108 | book review

gender stories: negotiating identity in a binary world

Sonja K. Foss, Mary E. Domenico, and Karen A. Foss, Waveland Press, Long Grove, IL, 2013, 264 pp., ISBN: 978-1-57766-791-9, US\$29.95

When I talk about gender with my students, they echo the binary conception of gender they hear from the media, research, and sometimes even women's studies courses: that women are one way and men are another. *Gender Stories* by Sonja K. Foss, Mary E. Domenico and Karen A. Foss offers a refreshing challenge to that perspective; the book transforms students' thinking by encouraging them to reevaluate the gender binary and to conceptualise gender as multiple and fluid. I use *Gender Stories* in my public speaking, argumentation and cultural studies courses to introduce students to the construction and effects of various gender choices. The authors of *Gender Stories* contend that identity should not be based on the dual notion of men and women; rather, it should acknowledge the process by which individuals construct their genders, resulting in a virtually infinite number of gender stories and performances—not just the two that the gender binary prescribes.

The nine chapters of *Gender Stories* are similar to a conversation, providing an invitational approach to the topic. The first three chapters bring us into the current gender conversation, introducing the key concepts that guide the book's perspective—gender, story, identity, binary and agency. Readers are clearly introduced to the notion that this book will not prescribe one correct way for viewing gender because of the book's focus on stories, each of which juxtaposes a 'challenging' and a 'normative' gender narrative in order to challenge the conceptions about what constitutes appropriate gender behaviour. Chapter 1 sets the tone for the book by stating that all gender choices should be respected. The authors pair the perspective of Kate Bornstein, a transsexual person, with that of Joseph Nicolosi, a childhood psychologist who offers gender therapy designed to change those with same-sex attraction into heterosexuals (p. 5). The authors use this juxtaposition to show that people hold very different views on gender for reasons that make sense to them and how those differences in perspectives often produce confrontational and thought-provoking conversations about gender. This encouragement to drop black and white thinking regarding various approaches to gender is best illustrated by students' comments in my classes, such as that of Suzanne, who noted, 'Normally, I would be disgusted with the idea of gender therapy. While I do not agree with its practice, I am trying to see it from Nicolosi's

perspective and not to be so judgmental about other people's perspectives on gender'.

Chapter 2 explores communication theory in greater depth, and the authors offer a critical look at how the definitions of gender and biological sex have changed over time. Similar to gender, the authors describe biological sex as a construction, which transforms the commonly accepted dichotomous biological view. The notion that one could have additional X or Y genes contributes to the authors' claim that biological sex and gender can extend far beyond men and women or male and female. They then continue to open up the possibilities for viewing gender in a more complex and expansive way. In a class meeting focusing on this chapter, my students express their astonishment with the notion that both gender and biological sex are created through language and performance. 'I had no idea', admits Samantha, a first-year college student, 'that sex is also constructed symbolically. I always thought biological sex was a given. I was socialised into believing that, but I know now that we created and reinforced the binary ourselves, including how we conceptualise our bodies'. The gender binary is explicated in more depth in Chapter 3, and the authors trace its ideals and its effects on life from birth to old age. The gender binary is a matrix that functions as a societal backdrop, and we all must decide how to negotiate it, as the book's title so aptly suggests, whether we adhere to the binary or not.

In Chapters 4 and 5, the authors present common narratives about gender. In Chapter 4, the focus is on gender stories offered through scientific research about gender differences, which the authors term *science fiction* because much of the 'research results in a fantasy created from science—something compelling and believable but often not entirely true' (p. 82). The authors tell three such 'science fiction' stories here—that men are superior to women in mathematics, that women talk more than men and that each gender is differentially impacted by its particular sex hormone. Many young women have shared stories with me about discrimination in their mathematics classes as a result of the story of male mathematics superiority. Josephine, a third-year college student, describes herself as an 'enigma' to her primary school teachers: 'I was often treated as though I needed remedial help, and my teachers were surprised when I excelled in mathematics, even though I told them it was my favourite subject'.

In Chapter 5, stories that reinforce or bend the gender binary in popular culture are discussed. One example of binary disruption can be found in musician CN Lester, who 'innovates the binary, refusing to be categorized as female or male and choosing both a new gender and a new label for that gender' (p. 134). After students read this chapter, I ask them to make a list of recognisable personalities from all areas of popular culture and to determine how those individuals perform gender in relation to the binary. The results are often mixed; no one fits into a

single categorical box, and many gender stories retell, revise and rewrite the binary simultaneously. Everyone is somewhere in between and moves around the continuum at various stages of life and from moment to moment. Using popular myths and cultural icons to demonstrate acceptance and rejection of the gender binary makes the gender continuum apparent in an applied way. Each case my students have studied has a place on the continuum, and I have yet to see an example that demonstrates a polarised extreme.

Chapters 6–8 focus on a performative notion of gender. In Chapter 6, the authors describe the individual's narrative-gathering process, where pieces of different stories from the cultural environment are selected and arranged to create individual gender stories. Chapter 7 continues the conversation with a description of what goes into an actual gender performance. This chapter parallels many ideas of Performance Studies, and the term performance is used to describe how gender is manifested in a person's behaviour. Similar to Goffman's notion of performing the everyday, performers test out their crafted stories to see how they feel embodied and how audiences respond. The point of describing and performing these processes is to show the very legitimate and reasonable practices individuals use to construct and communicate their own gender stories. One of my students, Jonathan, sums up these chapters well: 'As a gay man, I resented my parents for rejecting me and what they considered my "lifestyle choice". After reading this book, I understand now that they simply chose a different story from mine'.

In the final chapter, the authors encourage readers to reflect on the consequences of their communication 'regarding gender for the ways in which it produces greater appreciation for multiplicity; contributes to the cultural system of gender categories, norms, and attitudes; and creates a more civil and humane world' (p. 236). When discussing this chapter in the classroom, I can see a significant change among my students, even in such simple things as their use of 'you guys' to refer to their classmates. Students self-correct in the moment when they realise that they have used a term that excludes other members of the class, and their inclusion of and respect for everyone in the room is notable.

Whenever I use this book in a class, I can see a difference between students' perspectives about gender before and after their exposure to the book. Students are more receptive in their interactions with peers, particularly those with different beliefs from their own. As a result, their speaking styles are invitational rather than forceful. Students have also told me that this text has changed their perspective of themselves and others. 'I was so committed to my beliefs', says May, a third-year college student, 'but I knew I wouldn't succeed in my public relations major without recognising the views of others. That's why I took this class. The book, coupled with our discussions and class activities, allowed me to accomplish that goal in a way that I never thought possible'.

Gender Stories offers a new way of communicating about gender in the broader scholarly conversation as well as in personal conversations. The book blurs the lines between the classroom and other social spaces; it is both personal and political. As my student Jonathan so eloquently put it, 'I cannot say what is better for someone else, because they have their own stories to write. I am also constantly writing and rewriting mine'.

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