

HPRS5042/6042 COMPLEX BODIES: QUESTIONING GENDER, RELIGION, & SEXUALITY

Dr Angus M Slater

QUEER THEORY

In the last lecture we took on some of the more complex aspects of the work of Judith Butler, a key theorist in gender and sex studies

In this lecture, we will examine the foundation of a variety of different approaches, often lumped into the term “queer theory”. In doing so, we will address issues of masculinity and femineity, heteronormativity and homonormativity, and aspects of queer theory and sexuality studies.



JUDITH BUTLER & QUEER THEORY



JUDITH BUTLER

As some quick revision of Butler's position:

Butler argues that the use of identity (identification with a group) or subjectivity (the idea of individuality) are problematic as sites of resistance to social construction.

This is firstly because both of these things are themselves shaped by our social construction.

Secondly, this is because claiming an identity is *regulatory* - it can recolonise us according the social expectations of that category.

Butler doesn't totally reject labels, but argues that they must be "sites of necessary trouble"



JUDITH BUTLER

What does it mean that an identity should be a site of necessary trouble?

It means that our claiming of identities should always be open to flex, fluidity, parody, and change – we should not take our identities too seriously, as if they ‘meant’ something real.

While we tend to think of gender, sex, or sexuality as expressing some inherent aspect of our selves, for Butler, these identities are the effect of our performances, not their origin.



JUDITH BUTLER

An example of this is the dynamics of non-heterosexual identity – how does one claim a non-heterosexual identity, without making that identity regulative?

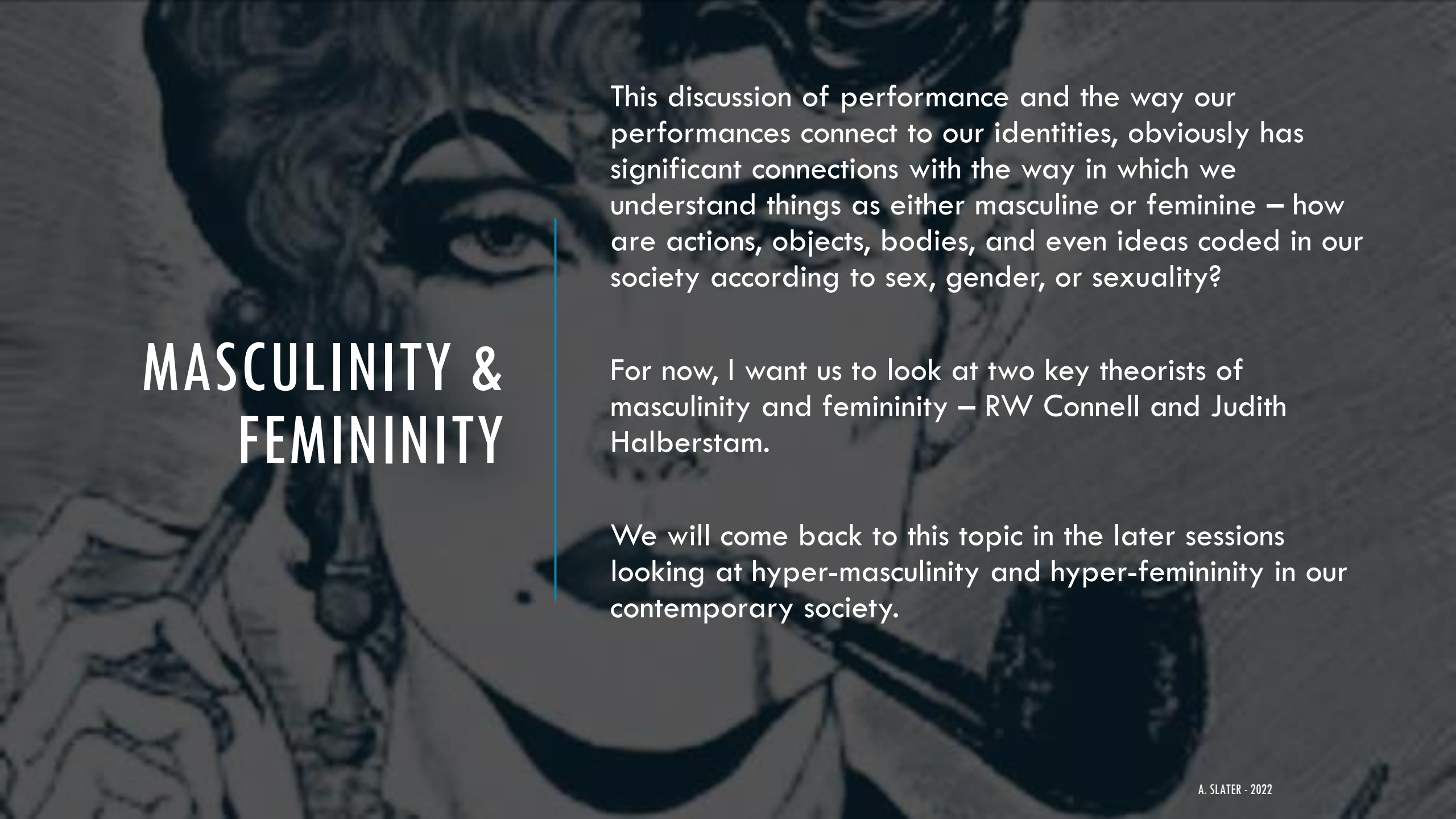
How does one *be* gay, without having to *act* gay?

Butler states: “If I claim to be a lesbian, I ‘come out’ only to produce a new and different closet”



MASCULINITY & FEMININITY





MASCULINITY & FEMININITY

This discussion of performance and the way our performances connect to our identities, obviously has significant connections with the way in which we understand things as either masculine or feminine — how are actions, objects, bodies, and even ideas coded in our society according to sex, gender, or sexuality?

For now, I want us to look at two key theorists of masculinity and femininity — RW Connell and Judith Halberstam.

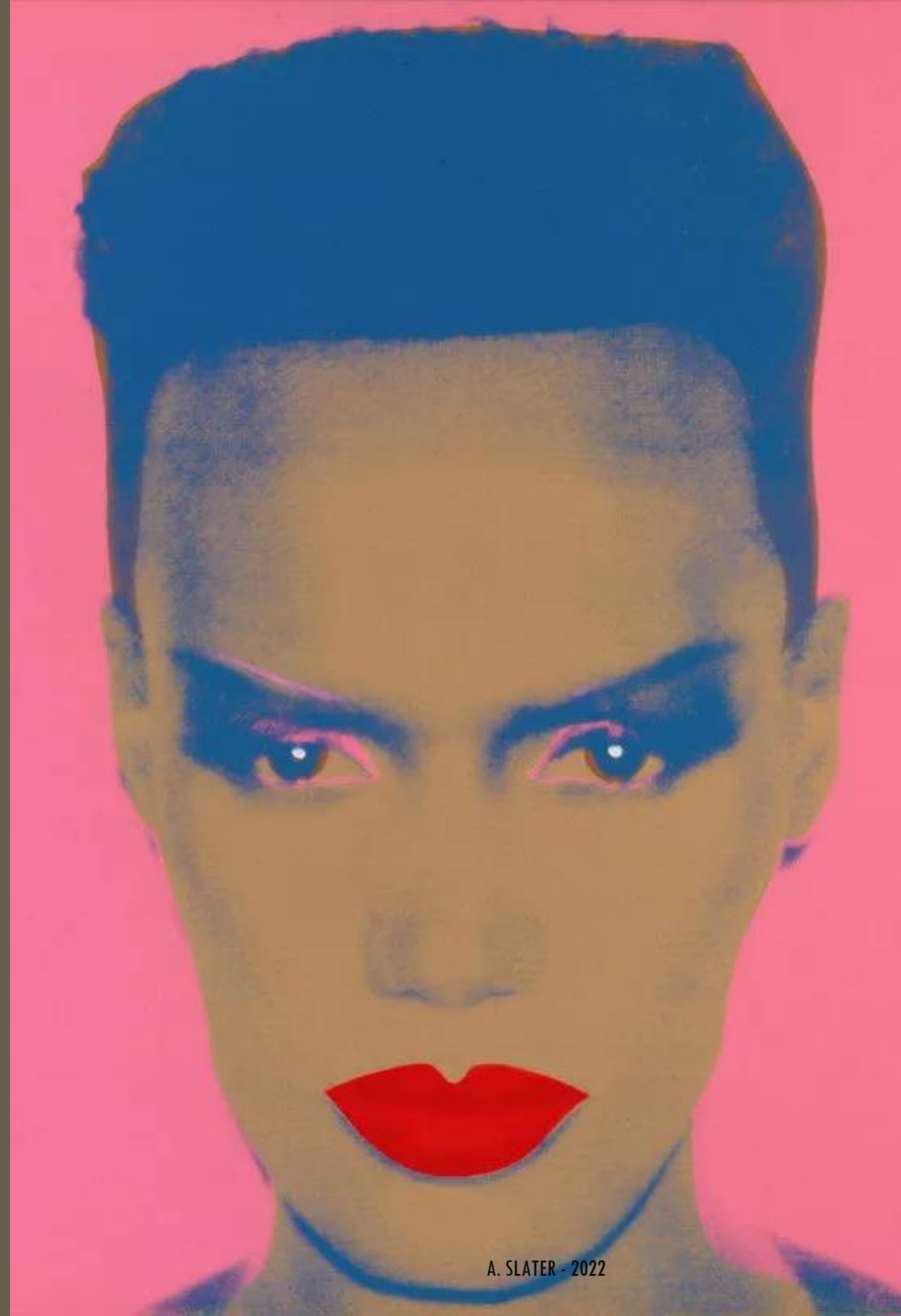
We will come back to this topic in the later sessions looking at hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity in our contemporary society.

RW CONNELL

Connell focuses largely on the role of masculinity in society, seeking to examine the different ways that the role of the masculine has been idealised, constructed, and performed in different time periods and cultural locales – for this reason, ‘masculinities’ is perhaps a better term for the object of study.

These forms of masculinity operate within society as the ways in which our masculinity, or femininity, is made intelligible to others – how we can be recognised in our performance as occupying the social role of male or female.

As part of this, certain forms of masculinity are institutionalised through social structures, like education, the workplace, fashion etc.



HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

This encouraged form of masculinity occupies the dominant position in terms of social construction of 'maleness' but also of correct human behaviour – it serves as the template according to which all performances of masculinity can be adjudicated, and also the template to which femininity can never measure up.

For Connell, every social system produces a hegemonic ideal form of masculinity, which serves as the ideal for maleness, and a subsidiary ideal form of femininity, which serves as the ideal for femaleness.

“Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”

2005 – p.77

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

This ideal form legitimates and normalises behaviours associated with it – e.g. boys will be boys – and pathologises or subordinates alternative expressions – e.g. marginalisation of effeminacy.

In doing so, the ideal masculine form defines itself against both femininity, but also against non-ideal masculine forms e.g. homosexuality, which challenges the naturalness of the hegemonic form of masculinity.



DISCUSSION

1 – What characteristics would you say the current hegemonic form of masculinity holds?

2 – How might this conception of masculinity have an impact on the construction of its female opposite?

3 – How are characteristics associated either with the feminine or with subordinated masculinity identified?



SOCIAL EMBODIMENT

Bodies don't just exist apart from their agency (their doing things). We must remember that bodies are not just physical realities, but also engage in performances and practices, and are understood and experienced as such — this is called 'social embodiment'.

The scholar, RW Connell notes:

Bodies cannot be understood as just the objects of social process...they are active participants in social process...

They participate through their capacities, development and needs ... through the direction set by their pleasures and skills.

Bodies must be seen as sharing social agency.

Connell, 2002, p.21

JUDITH HALBERSTAM

Judith Halberstam is another critical scholar of masculinity, particularly female forms of masculinity and their expression.

As an activist scholar she seeks to foreground aspect of female masculinity in order to show the presence of masculinity within the female sexed body and to open up space for alternative performances of masculinity / femininity.

She seeks to break out of the study of masculinity / femininity in their dominant forms and normative locations.

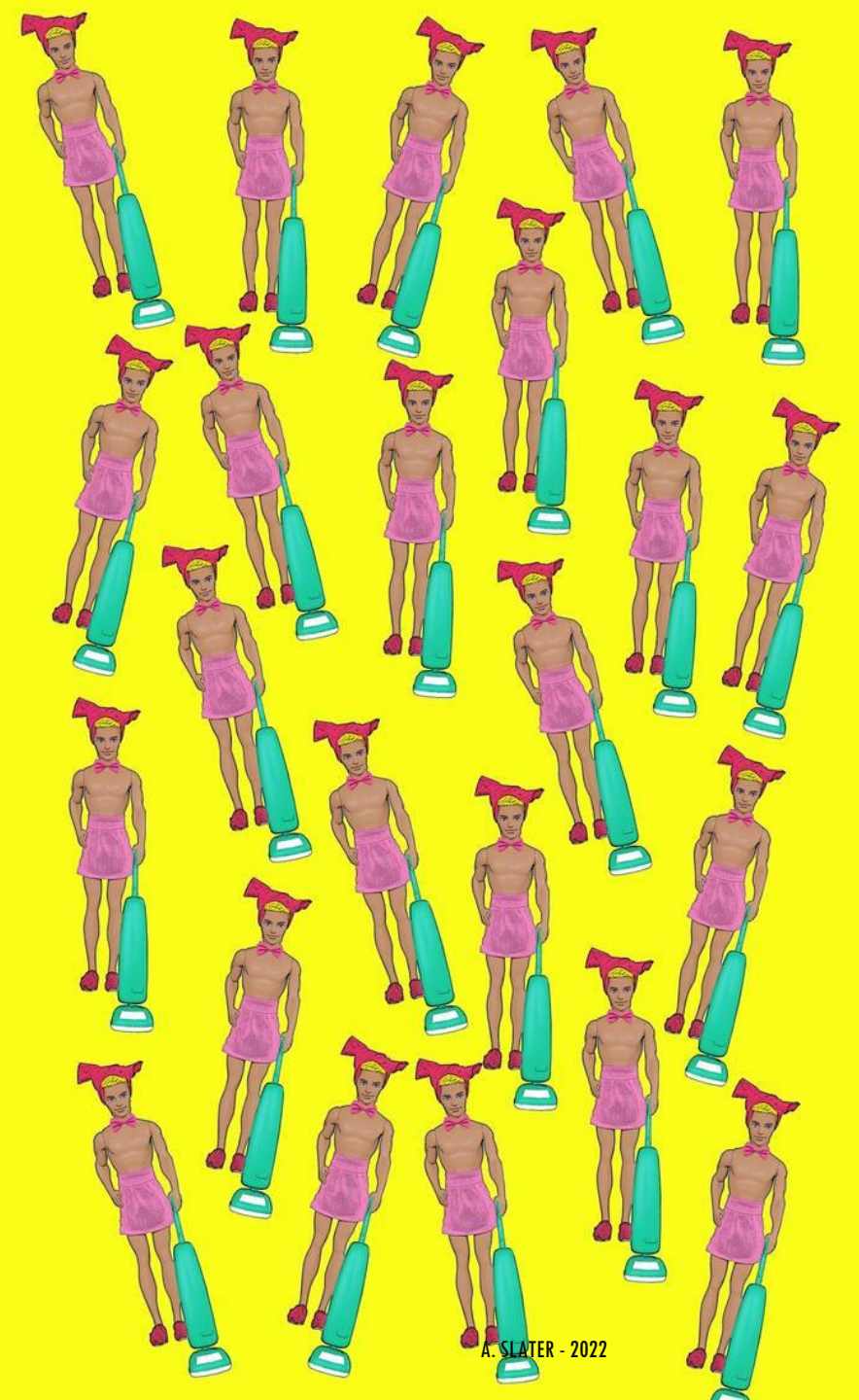


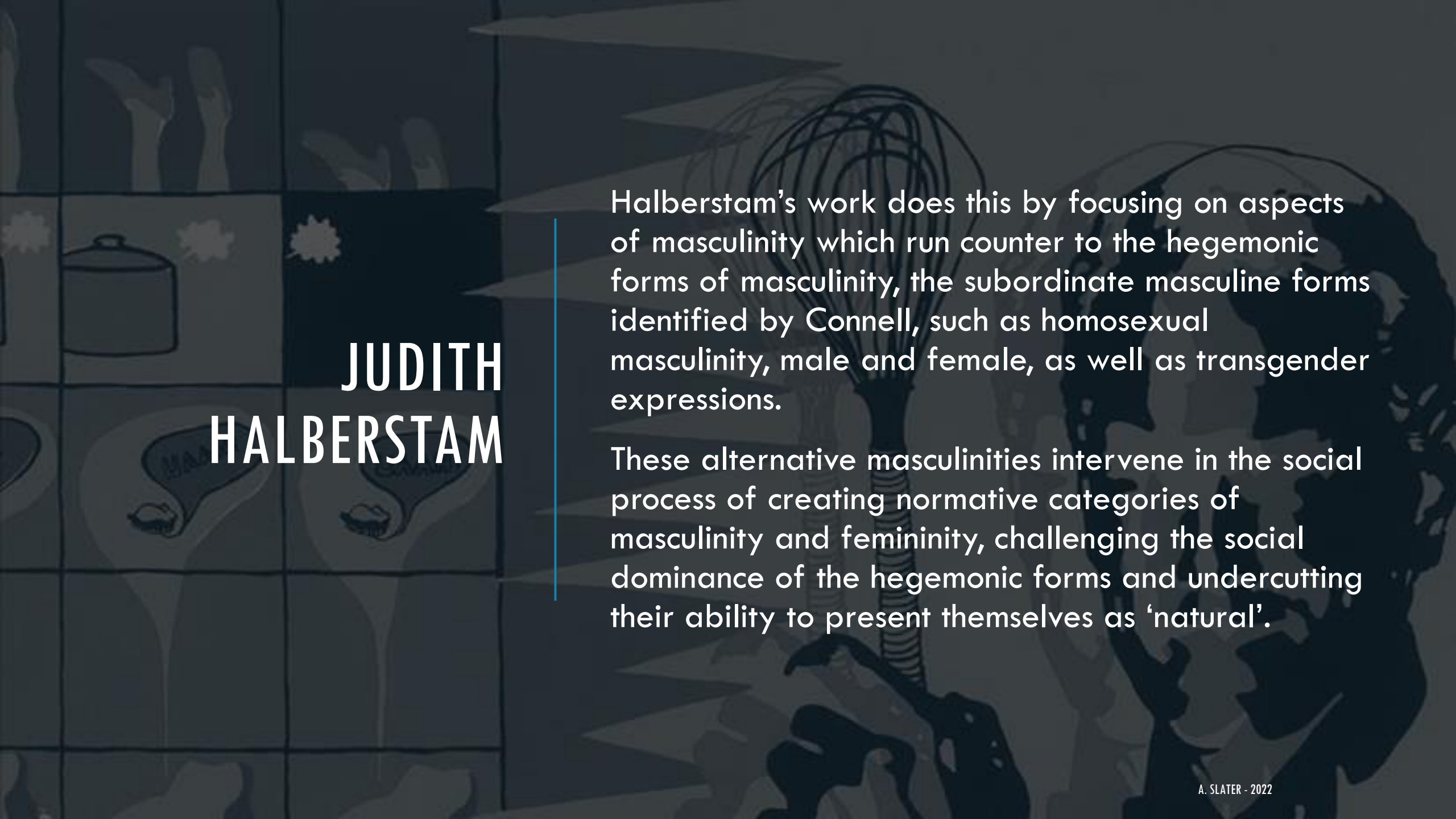
JUDITH HALBERSTAM

Halberstam seeks to show that masculinity is only related to or confined by the male body – but exists across the sex binary.

While most masculinity studies have focused on men, highlighting the way in which masculinity is socially connected to maleness, power, and domination, this connection is not necessary or natural, but rather a product of social construction.

We need to untangle masculinity from the hegemonic aspects of its ideal performance – reimagining masculinity without the patriarchal oppression of women.





JUDITH HALBERSTAM

Halberstam's work does this by focusing on aspects of masculinity which run counter to the hegemonic forms of masculinity, the subordinate masculine forms identified by Connell, such as homosexual masculinity, male and female, as well as transgender expressions.

These alternative masculinities intervene in the social process of creating normative categories of masculinity and femininity, challenging the social dominance of the hegemonic forms and undercutting their ability to present themselves as 'natural'.

JUDITH HALBERSTAM

Her work engages most with masculinity within lesbian sub-cultures, examining the way in which female masculinity, already challenging to hegemonic masculine forms, is most challenging when coupled with lesbian desire.

This allows her to study forms of masculinity that reject aspects of patriarchy and female oppression, as well as excavating alternative subordinate expressions and reclamations of masculinity on the part of women.

We will come back to this discussion later in the module, but for now, Connell and Halberstam offer significant resources for understanding the construction of both masculinity and femininity in our society.



HETERONORMATIVITY

HETERONORMATIVITY

As Gayle Rubin, a key theorist in gender and sexuality studies, states, the way in which gender, sex, and sexuality inter-relate and are seen to inter-relate in society always have political consequences – whether in the form of social privileging, exclusion, or physical violence.

We begin this session by examining some of the ways in which the association of sexuality, with norms of gender and sex, develop in this way – this is the next step, moving on from the connection between sex and gender, to consider their connection to sexuality.



HETERONORMATIVITY

Like gender, sexuality is political.

It is organised into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individuals and activities, while punishing and suppressing others

Gayle Rubin (1984: 309)

HETERONORMATIVITY

One of the easiest ways of examining the way that society connects issues of sex, sexuality, and gender is through the concept of heteronormativity.

This is because the concept of heteronormativity can assist us in understanding the political nature of the inter-relationship between these things and how this inter-relationship is upheld by social patterns which are regulated in a meaningful way.

Heteronormativity describes the assumption in most cultures that heterosexuality is normal, **socially or biologically**, in a manner that is **taken for granted or needs no explanation.**



HETERONORMATIVITY

Heteronormativity is ...the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent - that is, organized as a sexuality - but also privileged

(Berlant and Warner 2000: 312)

HETERONORMATIVITY

The concept of heteronormativity identifies and names a wide range of social processes which work to tie aspects of gender, sex, and sexuality together in a way that constitutes heterosexuality as both normal and natural – implicitly or explicitly constructing non-heterosexual forms of sexuality as both abnormal and unnatural.

Where do we see these social processes operating?

They often occur in forms of social institutions or community settings, such as through the media, in education, the law, or religious organisations.

This exclusion and marginalisation of non-heterosexual sexualities, often results in overt conflict and violence, but can also often take the form of social and cultural alienation.

DISCUSSION

1 – What are some of the ways in which femininity / masculinity are regulated in society?

2 - What do these process of regulation have to do with heterosexuality?

3 – To what extent do these assumptions about gender / sex, have an impact on our understanding of sexuality?

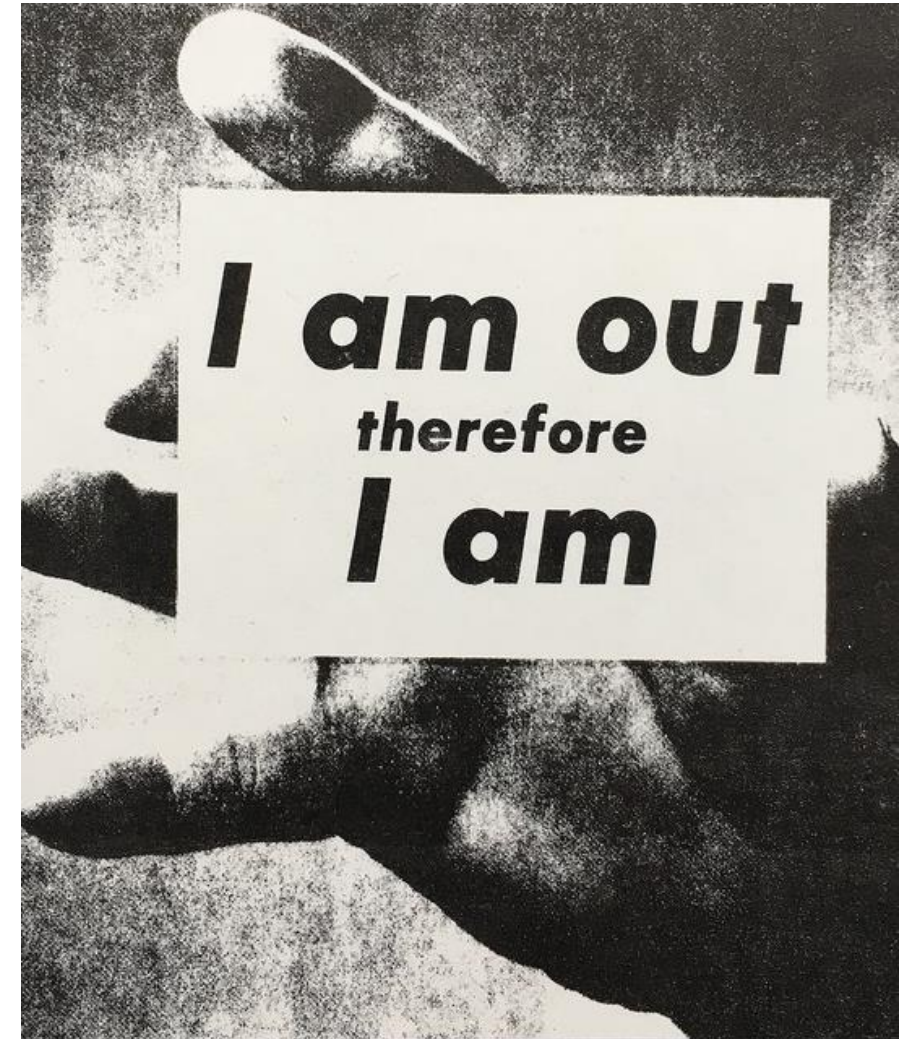
4 - What are examples of heteronormative assumptions in our contemporary society?



HETERONORMATIVITY

Heteronormativity operates as the 'fixed point' or 'default' against which sex, gender, and sexuality are understood and organised. This builds on the associations between sex and gender, and gender and social performance, you will have become familiar with throughout this module.

These associations, while perhaps functioning relatively well for the majority of people, become increasingly difficult to navigate for many who do not fit into their strictures as they become ever more closely identified with the only acceptable forms of expression.



HETERONORMATIVITY

This regulation operates not only on those outside of these dynamics (homosexuals for example) but also for those inside them (heterosexuals dealing with expectations) – in this way we see that sexuality, and its categorization and ‘identitisation’, can operate similarly to the association between sex and gender does – forming ideal categories against which performances can be measured (and found wanting).

Even within Connell’s subordinate forms of masculinity, for example, this ideal function still operates.

1 – Identify a subordinate form of masculinity / femininity operative in our society – what is the ideal form of masculinity / femininity for this subordinate social form?

HETERONORMATIVITY

Gayle Rubin (before) and Adrienne Rich (next) in their work showcase the way that heterosexuality operates as a social discourse and institution – and therefore as Foucault notes something that could be organised differently given different circumstances.

This is quite a departure from thinking about heterosexuality as a natural or biologically determined 'drive' that is often seen to underpin significant aspects of sex differentiation and gender role differentiation – that heterosexuality explains the natural need for gender differentiation, and therefore social gender differentiation.



HETERONORMATIVITY

Rich does this in her essay entitled 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980) – Rich describes compulsory heterosexuality as an oppressive social system that assumes that everyone is, and should be, heterosexual and that all other forms of sexuality and sexual expression are unnatural.

This understanding of nature, for Rich, is a political strategy that allows for the privileging of heterosexual over non-heterosexual forms of sexuality.

Further than this, it allows for the stratification of social rewards and punishments even within the performance of heterosexuality – producing a regulative function.



Inducements

Material

- The marriage contract (legalised sexual subordination of women)
- Financial and material support (husband)
- Sphere of influence (the domestic)
- Stay-at home child allowance for women
- Reduced earning capacity for women compared with their male partners

Symbolic or ideological

- Romance and love – made complete with a man (heterocoupling)
- Female beauty as an ideal of female worth
- Motherhood within marriage as female self-fulfilment
- Women valued only insofar as they are valuable to men

Punishments

- Social ostracism for unmarried mothers, women who leave their husbands and financially independent women
- Women who are sexually independent labelled as 'loose,' 'skettels,' sluts'
- Criminalisation, pathologisation and abuse of lesbians and women who are not exclusively heterosexual
- A system of gendered sexual violence that keeps women (and their sexuality) in its proper place

HETERONORMATIVITY

Rubin extends and expands this notion in a famous essay entitled 'Thinking Sex' (1984) which argues that in our society's heteronormativity operates to produce a hierarchy of sexual acts, gender performances, and expressions of sexuality.

Rubin argues that those aspects which are higher up the hierarchy are rewarded and privileged in society, while those that fall low in the hierarchy are socially punished or excluded.

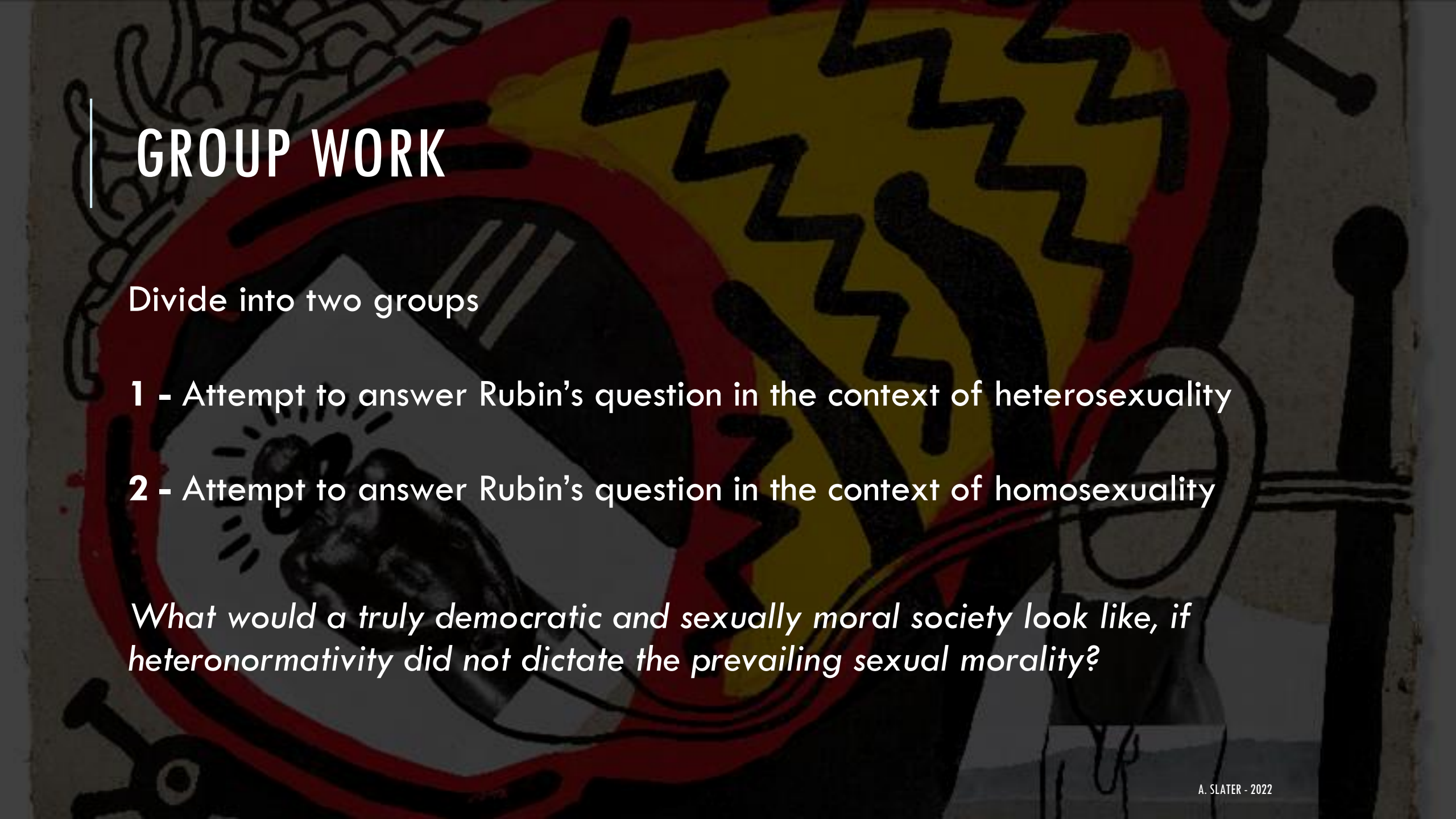
The sexual practices that Rubin argues are most valued and highly rewarded include a limited repertoire of sexual acts, **reproductive in intent**, undertaken by a **monogamous, adult, heterosexual couple** within the confines of the **family home** and sanctioned by the **state**, or **religion**, or both, through **marriage**.

HETERONORMATIVITY

Rubin's point is that those whose identity, practice or behaviour falls in 'the outer limits' rather than in the 'charmed circle' often receive treatment that can be viewed as morally reprehensible, but is justified on the basis of their location outside the bounds of acceptable and natural heterosexuality.

This is not a call by Rubin for a total liberation of any forms of sexual practice, without limit. Rather, her point is the following question: what would a truly democratic and sexually moral society look like, if heteronormativity did not dictate the prevailing sexual morality?





GROUP WORK

Divide into two groups

- 1 - Attempt to answer Rubin's question in the context of heterosexuality
- 2 - Attempt to answer Rubin's question in the context of homosexuality

What would a truly democratic and sexually moral society look like, if heteronormativity did not dictate the prevailing sexual morality?

HETERONORMATIVITY

Rubin uses the notion of a 'charmed circle' to describe and identify those aspects of sexuality which are upheld by society, and those which are marginalised.

This can be seen in the diagram opposite, which places those aspects of approved sexuality at the centre, with their opposites placed around the wheel of social acceptability.

For Rubin, this placement highlights some of the assumptions we make about 'good' sex / expressions of sexuality and 'bad' sex / expressions of sexuality.

The charmed circle:

Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality

Heterosexual
Married
Monogamous
Procreative
Non-commercial
In pairs
In a relationship
Same generation
In private
No pornography
Bodies only
Vanilla



The outer limits:

Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural,
Damned Sexuality

Homosexual
Unmarried
Promiscuous
Non-procreative
Commercial
Alone or in groups
Casual
Cross-generational
In public
Pornography
With manufactured objects
Sadomasochistic

FIGURE 1. The sex hierarchy: the charmed circle vs. the outer limits

DISCUSSION

Examine and explore Rubin's 'charmed' circle of gender / sex / sexuality expressions.

Consider:

- 1 - What informs the differentiations / distinctions made between acceptable and unacceptable forms?
- 2 - Does the 'charmed circle' describe the reality of (heterosexual) sex?
- 3 - Is most sex 'good' sex?

READING

Today, we begun exploring a number of precursor theorists to Queer Theory as well as their reflections on the shared dynamics of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Your readings for this session are 'Queer Theory and the Ethics of Opting Out' by Mari Ruti and 'What is Sex For?' by David Halperin – which both deal with aspects of Queer Theory

Links to these articles are included on the Moodle page.

