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When Words Fail: Towards a Subversive Account of Gender Theory

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To Dad— you are my inspiration in everything that I do.

Thank you to…

Gabe, my best friend and roommate of four years—I can't put into words how you've encouraged me to be my best self through Bard. I couldn't have done it without you.

Scout—you're the reason I do philosophy.

Bek, for teaching me how to love my gender.

Rose, Antonia, Kat, Jane, and everyone else I love.

Vlad and Earl, my cats, for staying beside me through late nights of writing and editing.

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Katie and Daniel for everything you taught me about having an inquisitive mind.

Mom, for always encouraging me to think.

And of course, Taylor Swift.

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Opening Words:

Writing About Gender and my Own Moments of Subversion

The philosophy of gender has been driven by the metaphysical question: *what is?* Early feminist theorists wondered what it is to be a woman, but as feminism progressed to be more inclusive, theorists began to question the substance of gender entirely. By the 90s, third wave feminism turned its attention towards intersectionality and away from a singular idea of 'womanhood.' As of the twenty-first century, queer philosophy is an up-and-coming field with extensive literature and thinkers. In this project, I will dive into the work of two prominent queer philosophers: Robin Dembroff and Judith Butler. While there are many points of difference between Dembroff and Butler, they are both interested in challenging the traditional metaphysical categorizations of gender— Dembroff searches for more inclusive labels, while Butler seeks to reject metaphysics as a whole. In this project, I will argue that while Dembroff and Butler may succeed in *inverting* gender theory—they turn oppressive cisheterosexuality on its head and make room for gender play and gender fluidity—their continuous return to metaphysical thinking prevents them from engaging in a true subversion of gender theory.

Before outlining my project, I will look to my own gender story. I do not believe that gender is simple enough to be captured in words, but I will attempt to tell you a bit about my journey. It is incoherent, inconsistent, elusive, and all-too fleeting to be pinned down as a linear narrative— the best I can do is offer several moments of subversion throughout my life.

> I cut my hair at seventeen years old. I was a lesbian then, with a secret girlfriend and a closet full of patterned button-ups. I wanted to look like a dyke, and I was scared that I would look like a boy with my hair gelled back and short at the sides. That same year, my

high school friend pulled me aside and asked me if I felt some innate connection to my female friends. I lied when I told her that I did.

Just the other month, I considered wearing the same red pin-striped suit I had worn to my junior prom at my twenty-second birthday party, but I ended up wearing a velvety red dress that I would have been repulsed by five years ago. I looked at my body in that dress and I felt like I did when my grandma was awestruck that I asked for makeup for a Christmas present last year. She remembers me as the little girl who ran around the house shooting pink things with a water gun because it was a ‘girl color.’ None of us could understand how testosterone had turned me feminine.

Every week for the past four years, I’ve stuck a needle in my thigh and injected a milliliter of testosterone. About a week into hormone replacement therapy, my skin started to feel different. It felt thicker, or maybe I just thought it did. My hands looked different, too, like they belonged on a body that wasn’t mine, one with an Adam's apple and hairier legs. In the coming months, the deep voice and the body hair followed. I was shot into a whirlwind of masculinity, of being called sir in public, of voice cracks, pubic hair, facial hair, and shoulder hair, of cowboy boots and Levi’s, a loud, commanding voice, and two incisions across a flat chest. Testosterone made me into everything I thought a man should be.

I had open heart surgery at sixteen weeks old, and my mother insisted that a plastic surgeon take care of my incision. She told me that she knew I would be a young woman

someday, and she wanted my scar to be as invisible as possible so that my breasts would grow normally. Twenty years later, I added two scars to my chest's collection when I had my breasts removed in a bilateral mastectomy. Being cut open, torn apart, reconstructed, and sewn back up was the most liberating feeling I can remember.

I chose the name 'Jamie' because it's gender neutral. If I regretted my transition, 'Jamie' would fit me as a boy, girl, or somewhere in-between. It suited me as I transitioned from she/her to he/him, and served me well for the three years I identified as a binary man. It suits me, still, in my journey from binary he/him to nonbinary he/they in the most recent two years of my life.

I used to coat my scars in silicone twice a day, every day, so that they would disappear. I felt like a patchwork of what I was and what I thought I should be. It's as though I'm synthetic— testosterone in its needle is my lifeline and I play dress up to pretend that I am a man. Now, I plan to have my scars tattooed on so they stay.

My journey with gender has been non-linear and incoherent. I hold true that I have eighteen years of lived experience as a woman and four years of lived experience as a man. I also hold true that I am not a binary man, despite being perceived that way from the outside. These are all facts of my existence that create my epistemology— my womanhood, my manhood, my transness, my nonbinaryness. As hard as I may try to capture the complexities of my existence and experience in words, I do not think it is truly possible. Words come, after all, one-at-a-time. My existence is not one-at-a-time— it is woman *and* man *and* in-between. The scars on my chest

signal to the breasts that once were there, just as the testosterone I inject signals to the estrogen it suppresses. The traces of my past are intertwined with who I am now, and these truths are inseparable. It simply cannot be summed up by a label, or a sentence, paragraph, or book. Words approach gender, but gender eludes words.

Evidently, this has not stopped me from writing a Senior Project on gender. But I do not intend to pin gender down— I want it to remain free and incoherent. My goal is, instead, to highlight the limitations in queer philosophers' attempts to philosophize on gender at all. Dembroff and Butler may turn gender theory on its head, engaging in an admittedly impressive *inversion* of gender theory, but the theory that both philosophers end up with is not *subversive*. It is imperative that we recognize this and begin to question the metaphysical frameworks through which we think and write. Let us pause and question together— how deeply entrenched are we in the metaphysical framework? It is in our desire to label. It is in my desire to say "I *am* transgender, I *am* masculine, I *am* nonbinary…" It is in our search for characteristics, the way I might say that I am masculine *because* I have a beard, *because* I have a flat chest, or simply *because* I claim to be. And it is in the way we search for commonality, that others are masculine, too, *because* of their beards and flat chests. To think within this framework is an attempt to make the fluid solid.

Consider the term 'genderfluid.' Let us take seriously the 'fluid' aspect— gender is like liquid. But liquid cannot be placed on a table and observed the way a metaphysician might observe a cup or a plate. The metaphysician cannot hold liquid in his bare hands, and the harder he tries to grasp it, the more quickly it escapes his grip. Thus the liquid flows off of the metaphysician's table and drips out of his hands. In order to philosophize on the liquid, the metaphysician must uproot his entire framework. He must subvert the very ways he

conceptualizes and philosophizes. If gender is fluid, then the queer theorist must also subvert their framework and consider gender differently than other philosophical pursuits. The metaphysical framework concerns labels, categories, and characteristics. It also concerns a sense of *being*— that one can *be* something and *belong* in a category, that one can *have* characteristics. How, then, does a queer philosopher avoid becoming the metaphysician? They must subvert the frameworks through which they think. They must do away with a search for *being* and *belonging*, and rid their work of labels and categories. To claim that one can *be* a gender is to think within the metaphysical framework, as is to search for a label or category to belong in.

My first chapter, "Defining the Elusive," begins with Robin Dembroff. I look to two of their articles: "Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as a Critical Kind" (2020) and "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender" (2018). I argue that these two articles reveal Dembroff's search for 'better' labels. This is apparent in the weight they give 'genderqueer' as a *kind*, complete with an analytic definition. Dembroff's intention is to subvert the cisheterosexual matrix by offering 'genderqueer' as a kind that destabilizes cisheterosexuality and the gender binary. I argue, however, that they *invert* instead of *subverting*. The weight they give 'genderqueer' is additive—it is an additional category piled atop the traditional categories 'man' and 'woman.' Dembroff also promotes pluralism, which I find helpful since I see gender as incoherent and complex. Dembroff does not believe that an individual belongs in a single category, but their philosophy is nonetheless one of categories. The framework under which they philosophize is metaphysical, and thus they do not subvert the way we think about gender.

If searching for more inclusive labels leads us back to the metaphysical framework, perhaps it is wise to do away with labels and categories altogether. This, among other things, is what Judith Butler attempts to accomplish in *Gender Trouble* (1990). In my second chapter,

"Trouble with *Gender Trouble*," I analyze Butler's angle to queer philosophy. They set out to argue that gender is not substantive, and that the subject is not continuous. At first glance, these claims appear to subvert the metaphysical framework, but the way Butler goes about proving their claims, I argue, continuously recenters metaphysics at the heart of their argument. Close textual analysis of *Gender Trouble* reveals that Butler still searches for a *reason* behind gender. It is as if they ask, 'if gender is not substantive, then what is it?' To wonder *what* something is falls within the metaphysical framework. Butler's second book on gender, *Undoing Gender* (2004) is perhaps more troubling, and more directly linked to the metaphysical framework. They use a number of case studies to analyze gender in real, lived experience. I will focus on two of these case studies: David Reimer and Brandon Teena. Close textual analysis reveals that Butler continues to ask *what* these people are, and under which *categories* they belong. Further, the way they write about David and Brandon's personhood points to a troubling commitment to the singular subject. They do not capture the incoherence and complexity of these case studies' genders, revealing the metaphysical framework surrounding Butler's work.

If these two seemingly opposite approaches to queer philosophy—the adding of labels and the doing away of labels—both return to a metaphysical framework, I wonder if it is possible to escape the traps of the metaphysical framework. Perhaps Dembroff and Butler's attempts to philosophize on gender are feeble. Consider their medium of communication: philosophical writing. I have become doubtful of the ability of written philosophy to capture gender at all—perhaps a true subversion of queer theory would not take the form of written philosophy. In my conclusion, I will explore the possibility that the answer lies in something more organic— art.

Chapter I

Defining the Elusive:

Robin Dembroff's Search for Inclusive Labels

In the recent years of the twenty-first century, the queer community has maintained the advent of new labels that better define subsects of queer genders and sexualities. We see this in the shift from the general label 'queer' to the more specific 'LGBTQIA+'— lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, plus. This 'plus' contains a vast array of labels— pansexual, demisexual, genderqueer, agender, genderfluid, greygender, demiboy, demigirl, and many, many more. Each of these labels empowers queer people to talk about their identity and relate to others who identify similarly. Contemporary analytic philosopher Robin Dembroff takes these labels seriously in many of their articles. They use the term 'genderqueer' as a serious philosophical kind in their work. This, on one hand, is empowering for the queer community— when our labels are taken seriously, real philosophy can be *done* on genderqueer kinds, just as it can be on more widely acknowledged kinds like 'man' and 'woman.' It is socially useful to be able to talk about queerness philosophically with such specific labels and definitions.

On the other hand, however, it becomes troubling to think about gender in such a traditional framework. If we are looking to subvert the cisheterosexual systems that queer people (Dembroff included, as I will later outline) find oppressive, why work within the same framework of labels and definitions? Though Robin Dembroff attempts to rid gender of this oppressive framework, I argue that they end up adding a new (but perhaps better) gender category, instead of offering a truly transformative gender theory. Though Dembroff's theory of gender kinds is more inclusive, more operatively useful, and overall 'better' than trans-exclusive

theories, I argue that being placed in a better named category still does not allow for *true* gender fluidity, even if this category is based in pluralism.

In this chapter, I will look at two Robin Dembroff articles. First, I will consult "Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Kind" (2020). Dembroff carefully outlines their issues with metaphysics— namely that gender categories require membership conditions that track (or are presumed to track) metaphysical truths. But when nonbinary categories such as genderqueer are introduced to the social sphere, as Dembroff argues, the metaphysical binary category system fails. I will use Dembroff's "Beyond Binary" to frame my underlying qualms with metaphysics, beginning with a brief summary of their own criticism of metaphysical thinking, and moving on to an analysis of both internalist and externalist approaches to understanding gender identity. I agree with Dembroff's assertion in "Beyond Binary" that both internalist and externalist approaches fall short of capturing genderqueer kinds. Dembroff further highlights some oppressions that take place at the hands of metaphysics, which I will outline before moving on to argue that at points, Dembroff undermines their own task by showing commitment to labels, despite claiming to reject metaphysics. I will show that, however anti-metaphysical their intentions, Dembroff ends up with an *additive* philosophy—where 'genderqueer' is simply added to the categories 'man' and 'woman'—instead of the *subversive* philosophy that they hope for.

This becomes clearer in "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender" (2018). I will similarly begin my analysis of this article by summarizing the metaphysical problems Dembroff attempts to solve, which again are very closely aligned with my own problems with metaphysics. More so than in "Beyond Binary," however, Dembroff falls victim to their own critique by creating further labels and categories. This deeply analytic approach, I will argue, is simply not

useful. Through Dembroff, we see that it is incredibly difficult (if not impossible) to escape the traps of metaphysics in philosophical writing.

Beyond Binary

Robin Dembroff is an analytic philosopher currently working in the Yale department of philosophy (as of 2022). In their own words, they philosophize on "what social classifications like *woman, Black,* and *gay* mean and are made of, and how these classifications feature in systems that reproduce inequality" (Dembroff 2022). They work primarily on classifications, particularly about gender in their 2020 article "Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Kind." Dembroff begins the article by problematizing classifications made on a metaphysical basis. Metaphysical methods of categorization involve questions of what it means to *be* in a gender category— to meet its membership criteria. But when the most commonly recognized gender categories are the male/female binary, Dembroff questions how metaphysical categorization might pertain to genderqueer (or nonbinary) individuals.

> First, by overlooking nonbinary identities, existing metaphysical approaches to gender are insufficient for capturing persons who reject (exclusive) categorization as either men or women. This creates a gap of metaphysical explanation and understanding. For example, what is the relationship between gender neutral language and being nonbinary? Or between androgyny and being nonbinary? What (if anything) unifies the vast variety of nonbinary identifications? Is there anything more to being nonbinary than calling oneself by a nonbinary label? These questions are metaphysically significant, but the theories on offer provide no answers.
> (Dembroff *BB* 2)

I share Dembroff's concerns. Many nonbinary identities cannot be defined metaphysically, as they undermine the very notion that gender identity corresponds to physical truths. Here,

Dembroff tells us some questions they see as "metaphysically significant," which push beyond the typical notion that metaphysics simply pertains to physical 'stuff.' For Dembroff, language and gender are metaphysically significant, as is androgyny and common factors between different nonbinary experiences. They wonder, "is there anything more to being nonbinary than calling onesely by a nonbinary label?" This final question leads me to believe that Dembroff sees labels as a primary component of metaphysical thinking. If a label brings forth metaphysical questions, then for Dembroff the act of labeling must have something to do with metaphysics. They note the modern effort to create inclusive labels: "MerriamWebster's dictionary added both terms[genderqueer and nonbinary], the Associated Press Stylebook embraces 'they' as a singular gender neutral pronoun… Facebook offers its over 2.4 billion users more than fifty terms to self-describe their genders" (Dembroff *BB* 1-2). Dembroff views this as a step in the right direction— for them, inclusive labels better capture lived queer experience. But how do we go about creating inclusive labels, and under what criteria does someone belong to a certain category, if not metaphysical?

Dembroff explores two methods of creating gender kinds: "It is common to conflate the project of analyzing a gender kind with the project of analyzing its membership conditions—indeed, they are treated as one within existing externalist and internalist models of gender kinds. I think this is a metaphysical error" (Dembroff *BB* 12). They go on to show that neither internalist nor externalist approaches truly capture genderqueer kinds, which I will briefly summarize and analyze in the next paragraphs. But first, I will begin to examine my troubles with Dembroff's commitment to labels. Though they claim that it is a "metaphysical error" to accept either the internalist or externalist approaches to gender kinds, they propose that instead we accept a third approach: genderqueer as a critical kind. Dembroff spends the majority of this

article outlining and defending genderqueer as a critical kind, which I will more carefully examine later in this paper. By accepting genderqueer as a critical kind, I argue, Dembroff rejects the gender binary. But what they are doing is not truly *transformative*— they simply *add* a new term to the existing metaphysical framework.

Dembroff urges us to consider the flaws of internalist and externalist approaches to understanding gender kinds. Essentially, the internalist approach focuses on things that come from *inside* a person (i.e. thoughts, feelings, perhaps some inherent essence of gender), while the externalist approach focuses on what social factors dictate how a person's gender is perceived (Dembroff *BB* 4). For Dembroff, both approaches fall short of capturing genderqueer kinds. They criticize the externalist approach in two parts: (1) that many genderqueer individuals do not express themselves androgynously, and (2) that many individuals who are not genderqueer do express themselves androgynously. If gender kinds are determined by external factors, then genderqueer individuals have some obligation to fit into an androgynous category that is perceivable by others. If we accept the externalist approach, claiming to be genderqueer is not enough; there must be some corresponding ontological reality that is perceivable by others. Further, there are androgynous people who do not identify as genderqueer. Dembroff writes, "genderqueer persons do not have a monopoly on being perceived as violating gender roles, much less on androgyny: Plenty of non-genderqueer men and women share in this experience" (Dembroff *BB* 6). If being perceived as androgynous is all it takes to be genderqueer, then we force non-genderqueer androgynous people into a category with which they do not identify.

Perhaps the internalist approach is more promising—external reality need not correspond to gender identity if it comes solely from within. At first glance, the internalist approach "might seem to worryingly essentialize gender by pointing to a mysterious, innate sense of one's own

gender that exists independently of external social factors" (Dembroff *BB* 8), but Dembroff does not see this as an issue, as the internalist approach can also be "based on internal ways of relating to societies' gender norms, structures, and interpretive guides" (Dembroff *BB* 8). For Dembroff, the internalist approach does not essentialize some innate sense of gender, as internal gender can also be a more nuanced, internalized conception of social norms. The internalist approach urges us to accept individuals as genderqueer simply if they say they are. Dembroff points out two problems to this approach: (1) there are contexts in which genderqueer individuals cannot assert their genderqueerness, and (2) that for many, external metaphysical expression is important to genderqueer identity. They write, "someone who is prevented from openly asserting a genderqueer identity due social costs…can still be genderqueer" (Dembroff *BB* 11). Here, we see Dembroff's first issue with the internalist approach: someone can still be genderqueer even if they cannot assert their genderqueerness, and the internalist approach does not allow for this. Further, Dembroff points out that the internalist approach "metaphysically trivializes being genderqueer" (Dembroff *BB* 11). For them, there is something important about external gender expression that the internalist approach "trivializes."

I pause here because Dembroff intentionally gives weight to the metaphysical. This is interesting, since they spent much of the beginning of this paper highlighting the issues with the metaphysical approach to gender. For Dembroff, the issues that arise from externalist and internalist approaches *do* concern metaphysics: there is not some objective *metaphysical* gender expression that might categorize someone as genderqueer, nor is there some *essential*, internal truth. Dembroff's solution, however, is not to reject categorization as a whole. Instead, they propose a new approach: "*genderqueer* as a *critical gender kind*" (Dembroff *BB* 11). Dembroff

still thinks in metaphysical framework, as they maintain that gender is something that can be categorized.

I will now examine the ways in which Dembroff continues to think within a metaphysical framework in "Beyond Binary." Throughout the article, it seems that Dembroff is in search of a 'right,' or 'better' label for genderqueer individuals. They work hard to define 'genderqueer:' "a category whose members collectively destabilize the binary axis, or the idea that the only possible genders are the exclusive and exhaustive kinds men and women" (Dembroff *BB* 2). Here, they break the gender binary by rejecting "men and women" as the "exclusive and exhaustive kinds." But Dembroff does not reject categorized thinking altogether— instead, their solution is to carefully analyze genderqueer as a new category. Further, they write, "substantive metaphysical questions about genderqueer deserve careful analysis in just the same way that women and men have been given careful metaphysical analysis" (Dembroff *BB* 3). Dembroff makes sure to give 'genderqueer' the same ontological weight as 'man' and 'woman.'

Dembroff notes that they "approach the project of metaphysical inquiry into gender kinds as the project of inquiring into the kinds that reinforce or resist hierarchical, male-dominant social systems" (Dembroff *BB* 4). Much of their work in "Beyond Binary" intends to analyze the ways in which the genderqueer kind "reinforces or resists" these oppressive social structures. In turning their focus, Dembroff resists the metaphysical framework. They continue, "I do not take it that the kind I call genderqueer is one that contains all and only those who identify themselves using the label 'genderqueer'. My focus, rather, is on using this testimony and other evidence to get a clearer picture of what, if anything, best characterizes the group of persons who do not exclusively identify as men or as women" (Dembroff *BB* 4). Dembroff does not focus on specific characteristics that would define a kind— this would show a commitment to the metaphysical. In

analyzing Dembroff, it is important to recognize that they do real work to break free from metaphysical thinking. Perhaps, at least in this moment on page four of "Beyond Binary," Dembroff truly does engage in an inversion of the metaphysical— they reject any ontological basis in belonging to a category, and push us to think instead about the ways that categories collectively destabilize oppressive structures. I find this aspect of Dembroff most compelling, and closest to a true inversion of metaphysics. They move on, however, to structure the rest of their argument within a metaphysical framework, undermining the subversive work they have done.

Though they intend to highlight the ways the genderqueer kind works beyond ontological reality, Dembroff offers strict definitions for critical and noncritical gender kinds. Their theory points to aspects of critical gender kinds that transcend ontology, but they ironically show a commitment to labels and categories. They define "Critical Gender Kinds: For a given kind X, X is a critical gender kind relative to a given society iff X's members collectively destabilize one or more core elements of the dominant gender ideology in that society" (Dembroff *BB* 12). They similarly define noncritical gender kinds as follows: "For a given kind X, X is a noncritical gender kind relative to a given society iff X's members collectively restabilize one or more elements of the dominant gender ideology in that society" (Dembroff *BB* 14). In these moments, Dembroff does not engage in the same radical subversion of metaphysical thinking they earlier proposed. Their definitions involve a label (Critical Gender Kinds and noncritical gender kinds), and a collective characteristic of the labeled kind (either destabilizing or restabilizing). Whether the labels are 'man,' 'woman,' and 'nonbinary,' or 'critical' and 'noncritical,' the framework remains the same— label plus characteristics equals category. Dembroff offers different (and

perhaps more inclusive) categories, but they work under the same framework they earlier claim to be oppressive.

I must note that Dembroff does not engage in the metaphysical framework in an oppressive manner. They make it clear that they are working against binaries and black-and-white thinking of any kind— they are not concerned with what it takes for an individual to belong to a category, and they do not believe an individual must belong to a singular, stagnant category. They do indeed "suspect it is unavoidable to belong to both types of kinds" (Dembroff *BB* 14). In other words, everyone both destabilizes and restabilizes. Further, they use Christianity as an example to explain that as an analysis of Christianity would be different than an analysis of what it takes for an individual to be a Christian, so too, an analysis of genderqueer is distinct from (though, of course, related to) an analysis of what it takes for an individual to be genderqueer" (Dembroff *BB* 12). It seems that Dembroff *is* doing work to break from the oppressive structures that enforce the gender binary. They accept a plurality of identity, and they are not interested in "what it takes for an individual to be genderqueer." In breaking from the gender binary, however, Dembroff does not engage in a subversion of the metaphysical framework that surrounds these structures. Instead, they invert the same framework to surround more inclusive labels and categories. These are, of course, labels and categories nonetheless, and though Dembroff does important work to reject the gender binary (among other oppressive systems), they do not offer a *true* subversion, or transvaluation, of gender theory.

Real Talk

Dembroff's 2018 article "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender" aims to reject a phenomenon they define as the Real Gender assumption: that "someone should be classified as a

man only if they 'really are' a man—that is, only if man is a recognized gender, and they meet its membership conditions" (Dembroff *RT* 22). Exclusionary ways of thinking often rely on the Real Gender assumption— a trans man might not be recognized as a 'real man' if he does not meet the membership conditions. In a blatantly transphobic way, someone may define a 'real man' as someone who is biologically male. But recall Dembroff's discussion of internalist and externalist gender kinds in "Beyond Binary." In a more subtle way, someone might be recognized as a 'real man' if they meet the internalist membership conditions (asserting that they are a man) or the externalist membership conditions (expressing their gender in alignment with male social norms). Dembroff argues that moves to make the Real Gender assumption more trans-inclusive are not enough. They write, "rather than insist that gender kinds always are trans-inclusive, I argue that we should reject the idea that gender classifications should track gender kind membership facts—i.e., we should reject the Real Gender assumption" (Dembroff *RT* 23).

So, why is Dembroff inclined to reject the Real Gender assumption? They believe that it causes ontological oppression, which, in short, "occurs when the social kinds (or the lack thereof) unjustly constrain (or enable) persons' behaviors, concepts, or affect due to their group membership" (Dembroff *RT* 26). They cite bi-erasure as a strong example of ontological oppression. Bisexual individuals are often forced into 'gay' or 'straight' categories— bisexual men are viewed as gay and bisexual women are viewed as straight. Dembroff explains that "this is an example of ontological oppression, not because gay and straight—i.e., the operative sexual orientation kinds—have unjust membership conditions, but because social structures and practices fail to recognize the kind bisexual" (Dembroff *RT* 27). Membership criteria do not need to change to combat bi-erasure. Instead, the problem lies in the constraints that social kinds place on bisexual individuals.

Rejecting the Real Gender assumption allows us to accept a more holistic *pluralist* philosophy of gender. If gender categories do not track membership conditions, then we can understand individuals as members of multiple different groups at once. Dembroff outlines why this might be a helpful way to think about gender— trans individuals are perceived in different ways in different contexts, and this is *important*. A trans man, for example, may be perceived as male in trans-inclusive contexts (as Dembroff defines), but not in dominant contexts. This distinction matters, and is overlooked when this trans man is forced into a singular category based on the Real Gender assumption. By accepting pluralism, we can see this trans man as a man in trans-inclusive contexts, while recognizing that in dominant or transphobic contexts, he may not be perceived as a man. It is important to be able to recognize the oppression he faces while affirming his identity. This way, gender categories need not come either internally or externally— because in reality, gender kinds are dependent on both external circumstance *and* internal identity. Pluralism helps us see this clearly. Dembroff writes, "when we take this pluralism seriously, we see the possibility that operative gender kind in dominant contexts (herafter 'dominant gender kinds') differ from those within communities of color, or within queer, working-class, or disabled communities, as well as their many intersections" (Dembroff *RT* 32-3). They note that it is important to understand gender kinds in both dominant oppressive contexts and inclusive contexts.

I find Dembroff's careful outlining of pluralism to be helpful. Gender, as I define it, *is* plural, ever-shifting, and context-based. But how can a philosopher pin down something as elusive as gender, and is there reason to try? Recall the term 'genderfluid'— Dembroff points to gender being *truly* fluid and elusive in their discussion of plurality, and yet they continue to search for a label and definition. Despite recognizing its fluidity, Dembroff attempts to put

gender on a table and look at it, as a metaphysician may look at a cup or a plate. Dembroff attempts to offer a subversive gender theory, but remains stuck in the very metaphysical framework that they criticize. This becomes clear as they progress through their argument in "Real Talk."

Essentially, in trying to create more inclusive labels, Dembroff *adds* labels instead of reimagining labeled thinking altogether. They fall victim to their own critique by centering their argument around the problem—labeled thinking. In doing so, they continue to use metaphysics as a framing for their argument. We see this when Dembroff analyzes gender kinds:

> 1. Persons in Group X are men.
> 2. Theory T implies that persons in Group X aren't men.
> 3. Therefore, we should reject Theory T.
>
> For example, one version of this schema would go as follows:
> i. Trans men are men.
> ii. Position-based theories of gender imply that some trans men aren't men.
> iii. Therefore, we should reject position-based theories of gender"
> (Dembroff *RT* 30)

While I do not argue that labels are inherently metaphysical, I believe that by basing their rejection of categories on further labels and categorization, Dembroff engages in *metaphysical thinking*. The above quote highlights this: They have "Group X" and "Theory T," which they then correspond to "men" and "position-based theories." Dembroff gives ontological weight to "groups" and "theories" by discussing them in such a clear-cut, definitive, analytical way. For Dembroff, categories are incredibly important. Their theory, in fact, rests on categories and is framed by metaphysics. They call us to look closer at labels, to reevaluate them, to *add* to them. They write,

> Suppose that someone is a woman relative to dominant gender kinds, but a man relative to trans-inclusive gender kinds. According to modest ontological pluralism, this person has both of these gender kind memberships in all contexts. For this reason he can truthfully say, 'I am a man.' This is because the term 'man' in his claim refers to the trans-inclusive gender kind—a kind he retains membership in even when in contexts where this kind is not operative.
> (Dembroff *RT* 41)

In "Real Talk," Dembroff encourages the reader to reject the Real Gender assumption and simultaneously accept their theory of ontological pluralism in dominant vs trans-inclusive contexts. We lose the notion that gender categories are truth-tracking and stagnant, but we keep the metaphysical framing that gender *can* be categorized at all. In this sense, Dembroff attempts to set water on a table and observe it.

I do not argue that categories are entirely useless in social contexts. I believe that Dembroff does excellent work to discuss trans and nonbinary individuals socially and politically by simultaneously validating their identities and their experienced oppression. I do, however, question whether Dembroff's project is philosophically useful. Perhaps Dembroff's project is not as transformative as it initially seems— upon closer analysis, I believe it becomes clear that Dembroff engages in an inversion, rather than a subversion, of metaphysical thinking. They use the same framework with substituted (albeit more inclusive) terms.

Further, Dembroff continues their argument by universalizing a single thought experiment.

> Given this, we can distinguish between two propositions that someone within a dominant context might pick out when they assert, 'Chris (a trans man) is a man':
> (a)) <Chris is a man *dominant-kind*>
> (b) <Chris is a man *trans-inclusive-kind*>

(Dembroff *RT* 43)

The goal of "Real Talk" is evident in its title: to bring some *realness* to queer philosophy. They want to base their writing on real, lived experiences, instead of engaging in lofty theorizing as many philosophers do. At first glance their thought experiment on Chris seems to be real. Many people like Chris do exist, and it is important to think about them while writing queer theory. But to me, it does not seem very *real* to universalize Chris' experience and identity. If Dembroff criticizes labels and categories in the beginning of "Real Talk," then why revert to this analytic hunt for labels later? The problem, I argue, lies in the metaphysical framework they use to construct their theory.

A true subversive theory would not be constructed within a metaphysical framework. Though Dembroff offers a powerful *inversion* or perhaps *edit* of existing labels, they do not truly subvert gender theory. This is evident in their *adding* labels— they offer more inclusive labels, but do not subvert the label system altogether. Dembroff admits that "like most philosophical theories, mine is probably wrong. But I believe it is closer to the truth than analytic philosophers have come so far" (Dembroff *BB* 2). Perhaps they are aware that their theory does not truly capture the complexities of gender identity, nor does it reject the frameworks they criticize. And perhaps this does not point to a failure of Dembroff, but rather a failure of philosophy. It is troubling that even Dembroff cannot escape the traps of metaphysical framework, despite actively criticizing its oppression.

I have argued that Dembroff attempts to make the fluid solid by adding 'better' labels, instead of subverting gender theory. I will now move on to look at a different, but perhaps more widely influential angle— Judith Butler. In what ways does Butler attempt to reject the

oppressive metaphysical framework, and in what ways do they, like Dembroff, continue to write in its shadows?

Chapter II
Trouble with *Gender Trouble*:
Judith Butler in the Shadows of Metaphysics

Queer theorist Judith Butler writes the prolific and groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble* in 1990, followed by *Undoing Gender* in 2004. They propose that there is *nothing* substantive about gender: there is no essence, there is only performance. This laid the groundwork for a significant move in queer theory to entirely reject substance, and view gender as a social construction. Though Butler is credited with rejecting the metaphysical account, I have found that there are moments where Butler is still thinking within a metaphysical framework. They set out to prove that the subject is incoherent and that gender is not substantive, but they often also sustain the singular subject. This shows just how deeply metaphysical thinking runs through gender theory. Though Butler opens *Gender Trouble* with the intent to prove that the subject "is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms," (Butler *GT* 2), they search for "stable and abiding terms" fourteen years later in *Undoing Gender*. I largely agree with the problems Butler highlights with the metaphysical account of gender, and I will note the ways they succeed in rejecting it. I will argue, however, that a close analysis reveals subtle—but recurrent—moments where Butler employs metaphysical thinking. These moments raise serious questions about both the intent and possibility of philosophizing about gender outside of a metaphysical framework.

I will begin with the introduction of *Gender Trouble* (1990) to outline how Butler intends to reject a metaphysical account of gender. I will move to section I.V, "Identity, sex, and the metaphysics of substance," to illustrate Butler's success in radically reimagining gender. I will show, however, that in section II, "Prohibition, Psychoanalysis, and the Production of the Heterosexual Matrix," Butler undermines their own work by calling us back to questions of 'being.' In their rigorous attention to language, Butler hints at a comfort or attachment to the

metaphysical. I will use Butler's discussion of psychoanalysis to show how they engage in an inversion of metaphysics that keeps the metaphysical at the center of their argument.

I will then look to *Undoing Gender* (2004) and outline Butler's intention to reframe gender in the language of performance and multiplicity. I will highlight, however, their troubling attention to the singular subject. I will closely examine Butler's examples of David Reiner and Brandon Teena— two individuals that Butler argues trouble traditional categories of gender identity. I will trace the ways in which Butler nevertheless seeks to answer the question of 'who' or 'what' these individuals *really are*. Both of these cases, as I will argue, undermine Butler's task of reframing gender. I will closely analyze Butler's language to show how they continuously return to questions of 'being,' and desperately attempt to find answers to questions of 'why' things 'are.' In the end, I aim not only to trace the recurrence of metaphysical thinking in Butler's theory, but also to explore the implications this has for a true subversion of gender theory.

Gender Trouble

It is easy to forget just how radical Butler's work was for their time. *Gender Trouble* was one of the first widely read pieces of queer theory, and their claim that gender is a performative construction was groundbreaking at the time of its publication in 1990. Butler sets out to prove the instability of gender categories, and in doing so makes the far more radical claim that there is *nothing* non-socially constructed about gender. There are many facets and directions to this work, but in the sake of my argument, I will focus on two main claims in *Gender Trouble*: that the subject is unstable, and that gender is non-metaphysical.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler deals almost exclusively with feminism and the categorization of the 'woman,' though I will be applying their feminist theory to gender in a wider context. In

the introduction, it is clear that Butler intends to challenge the stability of the subject: "The very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms. There is a great deal of material that…questions the viability of 'the subject' as the ultimate candidate for representation" (Butler *GT* 2). Right away, Butler suggests that the subject, as we understand it, might not be the "ultimate" means of understanding gender categories. They move on to state that "gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts" (Butler *GT* 4). In the introduction, Butler sets themself up to prove that there is not a "coherent" or "consistent" subject, and that the subject is not the best way to understand gender categories.

Butler also makes the claim that gender is non-metaphysical. In the introduction, they write, "gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (Butler *GT* 14). This is a direct rejection of the metaphysical account of gender, and since they make this claim in the introduction, it is evident that Butler intends to prove that "gender does not denote a substantive being." It is clear, then, that Butler's task in *Gender Trouble* is to question the continuity of the subject and to reject a metaphysical account of gender. I will now move on to a close analysis of some subtle moments where Butler both succeeds and fails at their task.

Butler's success is particularly apparent in section I.V, "Identity, sex, and the metaphysics of substance." In this section, Butler does major work to prove that gender is non-metaphysical, and that the subject is not coherent. They assert that "the 'coherence' or 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (Butler *GT* 23). They call us to question the way we understand "the person," and assert that the ways we understand identity categories are simply social constructions. They turn to Michel Harr's thinking on grammar to prove that the subject is

not as stable as one might think: “the grammatical formulation of subject and predicate reflects the prior ontological reality of substance and attribute” (Butler *GT* 28). Harr argues that grammatical structures create an illusion of a singular ‘I,’ or subject. This Cartesian ego, Butler and Harr believe, is a falsity caused by our commitment to subjects *doing* predicates. For Harr, there is no reason to believe that ‘I’ am the one who ‘thinks,’ outside of the grammatical structure. Butler uses this to argue that gender categories are similarly constructed through subject-predicate thinking. They write, ”But if these substances are nothing other than the coherence contingently created through the regulation of attributes, it would seem that the ontology of substances itself is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous” (Butler *GT* 34). Here, Butler very clearly states both that the subject is not consistent, and that substance is a social construction.

Butler does further work to apply this thinking to gender. From their assertion that the subject lacks substance, it follows that gender lacks substance as well. Butler uses this to argue that gender is entirely performative: “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler *GT* 34). They invert cause and effect— gender is constituted by the performative “expression” that is commonly thought to be *real* and substantive. Butler makes a strong case not only for the subject lacking metaphysical substance, but also *gender* itself. Further, they work to prove that the gendered subject is incoherent. They argue that a gender binary “results in a consolidation of each term [male and female], the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire” (Butler *GT* 31). Here, Butler asserts that the “internal coherence” of gender is an illusion created by the socially constructed gender binary. It is clear in section I.V that Butler supports their claims they set out to prove. They discuss the incoherence of the subject both in

general, and in terms of performative gender identity. They also discuss the illusion of metaphysical substance in gender identity. They do, however, contradict themself in section II. I will note how these contradictions cause Butler to fail at their task.

In section II, Butler aims to use psychoanalysis to further reject the metaphysical account of gender. Butler relies on Jacques Lacan— they spend much of the psychoanalysis section outlining Lacan's work and applying Lacan to their own theories. They make clear that they believe that Lacan "disputes the primacy given to ontology within the terms of Western metaphysics and insists upon the subordination of the question 'What is/has being?" to the prior question 'How is 'being' instituted and allocated through the signifying practices of the paternal economy?'" (Butler *GT* 59). Butler argues that Lacan gives priority to non-metaphysical questions, essentially asking 'why' instead of 'what.' Butler uses Lacan in an attempt to rid themself of metaphysical questions. Though this is their goal, it becomes clear through close reading that Butler does not, in fact, rid themself of metaphysical questions at all.

Butler heavily focuses on 'being' in their analysis of Lacan. Though they assert, as I addressed above, that their goal with Lacan is to subordinate the question "'what is/has being?'" (Butler *GT* 59), they continuously return to the word 'being.' They especially focus on Lacan's discussion of the phallus, writing, "for women to 'be' the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus…" (Butler *GT* 59), positing the word 'be' as central and important. Further, they write, "hence, 'being' the Phallus is always a 'being for' a masculine subject…" (Butler *GT* 61). I must note that Butler's use of 'being' is more nuanced than the typical metaphysical 'to be.' The woman 'being' the phallus is, for Butler, a reinstitution of phallogocentrism *for* the man. The woman 'being' the phallus, then, is not an assertion about the woman's physical genitalia. It does, however, still focus on substance in a way that Butler claims to avoid. For a woman to 'be'

a phallus, in this Lacanian and Butlerian account, she reflects the phallus in its absence. This returns to a metaphysical discussion of both the woman's[1] genitalia (her lack of phallus), *and* the man's genitalia (his phallus).

Butler goes on to offer two possible interpretations of Lacan. First, that 'being' a phallus is simply an "appearance," or "masquerade" (Butler *GT* 63). This aligns with Butler's theory of performativity. The second interpretation, however, is more troubling: "On the other hand, masquerade suggests that there is a 'being' or ontological specification of femininity *prior to* the masquerade, a feminine desire or demand that is masked and capable of disclosure, that, indeed, might promise an eventual disruption and displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy" (Butler *GT* 63-4). Butler suggests that there may be something ontological "prior" to performance. They do not move on to make an explicit judgment between the two interpretations, and so it is fair to conclude that Butler keeps the metaphysical interpretation open, despite so vehemently rejecting it in "Identity, sex, and the metaphysics of substance." I do not intend to claim that Butler *argues* for an ontological "prior" here, but I do think that it is important to note that they directly contradict their task of subordinating the 'what' under the 'how.'

There are further moments where Butler seems to search for an ontological or metaphysical 'what.' It becomes clear that Butler does not reframe or reject the metaphysical question, but instead offers a different answer. They use Freudian psychoanalysis to attempt to show how gender is created. Though they offer a social constructionist account of gender, I argue that social constructionism can still be closely tied to metaphysics. They argue that "gender acquisition" (Butler *GT* 87), happens through a complex network of taboos, desires, and losses.

[1] I conflate 'women' with lack of phallus and 'man' with presence of phallus only to write within Butlerian and Lacanian terms. In no way do I believe that lack of phallus has anything to do with being a woman, or vice versa.

For a gender to be acquired or created, need it not have some ontological reality? To be created, it must have some category of existence. Through taboos, desires, and losses, Butler still answers the question of 'what' gender is. Further, much of their argument around desire and loss is centered around 'the object.' They write, "strictly speaking, the giving up of the object is not a negation of the cathexis, but its internalization and, hence, preservation" (Butler *GT* 84). The "internalization" of "the object" reads metaphysically. Their focus on 'the object' as a central part of the formation of gender may be social constructionist, but it is not anti-metaphysical. Further, their theory focuses on the "preservation" of "the object." For an object to be preserved (even if it is preserved in one's gender identity or sexuality), it must have some ontological reality.

In their use of psychoanalysis, Butler also counters their claim that the subject is not consistent. They write on the incest taboo: "in repudiating the mother as an object of sexual love, the girl of necessity repudiates her masculinity and, paradoxically, 'fixes' her femininity as a consequence" (Butler *GT* 82). It is important here that Butler uses the word "fixes." This contradicts their earlier claims that gender is not "coherent" or "continuous" (Butler *GT* 23). This is not to say that Butler intends to contradict themself, or to claim that gender is inherently "fixed." It is, however, important to understand this as a subtle moment where Butler's words contradict their claimed intention. This shows that they have not *truly* escaped metaphysical thinking. Though they reject that gender has an *essence* and take a social constructionist approach, in the psychoanalysis section of *Gender Trouble*, Butler simply offers a different answer to the same question: what is gender? Their failures show just how deeply the metaphysical account runs, and how pervasive metaphysical thinking has become.

Evidently, Butler is caught up in the phrase "I am." Despite attempting to reject substance and question the continuity of the subject, a close analysis shows that Butler is still invested in the singular subject. Their commitment to the singular subject, or the "I," is particularly clear in their discussion of Foucault's *Herculine Barbin*. In referring to Herculine, an intersex case study that Foucault writes on, Butler alternates between "his/her" and "her/his" (Butler *GT* 32). It seems that Butler is attempting to capture the ever-changing, inconsistent, and incoherent subject in a consistent term. Perhaps this is a failure of language, and not Butler— since language works in singular words, one at a time, it would be difficult to capture something discontinuous in words. If Butler is confined by the terms at their disposal and the limits of language, then perhaps the failure is language, and not Butler. Perhaps their attempt to philosophize on gender is doomed from the start, as theory in language may not be able to capture the intricacies of gender.

Butler's troubling account of gender becomes further apparent in *Undoing Gender* (2004). They offer a social constructionist answer, but nonetheless answer a metaphysical question. Butler does not reframe the question, but instead offers a different answer that is still centered around metaphysics. Butler asks the question, "what am I?" where "I" is a singular subject and "am" focuses on ontological being.

Undoing Gender

Fourteen years after *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes *Undoing Gender*. Unlike *Gender Trouble*, they apply real-life case studies to their theory. I have found that, especially in their analyses of case studies, Butler has not broken away from metaphysical thinking any more than their work in *Gender Trouble*.

Similar to *Gender Trouble*, Butler intends to further prove that the subject is discontinuous and not substantive. Though there are notes of gender as performance in *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is an *action* more explicitly in *Undoing Gender*. They write, "if my doing is dependent on what is done to me or, rather, the ways in which I am done by norms, then the possibility of my persistence as an 'I' depends on my being able to do something with what is done to me" (Butler *UG* 3). Butler notes that the existence of a self is contingent on multiple forms of "doing:" the doing of societal norms, and the doing of the performance of selfhood. If gender is an active doing that creates the "persistence as an 'I,'" then it is clear that Butler does not view the self as continuous or coherent. Similarly, they argue that gender is not substantive. They write, "gender is not exactly what one is nor is it precisely what one 'has.' Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place…" (Butler *UG* 42). Butler intends to argue that gender is not substantive, which is evident in their assertion that gender is not what one "has" or "is." Instead, they offer a different definition— gender is socially constructed through a complex network of norms done to and done by us. We see in the introduction that Butler's goal in *Undoing Gender* is to further prove that the subject is discontinuous and that gender is not substantive.

In the same introduction that Butler asserts that the "persistence as an 'I' depends on being able to do something with what is done to me" (Butler *UG* 3), they rely on language of the

subject. In fact, on the same page, they write, "... the 'I' that I am…" (Butler *UG* 3). This phrase implies that one *is* an 'I'— to *be* a subject (again, we see language of being) is to affirm that a subject is a category that one can *be*. This does not align with Butler's assertion that the subject is discontinuous, nor that it is not substantive. This language of "being," both in *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender*, points back to metaphysics.

In chapter III, "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality," one of Butler's allegories is a young man named David Reimer. David was assigned male at birth, but after a botched circumcision, a psychologist named John Money convinced his parents that he would be better off if he were raised as a girl. Under Money's guidance, David went through gender reassignment surgery and was socialized female. Money observed David throughout his childhood— he consistently interviewed him, and photographed David and his brother in sexual positions on multiple occasions. At the age of ten, however, David began to realize that he was not a girl. He reported disliking his clothes and toys. Money took extreme measures to convince David that he was a girl. He showed David graphic images of vaginas and births, and offered him estrogen. At one point, he asked trans women to talk to David about the benefits of being a girl. He was forced to show his genitals to doctors who were interested in his case, as well. He ended up going through gender affirming surgery to construct a penis out of his previously constructed vagina, and lived full-time as a boy for the rest of his life (Butler *UG* 59-61). This truly tragic story is often used to argue that gender is not a social construct— if David was born a boy and grew up to feel like a boy, despite being socialized female, some would argue that David had some essence of "boy" in him all along. Butler argues, however, that this is a far too simple interpretation. David was sexually abused with his brother, shown graphic sexual images, and manipulated by Money. These factors complicate the story

beyond the 'essence of boy' interpretation, and for Butler, this case is not strong enough evidence for some substance behind gender.

Butler titles the chapter "Doing Justice to Someone." Their goal in this chapter is to (or at least to attempt to) do justice to David, and they define "justice" as follows:

> "Justice is not only exclusively a matter of how persons are treated or how societies are constituted. It also concerns consequential decisions about what a person is, and what social norms must be honored and expressed for 'personhood' to become allocated, how we do or do not recognize animate others as persons depending on whether or not we recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other." (Butler *UG* 58)

What interests me most about this definition is when Butler asserts that justice concerns "what a person is." This language of "what" is exactly what Butler has claimed to reject, and yet we see them write an entire chapter about "doing justice" to *what* David *is*. Though they reject that David has some gendered essence, they nonetheless focus on metaphysics by asking a metaphysical question: if he does not have an essence, then *what* is David now? In doing this, they provide a different answer to the same metaphysical question they attempt to avoid.

I will now provide some close textual analysis to show exactly where Butler remains entrenched in metaphysical thinking. I find it strange that in their initial analysis, Butler is seeking to categorize David. Butler uses David as an allegory for transsexuality, but makes clear that they do not believe that David is trans: "if the David/Brenda case is an allegory, or has the force of allegory, it seems to be the site where debates on intersexuality (David is not an intersexual) and transexuality (David is not a transsexual) converge" (Butler *UG* 64). Butler points out that David does not belong in these categories (intersexual[2] and transgender), so

[2] I must note that I use the word "transsexual" because it is the term that Butler uses. I do not use it in place of the term "transgender," which I prefer. I do not intend to define the differences between "transsexual" and

evidently they see that there is some criteria one must meet to belong to these categories. Butler focuses on *what* category David belongs to. Butler goes on to write, "David has learned about phallic construction from transsexual contexts…" (Butler *UG* 65). This further shows that they do not view David's phallus in the same context (or category) as a transgender phallus. One could push back against this: if David had a penis surgically constructed from his already constructed vagina, why is this a different context than a transgender man who has had a penis surgically constructed from his biological vagina? I do not raise this question to provide an answer, but rather to highlight the undermining effect of Butler's attempt to categorize David.

In analyzing an interview with David, Butler uses the same language of the subject as their introduction to *Undoing Gender*. David explains that his genitals have no bearing on his gender identity, and Butler observes that David "makes a distinction between the 'I' that he is, the person that he is, and the value that is conferred upon his personhood by virtue of what is or is not between his legs" (Butler *UG* 71). Though they analyze an interview with David, these words are Butler's interpretation, not David's language. Recall Butler's discussion of "the 'I' that I am" (*UG* 3) and its attachment to metaphysics. Here, Butler asserts that there is an "I" that David *is*. They imply that there might be some part of David that *is* the "I." Regardless of if they believe that this "I" is socially constructed, they discuss its conditions of *being*.

Further, Butler attempts to capture David's subject in a singular term. They continuously refer to him as "Brenda/David" (Butler *UG* 71), Brenda being the name David used as a girl. Again, one may assume that this is a failing of language, not a failing of Butler, but there is further evidence to show that Butler does not *truly* view David as an incoherent subject. They use awkward language when distinguishing his time as a girl versus his time as a boy: "during

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"transgender." I will use the term "transsexual" when discussing Butler's use of the term, but I will interchangeably use the term "transgender" or "trans" in my own discussion of transness.

the time that David was Brenda…" (Butler *UG* 61). Here, they focus on what David "is" versus what David "was." This does not allow for David to be multiple things at once. In their use of multiple names, and in their discussion of "is" and "was," Butler separates David and Brenda as though they are different people. For Butler, Brenda "was" a singular subject, and now David "is" a singular subject. Within their framework, the two cannot exist at the same time.

Butler sets out to do justice to David, which, as they have defined it, involves asking "what" he is. First, they note, "to do justice to David is, certainly, to take him at his word, and to call him by his chosen name, but how are we to understand his word and his name?" (Butler *UG* 69). It seems ironic, then, that Butler continuously does not call David by his chosen name or pronouns. It is strange that Butler recognizes the importance of taking David "at his word," and still misgenders and misnames him. The problems with Butler's attempt to "do justice" to David continue:

> "So what does my analysis imply? Does it tell us whether the gender here is true or false? No. And does this have implications for whether David should have been surgically transformed into Brenda, or Brenda surgically transformed into David? No, it does not. I do not know how to judge that question here, and I am not sure it can be mine to judge. Does justice demand that I decide? Or does justice demand that I wait to decide, that I practice a certain deferral in the face of a situation in which too many have been rushed to judgment?" (Butler *UG* 70-1)

There are a few things to note here— first, Butler searches for a "true or false." After denying that David's story proves an essence of substantive gender, they continue to ask metaphysical questions. Though they conclude that they cannot judge whether a gender is "true or false," this is nevertheless a question that they consider. Next they note that "Brenda [was] surgically transformed into David," and vice versa. Once again, this implies that David and Brenda are

different people, that the surgery is what separates them, and that they cannot exist at the same time. This is in tension with Butler's previous assertion that the subject is incoherent, because they do not allow for multiple truths (David *and* Brenda) to exist at the same time. Then, Butler asks, "does justice demand that I decide?" Their use of the word "decide" is strange— it implies that there might truly be a "true or false" answer to the metaphysical question. In the next sentence, they note that they may "wait to decide," but this still signals to a decision in the future. If Butler's goal is to do justice to "what a person is" (Butler *UG* 58), and justice demands that they "decide," either now or later, if David's gender is "true or false," then they seem to be entrenched in the metaphysics of David's gender. They search for a *right answer* to the question. A true subversion of metaphysics, I argue, would allow for the *right answer* to be a contradiction: true *and* false, David *and* Brenda.

In chapter VI, "Longing for Recognition," Butler uses Brandon Teena as a case study to consider how gender and sexuality are related, and how interpersonal relations affect our identities and the ways we're perceived. Though Brandon Teena is not the main focus of the chapter, the section contains many of Butler's oversights where they give priority to metaphysics. Brandon Teena was a young man who was raped and murdered, and his story is the subject of the 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*. Butler writes specifically about the film, but I would like to recognize that Brandon was a real person who experienced significant violence. I find that Butler's analysis of the film separates Brandon's story from reality, and I would like to make clear that I do not intend to use Brandon as a thought experiment, and I write about him with respect and in recognition of his suffering.

Brandon Teena, who was assigned female at birth, ran away from home in his adolescence and made friends with a group of young people. No one knows that he is

transgender until he has sex with his girlfriend, who accepts him and keeps his secret. When some men in the friend group find out, however, they rape Brandon and later murder him along with two others (Butler *UG* 142-143). The film *Boys Don't Cry* recounts this entire story, and Butler writes about the film to examine Brandon's relationship with sexuality, gender identity, and recognition. Their discussion of Brandon's story, along with being reductive and disrespectful, further reveals Butler's metaphysical thinking.

Butler begins with some discussion of the terms "trandgender" and "transsexual" and their relationships to sexuality. It is clear that they see a distinction between the two, and they make an effort to define the difference. They wonder, "it becomes difficult to say whether the sexuality of a transgendered person is homosexual or heterosexual" (Butler *UG* 142). This implies that there would be a need to categorize a person as "homosexual or heterosexual," and that the category "transgender" might change the membership criteria. They move on to even further label and categorize:

> "if we cannot refer unambiguously to gender in such cases, do we have the point of reference for making claims about sexuality? In the case of transgender, where transsexualism does not come into play, there are various way of crossing that cannot be understood as stable achievements…" (Butler *UG* 142)

Here, Butler states that if we "cannot refer unambiguously to gender," then we do not have a "point of reference" for sexuality. Butler does not want us to refer to gender ambiguously, because then it would be more difficult to place labels on sexuality. They are searching for strict categories. Further, they make a distinction between the terms "transgender" and "transsexual." For Butler, transsexual people "are in transition" (Butler *UG* 142), while transgender people are not. This distinction is strange, to say the least. First, it essentializes transitioning (though Butler

does not define what they mean by "transition" here), and second, it creates labels and categories within transness that they had previously claimed to reject. Though Butler sets out to reject labels, they return to a rigorous attempt to categorize, which shows entrenchment in metaphysics. If gender is truly not metaphysical, then there would be no distinction between "transsexual" and "transgender," *especially* if the distinction lies in a physical gender transition.

Butler moves on to search for an answer to the question: *what* is Brandon? I find this discussion particularly troubling— to me, it does not seem that Butler respects Brandon's gender identity or story. We see Butler attempt to label Brandon in a way that reverts to metaphysical thinking and does not allow him to be an incoherent subject. Similar to their discussion of David Reimer, they search for a *right* label for Brandon. This is in contradiction with the theory they had previously laid out, and close analysis of this section reveals their entrenchment in the metaphysical, despite their efforts to break free. They recount a moment in *Boys Don't Cry* where Brandon must secretly find a tampon: "Brandon Teena identifies as a heterosexual boy, but we see several moments of disidentification as well, where the fantasy breaks down and a tampon has to be located, used, and then discarded with no trace" (Butler *UG* 142). Butler refers to Brandon's using a tampon as "disidentification." This word alone might make sense— if Brandon identifies as a boy, then a tampon does not align with his identity. This could be seen as a moment of "disidentification."

They move on to refer to Brandon's identity, however, as "fantasy." This implies that Brandon's identity is like a game or a story, and does not seem to take his trans experience seriously. This "disidentification," for Butler, is the breaking down of the "fantasy." I must note, however, that the word "fantasy" is most likely used here in a psychoanalytic sense, but I will nonetheless argue that Butler's use of the term is both disrespectful and does not allow for

Brandon to be an incoherent subject. On the tampon, they continue: "his identification thus recommences, has to be reorchestrated in a daily way as a credible fantasy, one that compels belief." (Butler *UG* 142). The word "recommences" is important here— as though Brandon's identity pauses when he uses the tampon, then starts up again after. This does not allow for Brandon to hold two identities at once. Further, it implies that a tampon *cannot* be a part of a male identity. Why does his male identity pause when he uses a tampon? Can his identity not involve contradiction and incoherence?

They continue to make jarring claims about Brandon's "fantasy." They write about the moment when Brandon and his girlfriend first have sex: "Indeed, one of the most thrilling moments of the film is when the girlfriend, knowing, fully reengaged the fantasy. And one of the most brittle moments takes place when the girlfriend, knowing, seems no longer to be able to enter the fantasy fully" (Butler *UG* 142). Here, we see language of "reengaging" with and "entering" the fantasy. Again, this implies that Brandon's identity is something that he (and others) can enter and exit. The girlfriend "reengages" when she has sex with Brandon and indulges him as a man, as though his identity is something that pauses when he is not in the fantasy. This does not allow Brandon to hold multiple truths at once. Butler's language implies that *either* Brandon's femininity or masculinity hold priority in certain moments, depending on if he or others are engaged in the fantasy. Similar to David Reimer, they are searching for a *right* and coherent answer, and they do not accept a contradiction.

Then, Butler engages in further troubling discussion of Bradon's sexual identity, desires, pronouns, and rape. They posit fantasy in a binary against reality, as though Brandon jumps in and out of his identity as his desires and sexual relationships change. For Butler, it seems that in order to occupy the fantasy, Brandon must perform cis masculinity so accurately that he is

indistinguishable from a cis man. For Butler, Bradon's femininity ruins the fantasy, and he cannot occupy both spaces at the same time.

> "Brandon occupies the place of the subject of desire, but s/he does not roll on his/her back in the light and ask his/her girlfriend to suck off his/her dildo. Perhaps that would be too 'queer,' but perhaps as well it would kill the very conditions that make the fantasy possible for both of them. S/he works the dildo in the dark so that the fantasy can emerge in full force, so that its condition of disavowal is fulfilled. S/he occupies that place, to be sure, and suffers the persecution and the rape from the boys in the film precicely because s/he has occupied it too well. Is Brandon a lesbian or a boy?" (Butler *UG* 143)

Again, Butler uses "his/her" in an attempt to capture Brandon's incoherent subject in a coherent term. This, like the other times they use language like this in *Undoing Gender* and *Gender Trouble*, contradicts their assertion that the subject is unstable and incoherent. But beyond this, Butler blatantly misgenders Brandon here. I cannot see any philosophical reason for Butler to use she/her pronouns when discussing Brandon, especially since their attempt to capture Brandon in a coherent term does not support their previous claims on the subject. They also note that Brandon does not have sex "in the light," and he does not use his dildo in a way that would make it appear unreal. That would, for Butler, "kill the very conditions that make the fantasy possible for both of them." Butler believes that Brandon must use his body in a way that appears as cis as possible in order for the fantasy to operate. Brandon "works the dildo in the dark," as to occupy a *male* space, and when femininity is introduced, the fantasy is ruined. Butler does not allow Brandon to be both masculine and feminine at once. I read this as quite problematic— must Brandon hide his genitals in order to be masculine? And if fantasy is posited against real, then does Butler see masculinity as fantasy and femininity as real?

In the same passage, they move on to make what I see as the most troubling claim of this section. They suggest that Brandon "occupies that place" (the place of masculinity) so well that he "suffers…persecution and rape." Butler suggests that Brandon is killed and raped because he "has occupied it [masculinity] too well." This is alarming. If we take Butler's claim seriously, then it seems that Brandon's rape is his own fault simply because he occupies the fantasy. It is clear that this is wrong, because Brandon's rape and murder were only the fault of his assaulters. Then, Butler asks yet another metaphysical question: "is Brandon a lesbian or a boy?" Aside from this being a shocking dismissal of his identity, Butler asks about *being*. This perpetuates metaphysical being, since they seek to categorize the conditions of Brandon's being.

There are many moments in *Undoing Gender* where Butler focuses on "I am" in a way that reverts back to metaphysical thinking. They mix up pronouns for both David and Brandon, as if their subjects can be captured in one singular "I." They also use language that implies that only a single aspect of a subject can be true at one time. This search for a *right* answer does not allow for contradictions within a subject. Despite claiming to reject labels, Butler continuously searches for labels. They attempt to define "transsexual" vs "transgender," they distinguish David versus Brenda, they wonder if David's identity is "true or false," and they wonder if Brandon is "a lesbian or a boy." This is all in search of some subject, or "I," that is coherent and can be defined. They also focus on being. David must *be* true or false, and Brandon must *be* masculine in a real enough sense to occupy the fantasy. They ask metaphysical questions: "is Brandon a lesbian or a boy?" and "does justice demand that I decide?" Butler circles back to metaphysics again and again, despite so vehemently rejecting it in *Gender Trouble* and the introduction of *Undoing Gender*. This reveals just how entrenched gendered thinking is in metaphysics.

Butler writes in the shadows of metaphysics. It is certain that Butler laid the groundwork for much of queer theory to come, and they are commonly read as a thinker who rejects a metaphysical account of gender. Their theory of gender as performance has become pervasive in queer communities, and their work in *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender* has allowed for many queer people to take gender less seriously and play with expression and performance. The common reading, however, overlooks these subtle moments that close textual analysis reveals. We see that Butler is often deeply entrenched in metaphysical, or "I am" thinking. This does not discredit Butler's theory or make their work any less influential, but it is nonetheless important to recognize these moments because they reveal just how pervasive metaphysical thinking has become.

When we recognize these shadows of metaphysics in *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender*, we see some problems in their theory. They try to force subjects like David Reimer and Brandon Teena into a continuous, coherent "I," which does not allow for multiplicity of the subject. A trans experience, however, is full of multiplicity and contradictions. If we were to take the trans experience seriously, we would not search for a coherent label or a consistent subject. David can be David *and* Brenda, just as Brandon can be masculine *and* feminine at the same time. Further, when Butler returns to a metaphysical account of gender that focuses on *being* and labels, they fail to fully capture the trans experience. Metaphysics relies on being and body parts in a way that excludes trans expression. To ask if Brandon is a lesbian or a boy is to discount his gender identity on the basis of his gendered body. To define "transsexual" as a medically transitioned individual and "transgender" as someone who has not medically transitioned is to

essentialize the medicalized and gendered body. To ask what David is is to focus on what has surgically been done to his body above how he says he identifies. This metaphysical thinking is troubling, and does not capture trans experiences. What is perhaps more troubling, however, is how difficult it seems to be to truly reject metaphysics.

If Judith Butler, an accomplished queer theorist, inadvertantly writes in the shadows of metaphysics despite actively attempting to reject it, then how do we *truly* think about gender outside of the metaphysical? I argue that we need not an answer. Justice does not demand that we decide *anything* about David's gender. Philosophy does not demand that we question Brandon's sexual and gender identities. Instead, lived trans experiences demand that we accept gender as a series of discontinuous, incoherent contradictions. It demands that we hold multiple truths at once, and that we take subjects seriously as complex and multiple.

Closing Remarks:
Where do We Turn?

We have explored two opposite approaches to queer philosophy— Dembroff's search for more inclusive labels and Butler's doing away with substance. Both approaches return to the very metaphysical framework that they criticize, leading me to wonder whether queer theory is truly capable of ridding itself of the metaphysical framework. Perhaps queer philosophers are doomed from the start, because they are inevitably held by the limitations of language when writing philosophy. In order to engage in true subversion, perhaps it is time to look beyond written theory to other modes of communication.

So, where do we look? How do I best communicate my incoherent experiences of womanhood and manhood? Certainly, written theory reaches limitations. Even as I conclude this project, I find words insufficient to capture my lived experience with gender. The words 'womanhood' and 'manhood,' after all, are *singular*. I can only write them one at a time; you can only read them one at a time. But my gender is not singular. I hold my eighteen years of experience as a woman *just as true* as my four years of experience as a man. I also hold true that I am not a binary man. Words elude me— at a certain point, it does not make sense to attempt to describe my experience in written theory.

I do not argue that it is impossible to subvert— in many ways, I feel that my own existence is a subversion of the metaphysical framework. Like liquid on a table, I feel that I am too fluid to be observed as the metaphysician might attempt. The same is certainly true of Chris, the trans man Dembroff employs as a thought experiment in "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender." However useful Chris may be in Dembroff's effort to define "dominant kinds" (Dembroff *RT* 43) and "trans-inclusive kinds" (Dembroff *RT* 43), I argue that his experience is simply too fluid to be universalized and applied to others. The same can be said of David Reimer

and Brandon Teena in Butler's *Undoing Gender*. David and Brandon's gender experiences are incoherent, but Butler attempts to capture them in terms. They continuously search for who these people *really are*. This metaphysical framework does not allow David and Brandon to be fluid.

I do not intend this project to end cynically. In reality, I feel the opposite— this project has highlighted the beauties and complexities of gender. I have found that gender cannot be shoved into philosophical terms and definitions. It cannot be observed as an object. It is elusive, ever-changing, and incoherent. This, above all, speaks more to the beauty of gender than the failings of philosophy.

I turn away from written theory to a mode of communication I see as truly subversive— art. It is not my intention to provide a clear picture of what that may look like. Art is a mode of expression that need not come with written or spoken explanation. In many ways, it can speak for itself and elicit emotions and messages that transcend words.

I have reached the point where I can confidently assert that gender transcends the limitations of words. It has taken more than a year of reading, writing, and thinking— it has taken a lifetime of gender experience. I have lived twenty-two years of jumping between boxes, breaking labels, changing my style, cutting my hair, and surgically and hormonally altering my body. I have considered and reconsidered every possible label before taking them on—I have been lesbian, gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, woman, man, nonbinary, transsexual, transgender—and I have asserted these labels to the people around me, only to realize that each time I take on a new label, it isn't *quite* right. My lifetime of gender experience has left me here, at the end of this project, calling off my search.

What, then, could paint on a canvas tell us? What might a color describe? A shape, on a paper or perhaps in three dimensions? What might this shape evoke in different colors, or different materials? I have written far too many words on something so elusive, and so I leave you here:

I invite you to consider art as a mode of subversion.

However that looks, I cannot describe to you.

Words have failed me, and I eagerly turn away.

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