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Reckoning with our Binary Sex/Gender System: A Transgender Liberation from Patriarchy

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Reckoning with our Binary Sex/Gender System:
A Transgender Liberation from Patriarchy

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

By
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2023

Dedication

To Jamie,
My looking glass
Who in loving, I can't help but love myself

To my family,
Who inspire me to fail at womanhood and manhood every day

To my cats,
Who follow me room to room
Not because I tell them to,
But because they always do
What they want

And to anyone who has taken the time
To play with me
And hold me
Outside of my body

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Foreword

This project unknowingly began in my first moments of being gendered. Now, it is being born to contest narratives that gender variance is undesirable, transition is pain, and transness is located in a place of lack—that something is always *missing*. A trans life is lacking until... until when? Until you come out? Until you pass? Until you medically transition? Until you are no longer transgender? This project is for myself, for my trans siblings, and for all gendered beings who have ever felt as though they lack the right body, the right clothes, the right performance, the right interactions, or the right feelings. I especially call my trans siblings (who can do so safely) to consider the radical healing that could be done for humankind if we were to love our bodies and selves because we are trans, not in spite of being trans.

Because we are in the beginning stages of a gender disruption, without any knowing what might emerge from it, there are more questions than answers and even more questions unknown. José Esteban Muñoz writes in his piece *Cruising Utopia* that, “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing... Queerness is a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future” (1). This project asks: “what is missing?”

A Note on Pronouns

In this paper, I use they/them pronouns freely. There is an ongoing debate about whether or not one can use they/them pronouns in a formal literature setting. Because of this, I want to take a direct stance against the argument that using they/them/theirs as a singular direct pronoun is “grammatically incorrect”. Merriam-Webster Dictionary writes, “We will note that *they* has been in consistent use as a singular pronoun since the late 1300s; that the development of singular *they* mirrors the development of the singular *you* from the plural *you*, yet we don’t complain that singular *you* is ungrammatical; and that regardless of what detractors say, nearly everyone uses the singular *they* in casual conversation and often in formal writing” (Merriam-Webster, Singular ‘They’). We use singular they/them pronouns all the time; so why are many people unable to follow its evolution? I believe that the push against accepting “they/them” pronouns into common nomenclature is nonsensical and not really about grammar at all. In reality, the “they/them” grammatical discourse is a manifestation of people’s discomfort when confronted with non-binary individuals and genders.

The Linguistic Society of America writes, “Language changes for several reasons. First, it changes because the needs of its speakers change. New technologies, new products, and new experiences require new words to refer to them clearly and efficiently” (Linguistic Society of America, *Is English Changing?*). The third-person, singular “they” traditionally exists to refer to someone whose gender is unknown (i.e., “Look! Somebody left their

wallet—I don't know where to find them, so I'm going to leave it here for them and hope they come back for it"). Given the word's original context of representing a singular, unknown gender, it makes sense that they/them evolved into a non-binary pronoun. The only difference between the traditional singular they/them and the new, non-binary adaptation is that in the first instance, the person's body is invisible to you and can't yet be gendered. In the second instance, the person's body is visible to you, in front of you, and gendered by you.

This evolution is just one example, since language is constantly changing to catch up with expanding information and meaning. As mentioned, in old English, "you" formerly functioned as a second person plural pronoun. However, inspired by the French's use of plural pronouns to address those of higher social status, "you" eventually became a singular pronoun in order to address aristocrats. It wasn't until the 17th century that "you" caught up to modern standards of English as a universal second person plural and singular. If a semiotic shift from plural to singular can happen for "you/your" pronouns, shouldn't "they/them/theirs" pronouns be allowed the same practical change, particularly if it is already used as a singular pronoun in colloquial and everyday language? Even further, I believe it is no coincidence that "proper grammar" is deployed when the information being communicated threatens the binary sex-gender system. In language, per most institutions, the fight for tradition is a fight to protect the current structures of power. So, when the natural evolution of they/them pronouns in the English language destabilizes the binary, thus threatening patriarchy, a reactionary "logic" of "proper grammar" is deployed within formal writing.

I want to add that I have no issue with those struggling to use “they/them pronouns” as long as they genuinely interrogate *why* it is that they are struggling. Are you struggling because you’re unfamiliar with the changing language? (That’s okay, you can practice). Or, are you struggling because when you see a non-binary person, you don’t actually see them: you see their body, and in a split-second think “man” or “woman”, “he” or “she”, thus interpolating them?

Categories, Categories, Categories

In this essay I explore terms that perpetuate the categorization of gender. I ask that you don’t take these terms too seriously. My biggest frustration with queer theory is many authors’ perpetual desire to find the perfect term to categorize queerness. Despite their positive intention, no one is authentically represented by these scholars’ identity categories. It is no wonder that the language of categorization is being exhausted as more and more people come to this realization.

At the same time, social constructions like gender still have very real histories and repercussions. The same thing goes for categorization; its existence can’t be theorized away from actual lived experience. On a practical level, gender, like any category, exists as a tool for interpretation and interaction. It just so happens that our current tool for gendering, the binary sex/gender system, is failing, and therefore, so are our linguistic systems of identifying and categorizing gender. Any part of one’s personhood, particularly socially weighty parts such as gender, race, and class, interacts with far too many other parts of oneself and the world to fit

neatly into a term or category. Kimberly Crenshaw’s “intersectionality” insights are essential reflections on how these social categories interact, which adds a bit more accuracy to our process of categorization. However, claiming one nuanced term, or even ten nuanced terms, only gives you face value information about someone. This is why I ask you to both respect playing with categorization as a continuous process of self-identification and take my use of gendered terms with a grain of salt.

This is why I want to preface defining any gendered terms with this: both conceptually and personally, constructions of gender are constantly shifting. There are people who want to nail down this shift, and I am not one of them. If I use identity categories, it is to discuss where different people may exist in their gender journey within their current time and place—it is not with the intention to further interpolate them. As someone who has experienced and experiences a multitude of genders, identity categories can never fully encapsulate one’s gender. As my friend Jamie says, “there are as many genders as there are people”.

Introduction

Systems of male supremacy and patriarchy create and are made possible by the binary sex/gender system. Even further, the binary sex/gender system is so deeply naturalized culturally and historically that man and woman, conflated with male and female, are conceived as opposites. We are all socialized into the sex/gender binary from the moment we are assigned male or female at birth, or for visibly intersex children, from the moment they are surgically or hormonally treated for falling outside of medical standards of “male” or “female”.

The sex/gender binary targets transgenderism and gender nonconformance in order to continue the creation and subordination of women. This is because the formation of womanhood relies on the formation of manhood and vice-versa; they are defined by their relations to one another. Without everyone falling into strict notions of man and woman, we lose our ability to construct (the current system of) gender inequality. Although feminism has brought us far, it has not liberated us, for, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 25-28). Feminism cannot liberate women as long as it is working through the sex/gender system that authorizes women’s othering. In “The Creation of Patriarchy”, Gerda Lerner takes it so far as to say that “Women, more than any other group, have collaborated in their own subordination through their acceptance of the sex-gender system. They have internalized the values that subordinate them to such an extent that they voluntarily pass them onto their children” (234). Obviously, the same can be said for men that internalize sexist values of manhood, who are also collaborating in women’s subordination. Toxic femininity and toxic masculinity are the same thing: they are both defending the binary sex/gender system in order to uphold patriarchy and continue the subordination of women.

Feminism often accepts the current sex/gender system by defending the “innate” and “natural” qualities of womanhood and making a case for its equality to the “innate” and “natural” qualities of manhood. In reality, the epistemological knowledge that accompanies being othered by patriarchy is what gives feminism its power, not the “innate” or “natural” qualities of womanhood and the “female” body. Women, transgenderism, gender-nonconformance, and femininity are all othered for the same reason; to uphold gender systems of power.

We are in the midst of a gender destabilization, one which inherently challenges the patriarchy by abolishing the current binary sex/gender system. This is why transgenderism is so threatening. The power and community that come from being othered for threatening the patriarchy through acts of transgenderism or gender nonconformance extend beyond feminism. Because the fight to dismantle the patriarchy is a fight to dismantle the sex/gender binary system, transgenderism and gender-nonconformance are essential in this process.

In this essay, I am going to share the things I've noticed about the sex/gender binary system and patriarchy throughout my gender journey. I will reflect on how others have related to me as a girl, as a woman, as a lesbian, as a man, as a fag, as transgender, and everything in between. I only hope that these reflections offer an opportunity for readers to reflect on how our patriarchy and binary sex/gender system affect their being. Further, I hope to generate a desire for connection and gender revolution that outgrows feminism while fighting for woman's emancipation.

Patriarchy and the Binary Sex/Gender System

One of my earliest, most vivid memories is from when I'm about 5 years old sitting on my piano bench. My mom is sitting next to me, on the left, to encourage my practicing. She turns to me and asks for the third time that day, "are you sure you don't want to know where babies come from?". I can tell she is nervous. She moves off the piano and sits in a chair nearby, so I can see her face. I turn towards her and look down at my legs dangling out of my dress and off the piano bench.

I started crying and panicking afterwards, but I did not understand why. I just felt scared. I learned that my body meant something to other people, meant something about the way that people would interact with me: “a man puts his penis in the woman’s vagina”. Gender didn’t really affect me before then. The dress I was wearing didn’t really bother me. It wasn’t until after my mother’s description of sex that I realized I am supposed to be the woman in that scenario. It might sound silly, but I saw my future flash before my eyes: a man’s penis would go in my vagina, I would become pregnant, and I would become a mother. Nowadays when I feel gender dysphoria, I feel like that little 5-year-old girl sitting on the piano bench, learning that I cannot just be; that bodies mean too much. I think I was crying and screaming that day because I realized my body was not just for me: it had a role to fill. No matter one’s gender, this loss can be felt.

What is the sex/gender system? Gerda Lerner writes in “The Creation of Patriarchy” that the sex/gender system, a term coined by Gayle Rubin, is, “the institutionalized system which allots resources, property, and privileges to persons according to culturally defined gender roles. Thus, it is sex which determines that women should be child-bearers, it is the sex-gender system which assures that they should be child-rearers” (Lerner, 238). The sex/gender system applies meaning to bodies and their functions. For instance, the sex/gender system insists that if you are the female sex, it means you are designed to be a mother and caretaker just because you can get pregnant. The sex/gender system conflates one’s biologically given sex and culturally created gender, insinuating that your body innately *is* a gender and innately *has* gendered functions. The thing is, not every society, not every moment in time, possesses our current binary sex/gender system.

Gendered Bodies, Gendered Sex

In Will Roscoe's book "Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America" he discusses Western colonialism's production of the current binary sex/gender system through examining how hegemonic Western discourse on gender, sexuality, and the other approaches North American gender diversity. He points out how terms like, "berdache", "a third gender category", "hermaphrodite", "homosexual", "transsexual", "transvestite", "prostitute boys", and "gender crossing" are used in anthropology to reconfigure North American gender diversity into a "Western object of knowledge" which "often has rendered the subject unrecognizable to native informants" (Roscoe, 122). Currently, the term "two-spirit" is used to define native gender through the Western binary sex/gender system, and although indigenous Americans use this term today, it still originates and exists as an attempt for North American gender diversity to survive colonization. Even when discussing multiple gender paradigms in indigenous cultures, using terms like "third" or "fourth" genders implies that the current binary sex/gender system is the original; that Western "man" and "woman" are the first and second gender. Historically, "All of these efforts to classify human behavior emerged out of and contributed to ongoing racial projects that held apart white populations from populations of color; these "scientific" distinctions between normal and abnormal bodies lent support to white supremacist projects that tried to collapse racial otherness into gender variance and sexual perversion" (Halberstam, 6). Further, the Western construction of the binary sex/gender system belongs to white supremacy and colonization, which is demonstrated by the sex/gender system producing womanhood and manhood differently within race.

Currently, about 1.7% of people in the world are born with intersex traits (Amnesty International, Intersex Awareness Day). For context, 1-2% of the world's population has red hair (World Population Review, Percentages of Redheads 2023). Intersexuality, which does not fit into the binary sex/gender system, is often "fixed" through surgical or hormonal treatment. Julie Greenberg writes:

XY infants with "inadequate" penises must be turned into girls because society believes the essence of manhood is the ability to penetrate a vagina and urinate while standing. XX infants with "adequate" penises, however, are assigned the female sex because society and many in the medical community believe that the essence of womanhood is the ability to bear children rather than the ability to engage in satisfactory sexual intercourse. (Greenberg, 114)

In contrast to the current system shown above, María Lugones examines pre-colonial treatment of intersex individuals:

Intersexed individuals were recognized in many tribal societies prior to colonization without assimilation to the sexual binary. It is important to consider the changes that colonization brought to understand the scope of the organization of sex and gender under colonialism and in eurocentered global capitalism. If the latter did only recognize sexual dimorphism for white bourgeois males and females, it certainly does not follow that the sexual division is based on biology (Lugones 2007, 195).

If we understand gender as a guideline for one's function in society, and the binary sex/gender system has clear roles for its two genders, "what, after all, is gender if there can be more than two?" (Roscoe, 123).

Simone de Beauvoir writes in “The Second Sex: Woman as Other”, “He is the subject—he is the absolute, she is the Other”. The patriarchy and binary sex/gender system create woman as female in order to naturalize their subordination. The first step is tying meaning to a visual marker of difference. Bodies were just bodies, until meaning was added to them. For instance, we don't discuss the vagina as engulfing the penis, we say it is penetrated by the penis. The womb, often compared to passive objects like a basket, can't be forceful, strong, dangerous. The penis, often compared to active objects like a sword, can't be flaccid, soft, gentle (Mies, 61). The gendered language produced around sexual dimorphism insists that the female is woman and the male is man, claiming that there is something innately active or passive in each sex. This is how the patriarchy and the binary sex/gender system produce woman as female and other. Sex and gender are conflated, insisting that womanhood is naturally imbedded in the female sex and manhood in the male sex.

Producing Feminism: Producing Women as Womb

In Ynestra King's *The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology*, she states that, “We live in a culture that is founded on the repudiation and domination of nature. This has a special significance for women because, in patriarchal thought, women are believed to be closer to nature than men” (King, 18). King is not the only philosopher to discuss the correlation between the control of nature and women. For example, King writes “for [Simone] de Beauvoir, patriarchal civilization is about the denial of men's mortality—of which women and nature are

incessant reminders” (King, 21). Why are women and nature “incessant reminders” of men’s mortality? King writes,

For men raised in woman-hating cultures, the fact that they are born of women and are dependent upon nonhuman nature for existence is frightening. The process of objectification, of the making of women and nature into “others” to be appropriated and dominated, is based on a profound forgetting by men. They forget that they were born of women, were dependent on women in their early helpless years, and are dependent on nonhuman nature all their lives, which allows first for objectification and then for domination. “The loss of memory is a transcendental condition for science. All objectification is a forgetting” (King, 22).

King argues that men dominate women and nature in order to maintain control over their own mortality. She posits that men go through a “forgetting”—one that removes women and nature’s role from their existence. I agree that the objectification and domination of womanhood and nature is an act of “forgetting”. However, womanhood is constructed as closer to nature because androcentric power relations both rely on their domination, not because the female sex is innately any closer to nature. Even further, I think it is imprecise to claim that women are “incessant reminders” of men’s mortality simply because men are “born of women”. Moreover, when considering how the binary sex/gender system produces strict gender categories, it would seem that men aren’t grappling with their mortality as much as grappling with what it means to be a “man”.

Within the binary sex/gender system, which only allows manhood and womanhood to exist as antithetical to one another, women are incessant reminders of what men are both supposed to hate and never supposed to be. In this instance, what is the easiest way to prove

you aren't the other, you aren't the woman? Insist that something material, like having a penis, means you cannot be the woman. Everyone goes through a forgetting that their sex/gender role is constructed. I think many of us unknowingly fear who we would be if it weren't for the binary sex/gender system: we fear the loss of prescriptive gender roles within patriarchal systems of power. King and Beauvoir's discussion on man subjugating woman as closer to nature—womb as closer to nature—works within the binary sex/gender system without properly questioning its production. They argue that men forget what women, wombs, and nature do for humankind in order to objectify and dominate them. I argue that men are forgetting that they too, were enculturated into this system from the moment their sex was prescribed a gender, limiting them to the gender role of man as biologically dominant.

Once the clear category of woman is set in place by the binary sex/gender system, manhood must repudiate womanhood, and everything constructed it stands for (like nature, femininity, etc), in order to remain its antithesis. Even further, womanhood's identity does not come from an ability to give birth, it comes from existing as man's other. Because the binary sex gender system conflates sex and gender, the reproductive ability of the womb must be controlled, mythicized, and deemed "closer to nature" so that men can secure their own identity. Manhood projects their fear that dominant masculinity is socially constructed onto the womb as the woman. Further, the first step in putting an end to "woman as other" is in denaturalizing woman as womb.

Still, the history of biologically objectifying and dominating women is understandably traumatic for many. So how do women protect themselves? Often when a group is othered, they develop pride in their differences in order to survive. I know many women who find real

power, strength, and unity in fighting for women's rights, owning their womanhood, and owning their body. In this case, the problem with exclusionary unification is it works in favor of the mutually constitutive categories of "male" and "female", which ultimately serves the patriarchy that feminism strives so hard to dismantle. Even further, the binary sex/gender system purposefully excludes essential thought within womanhood's epistemic community.

Disassociating all "others" who are not the western archetype of "woman", the white female woman, from feminism is essential for patriarchy's survival. However, this strain of feminism, working through the western colonial binary sex gender system, will never be able to truly contest patriarchal systems of power. The Oxford Dictionary's definition of feminism is, "the advocacy of women's rights on the basis of the equality of the sexes" (Oxford Dictionary). At this point, mainstream feminism's fight for "equality of the sexes" limits the progression of women's rights and gender equality. So, if gender is historically produced through sex, but biologically unifying womanhood through the female sex only proves to further categorize and subjugate woman as other, how do we expand feminist thought?

Standpoint Theory

In *25 Years of Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Where Are We Now?*, Kristen Intemann writes,

What exactly is a standpoint? It might be tempting to think that a standpoint is just one's *perspective* in virtue of the sorts of experiences had from that particular social location. Contemporary standpoint theorists, however, have

denied that standpoints are merely socially located perspectives. Rather, standpoints are said to be *achieved* through a critical, conscious reflection on the ways in which power structures and resulting social locations influence knowledge production. (Intemann, 785)

Given Intemann's distinction between perspective and standpoint, being othered does not automatically mean that you utilize your social position through "critical, conscious reflection on the ways in which power structures and resulting social locations influence knowledge production". Therefore, it is possible for someone to not epistemically benefit from their particular standpoint.

To me, this is the source of womanhood and feminism's true power; a power that does not come from the uterus but comes from the achievement of knowledge through standpoint. And anyone who has experienced being othered for their womanhood, gender-nonconformance, or femininity can tap into this knowledge. It is simply their choice whether they decide to or not. For instance, Intemann says,

standpoints do not automatically arise from occupying a particular social location. They are achieved only when there is sufficient scrutiny and critical awareness of how power structures shape or limit knowledge in a particular context. Nor do they involve a universally shared perspective of all members of a particular social group. Individuals may contribute to the achievement of a critical consciousness within an epistemic community in different ways (Intemann, 785-786).

This means that diversity in experiences of womanhood and gendered othering are welcomed in standpoint theory, as long as individuals are contributing to “the achievement of a critical consciousness within an epistemic community in different ways”. For example, people who are assigned female at birth, raised female, and transition to another gender (such as nonbinary or male), have a unique perspective on womanhood and being othered for their gender. They can work to broaden womanhood’s standpoint, further growing and advantaging feminist thought. The same goes for trans women, who, with the opportunity to occupy a new social location, can also achieve a new standpoint and diversify the critical consciousness within womanhood’s epistemic community. By this standard, men who reflect upon how they have been othered when engaging with their femininity or womanhood can also add to the critical consciousness of womanhood as the gendered other.

Cis women also achieve feminist consciousness in their own unique way. They are the ones who perform the womanhood they were given (ideally performed upon reflection) and use this social location to question the validity of androcentric systems of power. As feminism was designed with cisgender women in mind, they also have the opportunity to further the cause by advocating for diversified feminist thought; by decolonizing gender and accepting how current categories of gender diversity, such as transgenderism and gender non-conformance, exist in favor of women’s liberation.

Given these facts, I argue that tactics to exclude standpoint knowledge that doesn’t solely belong to cisgender women hinders the critical consciousness of the feminist community. Further, I believe that anti-transness is a major regression of feminist thought and fails to critically evaluate patriarchal structures of power.

Feminism Beyond the Binary Sex/Gender System

Uplifting postcolonial feminism and trans theory are essential in the liberation of women because theorizing outside of the binary sex/gender system disturbs colonial and patriarchal systems of power. The sex/gender binary is not natural and negatively affects us all. The binary sex/gender system functions as an ideological system that legitimizes and perpetuates androcentric relations of power and privilege. Once I understood how the colonial manufactured binary sex/gender system constructs manhood as antithetical to womanhood in order to enable the production of patriarchal power, I questioned feminism's historical approach to gender equality. Making a case for womanhood's equality to manhood by perpetuating the "female body as woman: female body as other" is counterintuitive to feminism's core mission. Further, it does not encapsulate or protect everyone harmed or othered by the binary sex/gender system and patriarchal systems of power.

To amend this issue, I posit that feminism derives its power and unity from knowing what it feels like to be socially located as the gendered "other". This knowing does not depend on the womb, nor does it depend on someone performing womanhood their whole life, or even performing womanhood publicly. Those who do perform womanhood publicly, or interpolated into womanhood, can simply experience the patriarchy's dependency on their othering more directly. Because femininity and womanhood are conflated, even cis men get a taste of inhabiting womanhood when othered for expressing femininity. Femininity is only considered bad because it is socially intertwined with womanhood. This is also why people transitioning

into femininity or womanhood receive the brunt of gender policing and violence: because in the eyes of the patriarchy, why would anyone like women, let alone want to be one?

Womanhood, created to be the other, is a controllable threat when it fights for gender equality on the basis of sex. Transgenderism, particularly visible transgenderism, threatens patriarchal systems of power because it reveals that gender difference is socially constructed, and masculinity/manhood is not inherently dominant.

Performance and the Production of Self

What does it even mean to experience womanhood or live as a woman? Judith Butler says in *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* that, “how and where I play... is the way in which that “being” gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed” (Butler, 311). She is, in this instance, discussing how one can become a lesbian. Although she is discussing sexuality, the same thought process can be used to examine how one might experience gender. Butler states,

This is not a performance from which I can take radical distance, for this is deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play, *and this ‘I’ does not play its lesbianism as a role...* For if the ‘I’ is a site of repetition, that is, if the ‘I’ only achieves the semblance of identity through a certain repetition of itself, then the I is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it (Butler, 311).

Butler is not being trivial when they call performance “play”. In fact, they understand that the role of “I” is sustained through the repetition of performance, some of which can be,

“deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play”. This is, after all, how ‘being’ gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed”.

It may sound simple, but “being” a woman, existing and experiencing life as a woman, and having the opportunity to gain its epistemic standpoint, occurs for anyone who repetitively performs womanhood. In my case, as a transmasculine person, I was a woman because of the “deep-seated play” I compulsively performed when I was raised female. And even though I choose to perform my gender outside of womanhood, I love and value womanhood and everything that its standpoint has given me the opportunity to know. I also value transness and everything its standpoint has given me the opportunity to know. Even further, there are still parts of me that play with the performance of womanhood, even if only in private. This is because I understand that my gender, per anyone’s gender, is too personal and nuanced to be completely represented by categorical language.

In *Trans Women and the Meaning of “Woman”*, Talia Mae Bettcher writes:

Indeed, I know many trans women, for example, who are content with their ‘male genitalia.’ However, many do not consider them *male* genitalia in the first place, but the sort of genitalia congruent with transgender femaleness. Similarly, I know many trans men who have no interest in phalloplasty and who consider their genitalia (transgender) *male* genitalia. Often, what happens is that the social meaning commonly associated with a body part is, in a subcultural context, completely changed (Bettcher, 240).

This is a working example of how trans thought has real semantic changes that can be used to dismantle colonial, patriarchal thought structures. The repetitive performance of womanhood for somebody who has “the sort of genitalia congruent with transgender femaleness” automatically brings that specific role, that specific body, that specific woman, that “I”, into being. Looking back to Roscoe’s *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*, we see that “the study of non-Western cultures reveals not only variability in the sociocultural features of sex roles, but wide variations in beliefs concerning the body and what constitutes biological sex” (Roscoe, 124). Understanding one’s genitalia as “the sort of genitalia congruent with transgender femaleness”, the sort of genitalia congruent with transgender maleness, or the sort of genitalia that does not inherently hold any gender, is possible. Not only is it possible, but such “variation” was socially conventional within precolonial gender modalities.

Who is Transgender?

The question of what it means to “be” transgender always makes me laugh. It must, per any constitutive category, be placed next the question of what it means to be cisgender. Cisgender posits to be the natural majority. Transgender, forced to base itself off of cisgender, is made to be an unnatural minority. The binary sex gender system is implemented to produce men and women, assigning gender to a genital, in the name of having a visual and manufactured difference between categories so that one can dominate the other. The production of transgender and cisgender similarly appear absolute. We think of transgenderism

as not identifying with the gender you were given at birth. But how does anyone truly identify with the gender they were given at birth, particularly when the ideals of manhood and womanhood are designed to be impersonal, unreachable, and polarized?

This is where the language gets difficult. Transgender no longer solely means “not cisgender”. For many people, the category has grown into something more: it has become the denial of cisgender even existing. But the line of who believes in the binary sex-gender system and who performs their gender despite the sex-gender system is not clean cut between “transgender” and “cisgender” people. Like José Esteban Muñoz’s queerness as the horizon, Jack Halberstam’s definition of “trans*” creates an opportunity for fluid self-actualization. Halberstam writes, “Indeed this book uses the term ‘trans*,’... specifically because it holds open the meaning of the term “trans” and refuses to deliver certainty through the act of naming... As we will see, the asterisk modifies the meaning of transitivity by refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity” (Halberstam, 4).

If we look back to Butler’s idea of identity as repetitive play, “being” transgender means repetitively playing outside of the binary sex/gender system, playing outside of the manhood or womanhood you were prescribed at birth. This is an incredibly personal play, one that may not even result in you claiming “transgender” as an identity. Similar to the woman as “other”, transgender as “other” must be antithetical to cisgender as original. Those who do publicly play outside of the binary sex/gender system and claim transgenderism as an identity often elicit a negative reaction from those who haven’t come to terms with their own pain of dealing with the binary sex/gender system; those who haven’t come to terms with the fact that there are as

many genders as there are people. Because of this backlash, anyone who repetitively performs visible transgenderism gains their own epistemic standpoint—the knowledge of what it feels like to be othered for existing outside of the binary sex/gender system. You can still be transgender and not perform visible transgenderism, you just won't experience the same social retaliation. Social retaliation and violence are precisely why someone might not want to claim transgender identity or perform visible transgenderism in the first place.

Even further, trans people can police the binary sex/gender system by perpetuating the idea that everyone is a man or a woman and that men need to have a penis and women need to have vagina. This can be compared to cis women policing the boundary of womanhood. Transgender individuals with this outlook may insist that medical intervention is necessary for everyone outside of the binary sex/gender system to conform. Even further, it creates an idea that there is one way to “be” trans: that complete medical transition into manhood or womanhood is an essential part of transgenderism. I understand that transgender individuals might need to survive by assimilating into binary sex/gender system ideology. I am saddened, however, that these trans individuals insist that they need to change, not the sex/gender system. This directly relates to Intemann's distinction between perspective and standpoint and how it is possible for someone to not epistemically benefit from their particular standpoint. If they choose to, transgender individuals can, upon “passing”, repress their epistemological standpoint of transness in order to reap the benefits of cisgenderism.

This is not to say that medical transition is inherently anti-trans—remember, although gender is a construct, it has very real repercussions. Even further, someone can want to “pass” within manhood or womanhood and still not repress the epistemological knowledge they

gained from having a transgender standpoint. Nowadays, it is difficult for trans people to simply exist. If you play outside of your sex's constructed gender, being told you cannot escape your body's "innate" womanhood or manhood understandably produces very real gender dysphoria. Medical transition for me was a band aid that made existing outside of the binary sex/gender system more bearable, and without it, I do not know that I would be here today.

Personal Response

In Minnesota, everyone knows that it's spring the second we break 30 degrees. On this specific Sunday, the first Sunday above 30 degrees in months, my 9-year-old self is scouring Macalester Plymouth's church parking lot for my dad's beat up car. Hidden amongst the filthy snowbanks, I spot my getaway car and obsessively pull on the passenger door, as if it would convince my father to unlock the car any faster. After anxiously stuffing myself with post service cookies (which were trash by the way), I'm prepared to pass out while Michael Florey takes the wheel. We share the same interaction that we do every week: "Oh, you know it puts a big smile on my face when you join me for church, Rebekah", with a, "Of course, I love you Toad" in response. I begin to close my eyes when I hear a jagged guitar followed by vocals: "Take this pink ribbon off my eyes // I'm exposed and it's no big surprise // Don't you think I know exactly where I stand? // This world is forcing me to hold your hand". At first, I was thrown off by the nasally, sarcastic sound of Gwen Stefani's voice in No Doubt's "Just a Girl". I look over at my dad, who is performing for me in his tone-deaf falsetto. In this moment, he sings the lyrics "I'm just a girl // I'd rather not be" trying his best to sound and move like a woman. I know that the

performance is a joke, but suddenly I am consumed: by the lyrics, by Gwen's intoxicating anger, by my dad's brief escape from masculinity, and in particular, by the sight of my hairy knees: peeking out from under my church dress and begging to be thrown up on. I attribute the nausea to the post service cookies and swallow my vomit as we pull into my driveway. My dad turns to me with a grin saying, "pretty good, huh?" in reference to the song. I agree, and that spring we listen to "Just a Girl" religiously every Sunday on the way home from Macalester Plymouth Church.

After living the first nineteen years of my life as a woman, and now four years of my life as a transmasculine individual, I feel indefinitely separate from cisgender men, and it's not something that I particularly mind. At first, I thought that this would change when I started passing as male, but I realize more and more as time goes on that there's no unlearning what it's like to experience womanhood unless I choose to repress that essential part of myself.

I quickly found that trying to fit in with cisgender men felt like (going back to Ynestra King's *The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology*) "a forgetting". A main moment I knew I would have to forget my standpoint in order to become a man was about a year after my medical transition, when I started passing as male. My dad invited me to his annual "man party"—a large event that consisted of men from the ages thirty to sixty all cooking and eating steaks, drinking beer, and smoking cigars. As I walked downstairs from my room to join the party, I was stopped by one of my dad's friends from church. He asked me what I was doing at the event (at this point in my medical transition, my non-binary features left me looking and sounding like a 13-year-old boy). I replied, "I'm Michael Florey's son", to which he replied, "I didn't know Michael Florey had a son". John and I had met multiple times before, and yet, he

did not recognize me, nor had my father told him about my transition. When I did join the party, I found out that hardly anyone knew who I was. At that point, I could tell I was a secret—maybe not an intentional one—but a secret nonetheless. I felt my dad watching me as I drank my way through each adult male interaction, trying my best to mimic their performance of manhood.

The problem is, their performance of manhood relied on the rejection of femininity, the enforcing of the gender binary, and the objectification of women. For example, I saw my dad, who is tender and at ease in private, become competitive and disciplined in this environment. He slapped me on the back and projected, “if you want to be a man, come help me with this” as if my manhood relied on whether or not I helped him chop and carry wood to feed the grill. What’s more, comments about “the wife” back home were thrown around left and right in order to enforce the difference between men and women (“men are from Mars and girls are from Venus”).

It was surreal: standing there, finally having the manhood that I thought I wanted. I remembered only a couple years ago shaking hands with these men in church, feeling eaten alive by their gaze that made sure to remind me that I was a woman. I realized that if I wanted to exist in that space, a cis male space, I had to forget (or at least ignore) the fact that their gender performance relied on femophobia, the binary sex/gender system, and the othering of women. The problem is I could not forget what it felt like to be groomed and consumed for the cis, heterosexist male gaze. Even more I refused to understand gender as a binary with its performance fixed in male masculinity and female femininity. So, when I joined that party—that

grand and insecure attempt to prove how men act—what I expected to be my formal initiation into manhood became the rejection of my impending assimilation.

This deviance—this queerness—is threatening. It would be much easier to maintain the gender-binary and patriarchy if women despised being women and trans people despised being trans. To combat that, I solely think of myself as a trans individual—fortunate enough to both play with manhood and not forget what it felt like to play with womanhood; and, fortunate enough to not forget what it is like to be transgender no matter how much I may “pass” in the eyes of a society that uses gender as one of its main tactics to control its population.

Anti-transness and sexism rely on one another and benefit nobody. They harm some people more than others, but ultimately, they are both rooted in the suffering of all genders. This is a human rights matter because it touches every single life.

Conclusion

This argument is designed to be trans inclusive because anything less is a regression of feminist epistemology. More than that, though, my essay is meant to dictate an accurate representation of what many have already felt: that mainstream feminist thought (or some form of it) needs to encapsulate more than just cisgender women because the binary sex/gender system and patriarchal systems of power effect more than just cisgender women. For example, it would be in patriarchy’s interest for me to repress the standpoint I gained as a woman or as someone who is transgender, and further, forgetting my standpoint would only harm other individuals that manhood is contingent on othering. That is why standpoint, and not

the uterus, is what really threatens androcentric systems of power. Furthermore, anyone can choose to critically engage with the binary sex/gender system and reckon with the painful history of patriarchal productions of man as male and woman as female. In particular transgender standpoints need to be considered because visible transgenderism helps dismantle the idea that there is a right way to be a woman or a man, with no options outside of the binary sex/gender system. For this ideology hurts everyone no matter how they play with gender, or how they choose to produce their “I”.

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