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**Book Review: *Gender Without Identity* by Avgi Saketopoulou and Ann Pellegrini**


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In their 2023 book *Gender Without Identity*, Avgi Saketopoulou and Ann Pellegrini critique traditional psychoanalytic models that treat gender as an innate, fixed aspect of the self and instead advocate for a psychoanalytic approach that examines how trauma can serve as a resource in the process of gendered self-theorization. The authors are both psychoanalysts with a private practice based in New York City and are faculty members at New York University. Their work is grounded in their clinical experience, and is also informed by trans of color critique, Black feminism, and queer theory, grounded in their extensive clinical experience with queer and trans individuals.

#### GENDER AS A PSYCHICALLY CRAFTED PROCESS

Saketopoulou and Pellegrini lay out an understanding of gender as a psychically crafted process, based on Laplanchean theory. They begin by laying out an understanding of the ego as having been constructed and solidified in attempts to ‘translate’ the enigmatic features of an attachment relationship. This is typically in relationships between child and caregiver, and in this relationship, the child’s physical needs are fulfilled, thus communicating messages of care to the child. These messages are embedded with the sexual unconscious of the parent and inevitably affect all communication to the child, producing an enigmatic disturbance. Then, this enigmatic disturbance, or ambiguous obscurity, that has met the child’s psyche, drives the child to interpret and digest these signals in a unique process that is compatible with the child’s overall being. The child’s translations draw from what Laplanche calls the “mythosymbolic”--the cultural codes which surround the child, including traumas relating to the parent (68), and ultimately, these translations “sediment as ego, and . . . when the codes pertain to gender, as gender identity” (57). It is not the case that the child

simply reproduces the codes in which they are surrounded. Rather, they are spun and mixed by the child, though not consciously, creating a “psychic world in their own personal idiom . . . and, from there on out, yields identitarian experience by becoming structured in the grammar of culture” (58). This foundation substantiates Saketopoulou and Pellegrini’s claims of gender as a complex and personal process of psychic translation, shaped not only by the cultural codes and familial dynamics surrounding the child, but also by the child’s particular, unconscious efforts to integrate and transform these influences into a cohesive sense of self.

In developing their theory, Saketopoulou and Pellegrini draw upon a clinical example involving a particularly effeminate 12-year-old child, referred to as Ory, to support their conceptual framework. Ory was introduced to Saketopoulou by his parents, who were under the impression that Saketopoulou could help him behave as a ‘normal’ boy, eliminating his feminine mannerisms and presentation. Through an exploration of Ory’s mother Ilana’s family history, the developmental dynamics between her and her son, and the possible intergenerational transmission, Saketopoulou argues that Ory’s non-normative gender manifests as a form of translation of the enigmatic troubles passed down by his mother’s history, ultimately serving a psychic purpose within their family system. Thus, follows that Ory is neither innately trans nor gay, but rather that his gender expression is something he has psychically forged for himself. They adamantly maintain that this is not to be understood as ‘damage’ caused by his mother. Rather, Ory’s gender is a set of “translational codes” (64) that he has spun in his efforts to psychically translate and elaborate a gendered self.

Ory’s translation efforts, since they do not align with the propositional statements put forth by an imposed masculinity, are met with rejection, surveillance, policing, shame, and are generally regarded as an issue requiring correction. This stands in contrast to children who translate in ways that are regarded as ‘acceptable’ or ‘normal’ by their social worlds. In those instances, children are allowed to “keep” their gender formulation (66). Saketopoulou and Pellegrini’s detailed exploration of Ory’s case illustrates that his gender, with particular reference to his

femininity, is a multifaceted, psychically crafted process shaped by familial dynamics and intergenerational influences, rather than a pathological response or an innate aspect of his being.

Saketopoulou and Pellegrini contend that gender is not a static identity and critique traditional perspectives on gender formation and authenticity. They argue that gender is something acquired, suggesting that trauma might serve as a resource in shaping its constitution. They reject the dominant understanding that “gender is immune to trauma, or that gender, in order to be healthy, is uncontaminated by early traumatic intrusions, by adult interventions, or by the emotional debris of intergenerational pressures” (29), drawing links between the ways in which trauma can inflict gender, without implying that this is the cause of a “distortion” in one’s gender. They argue it is a human process to tend to experiences that are difficult, including those that are traumatizing, and as a result self-theorizations arise “that are not efforts to cope with or to survive trauma, but that, to the contrary, take up the energies roused by trauma to invent something new” (viii).

A child’s gender, such as with Ory, can be understood as an unconsciously crafted articulation of their own processing of experiences, as their own spinning of experiences into gender. The authors explain that the particular avenues of translation taken up by a child are dependent on their own relational understanding of their contexts. Working from this point, they argue that gender is not something that can be discovered once at one’s core, is neither right or wrong, but more in line with a fitting integration into the self that one may arrive at over and over again through their life course. This is a significant point in their theorizing because it then renders predicting a child’s ‘true’ gender an impossibility. Thus, it follows that there is nothing about gender inherently that has any claim to authenticity other than one’s subjective experience of it in that particular moment. It can only be described and claimed by the person to which it belongs.

Saketopoulou and Pellegrini also address the vision that this theorization may not solely be applicable to those with atypical gender expressions. All people, including cisgendered people, are subject to impositions from an “other” (26), and it is the processing of this imposition that solidifies a gendered facet

of ego. Ultimately, their argument extends beyond atypical gender expressions, positing that all individuals, regardless of their gender identity, are shaped by these intricate processes of psychic negotiation.

#### UTILIZATIONS IN THE CONSULTING ROOM

Saketopoulou and Pellegrini are critical of the binary in psychoanalytic theorizing that positions gender as either immutable, with roots in pursuits of ensuing protections against moral judgements and legal regulations, or as “acquired-and-therefore-possible-to-eliminate” (21). It is within this context where concerns arise that “the mere suggestion that psychic factors contribute to how one becomes trans, nonbinary, or genderqueer threatens to endanger the safety and rights of gender-diverse people. This is because such a suggestion is quickly constructed to authorize attempts to eliminate atypically gender experiences and identities” (21).

Saketopoulou and Pellegrini, in building their argument that one can unravel these relationships without necessitating attempts of elimination, cite the wide body of psychoanalytic literature that evidently shows psychoanalysts' explorations regarding the constitutions of cisgender experiences in which they work towards enhancing the patient's emotional life without aims of altering their gender. They detail how psychoanalysts, even those working towards eliminating transphobia in their consulting rooms, are limited in their approach, often not going beyond affirming their trans patients' gender. If they do approach the links between gender and trauma, it is around the traumatic experiences (violence, discrimination, policing, etc.) the patient may have accrued *as a result of* living in a queerphobic world, but the analysts will not explore further around the *becoming* of their gender. A simple validation of an individual's gender is not a substitute for efforts in uncovering deeper understandings of the patient's psychic gender process. Saketopoulou and Pellegrini see a necessity in implementing both practices, ultimately culminating into what they term “patient affirmation,” affirming for the patient that they have the right to their own non-linear process (27).

They envision that the psychoanalytic practice has more to offer to their trans and queer patients, that “strives to uncover

the psychic complexities that are present in non-normative experiences of gender, not as a way to question its validity or to alter it, but to articulate its complexities and enable its flourishing. In attending to these nuances with their trans and queer patients, psychoanalysts may begin unraveling the relationships embedded in a patient's gender, so that their patient's gender may feel more integrated within themselves, something of their own creation in which they may inhabit as an "idiom of their own forging" (55). At the heart of their argument is a call to open up the psychoanalytic world in a way that does not simply accept a trans and queer identity, but that utilizes the breadth of tools at its disposal to tell and discover more complex stories about non-normative gender expression, ultimately, supporting their patients in understanding and embodying their own queer gender and sexual self-theorization.

#### STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

*Gender Without Identity* is a profound piece that deepens developments in trans studies, breaks from reductive conceptions of transness, and does significant work in reframing normative cultural conceptualizations of gender. In fleshing out a psychoanalytic process that approaches gender as a process that is neither innate nor of an individual's choosing, they generate possibilities for full acceptance of any person's unique gender expressions as an embodiment of their own psychic process.

Saketopoulou and Pellegrini open up avenues to support non-normative gender expressions in order to ensure the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of queer individuals. Though the field of sociology generally regards gender as a social institution, perpetuated in its longevity of social practices, it may still integrate the concept of gender as Saketopoulou and Pellegrini discuss it into sociological work. For example, working with the idea of gender as something not subject to being known 'correctly' or 'incorrectly,' sociologists may incorporate policies and create programs that are not based on a criterion one must prove themselves against, making resources increasingly more available to those who wish to explore them.

This may also have implications for those who "detransition" (or "retransition") (29), as embracing the idea of no

true origin of gender that one is “returning to” after having previously been “wrong about.” Additional gender transitions no longer need serve as a signifier of “regret,” but can instead be seen as a new iteration of gender embodiment. Moreover, their reconceptualization of trauma as “generative source material” (xxxiii) transcends narratives of pain and dysphoria as defining aspects of transness, and instead reveals the profound beauty and complexity in the unfolding of each individual’s own gender becoming. This reframing has broader implications for the field of sociology, as it challenges reductive hegemonic views on gender, potentially signaling a driving force for a significant cultural shift. Their approach is both innovative and compelling, with the only shortcoming being a desire for further exploration of its implementation in the consulting room to further demonstrate applicability in patient life.

## CONCLUSION

*Gender Without Identity* offers a profound reframing of queer gender expressions by reconceptualizing trauma as generative psychic material, ultimately contributing towards a vision for a world that delights in the pleasures of difference. This piece can speak to trans and queer individuals seeking nuanced ways of thinking about themselves and their relationship to their queerness. It may also have relevance for those invested in improving the material, physical, and psychological well-being of trans individuals, as analysts, friends, family, and more. Additionally, cisgendered people may benefit by gaining a deeper understanding of gender as Saketopoulou and Pellegrini position it—not as something innate or given, but as a complex internal process unique to each individual, including themselves.

## REFERENCES

Saketopoulou, Avgi and Ann Pellegrini. 2003. *Gender Without Identity*. New York: The Unconscious Translation.