of an inherent essence in the sexed body. For example, women are more nurturing, passive, and emotional, while men are seen as more aggressive, competitive, and intellectual. These views naturalize sexual difference and reinforce a hierarchical system that identifies men as dominant over women.

Social construction is the opposite of essentialism: it signifies that all of a person's characteristics are socially constructed rather than biologically determined. In social construction, a society's conception of gender roles determines for its members a set of behaviors that dictate how a male or a female should act. The determination of these gender roles differs from one social context to another, and is heavily influenced by such considerations as race, ethnicity, class, and religion. It is important to recognize that this categorization of gender also serves as an organizing principle in social institutions like family, religion and economy. The social construction of gender, then, is shaped by the larger context within which an individual resides and is based on the requirements of these institutions' gendered practices. The extent to which individuals are either compliant or resistant to those gendered practices have real outcomes for their lived experience.

That first day, Sheila introduced me, and I really truly couldn't tell if Korm was supposed to be a he or a she. She was big shouldered and smelled male and her voice was low-deep, but she had a mountain of hair stacked high on her head, and she wore a flowing skirt and moved like a woman.¹²

Prevalent beliefs tend towards the forced imposition of gender on a sexed body from birth, and a continuation of this learned gender throughout the developmental phases of childhood. In clarifying the relationship between social construction and gender essentialism, West and Zimmerman note that "doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys...differences that are not natural, essential, or biological."¹³ Once these differences have been constructed, West and Zimmerman add, "they are used to reinforce the 'essentialness' of gender."¹⁴

PDGT [post-decision gender training] three times a week was hellish as they tried to train me into something properly female. Approaching thirteen I was the oldest kid there, still not getting "girl" right – and not wanting to.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 43.

¹³ West and Zimmerman, "Doing Gender", 137.

¹⁴ Ibid.,

¹⁵ Pat Schmatz, *Lizard Radio*, 84.

Issues with Gender

"Easy for you to say," says Sully. "What if everyone suddenly started telling you that you're a boy, and you have to act like one?"

"Guess I never thought about it like that," says Rasta, thoughtful.

"That's because you don't have to. Benders have to think about it all the time."¹⁶

It is important to understand the discourse and definitions around gender to highlight how these definitions, in practice, inform both societal and individual interactions. While essentialism as a perspective has mainly been contested by scholars who advance the alternative idea of social construction, essentialism is still a predominant assumption and belief in many cultures that produce and uphold a heteronormative patriarchal model of gender relations. Individuals who do not fit this hegemonic model are othered and rejected from the group.

Blight is full of defiants and defectives of all kinds. SayFree Gov took a whole city, surrounded it with a biosensor fence, and chucked all the problem people in there. They throw the benders and samers and general defiants in there with the violents, and once you're in, you don't come out.¹⁷

In Western practices, for example, the gendering process begins even before birth. This process initially relies on others to "do" the gendering; with the first pronouncement of gender ('It's a Girl' or 'It's a Boy'), colors, namely pink and blue, are used to identify the individual. Clothing, room décor, toys, and activities are all selected based on the gender ascribed by family members. Anne Phillips has identified several problems with essentialism that echo the sentiments in this essay.¹⁸ Essentialism, first of all, by its very definition, attributes certain characteristics to everyone subsumed within a particular category. For example, generalizing statements like 'all women are emotional' or 'all men are aggressive' reinforce the gendered cast of traits that are by no means dependent on gender. Second, it does so in a way that naturalizes or reifies what may be socially constructed or reconstructed. This creates a reinforcing mechanism that perpetuates the façade that gender is biologically determined by a person's sex and is therefore how 'it is supposed to be.' Lastly, essentialism creates a framework to police the identity. If the reified characteristics of the group are definitional to inclusion, then members--true adherents or exemplars--can both

¹⁶ Ibid, 24-25.

¹⁷ Ibid, 28.

¹⁸ Anne Phillips, "What's wrong with essentialism?" In *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, 11, no. 1 (2010).

prohibit entry to those who deviate from essentialized characteristics and threaten existing members with expulsion.¹⁹

This last issue is one of concern, as this policing ultimately lets individuals within the collective determine who is allowed in and who is determined to be "other." This results in social, structural, and even physical violence towards those with "othered" identities.

I hate this long hair. I've always hated it ... They made me grow it out. I never liked how it looked or felt, but I couldn't pass PDGT until it was long enough to braid. I got less of what-are-you looks and comments when I tied it off with a pink or yellow ribbon. I could walk into a public women's room without anyone screaming at me.²⁰

Judith Butler highlights that "under present and entrenched social conditions in which gender norms are still articulated in conventional ways, and departures from the norm regarded as suspect, autonomy remains a paradox."²¹ Social construction establishes gender in a realm where an individual's gender identity is reliant on their interactions with others. This interaction gives others -- in this case the society -- power to signify what is accepted as normal. There is often an illusion of choice, an illusion of freedom. In western "liberal" society, individuals are ostensibly awarded the freedom to choose who they wish to be and how they wish to present themselves and behave. However, dimensions of this freedom are negated when an individual interacts with a society that operates strongly on a heteronormative gender binary. If individuals have to monitor their behavior in specific social and cultural environments, is this individual freedom, or has society decided who they can be? Butler claims that the norms that govern gender ultimately restrict individuals from having recognizable personhood.²²

My Grade One teacher turned me in for gender testing , and I scored fifty-two. If I'd come in at fifty-three or higher, transition to boy would have been mandatory. Hormone blockers would have started right away, with surgeries and male hormones coming later. But anywhere from forty-eight to fifty-two was midrange, and therefore iffy. It's your choice, they said. You're free to choose, but if you don't pass post-decision gender training within three years, we make the choice for you.²³

Individuals are often not allowed to express certain characteristics or traits that might be fundamental to their sense of self if these traits don't align with societal expectations. This results in a personal restriction of their identity and suffocation of their true selves for the

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁰ Schmatz, *Lizard Radio*, 144.

²¹ Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 2004), 100.

²² Ibid.

²³ Schmatz, *Lizard Radio*, 84.

preservation of societal boundaries. For individuals who do not fall within the boundaries of the binary (masculine females, feminine males, lesbians, trans individuals, etc.), adhering to these socially constructed gender norms results in emotional harm as they have to continuously monitor their surroundings and modify their behaviors according to what is expected. Failure to do so can result in rejection, loss of safety, and other negative outcomes. On the other hand, for those who operate within the widely accepted heteronormative presumptions, gender almost becomes a banal term.²⁴

My every natural movement reveals bender, just like his. At least I try to keep mine under control. Especially here, among strangers.²⁵

Challenging the Binary

Before you can be what you are, you must be all things.²⁶

Judith Lorber suggests that one possible way to challenge the binary is to introduce multiple categories that "disturb the neat polarity of familiar opposites that assume one dominant and one subordinate group, one normal and one deviant identity, one hegemonic status and one 'other'."²⁷ She argues that binaries produce a margin and a divider, constructing a hierarchy of opposites. Introducing even just one more term forces a rethinking of these categories and a new spectrum of possibilities!

I've never worn men's clothes. No boys' clothes since that winter boy-boots day in the school yard. They feel good on me, and right. I widen my shoulders and broaden my chest and run my fingers through my hair. I look like a boy now, for sure. I'm not though. Man and woman: they're both familiar and foreign.²⁸

Gilbert, on the other hand, calls for a radical reconceptualization of a non-gendered model that removes the categorization of gender, claiming that if there are no categories of

²⁴ Banal, or banality, here is something that is so commonplace, as to go unnoticed, to be unseen and yet is a source of pervasive and sustained trauma, paralleling the use of the term in Hannah Arendt's work.

²⁵ Ibid., 7-8.

²⁶ Ibid., 45.

²⁷ Judith Lorber. *Paradoxes of Gender*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 450.

²⁸ Schmatz, *Lizard Radio*, 238.

woman and man, there would be no "othered," marginalized identities; no transexuals, no cross-dressers, no homosexuality.²⁹

While I acknowledge that removing or erasing the category of gender seems to be one logical way of challenging the binary, I contend that the inherent issue in gender categorization is not merely the assumed categorization itself. Rather, it is society's valuation of gender, and the interpretation society places on the differences between the categories, that is problematic.

One way in which we experience freedom, freedom of expression for example, is in the ability to not think about yourself. A cisgender femme-presenting woman may persevere on which dress to wear on a heterosexual date, but her comfort in wearing a dress aligns with dominant gender scripts and can go unremarked. However, the existence of gendered categories and expectations encumbers the freedom of someone with a divergent or non-dominant gender presentation. The individual must choose between self-expression and bearing the burden of societal sanctions for violating dominant norms. Here, I argue that it's not the existence of categories, but rather the expectations categories elicit that creates the conditions for an individual's unfreedom. Unfreedom occurs when society has already decided what an acceptable gender category is and what is allowed within those categories.

The policing of these preferred gender presentations and behaviors hampers an individual's ability to choose for themselves who they are. Gilbert argues that bigenderism - her term for defining the gender binary -- provides no space for self-identification or classification. She states, "self-categorization requires a non-hierarchical cultural organization that accepts difference and variability without judgment."³⁰

While Gilbert argues for a non-gendered model to challenge the prevalent gender binary, Butler's idea of challenging this binary is premised on performance: she claims that individual freedom concerning gender norms does not merely require individuals to "do" one's gender, but that in "doing" gender, one is active in "undoing" dominant notions of personhood. In her words, individuals must cause "gender trouble" and press against the boundaries put in place by heteronormative perceptions to gradually force societal change: "That alteration comes from an increment of acts, collective and diffuse, belonging to no single subject."³¹

²⁹ Miqui Alicia Gilbert. "Defeating Bigenderism: Changing Gender Assumptions in the Twenty-First Century." *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 93-112. Accessed April 21, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20618166>.

³⁰ Gilbert, 100.

³¹ Butler, *Undoing Gender*

The banality of gender and its omnipresence underlies its endurance; it permits an environment in which its oppressive aspects go unexamined by a majority of people precisely because those who defy the gendered norm are deemed 'other' or 'deviant.' Understood this way, it is possible to infer that in order to challenge gender norms or create what Butler called "gender trouble," one must fall far enough outside the norms in order to view their construction but also not so far outside as to be dismissed by society as wholly "other." While we cannot alter the biological realities of sex (other than accepting Fausto-Sterling's expansion of sexual categorizations), we can bring about a fundamental change in the social and cultural conditions that expose individuals to violence.

Conclusion

"What are you?" she whispers.
 For the first time in my life, I have a complete answer.
 I am me.³²

This writing's ultimate goal is to demonstrate how perceptions of gender might constrain an individual's freedom to choose who they are in society, linking explicit portrayals from *Lizard Radio* with current discourse in gender theory. The categorization of gender, I have argued, is not in itself the most constraining aspect; what matters is how these categorizations are reinforced in social institutions and structures. Gilbert brings up one issue with her proposed non-genderist model, that there is an inability to be sure what a non-genderist world would look like: "it would likely be generations before any strong non-genderist model could come about. Indeed, we cannot anticipate the political and social consequences until it is much closer, nor can we even imagine how it might feel to lose a system that is so completely integrated into our psyches."³³ In this regard, as this paper has demonstrated, the speculative fiction genre comes with the capacity to imagine any possibility. Just like the narrative within this text allows us to imagine and therefore comprehend what a binary heteronormative model does to an individual's freedom of choice and individuality, so too does literature give us the space to imagine what a non-gendered world could mean for an individual who is different. Not only does speculative fiction give us this space to reimagine society, it also gives us an avatar that personifies "gender trouble." The novel's protagonist, Kivali, exists outside our norms but is still able to disrupt our sense of how gender operates in our society. Her fictional presence carries the potential to open the conversation and ignite introspection in a world where norms otherwise go unquestioned. As a person who can navigate the porous edges of the gender

³² Schmatz, *Lizard Radio*, 265.

³³ Gilbert, "Defeating Bigenderism", 104.

boundaries, Kivali demonstrates the complex challenges inherent in existing on the margins of these boundaries.

The ability to imagine a post-gender society need not wait for Gilbert's many generations; collaboration with speculative fiction may allow cultural studies works to begin now on what such a future society might look like. Furthermore, by providing a model of society that is different from our own, yet still familiar enough to be relatable, speculative fiction offers a space to highlight the harms of current norms without immediately evoking the dismissal or repudiation of the "other" that has, for generations, protected and reinforced the same established norms. Harkening back to Butler's discussion of enacting societal change, in order to advance freedom, undoing gender does not require a big drastic shift but a small incremental act.

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