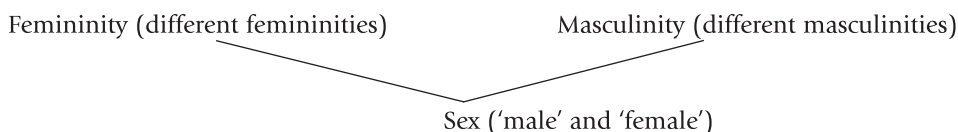


While feminist understandings of patriarchy would undoubtedly be wider if we had access to men's understandings of how they construct and transform this pervasive system of relationships, we nevertheless fear that such research might distort, belittle, or deny women's experiences with men and masculinity. Feminists therefore must be even more insistent about conducting research on men and masculinity at a time when a growing number of men are beginning to conduct apparently 'comparable' research (207–8).

## Queer theory

Queer theory, as Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (1995) explain, 'provides a discipline for exploring the relationships between lesbians, gay men and the culture which surrounds and (for the large part) continues to seek to exclude us' (1). Moreover, '[b]y shifting the focus away from the question of what it means to be lesbian or gay within the culture, and onto the various performances of heterosexuality created by the culture, Queer Theory seeks to locate Queerness in places that had previously been thought of as strictly for the straights' (ibid.). In this way, they contend, 'Queer Theory is no more "about" lesbians and gay men than women's studies is "about" women. Indeed, part of the project of Queer is to attack . . . the very "naturalness" of gender and, by extension, the fictions supporting compulsory heterosexuality' (ibid.).

To discuss the supposed naturalness of gender and the ideological fictions supporting compulsory heterosexuality, there is no better place to begin than with one of the founding texts of queer theory, Judith Butler's (1999) very influential book *Gender Trouble*. Butler begins from Simone de Beauvoir's (1984) observation that 'one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one' (12). De Beauvoir's distinction establishes an analytical difference between biological sex ('nature') and gender ('culture'), suggesting that while biological sex is stable, there will always be different and competing (historically and socially variable) 'versions' of femininity and masculinity (see Figure 7.1). Although de Beauvoir's argument has the advantage of seeing gender as something made in culture – 'the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes' (Butler, 1999: 10) – and not something fixed by nature, the problem with this model of sex/gender, according to Butler, is that it works with the assumption that there are only two biological sexes ('male' and 'female'), which are determined by nature, and which in turn



**Figure 7.1** The binary gender system.

generate and guarantee the binary gender system. Against this position, she argues that biology is itself always already culturally gendered as 'male' and 'female', and, as such, already guarantees a particular version of the feminine and the masculine. Therefore, the distinction between sex and gender is not a distinction between nature and culture: 'the category of "sex" is itself a *gendered* category, fully politically invested, naturalized but not natural' (143). In other words, there is not a biological 'truth' at the heart of gender; sex and gender are both cultural categories.

Furthermore, it is not just that 'gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. . . . [In this way,] the internal stability and binary frame for sex is effectively secured . . . by casting the duality of sex in a prediscursive domain' (11). As Butler explains, 'there is no reason to divide up human bodies into male and female sexes except that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality' (143). Therefore, as she contends, 'one is not born a woman, one becomes one; but further, one is not born female, one *becomes* female; but even more radically, one can if one chooses, become neither female nor male, woman nor man' (33).

According to Butler's argument, gender is not the expression of biological sex, it is performatively constructed in culture. In this way, 'Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (43–4). In other words, gender identities consist of the accumulation of what is outside (i.e. in culture) in the belief that they are an expression of what is inside (i.e. in nature). As a result '“persons” only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of intelligibility' (22).<sup>34</sup> Femininity and masculinity are not expressions of 'nature', they are 'cultural performances in which their "naturalness" [is] constituted through discursively constrained performative acts . . . that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable' (xxviii–xxix).

Butler's theory of performativity is a development of J.L. Austin's (1962) theory of performative language. Austin divides language into two types, constative and performative. Constative language is descriptive language. 'The sky is blue', is an example of a constative statement. Performative language, on the other hand, does not merely describe what already exists, it brings something into being. 'I now pronounce you husband and wife' is an obvious example; it does not describe something, it brings it into existence; that is, when the words are spoken by an appropriate person, they transform two single people into a married couple. Butler argues that gender works in much the same way as performative language. As she explains, 'there is no identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Butler, 1999: 33). One of the first performative speech acts we all encounter is the pronouncement, 'It's a girl' or 'It's a boy'. Each pronouncement comes with rules and regulations, which we are expected to follow and obey: 'little boys do this, little girls don't do that', etc. Various discourses, including those from parents, educational institutions, the media, will all combine to ensure our

conformity to 'performativity as cultural ritual, as the reiteration of cultural norms' (Butler, 2000: 29). In this way, 'the performance of gender creates the illusion of a prior substantiality – a core gendered self – and construes the effect of the performative ritual of gender as necessary emanations or causal consequences of that prior substance' (ibid.).

Butler's concept of performativity should not be confused with the idea of performance understood as a form of play-acting, in which a more fundamental identity remains intact beneath the theatricality of the identity on display. Gender performativity is not a voluntary practice, it is a continual process of almost disciplinary reiteration: 'gender performativity cannot be theorized apart from the forcible and reiterative practice of regulatory sexual regimes . . . and in no way presupposes a choosing subject' (Butler, 1993: 15). Sarah E. Chinn (1997) provides an excellent summary of the process:

While we may recognize that gender is coercive, it is familiar; it is ourselves. The naturalizing effects of gender means that gender feels natural – even the understanding that it is performative, that our subjectivities themselves are constructed through its performance, does not make it feel any the less intrinsic. Our identities depend upon successful performance of our genders, and there is an entire cultural arsenal of books, films, television, advertisements, parental injunctions and peer surveillance to make sure those performances are (ideally) unconscious and successful (306–7).

Butler (1999) chooses 'drag' as a model for explanation not, as some critics seem to think, because she thinks it is 'an example of [the] subversion [of gender]' (xxii), but because 'it dramatize[s] the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established' (xxviii). Drag exposes the assumed and apparent unity and fictional coherence of the normative heterosexual performance of gender. As Butler explains, 'In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency' (175). To be in drag is not to copy an original and natural gender identity, it is to 'imitate the myth of originality itself' (176).<sup>35</sup> As she explains,

If gender attributes . . . are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality (180).<sup>36</sup>

Butler (2009) gives the example of Aretha Franklin singing, 'you make me feel like a natural woman':<sup>37</sup>

she seems at first to suggest that some natural potential of her biological sex is actualized by her participation in the cultural position of 'woman' as object of heterosexual recognition. Something in her 'sex' is thus expressed by her 'gender' which is then fully known and consecrated within the heterosexual scene. There is no breakage, no discontinuity between 'sex' as biological facticity and essence, or between gender and sexuality. Although Aretha appears to be all too glad to have her naturalness confirmed, she also seems fully and paradoxically mindful that that confirmation is never guaranteed, that the effect of naturalness is only achieved as a consequence of that moment of heterosexual recognition. After all, Aretha sings, you make me feel *like* a natural woman, suggesting that this is a kind of metaphorical substitution, an act of imposture, a kind of sublime and momentary participation in an ontological illusion produced by the mundane operation of heterosexual drag (2009: 235; italics in original).

If, as Butler (1999) maintains, 'gender reality is created through sustained social performances' (180), perhaps one of the principal theatres for its creation is consumption. Michael Warner (1993) has noted a connection between gay culture and particular patterns of consumption. Such a relationship, he argues, demands a rethinking of the political economy of culture (see Chapter 10). As he explains, there is

the close connection between consumer culture and the most visible spaces of gay culture: bars, discos, advertising, fashion, brand-name identification, mass cultural-camp, 'promiscuity'. Gay culture in this most visible mode is anything but external to advanced capitalism and to precisely those features of advanced capitalism that many on the left are most eager to disavow. Post-Stonewall urban gay men reek of the commodity. We give off the smell of capitalism in rut, and therefore demand of theory a more dialectical view of capitalism than many people have imagination for (xxxi).

In a similar way, Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (1995) point out that 'the identity that we designate *homosexual* arose in tandem with capitalist consumer culture' (1). They draw attention to the particular relationship that gays and lesbians have often had with popular culture: 'an alternative or negotiated, if not fully subversive, reception of the products and messages of popular culture, [wondering] how they might have access to mainstream culture without denying or losing their oppositional identities, how they might participate without necessarily assimilating, how they might take pleasure in, and make affirmative meanings out of, experiences and artefacts that they have been told do not offer queer pleasures and meanings' (1–2). In other words, 'a central issue is how to be "out in culture": how to occupy a place in mass culture, yet maintain a perspective on it that does not accept its homophobic and heterocentrist definitions, images, and terms of analysis' (2).

Alexander Doty (1995) argues that 'queerness as a mass culture reception practice . . . is shared by all sorts of people in varying degrees of consistency and intensity' (73). As he explains, queer reading is not confined to gays and lesbians, 'heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments' (ibid.). The term 'queer' is used by Doty 'to mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception. As such, 'this "queer space" recognizes the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever *anyone* produces or responds to culture' (73; italics in original). The 'queer space' identified by Doty is, as he explains, best thought of as a 'contrastraight, rather than strictly antistaight, space' (83):

Queer positions, queer readings, and queer pleasures are part of a reception space that stands simultaneously beside and within that created by heterosexual and straight positions. . . . What queer reception often does, however, is stand outside the relatively clear-cut and essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function. You might identify yourself as a lesbian or a straight woman yet queerly experience the gay erotics of male buddy films such as *Red River* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*; or maybe as a gay man your cultlike devotion to *Laverne and Shirley*, *Kate and Allie*, or *The Golden Girls* has less to do with straight-defined cross-gender identification than with articulating the loving relationship between women. Queer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful or wilful mis-readings, or 'reading too much into things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along (83–4).

## Further reading

Storey, John (ed.), *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 4th edition, Harlow: Pearson Education, 2009. This is the companion volume to this book. It contains examples of most of the work discussed here. This book and the companion Reader are supported by an interactive website ([www.pearsoned.co.uk/storey](http://www.pearsoned.co.uk/storey)). The website has links to other useful sites and electronic resources.

Ang, Ien, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, London: Routledge, 1995. An excellent collection of essays from one of the leading intellectuals in the field.

Barrett, Michèle, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*, London: Verso, 1980. The book is of general interest to the student of popular culture in its attempt to synthesize Marxist and feminist modes of analysis; of particular interest is Chapter 3, 'Ideology and the cultural production of gender'.

Brunt, Rosalind and Caroline Rowan (eds), *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1982. A collection of essays illustrative of feminist modes of

- analysis. See especially: Michèle Barrett, 'Feminism and the definition of cultural politics'.
- Burston, Paul and Colin Richardson (eds), *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, 1995. An interesting collection of essays looking at popular culture from the perspective(s) of queer theory.
- Creekmur, Corey K. and Alexander Doty (eds), *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, London: Cassell, 1995. An excellent collection of essays on contemporary popular culture from an antihomophobic and antiheterocentrist perspective.
- Easthope, Antony, *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture*, London: Paladin, 1986. A useful and entertaining account of the ways in which masculinity is represented in contemporary popular culture.
- Franklin, Sarah, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacy (eds), *Off Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies*, London: HarperCollins, 1991. An excellent collection of feminist work in cultural studies.
- Geraghty, Christine, *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991. A comprehensive introduction to feminist analysis of soap operas.
- Jeffords, Susan, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989. The book explores representations of masculinity across a range of popular texts to argue that following the crisis of defeat in Vietnam strenuous attempts have been made to remasculinize American culture.
- Macdonald, Myra, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in Popular Media*, London: Edward Arnold, 1995. An excellent introduction to the way women are talked about and constructed visually across a range of popular media.
- McRobbie, Angela, *Feminism and Youth Culture*, London: Macmillan, 1991. A selection from the work of one of the leading figures in feminist analysis of popular culture.
- Pribram, Deidre E. (ed.), *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, London: Verso, 1988. A useful collection of essays looking at different aspects of filmic and televisual popular culture.
- Thornham, Sue, *Passionate Detachments: An Introduction to Feminist Film Theory*, London: Edward Arnold, 1997. An excellent introduction to the contribution of feminism to the study of film.