

**Redeeming Feminist Metaphysics:
The Inessentiality of Gendered Language**

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i. Introduction: Why Gender?

In 2022, I presented a paper investigating why heterosexual men cannot embody the divine feminine¹. Expanding on Marilyn Frye's theory of male homoeroticism, I argued that heterosexual men are divorced from the erotic which, "resides in a deeply spiritual, feminine plane"², and as a result, are sexually truncated. To my surprise, the most contentious part of my talk was the attempt to define gender 'spiritually'. I failed to make clear how something could be gendered in 'energy', but socially gender neutral (or universal). My audience struggled to understand how I could be making claims about the, "ways women have sex" and, "feminine intuitions in sex", without also subscribing to a binarized account of gender. I do not believe my audience was misled in these hesitations. I have often similarly wondered how we might preserve the rigorous work of feminist philosophers which can rely so heavily on unspoken concepts of womanhood, while also maintaining rejection of the social category 'woman'. How, I have asked myself, might we redeem feminist thought?

ii. Thesis

To accommodate a reliance on gendered language in feminist literature, I offer a method for applying feminist arguments about ways of being to any gender, binarized or otherwise, and a means of making gender-dichotic prescriptions while maintaining the reality of gender performativity and transparency. The execution of this method depends on a reorientation of popular feminist metaphysics.

Adapting Judith Butler's theory of performativity, I argue that scientific sex is divorced from so-called behavioural manifestations of gender. I depart from Butler's understanding of gender as a performance of categorized behaviours, and consider instead, the existence of metaphysical poles between which gender is realized. These poles are categorized as feminine or masculine but are such in name only. In other words, they feature no inherent quality which makes them predisposed to any gender kind but are real and apprehensible all the same. By proposing so, I do not mean to record an observation about the way gender operates, but to posit a metaphysical claim about the substance of gender itself. In other words, I mean to point out what *makes up* gender.

¹ Frye, Norah. 2022. *Male Heterosexuality as Homoeroticism, Expanded: An Inquiry into Why Men Cannot Embody the Divine Feminine*. Presented at the Eastern Michigan Undergraduate Philosophy Conference.

² Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*. In "Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches".

My argument challenges a neotraditional metaphysic of gender which maintains that gender is a collection of social performances, and offers in its place the claim that gender is a product of an individual's tendency toward, and orientation between, either pole. On this account, such a claim as, "men ought to be more feminine in their eroticism"³ does not ask men to be any less 'man-like' than they prefer, but rather, makes a prescription as gender-neutral as one which recommends mindfulness to an impatient commuter.

iii. Plan of Development

In defence of this claim, I will first offer a few notes on the scope of what is intended as a very pointed argument. Moving on, I will outline what I take to be the current popular metaphysical standing on gender and the problem I identify with its applications. Specifically, I will critique reliance on the name 'woman' in feminist thought as wrongly justified by this metaphysic and as potentially essentializing. This essentialization is the object of my redemptive mission.

From here, I offer a metaphysical claim which does not directly contradict any one metaphysic, but which offers a complimentary note on the materiality of gender to the popular consensus. I claim that one can maintain the performativity, fluidity and social constructivity of gender while also maintaining that 'masculine' and 'feminine' constitute abstract, but metaphysically real poles, which the phenomena we call gender tracks. While one's intuition may be to reject any claim which seems to binarize gender, I defend my reliance on the dichotic language on the grounds of readability and applicability. In queering the invocation of the feminine and masculine, I theorize radically while still maintaining legitimacy and stability for those who welcome their own binarized identity and struggle to decipher gender beyond traditional gender-talk's linguistic limitations⁴.

Even more, in maintaining the utility and legitimacy of the terms, my argument has the capacity to circumvent critiques which claim that performativity theory makes superficial the binarized, socio-behavioural pursuits which one might seek out as affirming and importantly

³ Frye. 2022. *Male Heterosexuality as Homoeroticism, Expanded*.

⁴ I think here of my mother who is all too willing to learn about the nuance of gender-queerness, but whose capacity to do is curtailed by an insufficient vocabulary in gender-talk. I think my mother represents a relevant archetype in this way and that the ability to communicate coherently with this archetype ought to be a concern in the pursuit of large-scale reform on notions of gender.

related to their gendered reality⁵. In short, I understand my theory as emboldened by its potential to concurrently dissent to gender realism and permit its individual subscription⁶.

In illustration of the efficacy of my argument, I offer an account of the inessentiality of gendered language. In so proving its dispensability, I aim to make clear that the use of gendered language seldom serves to indicate important facts about people, but simply names them, and so could be replaced by any such suitable term. In demonstrating this inessentiality and neutering ‘feminine’, ‘woman’ etc., I hope to preserve the use of such terms in feminist literature while situating them as universal. Having neutralized the terms, I posit a metaphysical claim which supports an account of gender as inherently unsystematized and so universalizable.

I will address some concerns and limitations on my claim, especially the concern that universalizing ‘woman’ might serve to erase discourse on political and social oppressions that are unique to woman and, in response, restate what I take to be the redeeming upshot of universalization.

iv. Notes on Scope

I must note as explicitly as is possible that I do not understand myself as defeating or replacing the work of feminist metaphysicians; I am intellectually and personally indebted to this work. I only hope to complement that which my predecessors have laboured to establish. My intent is intrapersonal; in this paper, I am not necessarily seeking to advance feminist activism or political theory, but to offer a claim which affords relatability to valuable work which might otherwise be found inaccessible. This is not to say that my argument might not have larger applications, only that in its inception it is not intended to dismantle misogyny or rewrite the English language, but to supply those writers and consumers of progressive gender theory with a personally therapeutic point of understanding. With these limitations in mind, I turn to those very writers and consumers.

⁵ I make informal reference here to arguments from transgender studies which have critiqued performativity as disallowing for the legitimization of social-gender affirmation (i.e.: a transgender woman who experiences gender euphoria when gossiping in a nail salon).

⁶ I do not mean to claim that there is any inference to binarized gender nor that there is a case to be made for the systematic installation of a gender binary, but to highlight the comfort that those harmlessly, willingly, and critically attached to their own binarized experience might find in my argument which may have otherwise risked their alienation.

v. *The Current Metaphysical Standing*

I begin by making clear that metaphysic which I seek to amend. In my reading, the current popular standing on the metaphysics of gender represents a coming together of Judith Butler's performativity theory, and the traditional feminist distinction between sex and gender.

The view that gender is either constructive or purely performative was democratized, at least in large part, by Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* from the early 1990s through to the early 2000s⁷. According to Butler, gender is realized through performativity which is a repetition and ritual whose effects manifest in the context of the body, and which is sustained over time and across cultures⁸. In other words, gender is manufactured partly through agency, but is partly constrained by cultural expectation, and is pushed out—that is performed—through behavioural reinforcement. To offer a simplified example of performativity, what makes one a woman is the fact that they are called woman each day, and choose to wear 'women's' clothing, and use a women's dressing room and so on. On this view, what one takes to be an internal essence of gender (their *feeling* a certain gender) is neither natural nor intrinsic, but contrived through sustained acts and gendered stylization of the body⁹. To call gender performative is to recognize it as an enactment which is not dependent on internal, essential truth, but is impelled by unavoidable gender norms; "there is no gender", Butler concludes, "without this reproduction of norms..."¹⁰.

While Butler cannot be called the founder of the feminist distinction between sex and gender, her argument is a helpful starting point in illustrating what I call the neotraditional feminist metaphysic. In my definition, traditional feminist metaphysics supplies the theory that sex denotes a biological classification based on chromosomes, hormones, and sex organs, while gender is a social classification which serves to categorize 'men' and 'women' according to factors like social roles, positions, behaviour and self-ascription¹¹. While the feminist metaphysic is largely aimed at positing a distinctive counter to biological determinism, Butler's theory is motivated to dismantle the idea that any one thing is essentially gendered, and claims instead that things become gendered by their being accessed as such. I present the Butlerian concept and the

⁷ Butler neither claims that gender is purely constructive nor performative, nor is she the first to make these claims.

⁸ Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Judith, Butler. 2009. *Performativity, Precarity And Sexual Politics*.

¹¹ Mikkola, M. 2016. *Feminist Metaphysics and Philosophical Methodology*.

feminist metaphysic concurrently because I do not think that the phenomena which I seek to describe can be named outside of their conceptual codependence. Together, these frameworks serve to realize the neotraditional metaphysic of gender: gender and sex are distinct, so gender is constructed socially (qua feminism) and there is nothing distinctly gendered about any one thing, it only becomes gendered through repeated interaction on gendered terms (qua Butler).

I do not mean to say that this is the most widely accepted metaphysic of gender, but at least that it has been popularized in the progressive West and is often assumed in the context of progressive institutions like the university¹². I take it to be a fair assumption, for example, that when a college-aged student or philosophy professor claims that, “women are disproportionately oppressed”, they are willing to concede that the women in question need not have a certain set of genitalia or chromosomes, nor a certain set of social habits to fall under the scope of their claim.

The large-scale adoption of this metaphysic is a feat, but also a source of ambiguity. It is unclear how, under the neotraditional feminist metaphysic, one can have no biological nor social indicators of womanhood, nor call themselves woman, but still fall under the breadth of the claim, “women are disproportionately oppressed”. In claiming a redemptive ambition, I aim to clarify this ambiguity, not by restricting gender membership, but by exposing the malleability of gendered language, and the subsequent need for a congruent metaphysic¹⁴.

vi. The Problem: What Needs to be Redeemed?

As I have begun to outline, I am motivated to apply pressure to a use of ‘woman’ which is progressive and inclusive, but which fails to offer an account of (1) sufficient terms for the category woman and which (2) fails to make a claim on the materiality of gender, that is, to implicate not just what gender tracks, but what gender itself is made up of.

To the first point, I wish to consider the implications of an account of womanhood which does not rely on sufficient terms and to raise the assumptiveness concern; the concern that hesitation to define the terms of womanhood might fail to induce progressive agnostics and result

¹² To say that this neotraditional metaphysic is popular or given, is not to say that it came without the labor of decades of feminist philosophers (e.g. Bach 2012; Frye 1996, 2011; Haslanger 2000; Mikkola 2009, 2011; Stoljar 1995, 2011; Sveinsdóttir 2011; Young 1997; Witt 2011) , but to say that it has been democratized as the more correct way to think about gender.

¹⁴ The remainder of this paper investigates the term and substance of ‘woman’ as instantiation for all gender kinds for the sake of precision; it is efficient to dissect one gendered term closely. This should not be taken as defining the subject of my conclusion as woman exclusively.

instead in an assumptive reliance on pre-existing definitions. In illustration of these concerns, consider the following passage from Catharine MacKinnon:

“Epistemologically speaking, **women** know the **male world** is out there because **it hits them in the face**. No matter how **they** think about it, try to think it out of existence or into a different shape, it remains independently real, **keeps forcing them into certain molds**.”¹⁵

This passage is not meant to represent McKinnon’s stance on gender metaphysics, but to offer an illustrative reference-point to the use of gendered language in feminist literature writ large. In McKinnon’s passage, “women” is linguistically constituted by those parties who inhabit the “male world” and who are hurt, either metaphorically or otherwise, by it. “Women” are hurt by this, “male world” in virtue of the tension and constraint it places on their beings. So, in this passage the linguistic qualifier for the term “women”— what makes one count as subject of the passage —is their being hurt and constrained by the male world. Note also that it hits, “them” in the face. In employing the third person referential pronoun, McKinnon establishes the fact that, “their” falling into the category, “women” is contingent on their relation to a certain experiential phenomenon (being hit in the face). McKinnon has established a distinct, restrained linguistic category according to which she makes critical claims.

Consider another example of this language move: if I say, “I love Descartes. He is the best”, *he*, the linguistic category I have carved out with the referential pronoun, is contingently applicable; it necessitates that the person I have described as the best is also Descartes. Only by first establishing this contingency, by setting some sufficient terms of my claim, can I coherently use “he”. Thus, only by first establishing who she refers to can McKinnon rely on the otherwise nondescript “they”.

In McKinnon’s passage, ‘woman’ operates divorced from the social and biological qualifiers which neo-traditional metaphysics claim it relies on. While McKinnon defines the subject of her claim as those hit by the male world and names them woman, it is not obvious why they must have any one gender expression. Nothing in the passage indicates that, say, a nonbinary person could not resonate deeply with the assertion. Nor a gay man, nor a cisgender one. In probing the potential for the universalization of feminist claims, this flexibility in

¹⁵ MacKinnon, C. A. 1989. *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Harvard University Press.

referential language is what I mean to point out. I endorse the feminist reluctance to define sufficient terms of womanhood and encourage an even more thorough submission to the unfastened nature of the term.

That said, I also caution that reliance on the term ‘woman’, no matter how unfastened we might take it to be, still hosts tonnes of social, ontological baggage. This is the concern of assumptiveness. In using the term ‘woman’ to define a unique position, we imply, and in fact demand, that we are setting an exclusionary boundary with our language: “I am referring to this thing, not the other”, we assert. In remaining ambiguous in gendered naming, room is made for the assumption of essentialism, biological or otherwise. This threat of assumed exclusion is not as distant as it may seem. Realizing my own gender-queerness, I questioned if previously therapeutic feminist literature was still applicable to me. I was not invited in, so I ruminated in the possibility that I was being kept out.

What I am suggesting is that even if McKinnon’s intentions are not to forward a problematically exclusionary ontological category (and I do not think they are), in so naming woman, she unavoidably invokes a linguistic category and so says that there is someone who does *not* count. Recall though, my analysis of McKinnon as naming woman those harmed by the male world. On this reading, ‘woman’ is constituted by ‘those who have a specific grievance with a specific phenomenon’. It does not seem sufficient to say that McKinnon meant to indicate phenomenal experience and only accidentally relied on ontological category though¹⁷. We must pay mind to this situation of ‘woman’ as an unavoidable indication of ontological kind. To say one is or is not a ‘woman’ is necessarily to categorize, thus how we define woman and who we say counts is critical to how we understand gender itself.

The claim that I am making is not that gender is only made real by the language we use. There are many expressions of gender that are difficult to conceptualize in thought, never mind in language, but which are real all the same. My argument is not that we should approach the metaphysics of gender by looking for kinds that correspond to popular language¹⁸. On the contrary, my argument is that in relying on the term woman, and in failing to define its terms as inclusionary, we leave room for the assumption of only those most popular terms in the

¹⁷ Plus, defining woman according to phenomenal grievance seems an importantly lacking and misled definition.

¹⁸ Dembroff, R. 2020. Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Kind. “Philosophers’ Imprint”, 20, 1–23.

metaphysical taxonomy of gender kinds¹⁹. In other words, we either define our terms as other than those which rely on pre-existing notions of gender and do so robustly, or risk subscribing to them.

If left unaddressed, the result of the assumptiveness concern is ontological oppression. Robin Dembroff defines ontological oppression as a phenomenon which occurs when social kinds unjustly constrain one's behaviours, concepts or affect due to their group membership²⁰. So, if a university only has male and female dormitories, for example, then the university constrains one's capacity to identify themselves, and so realize themselves, as anything other than male or female. I argue that ontological oppression of this sort is inextricable from the situation of linguistic kinds. That is, what we call man and woman, especially in literature concerning gender theory, serves to truncate or expand gender kinds. While Dembroff's account of ontological oppression requires defining social kinds, and mere uses of the term woman would technically be exempt from reprehension under their view, I argue that there is little distinction to be made between ontological and linguistic categorization. What we call ontologically legitimate is deeply informed, perhaps irredeemably so, by what we name legitimate in language. This is not to say that real genders are only those which we taxonomize or that any one definition of woman could satisfy all the demands of gender nuance. It is to say though, that what we *call* often informs how we think about what *is*, so we ought to use caution in either practice.

In defence of this correlation between ontology and language, I turn first to Wittgenstein's claim that language is normative so cannot be spoken by one individual alone. To put succinctly a complex argument offered in *Philosophical Investigations*, words have proper, referential meanings, thus one individual is not capable of knowing whether they are getting a meaning correct; it is only other language users who can do this because the indicator of proper meaning is consensus²¹. Thus, I claim that names, a linguistic phenomenon, are fundamentally wrapped up in consensus, an ontological one.

If we take seriously the relationship between ontology and language, then the role of the feminist writer becomes grave. To underestimate the power of feminist academia and activism would be to ignore the successful democratization of the neotraditional feminist metaphysic

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Dembroff, R. 2018. *Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender*. "Philosophical Topics", 46(2), 21–50.

²¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1993, 2009, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G. E. M *et al.* §243.

highlighted earlier. The point I mean to make is that the ideas of feminist writers and the language demands which follow from their work serve to inform mainstream conversations on gender and sexuality. If experts invent by naming²³, when it comes to gender-talk, feminist theorists have proved themselves virtuoso. I am of the conviction that if we can establish a use of the term woman which is maximally inclusive, even without making any change to the term itself, the popular concept of gendered language and so gender itself might undergo a subsequent, positive shift.

What would come in the wake of this shift illuminates the second fold of the problem of redemption. If, as I will attempt to persuade my reader to do, we accept a use of ‘woman’ which is universalizable and so essentially gender neutralized, we are confronted with the materiality of gender. We must ask, if anyone can count in the permeable social and linguistic category of woman, who counts as woman at all? In other words, what makes up gender in the first place?

In attempting to extend the category of woman beyond the reach of the biological or social, I will unsettle the neotraditional metaphysic, and so strip womanhood of its ontological standing and expose a metaphysical superficiality. In this exposition, I do not suggest there is a lack, but rather an underexplored facet which might offer liberating insight on the *stuff* of gender. *Stuff* being the actual contents of gender itself or, in the phenomenologists sense, that which is behind gender.

My aim is to make a claim about woman-ness itself, to install this claim as underlying any invocation of the term, and in so doing, dispel any exclusion from its use. In offering a reading of feminist literature which only demands a phenomenal relatability, my goal is to make legitimate claims of gender which are metaphysically rooted, and in so doing, to contribute to gender liberation.

vii. *Proposed Means of Redemption*

I have begun to paint the picture of the inessentiality of gendered language. Earlier, I offered a reading of McKinnon’s passage which indicated that ‘women’ was only constituted by an experiential relation. In the passage, the ‘gendering’ power—that is the power to categorize someone as relating one way and not another—was not in the invocation of ‘women’ at all. I argue that this, the inessential reading methodology, might be systematized and applied to most

²³ Halberstam, Jack. 2018. *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.

other gendered language. In the introduction of my paper, I cited Audre Lorde's claim that the erotic resides in a deeply spiritual feminine plane and the contention I encountered when imploring men to consider this claim as relevant to their own sexualities. To demonstrate the application and function of the inessentiality argument I am making, I return to this dispute.

The prescription to consider is, 'men ought to embody the divine feminine in their sexual activities'. Reading gendered language as an indication of phenomenal or experiential reference, in this prescription, 'men' constitutes anyone who does not currently embody the divine feminine in their sexual pursuits. This follows the same linguistic move of referential establishment outlined in my analysis of McKinnon. I do not take this working definition of men to be especially argumentative; a claim which criticized one's sexual practices on the grounds of their genitalia, presentation or pronouns alone would be assumptive and problematic, so, any noncontroversial appraisal of 'men' in this context must track something other than those indications. Further, this prescription does not claim that the embodiment of the divine feminine is natural or endowed to any party, so it follows that anyone could be the object of the feminine deficit, and anyone might improve the quality of their sexual activities by subscribing to the directive.

I revisit this prescription according to the inessential reading methodology to illustrate the potential of feminist claims for universality regardless of their reliance on gendered language. In the passage at hand, none of the seemingly gendered language serves to exclude, rather, it affords the prescription helpful linguistic boundaries. Rather than read the prescription as naming gender kinds, I argue, one can employ a reading by which 'men' only serves to connote person x, who might benefit from y. Like in McKinnon's argument, it would be limiting and even inaccurate to say that the objects of this Lordean prescription might be neatly gendered. Disrupting an attempt to carry-out such categorization, one might dissent: Are transgender men in need of the same embodiment? Are nonbinary people? And on. Rather than attempt to delineate on gendered lines, I reiterate the need to understand gendered language through phenomenal relatability. On this view, we need not ask which genders count, only who is pointed at in the declaration 'men' and who is phenomenologically disposed to its applicability.

I remind my reader that the motivation of my argument is a desire to preserve non-woman's relatability to invaluable feminist claims about how 'women' should be, or the experience of 'woman' in the world. In embracing the proposed methodology for understanding

and applying gendered language, I argue that we can redeem feminist claims from their potential exclusivity while, for the moment, preserving popular language²⁴. This is only a methodology though. The question of the metaphysical standing of gender remains: even if one can accept the neutrality of the prescription to ‘men’, how is one to read Lorde’s call to the ‘deeply feminine’? In response to this lingering concern, I turn to my final, most robust consideration.

While I challenge language which attempts to confine ontological and linguistic gender kinds, I maintain that gender itself, which ontological and social categories attempt to track, is a matter of phenomenal orientation towards masculinity and femininity. On my view, gender is a measure of the ways in which one relates to and orients themselves towards two poles: masculinity and femininity. These poles are metaphysically real in that they establish fundamental ways of being according to which we naturally order ourselves. In other words, being oriented towards these poles is inevitable. This may immediately strike the reader as a binarized account of gender which only offers an anticipatory restatement of what is socially real. I contend that my claim is radically different than this.

I suggest that these poles are real and that all people²⁵ necessarily relate to them (whether positively or negatively²⁶). I do not, however, posit any attempt to regulate these poles. I do not understand them to be inextricable from genitalia or faculty or epistemic capacity, nor do I understand them to be finite or bounded. To say that there are two poles is not to fix the ways one might relate to the poles. On this model, gender is entirely unregulated and is shaped only by the fact that it occurs as metaphysically legitimate, phenomenally manifest and could be tracked according to whatever unit might exist between the masculine and feminine²⁷.

In my current capacity, it is difficult to give conceptual substance to the materiality of gender that I suggest. I understand my qualm like that which might be encountered in an attempt to describe what it means for a particle to be either negatively or positively charged; one can rightly describe a negatively charged particle as one with a negative charge. To characterize further is to enter a realm of ambiguity and risk unhelpful fluidity. At the moment, I fear the

²⁴ My effort to preserve popular language is not an indication of satisfaction. I believe that popular language could afford a radical revaluation. Rather, my ambition is to offer a therapeutic tool to those attempting to apply feminist literature either interiorly or exteriorly and to do so in accordance with the language conventions which the current literature is largely dependent on.

²⁵ Perhaps I will make a claim elsewhere about all beings, but for now, I will stick to the confines of those beings gendered by social ontology.

²⁶ This is to say that saying, “I am none of these things” (i.e. agender) would still suit the scope of my claim.

²⁷ Take, as an arbitrary example, a unit of measurement which states that one is 4% feminine.

same is true about an attempt to more tightly define femininity and masculinity. Nonetheless, I might make clearer the claim that relation to either pole manifests as a way of being, that is an interior phenomenological orientation. To orient oneself in relation to femininity and masculinity, is to be in a certain way and then, to manifest that way. One might compare this to a person being oriented towards either extroversion or introversion, and then realizing their social habits accordingly²⁸. In claiming the interior orientation of gender and a manifestation towards it, I mean to maintain the legitimacy of notions of *feeling* a certain gender and such statements as ‘feminine plane’.

To help parse this conceptually ambiguous claim, consider the following conversation. Discussing gender with me, a peer shared that they had long felt alienated from the female category assigned to them at birth. They did not like feeling ‘womaned’. They recounted their past relationship with a man and the discomfort they felt having sex with him. It felt, they explained, as if their partner expected a feminine sexual prowess from them regardless of his acceptance and recognition of their nonbinary identity. In some intangible but expressible way, they felt oriented and manifested as inaccurately feminine. In their current relationship, using the same pronouns, maintaining their female genitals, and presenting the same, their partner encourages and acknowledges this intangible masculinity, and my peer feels at ease in their sexual relationship. In both pairings, my peer was the ‘female’ sexual counterpart, yet they experienced themselves as masculine in the second pairing, and not the first. This conversation picks out a feeling of gender incongruity regardless of gender congruity on all the apparently relevant axioms. In the face of this incongruity, I implore my reader to consider which culprit might be left behind when social, biological, ontological, and linguistic gender are all in right-order, yet one’s sense of their gender remains in disarray. While this anecdote may not name the phenomena I seek to define, I hope that it might at least legitimize my claim of a dimension of gender which extends beyond currently available gender markers. To quote Lorde, I hope it might illustrate how gender manifestations could be deeply spiritual.

It might also be helpful to consider the following analogy. Race is a social measure of the pigmentation in one’s skin. That this pigmentation indicates Blackness or Asianess is a social

²⁸ This comparison is helpful as one would likely have little trouble understanding extroversion and introversion as unfixed and variable in degree, and also as socially innate. That is, any person born into the social world will relate to one or the other in any which way.

invention which puts to an end that which is inevitable in our being²⁹. I argue for a similar understanding in the context of gender. Like the pigmentation of one's skin is a biological reality which manifest socially, gender is a phenomenological one. The difficulty in explaining this model of gender is largely thanks to this phenomenal quality. That is, its manifestation as a first-person experience which expresses one's relation or awareness of a thing rather than the thing itself³⁰.

Difficulty also arises in the gross degree to which gender-talk is steeped in social and biological assumption. In even calling these poles masculine and feminine, it is hard not to imagine that I mean to say one can be man-like or woman-like. The attempt to extract the terms from their gendered past is laborious and awkward. To aid in this extraction, we might consider this model of gender beyond the scope of human manifestation. Say, the manifestation of phenomenal poles of masculinity and femininity as Yin and Yang or order and chaos. In spirituality, literature, myth and on, these pairs track the same poles and the same means of orientation that I mean to point out here. The difference is only their ontological manifestation.

The critical caveat which separates current gender-talk and the neotraditional metaphysic from my claim is the attempt to systematize these poles whatsoever. "...Trying to contain all that might be poured [in]", Marquis Bey writes, "the cup of gender...runneth over with dingy tap water, spilling onto the floor... eventually eroding the cup altogether."³¹. Attempts to taxonomize gender continue to fall to this misfortune. In defining gender metaphysically, I define it as *prima facie* to any realization of gender which appraises social or biological manifestations, and thereafter makes claims about them. On my view, gender is fundamentally liberated and so cannot be encased in any one taxonomy or ontology. Like pigment in one's skin is endowed and real, but also infinitely multiplicative³², by defining gender as an orientation between two poles, I aim to define it as necessarily capable of infinite variety. Following Bey's claim, I seek to do away with the eroded cup that could never have hoped to hold that which it presumed naturally took its shape in the first place³³.

²⁹ This analogy is only a superficial illustration and dissolves at any technical level.

³⁰ Smith, David Woodruff. 2018. *Phenomenology*, "The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy".

³¹ Bey, M. 2022. *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender*. "Heart of Cisness".

³² Two skin tones may never have exactly the same degree of pigmentation.

³³ *Ibid.*

viii. Putting it All Together: The Means Applied

If we adopt this claim on the materiality of gender and the inessentiality of gendered language, we are left with a gender ontology and gender-talk that is fundamentally divorced from gender itself and so radically liberated. On this view, to use a gendered pronoun or name is only to point out a certain sort of relatability. Thus, Clarissa Estés can praise the, “woman [who] resurface[s] from naïveté... [and] draws an internal masculine energy to her aid”³⁴, without also praising the linguistic system which implies that those who relate to the intended celebratory statement are also those with certain sex organs or social tendencies. Estés can also substantiate her demand for, “masculinity” while maintaining no reference to so called male or female faculties; she can rely instead on a claim of metaphysical reality which begs a certain phenomenal internal orientation³⁵.

I note for the final time, that this is not a defence of those linguistic and ontological moves which legitimately serve to truncate gender expression, but a proposed means of reconciliation for those who understand themselves as excluded from valuable feminist rhetoric which so often relies on privileged names and kinds.

ix. Conclusion

There are a number of limitations, concerns, and upshots I intend to explore further, however the space constraints of this paper do not allow me to do so. In lieu of a complete report, I state succinctly the need to consider the implications this metaphysic might pose to cis-ness and the unique political concerns of woman. I am inclined to understand these concerns as indications of exclusionary feminism, and so vincible, but otherwise, as only falsely incoherent with my claims.

I might also consider the claim that, in preserving the socially produced taxonomy of gender, my claims only anticipate authoritative discourse on gender, and so merely replicate it³⁶. In a more thorough response, I might defend my argument as highlighting a productive tendency, that is the inclination to produce social structures which mimic what inherently is, rather than a causal tendency, that is the production of metaphysical claims which only react to what is. In the same breath, I might also cite Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* as a reminder of the

³⁴ Estés, C. P. 1992. *Women Who Run with the Wolves*.

³⁵ This is not necessarily to praise Estés’ claim, but to offer an illustration of the redemption of gendered language and metaphysics.

³⁶ Butler, 1990.

phenomenologist's caution not to erase the signs of history and apprehend the object as simply given. Plainly, I would defend my attempt to make sense of the ways in which phenomena are bound to their social form.

To make succinct the upshots of my argument, I restate that my view serves to universalize feminist literature and so make it prehensible and applicable to all, and, to define femininity and masculinity as fundamentally integrated in all. With this latter outcome in mind, I suggest a valuable capacity to make claims about, say, men and their femininity, without disrupting or offending their gender identity and expression.

Motivated by an effort to make accessible and universalizable feminist claims, I have attempted to provide a redemptive feminist metaphysic. To display the need and possibility for this redemption, I began with an overview of feminist metaphysics and gender-talk as they currently stand. I have argued that the popular adoption of feminist metaphysics serves to indicate an influential force in feminist literature which might be harnessed to radically shift the standing of gendered language. In the course of this argument, I established a catenation between ontological possibility and linguistic reality, specifically, that feminists might expand the potential of ontological gender by revaluating their use of gendered language. Through a close reading of a passage from Catharine McKinnon, I exposed the potential for the neutrality of gendered language, arguing that it seldom indicates ontological or biological essentialities, but rather, is concerned with indicating experiential relatability. With this reading methodology in mind, I pointed out a dearth of essentialities in the biological, social, or linguistic categorization of gender kinds, and so exposed a metaphysical foible, that being that gender does not seem to be comprised by any of those axioms which we take it to manifest on. To remedy this exposition, I proposed that gender is a phenomenal component of metaphysical reality, so is fundamentally liberated from essentiality. In making these claims, I have attempted, primarily, to allow gender-talk and gender expression to coexist inclusively and comfortably amidst current handlings of gender and sexuality. In further research, I hope to conceptually substantiate this claim, and to explore its implications and limitations more exhaustively.

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