

Medusa

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Medusa: An Undergraduate Journal of Feminist Philosophy

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Medusa: An Undergraduate Journal of Feminist Philosophy is the nation's first feminist philosophy journal for undergraduate students. This online journal was created by Jill Drouillard, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the Mississippi University for Women. *Medusa* is a peer-reviewed journal that provides undergraduate students with an experience of academic publishing. Reviewers are graduate students who specialize in the field of feminist philosophy.

Medusa is an interdisciplinary journal seeking feminist scholarship across a variety of disciplines and approaches. We welcome submissions from all philosophical traditions (whether analytic or continental) and encourage papers that bridge feminist thought with other critical, cultural, gender, literary, queer, race, disability, social, political theories. Mississippi University for Women is the first state-supported college for women. In keeping with the university's historic mission to promote inclusive learning, we encourage submissions that foster this pursuit.

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After Becoming a Transwoman: Conocimientos of Transgender Women and Paternalism

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Abstract: *This paper uses the philosophy of Gloria Anzaldúa to analyze the questions, “What is a transwoman?” and, “How does a man become a woman?” This inquiry presupposes that gender explains what someone is. Gender and identity are un-fixed and continuously changing. However, gender is not identity. Utilized as a lens, gender categorizes and defines people despite who they are as individuals. Identity is too multifaceted to be comprehensible under gender, so identity is obscured by gender. This desconocimiento is the foundation of gender paternalism as a post-hoc justification for the desire to be superior to others, dictate their behavior in gender, and criticize them. Passing is a specific way transwomen are obliged to continue becoming women after having become women. Whether transwomen accept gender paternalism or facilitate it there is no grounds for pity, forgiveness, or judgment because conocimiento is never complete. It is enough that transwomen live as themselves.*

Keywords: Anzaldúa, Gloria; transgender identity; nepantla; conocimiento; paternalism

Introduction

In this article, I am going to focus on the dualities of transitioning and gender in nepantla, how paternalism affects identity and gender as a form of desconocimiento, and how overcoming this desconocimiento can begin bridging nos/otras. Transgendered people navigate the world in terms of their identity and the perception of others, with a cautious distrust. At its worst, it is this distrust that enables gender paternalism. The rest of this essay is a non-exhaustive account of transgendered phenomenology transformed by Anzaldúa’s philosophy and made into a new form of transgendered philosophy.

Anzaldúa’s Terms

Conocimiento and desconocimiento form a duality of knowledge.¹ Conocimiento is the transformational knowledge gained in self-discovery; desconocimiento is the knowledge that prevents change, “the unacceptable attributes and unconscious forces that a person must wrestle with to achieve integration.”² Anzaldúa’s conocimiento has seven stages of continuous reconstruction of identity after its deconstruction. The knowledge gained from self-discovery assists in navigating nepantla and building

bridges from nos to otras.³ Nepantla refers to the space of ambiguity between dualities, the points of crisis in life's transitions.⁴ Thus the stages of *conocimiento* are always in nepantla, always cycling, and never finished developing.⁵ Knowledge is only one duality though; Anzaldúa talks about "the thresholds between worlds"— race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, spirituality, and more.⁶ Nepantla exists between any conceivable duality. Nos/otras is an alternative binary to self/other in which nos implies us and otras implies others.⁷ The slash between them represents the bridge over the divide between them.⁸ Anzaldúa hopes that one day people will no longer perceive a divide between nos/otras, envisioning nosotras.⁹ She acknowledges this would only come when people as a whole yearn for change; it would take effort across communities to cross the nos/otras bridge.¹⁰

What is a Transgendered Woman?

The term transgender is an impermanent identity marker of a group of people and their traits. Transgender came into use because transsexual and transvestite were considered politically incorrect. The change was not in identity but in language. A shift in language is not a small thing because the identities of transgendered people are conceptualized in terms of a transition of gender, rather than sex or clothing. The term "transgender" is thus contingent on this time and place. It is not a fixed point of identity that reaches far into the past or that will persist in the future. The nominal transgender is the result of nepantla for both society and the individual, as gender is also contingent on this time and place rather than a manifestation of identity. In Anzaldúa's description of identity, "[n]othing is fixed. The pulse of existence, the heart of the universe, is fluid. Identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition, always in nepantla."¹¹ Both transgender and cisgender are in nepantla, so transgender is always contingent upon the flux between cismen and ciswomen genders.

Comparably Judith Butler explains Simone de Beauvoir's conception of a woman's body as a situation obligated to receive and interpret other's perceptions of gender.¹² Society changes gender terms, genders are perceived in disparate ways, and the trans gender is new. Transsexual becomes transgender, and what was once a sexual perversion is human. Individuals transition from assigned genders to a new understanding of themselves, i.e., from cisgender to transgender. They can additionally transition from the binary to non-binary, to agender, to a refusal to participate in labels, and not necessarily in the order described. "Transgendered" helps highlight the gendering of peoples' identities that exist in the nepantla of the gender binary.

The difference between a transwoman and a ciswoman appears to be simple. Transwomen transitioned from another gender and ciswomen are not transwomen. People say ciswomen are born women, but no one is born with gender. Genders are not instinctual like the palmar grasp of babies. It is instead learned from our parents as we grow up. This can be seen in how people have differing ideas of what a man and woman should be in the present as well as in the past. Ciswomen are comfortable with the gender assigned at birth, and transwomen typically are not; I say typically because some transwomen are comfortable with their previous gender.

A complicating question that took me into *conocimiento* is, "When you realized you are a transwoman were you always a woman or did you become one?" When I came out it felt like instead of treading water in the ocean I had a little boat. However, with no

knowledge about how I was supposed to be trans, I felt like I had no oars for my boat. I immediately sought out how to be trans rather than simply being my new self because of how I thought of gender as a man. I grew up seeking male role models to try to figure out how to be a man, and now I was going to look for ciswomen and transwomen for new role models on how to be a woman. This is despite the fact I had already transitioned away from thinking of myself as male to female because I had found out that I was who I thought I was. My identity was mysterious to me, and being a woman felt right, but it was an empty comfort because I did not know how to be a woman as much as I did not know how to be a man. In actuality, I did not know how to be myself yet as the social constructs of gender do not provide the answers to what they are, and therefore who I am. Gender paternalism is when one assumes they know what a woman is and then tells themselves and others what a woman should be.

I assumed becoming a transwoman was a performance in the sense Butler once stated, “the transvestite’s gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations.”¹³ However, I behaved as myself when I was a man and a boy, so performativity cannot fully explain the discrepancy of expectations imposed on my masculine self and my trans self. One such example is if I wear t-shirts and flannel, some transwomen take it as me being ashamed of my body, as if I am supposed to show it off, whereas when I was masculine wearing the same clothes never prompted that kind of criticism. It would instead be taking off my clothes that made me feel afraid of criticism of my non-muscular body. Despite the fear my body was not criticized much then, nor is it now; the difference is how I am criticized by transwomen for being trans enough despite performing similarly.

After all, performing as a man does not make me a less real transwoman. I could not grow up a ciswoman, so I thought I could not act like a normal woman. I sought a mentor who could guide me through it, and I considered every opinion I heard uncritically. I began by trying to compensate for having been a man. There are transwomen who try to compensate for having once been a man, so most transwomen try to be aggressively feminine at first, whatever that means to them. One of the first things transwomen learn about is passing. Passing means to pass as cisgender to avoid being transgendered, and I will expand on passing later in this paper.

But to go back to the question I raised and never answered, “Are transwomen always women, or did they become women?” When I asked myself this question, I assumed that there was an objective answer in gender. I now see gender not in objective terms but as a framework imposed upon my life and experience. I used to think I was always a girl but did not have the means to understand it, which is persuasive but can lead to paternalism. For example, I knew someone who insisted that Divine and Freddy Mercury were transwomen: “They did not have the language to understand themselves.” She assumed that crossdressers and gay men were transwomen in denial because of her belief that transwomen were the basis of all misogynistic oppression or another unfathomable esoteric justification. Her arrogance led her to believe she had superior insight into other people’s genders, so she made herself a missionary with an Evangelion to ignorant, inferior men. This is an egregious example of gender paternalism, of forcing a gender framework upon others as when gendering transwomen as men, but by transgendering others.

Similarly, I transgendered myself and accepted her direction that I was always a girl but had been unaware of it. Later as I grew more independent and less self-abasing

to this unsavory person, I began feeling nostalgic for my male childhood instead of feeling like I was I was robbed of a feminine childhood. Believing in the evergreen girl inside me, a feminine soul that existed all my life, was not how I perceived myself. As an oar I had used to row, it was not helping me live anymore. I broke down my emotions, journaled, studied, analyzed, and philosophized my experience. Then it became clear to me that I could construct a narrative of my gendered life. I saw myself as raised as a boy, being a boy, growing into a man, but transforming into a woman somewhere in my maturity. I did not oblige myself to be upset about who I used to be. I could embrace my old memories. I enabled myself to critically understand how I developed with a male upbringing and analyze my misogynistic tendencies.

At the same time, my male childhood is of the woman I am. It is not that I had social pressures that turned me into a woman, but because I became a woman as the man I was. "Every individual concerned with justifying his existence experiences his existence as an indefinite need to transcend himself."¹⁴ Therefore, trying to justify how one is a woman is based on a need to transcend their male past. I changed and grew as a woman, taking myself apart and putting myself back together, a process informed by my new gender and my childhood. The issue at heart is whether one is a woman or a man, and then must transition, thus identifiable as a transwoman, or whether one is always becoming. Gender is used to interpret transitioning identities rather than facilitating the transition between male to female. Through *conocimiento*, I re-evaluated my identity and took apart myself to remove my *desconocimiento* of the trans gender, reincorporate the male past I tried to abandon, and put myself back into a whole once again.

I conclude that transgendered people already became their true selves before gender is applied to conceptualize this process as a gender transition. Once the egg cracks there is no going back to the state of *desconocimiento* that kept them stagnant. It is not an experience exclusive to transgender individuals because cispeople discover their identity submerged under their gender. Cisgender people also struggle against the roles imposed upon them that are contrary to their interests and desires. Transitioning involves moving from one end of the gender spectrum to the other end, moving in between the spectrum, or moving away from the spectrum altogether. For transgender people to accept their new identity fully they must realize that passing is unnecessary and is imposed only for heteronormativity's conditional security at the cost of an individual's freedom in deciding their identity. The experience of a cisgender person detaching themselves from gender roles and a transgender person detaching themselves from gender roles are the same. A cisperson was compliant with the gender assigned at birth and the transgender person became defiant, but both can free themselves from paternalism.

I mentioned before that it is not the circumstances in which transwomen grow in that make them women, such as the stereotypes of growing up surrounded by women, without a father figure, or unable to outgrow their mother. It is through the transformation of their identity that they discard, keep, and add parts of identity that transwomen decided what kind of woman they are. They could live by misogynistic attitudes or abandon them. They can discard their childhood as worthless or hold it in high regard. They can adopt stereotypical womanly traits or maintain male behavior. Before the person is transgendered their identity is all the knowledge and experiences they draw upon. In summary, it is unnecessary to make a choice to be a woman, which is to use gender-as-identity, but many creative choices could be made in *conocimiento* for

how to express one's identity to others and how to understand one's own identity. However, the line must be drawn at gender paternalism in which you try to understand others exclusively with gender, tell others how to "be themselves" justified with gender, understand oneself as only a gender, and limit what oneself can be because of gender, just to name some examples of gender paternalism. This means that choices concerning identity should not be made for transwomen, much less anybody else, because no one can know how to be a transwoman.

Through shifts in *conocimiento* one discovers their new self as a woman, but after another shift, the idea of "woman" and "gender" are now vacuous, there is no explanation of what a woman is, and it no longer explains what identity is. The identity constructed with gender, gender-as-identity, is taken apart and put back together with identity and gender separated as they were not before when transness was realized for the first time. However, a transition still took place and now a second transition is taking place. A transwoman does not have to become a woman because she had already made the transition before getting worried about "what is a woman and how am I supposed to be one." Worrying about passing and being authentically a woman were in fact *desconocimientos* that prevented the full transition away from trying to be a man. This is not to suggest, paternalistically, that transwomen should not call themselves women, use they/they, or anything else just because gender is arbitrary and not identity. I am only making the point that gender is not an aspect of identity so any mode of expression with gender is not an identity claim. It is not indicative of identity to pass nor contrary to identity to not pass for example.

Transgendered Life

There are times to give a push and times not to push. When helping others with the best intentions, good intentions may guide an unconscious desire to be superior to others. I want to emphasize the point with a couple characters from *Our Dreams at Dusk*, written by Yuhki Kamatani. Kamatani illustrated this issue in their writing, which introduced me to the concept. The desire to help minorities could belie paternalism toward those oppressed and less fortunate, or worse an assumption that a minority must be less fortunate. A mother insists a transman come to give a speech to elementary school children about the transgender struggle.¹⁵ She insists he is obligated to help transgender minorities be understood as victims of a disability instead of immoral agents like homosexuals.¹⁶ At the same time, she does not understand it is not worth being belittled for the benefit of her political agenda or any political agenda.¹⁷ Accepting degradation and belittling oneself—stripping oneself of dignity—by defining trans identity as a detriment to be overcome is a depraved thing to do to oneself much less to other people. The greater offense is to make trans people feel obligated to accept this because of who they are.

A gay high schooler Tasuku wants to help Misora, a crossdressing boy, understand his gender. "So maybe right now you're 'trans' Misora-san. Like, you want to be the opposite gender. So?" Misora replied, "'So' what? I don't know!"¹⁸ Tasuku wishes that when he was younger someone was there to help him through the tough time, so now he believes he can be the guide for Misora. "I feel like I might be able to be that now. Back then, when I was still wondering I wanted someone to be there [for me]."¹⁹ He assumes that the Misora must be trans and pushes him to cross-dress outside.

Tasuku's intentions are good but after Misora gets groped by a stranger and Tasuku fails to console him, they have a falling out. Misora abandons cross-dressing and leaves. In the end, all that can be certain is it was not the time for a push, and Tasuku found out that he acted out of paternalism. Tasuku's friend tells him, "The only one who can decide how Misora-san wants to be is Misora-san. Not you—and of course not me either."²⁰ Despite the best intentions, he did not realize what he did not know, which were Misora's feelings and the possible danger Misora would have to face. His paternalism led him to act blindly, and it took *conocimiento* to admit his mistakes. At the same time, *desconocimiento* has embedded itself within the cross-dressing boy, who would have to unravel his uncertainty and insecurity to be himself again, on his terms. Despite the consequences, both boys can continue the process of *conocimiento* to move forward and change. The damage done is not permanent and can be a catalyst of change for their future benefit. It is not morally wrong that this situation happened. By accepting that he cannot understand others, he accepts that people can live together without understanding each other and themselves. This is the first step in building the bridge between *nos/otras*. The second step is to overcome the barriers between *nos/otras* built by gender and paternalism.

The Continuous Change of Gender and Identity

There are a couple of senses of the word "gender;" one refers to a social construct, and the other refers to a person's identity. One conception is of gender as an unchanging inherent fixture of identity. The other is gender as a changing social construct to which roles and identities can be attached. These conceptions are not mutually exclusive; they coincide with gender-as-identity. This combined concept acknowledges gender as a social construct and at the same time treats it as a defining aspect of our identities, such as the assertion that transwomen were born women and assigned male at birth. This can be confusing when talking about identities, and I want to divide the concept by asking what gender is trying to describe when used for identity. So, when I claim I am a transwoman, does that mean my gender-as-identity constitutes me? Did I become trans because I was born a woman? I answered that I became one rather than was born one, but that answer only kicked the can down the road. That response does not speak to whether I changed my gender or if my gender changed me. I would respond "neither" because gender is a lens that interprets and categorizes a person's identity rather than a composer or composition of a person's identity. The first scenario, "I changed, so my gender changed," assumes the change of my gender was outside my control, rather than a concept I used to interpret my identity when I realized who I was. In other words, calling myself a woman because I did not understand gender was a social construct. So, I mistook the gender of woman as defining my identity rather than an interpretation of my transitioning identity. Without the concept of gender, it seems like I do not have the means to describe a transition, but this is false. Gender is an attempt to define identities and organize them into groups.

When transpeople struggle to understand who they are, gender is a ready-made answer, such as a what's-your-gender workbook or quiz that takes away the boundlessness of identity. The trans gender is a way to describe a transitioning or transitioned identity, but it primarily is a tool to structure knowledge of another person. Gender rejects accepting individuals as they appear to be; it requires their appearance

and identity to be understandable, explainable, and compatible with gender. Gender is an invented explanation of a person's identity that is too multifaceted to grasp and comprehend. For example, in the claim, "Someone-san must not desire companionship because they are asexual,"²¹ asexuality defines them instead of being predicated on their existence. Gender is a fixed reference point for understanding anyone who matches the criteria, and it imposes missing criteria upon misfitting identities, like a scientific paradigm a la Thomas Kuhn. In sum, gender is a lens through which a person sees themselves and everyone else. This means that everyone gets distorted through gender.

Defining gender as always in flux may solve this; the fixed point of reference becomes non-existent, but this conclusion does not follow from the premise. The fixed points of reference are also in flux. What it means to be a man or woman changes with time, the roles of men and women change, and along with them what it means to be transgender. No matter the changes, the identities of people remain obfuscated by gender constructs.

The identities within gender also continuously adapt and change, but there are a couple of ways to imagine this. The first is conceptualizing gender as a shape that constrains identity. If the borders constrict, identity must develop within those borders whether for better or worse. If the borders expand, identity can grow further but only so long as it respects the gender borders. This explanation involves a decision-making process between oneself and the pressures around oneself; there is an element of choice in constructing a gender-as-identity. If society alleviates the gender restrictions someone can still conservatively limit their identity within their *self*-imposed traditional gender rules. The second way to imagine a gender-as-identity is as a boundary drawn around an identity, which it does not obey. The person is gender nonconforming and crosses the borders as they please. As a modification of the first conception, there is still reference to the boundaries of the gender boundary because they define gender nonconformity. This creates queerness, a willing breach of the boundaries to contrast with heteronormativity.

Queerness itself is an identity marker. However, where a person lives without caring about the borders or identity markers, they would simply have an identity without gender, embracing their borderlessness. They do not use gender to analyze themselves and ignore the perspectives of gender others impose on them. Transgender people can take advantage of this attitude to resist the inherent paternalism of gender and passing.

Passing is pressured upon transpeople by society, but it is ultimately a choice for trans people to impose it on themselves and other trans people; positioning transgender people at the apex of queerness is also an imposed gender rule. There is a threat to safety, coupled with a threat of meaninglessness through discrimination or idealization. As such living transgendered can be challenging and exhausting when—instead of bridging the gap from nos to otras—people's focus is on how great and/or terrible being trans is.

Passing and Reconciling with Masculinity

Obsession with passing is an adaptation of the drive to attain beauty and is a way to lessen violence and discrimination as passing does not eliminate transness. When

transness is discovered, it is then beauty has something to offer to the heteronormative lens.

It is not only heteronormative because queer people have unrealistic beauty standards too. I imagine cispeople can go through a similar process of trying to achieve Forms of gender, following the vague yet perfect blueprints of the male and female body. Then, like Plato's philosophy, everyone must get over gender essentialism at a certain point, and it is done through *conocimiento*. First *desconocimiento*, the obsession with passing impedes transwomen with clothes, workouts, makeup, hormones, and surgery. Their identity is measured by the Form of ciswomen, so the ideal beauty of ciswomen is the metric of all transwomen. Passing frames transition as a movement from danger to safety by disguising a transgendered being as a cisgendered being. A negative self-image and fear of harm fuels the drive to pass. This leads transwomen to judge other transwomen as lazy, unworthy, and unreasonable because they do not pass, deepening the divide between transwomen. These *desconocimientos* are from childhood—the time when patriarchy and misogyny are nurtured. A big step transgendered women must make, and some never make, is recognizing their misogyny. It hurts to see the shadow of toxic masculinity underneath the surface when investing oneself in escaping into femininity. It is still more painful to face that as a transgendered woman, one still thinks and acts like a misogynist towards themselves, even to others. Further still, they are forced to see after passing that transwomen are shamed and branded tricksters despite passing. If one never passes, they must learn not to try, despite the judgment they will have to face. Now at the second stage of transition, post-passing, both kinds of transgendered women find out their identity is not dependent on passing and that the question, "How do I be a woman?" misunderstands gender as identity. Paternalism is predicated on this misunderstanding to justify dictating how others behave according to gender norms. It is an ironic way of telling a person that they are not being themselves unless they behave how they should.

Passing and Gender Paternalism

Paternalism is a *desconocimiento* that prevents bridging *nos* to *otras*. People can be compassionate to others while supposing themselves to be superior and believing that others are inferior. The homophobic missionary believes that the homosexuals are helpless without the missionary's knowledge and experience, assuming that homosexuality is an illness born from ignorance. They suppose themselves to be the knowledgeable sinner that shepherds lesser sinners. In the same way, the queer community teaches itself knowledge of gender and transitioning paternalistically. This obstructs understanding others by projecting imagined needs with prescribed solutions because with paternalism *nos/otras* cannot be accepted because of arbitrary hierarchies. In *desconocimiento*, there are times in life when people are certain their knowledge is infallible, so they can tell others how they should be. But later in life, people reflect and understand their previous knowledge was informed by misinformation, ignorance, and inexperience. In the same way, people are taught in gendered thinking to suppose who is superior and inferior along dualities such as men vs. women, straight vs. gay, and cisgender vs. transgender. There is even: transgender vs. nonbinary, transgender vs. homosexual, ciswomen vs. transwomen, transwomen vs. transmen, and transgender vs. drag queens.

A reflection on heterosexuality from the perspective of a transwoman is a good example of this retrospective of supposedly infallible knowledge of gender and sexuality. When a cisman and a transwoman grow up, they are both conditioned with expectations of women. Where the cisman experiences attraction to the opposite sex so does the transwoman. The difference is that transwomen can initially understand the desire to become the opposite gender as a sexual attraction before they can distinguish the desire to transition from heterosexual attraction. This is because before gender conocimiento, the desires of the cisman and the transwoman were the same. Their different genders are lenses used to interpret sexual desire of the opposite sex, and they reveal truths about the self when fully understood.

Sometimes attraction to others is not independent of desconocimiento but belies paternalism. Raised in the patriarchy, men can desire women in terms of having a woman underneath them, which gets confused with the desire to be with a woman. Likewise, the desires transwomen feel towards ciswomen betray a desire to be like them. These desires are not mutually exclusive as misogynistic transwomen harbor the desire to be superior to ciswomen and maintain control over the world as misogyny has taught them. Fortunately, not everyone is steeped in misogyny, and not all transwomen grew with gender paternalism, so the transition from the male sex to the female gender is not inherently defined by misogyny. With gender paternalism, transwomen are in a situation in which transition comes with layers of desconocimiento that must be torn apart and discarded; but, with conocimiento their male-gendered experiences become part of their womanly gender. There is a difference between male-gendered experiences and misogyny, as male-gendered experiences do not constitute male or female gender and nobody does male or female things, actions become gendered arbitrarily. Misogyny stands atop gender paternalism by arbitrarily placing the male gender over others. So, whether it is misogyny, misandry, or transgender supremacy it is all gender paternalism.

I think to stop acting with gender paternalism would require reconceptualizing gender without obligations, so that people's identities are not obliged to gender. Transitioning male to female should not be an obligation to be a woman but how someone chooses to become a woman. This means that becoming a woman could be done anyway, thus a woman can be anything rather than a gender category. Someone would probably object to the use of the terms 'woman' or 'transwoman' or any gendered term if they say nothing about the gender itself. I would say the difference between the use of woman in, "This is how to be a woman" and "I am my own woman" is already understood as an obligation versus a statement of a person's authentic self.

Although saying "I am my own woman" is a statement that means nothing because what is a 'woman' is nothing, there is no better honest way to respond to gender paternalism than to give no genuine answer as to what your identity is. Who someone 'is' is borderless; souls are immense, and there is plenty of ourselves unknown to others and ourselves. This is to say that all men, women, transmen, transwomen, and many other genders are not able to be neatly categorized and understood by way of the words 'man,' 'woman,' 'transgender,' and so on. Knowledge of ourselves is also always changing, always in nepantla, and being recomposed in the process of conocimiento. So, when replying "I am my own X" whatever fits in X is the whim of the respondent and not the questioner; any response does not say much about identity.

Conclusion

Jay Prosser makes clear in his critique of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*²² that queerness epitomizes transgender performativity in conflict with transgender people who seek to live without gender performativity and attain sexual embodiment.²³ I agree with Prosser. I explain sexed embodiment plainly as passing; then I explain how passing is an attempt to use gender to realize one's identity as a woman. However, gender is not identity. Gender is simply an attempt to describe an identity too multifaceted by hammering it into a flat shape. Gender is a perception of someone's identity. Gender is what society made and not what identity makes. Trying to make a gender-as-identity is to confuse the social construct of gender as the identity of people and persons. By gender paternalism, others define a transgendered woman by what she lacks. This desconocimiento cements the feeling of lack, and I have felt it before.

Prosser describes the tragic end of Venus Xtravaganza in the documentary *Paris Is Burning*²⁴ as being duped by heterosexual ideology.²⁵ She and others have not fallen to true strength but to cowardice. In the same way, transwomen are not duped by an intelligent heterosexual matrix into believing they are incomplete. Transwomen already understand who they are even when they believe they lack what they need to be a woman. It takes strength, stubbornness, callousness, and determination to live a normal life when they are made to feel incomplete, incompetent, perverted, degraded, degenerate, unctuous, stupid, brutish, nasty, frightening, pathetic, and worthless for staying true to themselves. Venus Xtravaganza deserves nothing less than for all the stars in heaven to bow to her for living exactly how she did. In a world dominated by paternalism and filled with too many willing hands with hammers to fix transwomen, I wish I could cry for each one and give them grief and reverence. Despite this, I cannot find it so easy to pity transwomen who live with gender paternalism or forgive transwomen for facilitating it because conocimiento is never complete. There will never be an objective standpoint from which one could justify pity or forgiveness for transwomen who adopt gender paternalism. To judge the life of a transwoman, to tell them what they should do, to say what they should be, is to say that one is superior and the other inferior. To begin the bridge of nos/otras is to live without dependence on gender with acceptance of appearance and respect as equals.²⁶

Notes

¹ Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2015. *Light in the Dark Luz en lo Oscuro Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Edited by Analouise Keating. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

² Anzaldúa 2015, 16; 243; 216n68.

³ Anzaldúa 2015, 19.

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- ⁴ Anzaldúa 2015, 245.
- ⁵ Anzaldúa 2015, 124.
- ⁶ Anzaldúa 2015, 46.
- ⁷ Anzaldúa 2015, 246.
- ⁸ Anzaldúa 2015, 151.
- ⁹ Anzaldúa 2015, 151.
- ¹⁰ Anzaldúa 2015, 85; 155.
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(Re)conceiving François Poulain de la Barre's Feminism and Social Philosophy

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Abstract: *François Poulain de la Barre is a 17th-century French Philosopher who is known largely through three of his feminist works: A Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of Both Sexes (1673), On the Education of Ladies for Training the Mind in the Science and Moral Judgement (1674), and On the Excellence of Men. Poulain was exposed to Cartesian Philosophy and explicitly adopted Cartesian methodology in his works. Poulain's feminism is consequently largely perceived as simply a continuation of Cartesian Feminism, which is best manifested in the single phrase that is often considered to contain the essence of his feminist thoughts – “the mind has no sex.” In today's literature, Poulain de la Barre's work and his feminist thoughts are seldom examined independently from a Cartesian lens (Reuter 2017, Schmitter 2018).*

I believe that there is more to the content of Poulain's philosophy beyond its adoption of Cartesian methodology, which has been the primary focus of the discussion. This essay attempts to fruitfully (re)conceive Poulain's feminist thoughts through a socio-political reading, with a focus on A Physical and Moral Discourse concerning the Equality of Both Sexes. The essay is divided into three parts, each concentrating on Poulain's analysis of the formation of the subordination of women, the perpetuation of women's subjugation, and the situatedness of gender oppression within the broader scope of social injustices in Poulain's philosophical framework. The socio-political reading presented here is by no means an exhaustive representation of the richness of Poulain's Feminist Philosophy. The aim here is to potentially shed new light on Poulain de la Barre and his feminist philosophy through this reading, which remained to be largely under-recognized.

Keywords: Poulain de la Barre; sex inequality; gender oppression; social philosophy

I. A socio-political account towards the formation of the subordination of women

In *The Equality of Both Sexes*, Poulain de la Barre¹ advances the view that the existing disparities between men and women are rooted in prejudice and are largely socially constructed. To unveil the artificial origins of the subordination of women, Poulain constructs a historical conjecture, providing an analysis of gender inequalities through a socio-political lens.

¹ Poulain de la Barre is also referred to as Poullain de la Barre or simply Poulain/Poullain. He added "de la Barre" to his name later in life.

Firstly, Poulain singles out the institution of the family as a significant factor contributing to women's inferior social status. He contends that pregnancy renders women physically and potentially economically vulnerable, creating a dependency on their husbands. This dependency, he argues, inevitably results in a power imbalance within the family structure: "Since the interruptions of pregnancy and after-effects reduced the strength of women for periods of time and hindered them from working as they had done before, their husbands' assistance became absolutely necessary [...]. One then saw the mistress of the house submit to her husband..." (556b). Beyond the physical implications of pregnancy, Poulain underscores that as households grow, the family structure often confines women to private spheres, further limiting their opportunities to engage in activities beyond their own households: "It is easy to imagine that the various household chores then became specialized. The women were required to remain at home to take care of the children and to assume responsibility for indoor duties" (556b).

Furthermore, Poulain asserts that the institution of family is also closely linked to the underrepresentation of women in intellectual pursuits (or science, in Poulain's narration). Poulain outlines two potential explanations for this phenomenon, the first being that since 'science' was predominantly practiced among the privileged who had plenty of leisure and idleness (especially in its early stage), women naturally distanced themselves from engaging in such activities since they were already preoccupied by their duties within the households (558a). In addition, Poulain posits that the institution of family and social environment act as constraints on women's participation in intellectual endeavors, hindering their intellectual growth. For instance, when women attempt to acquire knowledge and have to seek help from strange men outside their families, they face asymmetrical disadvantages. Poulain highlights that their identities as women and wives may lead to misunderstandings regarding their motivations for pursuing knowledge, putting their reputations at risk (558a).

Lastly, Poulain points to the disparity in the natural tendencies of men and women as the third factor explaining the latter's inferior social status. Since "[...] people valued things only insofar as they were thought suitable for whatever objectives they had in mind (557a)," men, who are more prone to the passion of conquest and domination, were naturally preferred over women for their suitability of such enterprises. On the other hand, due to their gentleness and humane temperament, women are often "deemed capable of contributing to the protection of the kingdoms only by helping to populate them (557b)" and are far removed from the governing of the states.

It's crucial to highlight that while Poulain appeals to the natural tendencies of the two sexes to explain the systematic exclusion of women from the political sphere, his argument does not imply the intrinsic inferiority of women's nature. Instead, he suggests that it is the peculiarities of history and external conditions that contingently render men's temperament more desirable under certain social contexts. The argument emphasizes the influence of societal perceptions and historical circumstances rather than an inherent superiority or inferiority of one gender over the other.

II. How the subjugation of women is perpetuated

Aside from the origins of the subordination of one sex, Poulain has also offered a

socio-political analysis of the perpetuation of the subjugation of women. He identifies three significant mechanisms through which men's authority and power are maintained: the establishment of the states, the intellectual silencing of women, and the unwitting perpetuation of the subjugation of women by themselves.

Start with men's domination in political authorities. According to Poulain, the establishment of states often involves a process of consolidating power for those who are already in control. Poulain notes, "It was impossible to establish states without making distinctions among those who composed them. In that way, the public deference that one shows to those in authority was linked with the idea of power" (557b). Given men's more active engagement in the governance of states, driven by both their natural inclinations and a relatively lesser degree of social constraints compared to women, the formation of political authorities becomes a significant avenue to perpetuate the dominance of men over women. As Poulain writes, "When the wisest legislators founded their republics, they put in place nothing that was favorable to women in this respect. All laws seem to have been passed simply to maintain men's possession of what they currently have" (555b). This underscores how the establishment of states, with laws and structures designed in favor of one sex while entirely ignoring the interests of the other sex, serves as a substantial means to uphold and perpetuate the existing dominance of one gender over the other.

Secondly, Poulain critiques the socio-epistemic environment that not only hinders women from actively engaging in intellectual activities but also results in their intellectual silencing. To illustrate this form of silencing, Poulain provides an example: "If some women happen to stand out from the crowd by reading certain books, which they manage to do with great difficulty in the hope of opening up their minds, they are often obliged to conceal it; most of their friends, out of jealousy or otherwise, never fail to accuse them of affectation" (562b). In this scenario, even when certain women overcome social constraints to pursue knowledge out of a genuine passion, they may find themselves forced to retreat from intellectual activities later due to societal customs and prejudice against 'learned women.'

Furthermore, even if a small number of learned women manage to resist the social pressure described above and, after overcoming numerous obstacles imposed asymmetrically on their sex, become scholars equal to their contemporary male counterparts, their intellectual achievements are still likely to be ignored. This neglect may eventually lead to the erasure of their intellectual achievements over time, owing to the prejudiced socio-epistemic environment. As Poulain notes, "[...] the demands of etiquette did not allow men or other women to visit them for fear of causing offense; they (women scholars) failed to acquire any disciples or followers, and everything they learned died with them in vain" (558b). It is not hard to detect how such forms of intellectual silencing contribute significantly to the absence and marginalization of women in intellectual spheres. Such practices reinforce the prevailing notion of women's incapability to engage in intellectual activities, reaffirming the belief that women are fit only for menial tasks within their households. Furthermore, this intellectual silencing justifies the current situation by portraying men's authority as a result of their merit and wisdom.

In essence, these dynamics perpetuate a cycle that not only hinders women from actively participating in intellectual pursuits but also sustains societal beliefs that validate the current disparities in the distribution of authority based on gender. The

intellectual silencing becomes a tool that reinforces and perpetuates gender-based stereotypes and inequalities within intellectual and societal domains.

Thirdly, as women find themselves largely excluded from active participation in public and intellectual spheres, their lack of influence within these realms prompts them to invest their time and energy in seemingly frivolous activities, such as fashion, as "their clothes and beauty won them more esteem than all the books and knowledge in the world" (558b). However, this continual preoccupation with seemingly frivolous pursuits can further isolate women from engagement in public affairs. There appears to be a self-fulfilling aspect to the perpetuation of women's subjugation. Their efforts to gain power and improve their social standings can inadvertently transform themselves and conform women to stereotypical notions of femininity, providing additional justification for men's domination over women, forming a vicious cycle of the subjugation of one sex.

III. Gender oppression as a sub-form of social inequality

Besides observing the formation and perpetuation of the subjugation of women through a social-political framework, Poulain's feminism is also exceptional in that he has focused on broader social injustice in tandem with gender inequality, which allows him to advance a highly egalitarianist and humanist view beyond only the scope of gender oppression. According to Poulain, domination and inequality of power is the normal condition throughout human history: "[W]hen we think honestly about human affairs, both past and present, we find that they are all similar in one respect: that reason has always been the weakest factor. It seems as if all histories were written simply to show [...] that force has always prevailed since the first appearance of human beings (556a)." The subjugation of women, thus, is by no means an isolated phenomenon (though it might be one the most widespread and impactful forms of domination). Poulain further contends that the subordination of women is closely associated with and may even serve as the foundation for other forms of domination. He suggests that the patterns of domination observed among men in their interactions with peers likely originated from similar behaviors initially directed towards their wives: "If men act that way in relation to their peers, it is most likely that each of them did the same thing initially, and with more reason, in relation to their wives" (556a). This perspective underscores the interconnectedness of the domination of gender and other forms of inequalities of power in Poulain's Social Philosophy.

Moreover, Poulain later further delves into the broader issue of social injustices. Poulain is especially attentive to the external factors' (education being potentially the most prominent among them) impacts on individuals and how they play out in bigger pictures of social injustice. For example, when examining men's appointment in public spheres, Poulain writes: "How many people remain impoverished who would become distinguished had they been given a little encouragement, and how many peasants would have become great teachers if they had been sent to school? It would be a serious mistake to pretend that the most skilled people today are those who [...] showed most aptitude [...]" (559a). Rather than attributing the inferiority of certain social classes to their intrinsic characteristics, Poulain convincingly suggests that external conditions play a significant role in explaining one's social status quo. Poulain later extends this argument to the inferiority of women, asserting that "if we notice

some fault or impediment in some women today, [...], that should be attributed uniquely to the conditions in which they live and the education they are given [...]" (561b).

The parallel analysis of class inequalities and gender inequalities in Poulain's work potentially highlights two key aspects of his feminism. Firstly, it suggests that Poulain's feminism aims to promote a highly egalitarian view of human beings and human nature, by challenging the views that link social status solely to inherent qualities of different social groups (e.g., people of lower socio-economic backgrounds, women). Secondly, the inclusion of both class and gender oppression in Poulain's analysis underscores a broader scope of social injustice within his feminist framework. Both aspects pertain to a socio-political interpretation of Poulain's feminism.

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Foucault's Deployment of Sexuality and The Power of Trans Discourse

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on Foucault's theories on discourse explored in History of Sexuality in relation to social discourse surrounding transgenderism. Discourse within and surrounding the transgender community is spoken about through the lens of the gender binary, so I seek to deconstruct the language we use when approaching gender. How can we move away from viewing the crossing of gender lines as "deviant" and something to be "cured" in individuals when the gender binary affects us all? Can we understand ourselves and be understood by others without the use of labels? Discourse is at the heart of every societal shift, so how can we use language to our advantage in order to achieve liberation within ourselves and within our heavily gendered society? Through the philosophical theories of Foucault, Gagné, and Nash, I illustrate what it might look like to allow ourselves to engage in critical discourse of our existing societal norms.*

Keywords: Foucault; trans discourse; Gagné; Nash; sexuality

In Foucault's, *History of Sexuality*, the chapter titled "Deployment of Sexuality" explores power dynamics and discourse surrounding sexuality which has informed the way we talk about and perpetuate sexual "norms" and "taboos" in our western society. He writes about power in a cyclical way in which we are all influenced through discourse with our families, friends, doctors, professors, therapists, etc. (Foucault 1978, 56). In other words, Foucault does not see power as a top-down dynamic, and instead suggests that there is power in the discourse we engage in, or choose not to engage in. Power dynamics are also mutually reinforcing, as in the case of the family and state reinforcing one another in creating a home environment where the family reflects the ideals put forth by the state. This dynamic, also referred to as "double conditioning," can make it very difficult for those who stray from socially acceptable sexual norms (94). This conditioning becomes even more frightening when we realize that while transgenderism is perceived as "deviant" in America, transgender people have been accepted and even worshipped in other cultures. Could this be because of our obsession with discourse about our own and others' sexuality and gender?

Historically, transgender individuals have been especially vulnerable in the face of discourse about their bodies and bodily autonomy. In order to talk about how bodies are policed and shunned through discourse, we have to understand Foucault's notion of "Scientia Sexualis," which refers to the idea that science reveals the truth about sex and sexual desires. So, according to Foucault, doctors' offices become confessionals and diagnoses are often given for people's sexual deviances or perceived inadequacies. Instead of looking inward and letting pleasure lead a person to sexual fulfillment, or *Ars Erotica*, the Victorian era brought the idea that confessing every detail of your sexual life

to your priest or doctor would literally or metaphorically wipe you of your “sins.” This would lead someone who was otherwise seen as a deviant to a more socially acceptable sexual life. But as most of us know, sexuality is not so simple.

It is very easy for a person to feel repressed in their sexuality or gender when the discourse surrounding their body and pleasure often views them as “deviant.” Patricia Gagné illustrates how discourse can affect our understanding of ourselves in her article “Knowledge and Power, Body and Self: An Analysis of Knowledge Systems and the Transgendered Self.” In talking about how outside knowledge affects our perception of ourselves and others, she states “knowledge has an enormous influence on the development and maintenance of the self” (Gagné 1999, 62). She goes on to say that those who fail, or refuse, to conform to society’s expectations may internalize the belief systems they’ve been exposed to. This can lead people to start believing that they truly are deviant and that they need to be “fixed” somehow.

This is often the case in transgender individuals who are constantly fed the idea that experiencing dysphoria and wanting the opposite sex’s genitals are the criteria that makes a person trans. Historically, this has never been the case. Male to female, female to male, two-spirit, and non-binary individuals have existed throughout human history, and today’s science has constricted us all into a box of definitions and criteria for our own gender expression. This example of *Scientia Sexualis* has infiltrated the transgender community and some transgender individuals have adapted this trans-medicalist ideology as a way to “fit in” just enough to gain the trust and support of those not in the community and to strip away the rights of transgender children.

This leads to Foucault’s “Rules of Continual Variation,” which claims that discourse surrounding sexuality is constantly shifting. Because of this shift in discourse, which in this technological era can happen day to day, it is easier now more than ever to find a word that exactly describes your sexuality or gender identity. Some could argue this form of *Scientia Sexualis* is productive in that it puts a name to peoples’ feelings when they may have felt isolated before. But this obsession with finding the perfect label seems to come from the idea that there is a “secret” to sexuality and gender that is waiting to be discovered. By categorizing people’s sexual interests and gender identities, we perform a sort of *Scientia Sexualis* that feels pleasurable. Humans like to understand themselves and others, so it makes sense that we want to put a name to every single thought and feeling. In doing so, Foucault might say we make ourselves an object to be studied, which can further society’s perception of us as the “other.”

People’s gender and sexuality are exploited as an object of knowledge and science. This ideology leads trans individuals to place less importance on the relationship between the body and the self and opt for seeing the self as a “social creation” (Gagné 1999, 61). In regard to this dynamic of self and others, Foucault says, “The self... is an agent in its own creation, but it’s subjectivity does not exist in a system of its own making,” meaning that we create our sense of self, but others will always influence the view we have of ourselves (Foucault [1978] 1990) (Gagné 1999, 60).

The gender binary and everything that comes with it isn’t going away anytime soon, so what do we do when our own self perception is negatively affected by it? Nash might say that if we are to feel liberated from the confines of society’s perceptions, we should try to find pleasure in society’s representations of us. Since the trans community has both been constrained and liberated by the media’s representation of us, she suggests minority groups counter-read media in order to derive pleasure from it rather

than pain (Nash 2014, 6). The obvious argument against this line of thought is that counter-reading pain for pleasure doesn't quite eliminate the effect of the social injury done upon minority groups in media. Though Nash was specifically writing about black women's portrayal in pornography, I think the same sort of counter-reading is often done by members of the trans community when viewing trans media as well as other media dependent on gender stereotypes (aka, all media). In counter-reading media meant to bring harm upon us, it is a new kind of liberation of both mind and body. For example, though the 1999 movie *Boys Don't Cry* featured many gruesome scenes detailing the rape and torture of a trans man, my younger self was seeing a trans man's story being told for the first time. I saw myself in Brandon Teena, which was both beautiful and incredibly terrifying. In fact, I actually attribute this movie as the reason for burying myself in the closet for as long as I did. So, maybe counter reading can only come into play once you've accepted the fate society has bestowed upon you.

With all that said, instead of trying to find some universal "truth" of sexuality or gender, Foucault, Gagné, and Nash would probably all agree that we should let pleasure lead the way. Unfortunately, this brings up a whole other set of issues about whether some people's pleasures would bring pain upon others. But, talking specifically in the case of gender, people should feel free to express their gender in any way that brings them the most pleasure. Sorting through 1 million labels trying to find the perfect one for you can be pleasurable for some, but it can feel completely unnecessary and sometimes limiting for others. Foucault's "Rule of the tactical polyvalence of discourse," or flipping the meaning of a word, can be applied to words like Queer, which many people prefer to use rather than putting a specific label on themselves (Foucault, 100). While Queer used to be used as a slur against people in the LGBTQ+ community, it has been reclaimed as a sort of umbrella term for anyone who is a part of the community. The word reclaims the perception of us as the "other" and makes being the outcast feel like being a part of something bigger than ourselves.

Foucault wrote that "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together," so to bring knowledge about, and power to, the trans community, discourse must continue (Foucault 1978, 100). I've witnessed powerful testimonials on the internet from trans individuals, individuals who have not only shaped my perception of gender but have also reshaped biases I have been socialized to have about trans people, and consequently myself. Without discourse, we can bring no true knowledge to things that may seem outside of our understanding. Those who misunderstand trans people whether on purpose or through implicit bias have most likely never interacted with a trans person. This lack of experience and understanding is what is at the core of issues of trans liberation. There is power in discourse and in small pockets of resistance to oppression everywhere (96).

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Expanding Moral Considerations and Obligations to Nature

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Abstract: *While many environmental philosophers can agree that we should care for the environment and treat it with respect, the basis for which we should do so is vastly disagreed upon. This paper aims to explore the difference between shallow ecology and deep ecology in favor of the latter. Emphasizing the use of scientific knowledge over aesthetic appreciation provides a strong basis for why we should care for the environment and why it has a good of its own. The different types of ethical centrism are compared, such as anthropocentrism, zoocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism. It builds upon the previous type, extending moral consideration beyond the traditional human-centric perspective. Our relationship with nature should be inclusive and focus on nature's intrinsic value. Lastly, this paper explores the different ecological responsibilities and duties we owe nature and provides principles for how we should treat it morally with respect.*

Keywords: Environmental ethics; deep ecology; ecocentrism; nature; ecological responsibilities

Ethical Perspectives on Nature

Moral considerations differ from moral obligations in that considerations focus on which entities are deserving of being treated with respect whereas obligations focus on what specific treatment we should give to those entities. Consideration simply says that those entities belong in our blanket of ethics. This does not necessarily mean that they should be treated wholly equally or even explain how we treat them, just that we recognize there is some reason that we should contemplate the possibility of them being worthy of at least the smallest ounce of regard. Obligation takes this a step further and defines what it means to act morally toward these entities. It builds standards for how we should behave in joint conversation where the absence of proper behavior deems us unethical. Before evaluating which beings should be considered and what our obligations to them are, I would like to look at the bigger picture of how we should perceive nature ethically.

The most common ethical holding among civilians is that of shallow ecology, which states that we need to protect the environment for the sake of current or future human generations (Cochrane n.d.). Humanity relies on it for survival and therefore we should be careful with our overconsumption of resources. However, this is an anthropocentric approach, claiming that we should only care for nature because it provides us with something in return. It is selfish, egotistical, and expectational. In practice, we tend to find actions moral because it feels like the right thing to do, even if it

is against our personal best interest. Thus, we should protect nature because it inherently deserves respect, not because of what it can do for us.

Deep ecology is the converse of shallow ecology, the argument that the environment has a good of its own and nonhuman entities have intrinsic worth apart from their benefits to humanity (Cochrane n.d.). Rather than only conserving resources that are valuable to humans and implementing wildlife management and soil erosion prevention since the lack thereof would cause starvation among humans, Arne Naess, the father of deep ecology, states that no natural object is conceivable solely as a human resource and the Earth does not belong to humans. We should only use the resources that satisfy our needs (Naess 1986, 72-74).

More specifically, the most appropriate form of deep ecology is a mix of Zen Buddhism and Allen Carlson's approach of the Natural Environmental Model: the belief that we ought to appreciate nature on its own terms but need to be guided by scientific knowledge to have a full grasp of the appreciation and be informed of what moral obligations we owe nature (Carlson and Lintott 2008, 99-102). This moral understanding of nature does not need to be limited to scientists or persons of considerable scientific knowledge. A basic understanding of the processes at play is sufficient enough to recognize that nature has life and interests that it wishes to exert, therefore giving it equal moral consideration.

Aesthetic positions are not adequate for nature appreciation since humans are not the only beings in the universe. We are parts to a whole, and all ethical stances should consider the whole in its entirety. "Wild things do not exist in isolation from one another. They are [to quote Leopold] 'interlocked in one humming community of cooperation and competitions, one biota'" (Carlson and Lintott 2008, 110). While you can appreciate nature for any reason you want to justify, in order to ethically understand why it deserves equal moral consideration, you need to understand what it is, which lies in the understanding of science. Aesthetics limits us to only appreciating things which we deem as pleasing to our senses and also lacks any moral obligation.

Therefore, appreciation should be "guided by any attempt to understand nature for science ... [which] satisfies this moral criteria for appropriate appreciation" (Carlson and Lintott 2008, 152). Some claim this view is also unsatisfactory since science is anthropocentric and therefore reduces nature, leading to little respect for it. I would argue that it is not anthropocentric, but it is subjective, as all things formed by humans are. The reason it lacks anthropocentrism is because we are not strictly focused on human studies. Science includes oceanography, geology, ecology, physics, astronomy, and more, none of which have humanity as the central focus. While many of these sciences can be used for human gain, like studying astronomy for space travel or studying ecology to find new medicines, their primary functions are not for human-centric purposes.

The reason it is subjective is because science attempts to describe how the external material world operates, and we can only see that world from a human point of view. As discussed in Thomas Nagel's paper, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", different species have different direct experiences with the world. For example, while humans use sight, bats use echolocation (and shrimps can see way more colors than we can even imagine). In order for these different experiences to occur, there must be an object to be perceived. For external objects to exist, there must be an objective material world for them to exist in. Therefore, this external material world is completely objective, and

science is our way to search for that objectivity. We are seeking to identify the body of fundamental truths and laws that our universe functions under. Since we only have the experience of being a human, we will never reach full objectivity and it will continually be restricted to our subjective existence. However, since we do our best to be as objective as possible and consider things outside that of which we see (like gravity, dark matter, bat echolocation, and colorful shrimp sights), science is still a form of knowledge that can lead to ethics.

Of course, sometimes science gets it wrong, and the Earth is not the center of the solar system. Nonetheless, the current knowledge we possess will, at least in some respect, help us guide our actions towards nature. By understanding the necessity of bees for pollination and that global warming is destroying the ecosystem, we can take actions to make more morally apt decisions. In this case, these decisions are not because they exclusively protect human life or they exclusively bring us aesthetic pleasure but because of the yearning to take care of things as they are. As deontology says, it is the intent behind our choices that are ethically judged. Therefore, if our incorrect knowledge of science is harming the environment, we are not morally wrong, assuming our motive was protection and respect. The continual development of scientific understanding will continue to drive us to more moral actions. Using scientific knowledge, we can determine which things have a good of their own.

Moral Considerations: Types of Ethical Centrism

It is important to define who this notion of moral consideration extends to. With scientific knowledge, we can explore the several types of centrism and declare what entities of nature we owe duties to. It should be clear that humans deserve to be treated respectfully, but this paper aims to broaden to entities which are included beyond anthropocentrism. I first argue for zoocentrism, claiming that animals should be included in the scope of the moral community. Before going further, I want to make it clear that I am not saying animals deserve the right to vote or should be treated equally as humans. Rather, I am stating they deserve to be considered as moral subjects and be taken into account when morally questionable actions are occurring.

Peter Singer says that humans are speciesists. We treat animals as less than us and use them purely for our gain. One prime example is consuming them. If it were a kill or be-killed situation or we were strictly carnivores, only able to survive off the ingestion of meat, then there is no reason for us to restrict ourselves. However, since we can live a healthy life without eating animals, the moral thing to do is to not put our trivial desires of the taste of meat over the life of a living and conscious being (Singer 1974, 5). Another example is vivisection: animal testing for scientific experiments. We use animals since it is immoral to test on humans or babies. The grounds for animal testing as a result of inferior ability to reason, intellectual level, and cognitive degree fail for many reasons. Singer argues that if we oppose testing on infants, we must oppose testing on animals (6). While some animals have a lower mental capacity than infants, others do not. And sure, an infant if left alone might develop a higher mental capacity. But that would also mean abortion and contraception should be banned. Also, we would not want to test on a mentally handicapped person who is incapable of more mental cognition. As Singer concludes, “[E]very sentient being is capable of leading a life that is

happier or less miserable than some alternative life, and hence has a claim to be taken into account” (7). Since animals can suffer, we need to respect them.

However, we can and should take this one step further. Biocentrism includes all living entities such as plants and bacteria. While it is possible that their consciousness levels are lower or nonexistent, they still have an inherent worth. Since they have integrity, agency, and interests, they are still welcome under our umbrella of moral consideration. According to Anders Melin (2021), the following three philosophers provide these arguments for plants. David Schlosberg says the agency that plants have is through potential and process. They are not merely a product of their environment, unmovable externally or within. They drink water, undergo photosynthesis, and communicate through pheromones. Daniel L. Crescenzo says they have integrity since they have the opportunity to flourish as a system itself and live. They have “the agency and autonomy through which nonhuman nature can develop, self-correct and self-regulate itself” (Melin 2021, 4). Lastly, Teea Kortetmäki says that species should be considered existing entities because they are an evolutionary group. Assume we must kill an animal or a plant so that we can be nourished and live. That is okay, as long as we do not permanently disrupt their functions or cause them to be extinct. Melin tries to argue that if we regard species and ecosystems as collections of entities and beings, it seems problematic to claim that we have duties to them, over and above the duties we have to the beings that are part of them (11).

However, I think it is appropriate to claim we have more duties to species than to the individuals. We are only to disregard the livelihood of beings if our own lives are at risk. If that is the case, we must take its life respectfully. We ought to be grateful for what that being has given up for us, as Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer would advocate. On the other hand, wiping out an entire species is going further than respectfully taking the life of one being. It harms the entire ecosystem, the biodiversity that runs through the environment, and the food chain through which all entities operate. This is not to say it is the consequences of extinction that make this action immoral, although it does not help its case and would be a deciding factor if all else is equal. The intent behind being immoral to one being versus its species is often different. In an ideal world, the only reason we would intend to harm something else is because of dire need. Reasons for eliminating a species can go beyond this. It can be for our fashion senses, our interior designs, or our energy resources. But the intent is driven by greed and selfishness.

Take this following thought experiment for a moment and assume that there was no greed or selfishness. Imagine there is a village of ten people with no fruits or vegetables surrounding them. If they do not eat soon, they will die. There are only two scenarios in which they live: eating the last ten pigs in the world, driving them to extinction, or eating one specific animal from ten different species. I will not go into cannibalism ethics within this paper. Of course, neither scenario is great, and we would prefer to eat no animals. Some might even choose death in this case, but I will assume our own individual life is a top priority. The intent in both scenarios is equal: survival. However, going for the ten pigs is still the more immoral action because of the consequences it brings. Only when the intent is equal can we then evaluate the different outcomes of the actions. In other words, that is the only scenario in which we move from a deontology framework to a consequentialist framework.

Aside from plants having integrity, agency, and interests, it is possible that they have a soul like that of humans and animals. I believe life gives rise to consciousness and allows beings to be aware and have the capacity for autonomy. With this comes the ability to suffer and have a desire for a high mode of life. Even though it is not clearly seen in plants, Kimmerer offers a great perspective to this by combining scientific knowledge with indigenous wisdom. It was first thought that plants had no form of communication. They cannot talk or move. Now, we know they can communicate via pheromones. Trees can release compounds when under insect attack to warn the other local trees, allowing them to prepare their chemical defenses (Kimmerer 2020, 20). The initial tree receives no benefit from warning the other trees as its attack already occurred. However, as a joint ecosystem, the whole is better off through this means of communication. I would like to place extra emphasis on this quote by Kimmerer on page 20: “[T]here is so much we cannot yet sense within our limited human capacity.” Despite my claim that scientific knowledge is the best source for foundations of environmental ethics, I continue to recognize that there are limitations and this needs to be taken into account. Continually improving our knowledge through more extensive research and opening our minds to other perspectives, such as through indigenous ways of knowing, helps prevent us from becoming epistemically narrow.

To me, biocentrism is where moral consideration ends. Yet, it is important to take note of ecocentrism, the notion that all living and nonliving things are worthy of being treated respectfully. A nonliving entity, like a rock, for example, does not have a consciousness according to my stance of property dualism. It has no interests, no desires, no suffering, and no specific form of way that will make its existence more fulfilling. What then do we owe to it? We still owe some form of responsibility because of its role in keeping other life sustainable. This is similar to the shallow ecology notion where the environment should be protected for humans. Our extent to ecocentrism should be protecting nonliving things for living things. Destroying rocks will destroy habitats for bugs. Drying up rivers will destroy homes for fish. As Naess puts it, “[D]iversity enhances the potentialities of survival, the chances of new modes of life, the richness of forms” (Naess 1973, 96). Thus, while nonliving things do not have a good of their own, their role in ecosystems is too large to be ignored.

One might recognize that there are certain destructive habits which are not inhibiting the biodiversity of life. For example, there might be a large pile of rocks in which no life forms currently inhabit. Is it moral then to destroy all of the rocks? It depends again on intent. Should I use those rocks to build a home, to release internal stress, or to create art, then my actions may be justifiable. However, if I destroyed the rock purely for the desire for chaos and destruction, my actions would lack moral justification as they are fueled by malevolent intent.

It would be wrong of me to not consider the possibility that there is something beyond which we see. Once again extending Kimmerer’s claim that there is more beyond which our human capacity can recognize, there might be more to rocks than we currently know. We would often be more willing to eat a cow than a dog. To us, dogs are cute, and we have domesticated them to become our pets. The initial purpose of dog domestication was for hunting and protection; it was a means to an end. That has since evolved to keeping pets for the pleasure we have in taking care of them, spending time with them, and cuddling them. Likewise, otters have pet rocks. They use rocks as tools to crack open mollusks, clams, and shellfish (Beach 2023). But there is no reason for us

to believe it ends there. Otters have been seen having favorite rocks, juggling with them, and treating them as their own. Thus, taking our own human perception out of it, even if we do not fully understand the bond between an otter and its favorite pet rock, the rock needs some sort of appreciation and respect.

Moral Obligations: Duties and Responsibilities

I would like to close this paper by exploring what our duties and responsibilities are to animals, plants, and nonliving entities. Paul Taylor insightfully explains that our duties are to respect the integrity of natural ecosystems to achieve and maintain a healthy existence in a natural state (Taylor 1981, 1). As I have mentioned earlier, these moral entities deserve equal moral consideration as they have inherent worth which does not mean we need to treat these things exactly equally but should consider their life and properties by thinking before we act. To give a more specific framework to follow, I would like to give attention to both Naess' eight deep ecology principles and Martha Nussbaum's ten capabilities.

Naess (1986) lists eight principles which are summarized as follows: (1) The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on earth have value in themselves. (2) Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves. (3) Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. (4) The flourishing of human life is compatible with a smaller human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires a smaller human population. (5) Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive and rapidly worsening. (6) Economical, technological, and ideological policies must therefore be changed. (7) The ideological change will be mainly that of appreciating life quality. (8) We have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes (68).

I also see it fit to extend Nussbaum's (2021) ten capabilities to include animals, plants, bacteria, species, ecosystems, and living things of the like. As for nonliving entities, these capabilities cannot apply since there is no life to be had. As a solution, we should protect the nonliving such that these capabilities are enhanced for the living. The capabilities are: (1) Life, (2) Bodily Health, (3) Bodily Integrity, (4) Sense, Imagination, and Thought, (5) Emotion, (6) Practical Reason, (7) Affiliation, (8) Other Species, (9) Play, and (10) Control Over One's Environment.

I think a combination of these principles would accurately convey the moral obligations we owe to nature. Naess' principles are framed more on why and how these obligations exist whereas Nussbaum's principles specify what the exact obligations are. We can reduce these principles down to four obligations that all forms of nature deserve. (1) We should not prohibit life, bodily health, or bodily integrity in such a way that harms the richness and diversity of life forms unless to satisfy our vital needs. (2) Nature should not be limited in their expression of any cognitive abilities such as sense, imagination, thought, emotion, and practical reason. (3) Nature should be able to interact with other species as diversity intensifies passions, responses, and pure enjoyment. (4) We should not prohibit life forms from controlling their own environment and expressing their integrity and agency as needed.

In Western points of view, not all of these four obligations can extend beyond animals as plants or nonliving entities do not have cognitive abilities, possibilities for

enjoyment, or the ability to exert autonomy. However, I would like to leave it to science and indigenous knowledge to claim that some of these can be encompassed by nature and if not, the bare minimum is to treat all entities with respect as if they do have these abilities in case our subjective experience is limiting the objective truth which we cannot see.

Conclusion

The exploration of expanding moral considerations and obligations to nature reveals a fundamental shift in environmental ethics from shallow to deep ecology. This transition emphasizes the intrinsic worth of nature beyond its instrumental value to humanity, advocating for an ecocentric perspective that acknowledges the interconnectedness and inherent rights of all entities in the natural world. By broadening ethical centrism to include animals, plants, and ecosystems, due to the notion they contain life and have a good of their own, we are moving towards a more holistic and harmonious relationship with nature. We shall follow the four principles to be respectful, treat nature with reciprocity, enhance sustainability, and conserve. As for nonliving natural objects, their good should be considered such that it does not prohibit the wellbeing of the other moral subjects listed above for they themselves do not have life or desires. Furthermore, we shall also not carelessly disrespect the object for there might be more than meets the eye.

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A Culturally Sensitive Understanding of a Queer Environmental Ethic

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Abstract: *Queer environmental feminism's global implementation sparks fears of cultural imposition and queries whether integrating queer/feminist thought truly enriches environmental philosophy. This paper argues such concerns are surmountable: queer eco-feminism, which challenges interlocked patriarchal-colonial domination of women, nature and queer identities, need not override reasonable cultural/religious expression, as vibrant feminist movements exist within diverse traditions reinterpreting texts/practices. Centrally, queerness emerges intrinsically tied to decolonial struggles, given how heteronormativity historically rationalized oppression. Rather than auxiliary, incorporating feminist/queer perspectives proves indispensable to comprehensively redressing how humanity's subjugation of nature emanates from ideological foundations devaluing the feminine, erotic, and queer. While culturally attuned approaches avoiding neo-colonial overreach are crucial, globalizing this ethic remains vital to uproot hierarchical logics underlying ecological crises.*

Keywords: Queer; ecofeminism; decolonial; domination; intersectionality

Introduction: The Global Population Problem¹ and the Beliefs of Those Affected

Queer ecofeminism, as a theoretical framework and a form of praxis, seeks to illuminate the interconnections between the oppression of women, nature, and LGBTQ+ communities. By challenging the hierarchical dualisms that have justified these oppressions, queer ecofeminism offers a powerful lens for understanding and resisting the interlocking systems of domination that have shaped our world. However, the global implementation of queer ecofeminist ideas raises important questions about cultural diversity, anti-colonial struggle, and the role of environmentalism in these intersecting issues.

This paper attempts to navigate these complexities by exploring both the conceptual and material connections between queer liberation and environmentalism. On a conceptual level, queer ecofeminism argues that the logic of domination, which relies on hierarchical dualisms such as culture/nature, male/female, and heterosexual/queer, underlies the oppression of both LGBTQ+ communities and the natural world. Greta Gaard's notion of "liberating the erotic" is central to this critique, as it challenges the ways in which sexuality and embodiment have been devalued and othered within Western patriarchal and colonial thought.² By affirming the diversity of sexual expression and embodied connection as integral to humanity's relationship with

the natural world, queer ecofeminism seeks to transform the dualistic logics that have authorized exploitation and domination.

On a material level, queer ecofeminism suggests that environmental activism must be inclusive of sexual and gender diversity, recognizing the unique vulnerabilities and strengths of LGBTQ+ communities in the face of ecological crises. This involves not only fighting against the disproportionate environmental burdens faced by queer communities, particularly those who are low-income and/or people of color,³ but also centering their voices and experiences in discussions of sustainability, resilience, and ecological justice. By bringing queer perspectives into the environmental movement, both conceptually and materially, queer ecofeminism can help to build more expansive and transformative visions of social and ecological liberation.

At the same time, the global implementation of queer ecofeminist ideas raises important questions about cultural diversity and the ongoing legacies of colonialism. In many parts of the world, particularly in the Global South, discussions of gender and sexuality are often shaped by complex histories of cultural and religious practice, as well as by the traumas of colonial domination and its regulation of Indigenous bodies. The potential clash between liberating the erotic and more conservative views on sexuality, particularly in post-colonial countries that will be most susceptible to the climate crisis,⁴ is readily apparent. By proposing that climate action should find its basis in the ideological liberation of queer oppression, Gaard's proposition of liberating the erotic could potentially threaten traditional ways of life or place undue burdens on global communities to change their outlook on queerness to aid in their environmentalist pursuits.

Queer ecofeminism must navigate these tensions with care and humility, working in solidarity with local movements to challenge oppression while also respecting the diversity of cultural expressions and the right to self-determination.

This paper explores these complexities by engaging with the work of contemporary queer ecofeminist thinkers, as well as with the voices of activists and scholars from the Global South who are working to articulate decolonial and culturally grounded visions of gender, sexuality, and environmental justice. By putting these perspectives into dialogue, the paper seeks to develop a more nuanced and contextually sensitive understanding of how queer ecofeminism can contribute to the urgent task of building a more just and sustainable world for all and resolve the tension between its progressive aims and traditional cultural practices.

The Queer Environmental Feminist Perspective

Feminist Environmental Philosophy refers to a diverse set of positions that insist on the existence of interconnections among women, nonhuman animals, and nature within Western philosophy—what will be called, simply, “women-nature connections.” In contemporary practice, however, eco-feminism has adapted itself to reflect 21st-century feminist values and relies closely on the theory of the “logic of domination.”⁵ The logic of domination refers to the system of value-hierarchical thinking that positions certain groups or concepts as superior and others as inferior, thereby justifying the subordination and exploitation of those deemed inferior.⁶ Ecofeminist theorists like Val Plumwood and Karen Warren have developed critiques of this logic, arguing that it underlies the interlocking oppressions of women, nature, and marginalized groups.⁷

While this logic of domination takes various forms, it is often characterized by the existence of oppressive binaries or dualisms that link certain concepts together in superior/subordinate pairs.

The idea of domination is central to understanding the theory behind eco-feminism, and its underlying framework utilizes the abstraction of eco-feminist values into real-world scenarios. Val Plumwood, a prominent ecofeminist philosopher, has articulated a comprehensive critique of the logic of domination.⁸ She argues that this logic relies on a series of interrelated dualisms, such as culture/nature, reason/emotion, and human/animal, which create a hierarchical structure that justifies the domination of the subordinated category by the privileged one.⁹ Critiques of the logic of domination are used to dismantle current power hierarchies within the legacy of post-Enlightenment environmental philosophy and form a connection between all forms of domination that has become largely accepted in Western thought. While this framework is essential to the deconstruction and application of the eco-feminist viewpoint, it would be unkind to use these authors, and the dualisms that they propose, as representatives of the current state of the field. While Plumwood and her contemporaries included a fruitful base for conversations surrounding the deconstruction of forms of domination, their omission of queerness or the oppression of various expressions of human sexuality notably leaves critiques of dualisms falling short of encapsulating the full scope of a modern feminist's approach to challenging the logic of domination.

Alternatively, I will examine a new kind of ecofeminist theory, which builds upon past ones and recognizes the framework of domination present that links the oppression of women to the oppression of the environment while incorporating more progressive views on gender, race, oppression, and how those interplay with environmental philosophy. Greta Gaard, a contemporary philosopher and advocate for a feminist-ecological philosophy in the 21st century, agrees with earlier philosophers such as Plumwood that, "at the root of ecofeminism is the understanding that the many systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing."¹⁰ In her paper "Towards a Queer Eco-Feminism," Gaard builds upon ecofeminist literature by recognizing the pervasiveness of Christian-oriented language, loaded with anti-sexual and anti-queer terminology, which helped legitimize colonial thinking as a component of the logic of domination.¹¹ This line of thought introduced two important binaries: procreative/queer and reason/erotic.¹²

Queer ecofeminists like Gaard argue that the heterosexual/queer and reason/erotic dualisms are integral parts of the larger network of hierarchical thinking that enables domination. She argues that the devaluation of queer sexualities and erotic experiences is rooted in the same hierarchical, dualistic thinking that has justified the domination of women and nature.¹³ The framing of heterosexuality as natural and queer sexuality as unnatural parallels the construction of nature itself as a feminized, subordinate 'other' to human culture. Queer ecofeminism not only offers a theoretical framework for understanding the interconnections between sexual, gender, and ecological oppression but also has important implications for environmental activism. By challenging the dualistic logic that has justified the domination of nature and marginalized communities, queer ecofeminism suggests that effective environmental justice movements must be inclusive of sexual and gender diversity.

The introduction of these dichotomies attempts to illustrate how the logic of domination extends to human sexuality and that these must also be deconstructed to achieve liberation from hierarchy fully. In proposing a solution to such dilemmas, Gaard proposes a 'liberation of the erotic'¹⁴ to create a world in which nature, women, and queerness are brought up to equal levels.

The Dilemma: Queer Feminist Thought, Religious Practice, and the Historical Trauma of Procreation Regulation

Two potential issues arise when considering Gaard's proposal of liberating the erotic and dismantling the reason/erotic and procreative/queer dualism. The first issue can be seen in the immediate difference between queer feminist values and their application within countries that may be less open to proposed ideas of sexual freedom. Within the African continent, South Africa boasts the highest amount of acceptance of queer lifestyles at 32% of its population, however, countries that are expected to experience rapid population booms such as Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, and Uganda still have upwards of 90% of their population reporting that they disagree with same-sex sexual encounter.¹⁵ Resistance to globalization is a key point underpinning these perspectives and the hesitancy to accept queerness,¹⁶ which indicates that acceptance of queerness is seen as an attempt by Western governments to influence the sexual practices of Africans.

Queer environmental feminists argue that anti-queerness across the globe finds its conceptual roots in Western imperialism, however. Despite this, historical attempts to regulate the reproductive lives of colonized peoples were often justified in the name of population management and resource conservation, even as colonizing powers exploited those same resources for their own benefit. In the contemporary context, discussions of population growth and environmental sustainability can sometimes reproduce similar logics, by placing the burden of responsibility on marginalized communities in the Global South while obscuring the role of overconsumption and extractive capitalism in the Global North.

Following this, it can be seen that the pursuit of eco-feminism comes with the risk of recreating hierarchies of Western cultural superiority and imposing perceived Western values on non-Western people. Furthermore, the application of queer eco-feminism could undermine the global environmental movement as a whole by necessitating the adoption of certain values, such as the liberation of the erotic, that are arguably tangential to environmental activism and would likely push people away from the necessary movement.

Resolving the Tension: A Culturally-Conscious Reading of Queer Ecofeminism

To dissolve the above tension, for queer eco-feminism to be effectively implemented the pursuit of its application (a) mustn't deny reasonable freedom to exercise one's religious and cultural values and (b) must be proven necessary in the deconstruction of all interrelated hierarchies, including colonialism. These two statements motivate my project—which attempts to reconcile queer feminist theory and the accusations that it is a product of Western superiority—by dissolving fears that the

pursuit of eco-feminism comes coupled with neo-colonialism and the imposition of Western values where they are unwarranted. The following elaboration on points (a) and (b) seeks to show that while the implementation of it may be difficult, no ideological tension exists between queer eco-feminist theory and current projects aimed at resisting Western globalization. Instead, the two concepts work hand-in-hand toward the literal and ideological deconstruction of all global hierarchies and structures of domination, with the conceptual critiques offered by queer ecofeminists being able to help guide more tangible policy goals that could have a positive impact on ecoactivism.

On a conceptual level, queer ecofeminism argues that the hierarchical dualisms that have justified the domination of nature and queer communities are themselves products of colonial and patriarchal ideologies, not inherent to any one culture. Challenging these dualisms is thus part of the larger project of decolonization. On a material level, queer ecofeminism must navigate the complex realities of cultural norms and practices, working in solidarity with local movements to promote ecological and social justice in contextually sensitive ways.

The accusation that queer eco-feminism could deny a population reasonable freedom to exercise their religion hangs over the entirety of this debate, especially when discussing its implementation in countries where the majority rejects the idea of homosexuality or embraces a more sexually conservative culture. One of Gaard's proposed solutions in dismantling the procreative/queer and reason/erotic binaries is "liberation of the erotic," a concept that might face resistance in many global communities. Undertaking this mission would mean attacking the logic of domination on a conceptual level alongside providing a directive to be receptive to queerness within global communities. The potential discrepancy between values and action is worth further exploration but does not seem to completely hinder the further implementation of queer eco-feminism. Let me explain.

For queer eco-feminism to hinder freedom to exercise religious and cultural values, it must be proven that the standards it imposes on populations to dismantle the logic of domination are unreasonable or infringe on their right to practice freely; reasonable limits on religious freedom can look like the banning of sacrifices or the mandate that all individuals within a community follow the same faith. Eco-feminism achieves such a reasonable limit of cultural expression, in that the primary freedom it would be limiting is one's ability to claim that sexism or homophobia is fundamental to cultural expression. To argue that those factors are central to cultural or religious expression would be to deny the existence of feminists operating within these traditions and working *with* their religious texts to dismantle the domination present within their communities. Plenty of feminists operate within their cultural movements, and there exist vivid Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc. feminist movements across the globe. For example, certain Muslim feminists or LGBT rights activists, such as El-Faroul Khaki or Asma Barlas work through texts like the Qur'an to challenge dominant understandings of sex and sexuality within Islam. Barlas utilizes the Qur'an to make arguments against domestic violence and the oppression of women in Islam,¹⁷ demonstrating the possibility of one working *with* a traditional text to come towards a more progressive understanding of religious practice. The work of scholars and activists like Khaki and Barlas demonstrates that challenging patriarchal and heteronormative interpretations of religious texts is not only possible but also essential for building inclusive, intersectional movements for social and ecological justice. By articulating visions of

gender and sexual equality that are rooted in their own cultural and spiritual traditions, they open up space for more diverse and contextualized forms of environmental activism.

This type of work exemplifies that attempts to dismantle hierarchies of domination, even if considered commonplace or a large part of traditional practice, do not necessarily have to result in the fundamental repudiation of traditional practices. Feminist scholars demonstrate how critiques of longstanding cultural values are able to manifest themselves in the real world, generating the basis for actionable change through ideological critique. The pursuit of a queer-environmentalist perspective may look different depending on the cultural context, but it certainly is possible to work alongside traditional texts while still attempting to sew radical change within any given community.

The second point I wish to address is (b), the addition of queerness and feminism into environmental ethics must be proven necessary and not simply tangential to the movement. It would be much easier for us to throw up our hands and look for another solution, claiming while admirable, the pursuit of a queer eco-feminist ethic is unnecessarily complicated and detracts from an actual pursuit of effective climate policy. This pervades conversation around any eco-feminist philosophy, not just modern or queer ones. For queer eco-feminism to be a philosophy whose implementation is worth pursuing, it must follow that any alternative would prove insufficient in addressing the systemic issue of environmental subjugation and mistreatment. Yet, queer liberation is not a separate or secondary issue, but a crucial component of dismantling the hierarchical systems of power that have legitimated both social marginalization and environmental destruction. By recognizing how the oppression of LGBTQ+ people is historically and conceptually linked to the domination of land and resources, queer ecofeminism provides a framework for understanding why sexual justice is integral to decolonial and ecological justice.

An example of this outlook in action can look like the work done by queer critical cultural studies scholars such as Godfried Asante & Jenna N. Hanchey, who demonstrate that the deconstruction of homophobic values in countries within Africa works as a fundamental component in the attack of other forms of hierarchy, including colonialism. They studied the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) proposal in Ghana in 2018. The proposal, which would provide comprehensive sex education to teenagers within the country, faced incredible pushback by major policymakers and public figures in the country, with the Catholic Church diocese in Ghana arguing that the curriculum is against “Ghanaian/African culture and values” and also a neocolonial ploy to further colonize and control African bodies.¹⁸ In that same year, the Canadian ambassador to Ghana stated “People in Ghana are still evolving on this issue, this is the same trajectory that Canada took years ago and now gays and lesbians can live freely.”¹⁹ Comments like these reflect the simplified notion of a “homophobic Africa,” and refuse to engage with the complex narrative of how regions ended up with such views; the statement made by the Canadian ambassador demonstrates a linear conception of progress, one in which Ghana must not be expected to catch up with the West ‘before its time.’

As Gaard recognizes in her paper, queerness and homophobia in Africa are inextricably linked with colonialism, as Europe’s erotophobia and religious convictions have historically justified the evasion, extermination, or conversion of non-white

communities.²⁰ The contemporary reality of homophobia in Africa requires further discussion, and its origins are complicated. However, queerness must be a part of the anti-colonial narrative because, at the very least, it recognizes the fundamental tie between the domination of states and imperial projects justified through the proselytizing of indigenous communities. While the contemporary reality of homophobia cannot be solved through the recognition of its ties to colonialism, the identification that queerness is linked to the region through colonial forms of domination justifies its inclusion in the project of dismantling all forms of domination or hierarchy and helps alleviate the proposed tension that queer eco-feminism itself would be a replication of imposed Western supremacy.

At its core, queer ecofeminism recognizes that the oppression of LGBTQ+ people and the exploitation of nature stem from the same dualistic logic that valorizes the masculine, the heterosexual, and the rational over the feminine, the queer, and the embodied. Gaard's concept of 'liberating the erotic' is not just about sexual freedom, but about reclaiming the value of sensuality, emotion, and connection that have been denigrated under patriarchal and colonial systems of domination. In this sense, affirming queer sexualities and erotic diversity is part of a larger project of resisting the ideological hierarchies that have sanctioned both social and ecological violence.

At this point, a potential critic may say that even if the origins of homophobia in Africa can be 'simply tied' to colonialism (which is, in itself, a stretch), it has become so ingrained in religious and cultural traditions in specific regions over the past hundreds of years that to attempt to dismantle it would, in itself, function as a colonial project that further justified the imposition of Western values on non-Western people; the creation of a problem only to justify further influence in the name of a solution.

In response, I would say that while it is true that cultures can have vivid and legitimate practices born in response to colonial imposition, that does not undermine the entire project of working to understand how such relationships function and their implications. Queer eco-feminism, at its core, functions to dismantle all logical hierarchies and related dominating dualisms, and that project must begin with an identification of oppressive structures globally, followed by the subsequent disentanglement of how they intertwine. The attempt to do so does not target any specific culture and instead seeks to champion the idea that all forms of oppression are interrelated.

As modern eco-feminist thought recognizes, dismantling the straight/queer and reason/erotic binaries is not tangential but central to establishing a comprehensive environmental ethic that recognizes the subordination and subsequent devaluing of many constructs, including nature, queerness, and the non-white. Gaard's conception of "the liberation of the erotic" is not an arbitrary addition but a necessary element in breaking down the ingrained structures of domination as it confronts societal norms and challenges existing power dynamics that perpetuate oppression. In the broader context, queerness and feminism within the environmental ethic function as integral parts in the liberation from binaries and the recognition that humanity's disregard for nature's wellbeing stems from larger theoretical underpinnings that permit the subordination of all concepts viewed as irrational.

Conclusion

In the ways I mentioned above, queer eco-feminism can become somewhat of an anti-colonial asset in preventing the onset of excessive Westernization. The tension arising from the potential clash between queer feminist values and cultural traditions, particularly in regions with conservative views on sexuality, underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to the subject and the recognition of feminism as a global, not solely Western, issue. Understanding the potential for queer eco-feminism to impede religious and cultural freedoms is essential. Thus, it must be stressed that the focus of the movement is on targeting oppressive ideologies rather than stifling genuine expressions of faith or cultural identity. The existence of feminist movements within cultures around the globe that work hand-in-hand with traditional frameworks proves that to be a possibility and demonstrates the compatibility of eco-feminist principles across a diverse array of contexts.

The integration of queerness and feminism into environmental ethics, and particularly the dismantling of the dualisms associated with them, emerges not as a tangential addition but as an essential component of an environmental ethic. Queer eco-feminism places a critical perspective on the logic of domination, and its prevailing ideologies have the potential to play a pivotal role in dismantling all structures of domination. It offers a powerful framework for understanding and challenging the logic of domination that underlies the interconnected oppressions of women, nature, and LGBTQ+ people. In the face of escalating ecological crises, it is clear that we need a radical reimagining of our relationships with one another and the more-than-human world. Queer ecofeminism offers a powerful framework for this reimagining, one that recognizes the interdependence of social and ecological liberation.

Ultimately, a queer ecofeminist perspective insists that the struggles for sexual justice and ecological sustainability are inextricably linked. The ideological devaluation of women, nature, and queer lives stems from interlocking systems of domination that can only be fully dismantled through an intersectional approach. Liberating the erotic and embracing the full spectrum of human sexual diversity is thus not a distraction from, but an essential part of cultivating a radically transformed relationship between humanity and the more-than-human world.

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Virtuous Women of *Martyrs Mirror*: Stories of Steadfast Faith

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Abstract: The Bloody Theater or *Martyrs Mirror* is the preeminent text of the Mennonite faith, teaching its followers how to be virtuous individuals within the larger community and towards the world around them. Such virtuous teachings are gendered, but in ways that one may not expect. Within this text, many female martyrs are depicted as having both masculine and feminine traits and are seen as heroic. They embrace feminine domesticity while exhibiting masculine courage towards death in defense of their Mennonite faith. In this paper, I examine three women within this tome to break a traditional binary logic that associates men with courage and strength and women with frailty and weakness.

Keywords: women's history; religion; Mennonite; martyrs; virtues

Throughout history, philosophical texts like Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* have provided guidance to individuals regarding how to live a good life and how to be a virtuous member of a larger community. A massive tome sits on the shelf of almost every Mennonite home entitled *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, revered as an almost holy book with a similar intent to inculcate virtuous behavior, as well as honor those who were lost in the forming of the early Mennonite church. It was written in 1660 by Thieleman J. van Braght and compiles the stories of the earliest martyrs in the Christian and later the Anabaptist church until the year of its publication. As a woman raised by Mennonites, acknowledging the sacrifices of female martyrs and their importance to the community, I am interested in the gendered aspects of their virtuous behavior. By examining the stories of three women depicted in this tome, I demonstrate that while such martyrs upheld stereotypical feminine traits associated with domesticity, their display of courage, literally translated from the Greek *andreia* as "manliness," (Russon 2020, 45) defies traditional understandings of binary gender roles.

Martyrs Mirror is beloved by Mennonites despite its unnerving imagery of executions because it acts as a foundational text to the history of the Mennonite community and the reasonings behind the urge to seek peace and non-violence in the world. Julia Spicher Kasdorf acknowledges the importance of the book in Mennonite culture saying, "I have come to believe that the big book – or more precisely, the memory it fostered and still fosters – strongly influenced our home and the homes of other Mennonites like us" (Spicher Kasdorf 2013, 46). *Martyrs Mirror* is more than a book for Mennonites; it is a telling of culture and a guide on what to strive for. Mennonites must strive to be peaceful even in the face of hatred and suspicion. There is an inner strength and determination needed to maintain that level of peace.

Strength is a form of courage for Mennonites, especially those in *Martyrs Mirror*. Courage as Aristotle's virtue *andreia* (which translates literally to "manliness") is associated with the ability "to be self-possessed in the face of dispossessing tendencies of pleasure and pain" (Russon 2020, 46). The Mennonites of *Martyrs Mirror* face certain death if they do not forgo their faith, yet they do not give up their commitment to the Mennonite faith. This is the courage they show: they are faced with a choice where they demonstrate unyielding courage by accepting the harder path that leads to their salvation. The ability to make one's own choices under duress takes strength and courage, and the strength shown by the martyrs of *Martyrs Mirror* does not come from external encouragement. The martyrs are faced with daily challenges in the outside world attempting to force them to recant their faith, but they are self-possessed in that they hold an inner strength and motivation to remain Mennonite. While the outside world pushes the martyrs to give in, they hold fast to their faith.

Simone de Beauvoir has criticized the idea of courage as self-possession, however, since women historically have not had the same level of choice as men, nor have women been raised to be as assertive as men (45). Because of the socialization that women undergo in comparison to men, they are raised and seen with different expectations to men. Plato, similarly to Aristotle, associates the quality of courage with men. In the *Republic* he associates it with the traditionally male role of the auxiliary or military; however, women and men are allowed to be members of the auxiliary in the *Republic*. Similarly, in the *Republic*, it is said that "[w]e would be right, then, to remove the lamentations of famous men. We would leave them to women...and cowardly men." Women are grouped with the opposite of courage (cowardice) and associated with lamentations related to dispossession or "deprivation of a son, brother, possessions, or the like" (Plato 2011, 111). Women are associated as more in need of external goods in this way. In Plato's *Symposium*, women are associated with the body and men with the soul. As Diotima teaches Socrates, those who are "pregnant in body" become women and those who are "pregnant in soul" become men. (Plato 1989, 56). Women are not characterized by the soul and its virtues or wisdom according to Plato. *Martyrs Mirror* utilizes these virtues such as courage, and they do remain, in a way, gendered. However, they are unrestricted by gender in practical demonstration, and the ideal martyr shows virtues that are both masculine and feminine.

Within *Martyrs Mirror*, 930 men and women's deaths as martyrs are described with around a third of them being women (Sommers-Rich 2002, 18). However, Spicher Kasdorf points out that female martyrs are depicted differently than male martyrs in the tome. Female martyrs are not only courageous like the men; they are also domestic, modest, and at times paragons of elegance as they are walked towards their deaths. All martyrs were ascribed the peak virtues associated with masculinity such as courage, steadfastness, and a strong sense of justice (Spicher Kasdorf 2013, 55), but only women were able to carry both the masculine and feminine virtues of the perfect martyr. Through examinations of several women who were martyred, one finds that women were the exemplary martyrs in *Martyrs Mirror*, demonstrating the most virtuous traits of both man and woman.

The death of Maeyken van Deventer and a testament made by her for her children is featured in *Martyrs Mirror*. Van Deventer was arrested and killed in Rotterdam in 1573, and according to Sommers-Rich (2002), van Deventer would have been from Deventer, as demonstrated by her last name, meaning she was around a

hundred miles from her hometown for reasons unknown (19). A variety of reasons for her distance from Deventer are proposed such as fleeing for her life, teaching Anabaptist gospel, preaching, or attending meetings related to church activities, any of which could have been grounds for her arrest (20). Maeyken van Deventer, in her letter written to her children during her time in Rotterdam, courageously faces the fate she knows awaits her. "I shall go before you, without looking back, for this is the way of the prophets and martyrs, and behold, I shall now drink the cup which they drank," van Deventer writes in the letter to her four children (van Braght 1964, 978). There is no hesitation in her letter, and van Braght says that the court described her as "an immovable and obstinate heretic" when condemning her to death (977). Van Deventer is an interesting example of a martyr because of her independence shown by the fact that she was about a hundred miles from home, her driven language in the letter she writes in the to her children including countless comparisons of her martyrdom to that of Christ, and her consistent appeals to her children for forgiveness. Following the thesis of Spicher Kasdorf in "Mightier Than the Sword," there is both a courageous masculine depiction and a motherly instinct in van Deventer's letter.

Maeyken Van Deventer shows more than courage in her ability to approach death and pain without fear. She demonstrates her femininity through her love for her children. She apologizes to her children for not having left more for them in terms of earthly wealth but assures them it is best and hopes they seek the same path as her towards "eternal riches" (van Braght 1964, 977), seeking the best for her children in life and after death. Yet she also shows how as much as she loves her children and does regret not being able to support them as they grow, she does not regret martyring herself in the name of her religion. Van Deventer tells her children to "thank the Most High, that you had a mother who was found worthy to shed her blood for the name of the Lord", showing a dedication to her religion and hoping to inspire it in her children as well with her own sacrifice (977).

The Anabaptist hymnal, the *Ausbund*, features a ballad dedicated to Lijsken Dircks who was put to death in 1549 (Sommers-Rich 2002, 25). Dircks was put to death by drowning for the crime of being a "teacher" in the church, which was a term for "preacher" at the time; there is also a possibility she was the first Anabaptist deaconess, according to Sommers-Rich (25). Just like Maeyken van Deventer, Lijsken Dircks carries herself to death with both grace and courage, refusing to give up her faith. In the ballad, she is described as very feminine in her appearance: "A maid she was of slender form, / Attractive and of conduct, good" (25). The ballad continues to describe her arrest, interrogation, and torture, and eventually the reader is shown the driven and courageous side of Dircks – backed by an answered prayer. "God did rescue her from pain! / Such courage did He give that hour / That she was filled with quiet strength" (27). The masculine part of Dircks is coming from God and her call for help in a time of need. In the final verse of the ballad, Lijsken is called "brave" (28). Even as she cried for God in desperation, her own steadfastness to her faith is admired in the ballad. The difference between Maeyken van Deventer and Lijsken Dircks (per the *ballad's* telling of Dircks' execution) is where that masculine courage comes from. Maeyken van Deventer's courage comes from her internal faith. Lijsken's courage comes from God's touch and inspires her to endure, all the while giving her the tools she needs to endure.

In *Martyrs Mirror*, however, a different picture of Lijsken begins to be revealed with her strength being, like Maeyken van Deventer, internal. Benjamin Goossen (2018)

discusses how Antje Brons points out Lijsken's "inner collection, calmness, and surety" and calls her a "heroine of faith" (362). Antje Brons, a widely respected Mennonite historian from the nineteenth century, found inspiration in Lijsken Dircks' story and wrote that the direct words of women could be inspirational to others as well if only historians would utilize them. In the telling of Dircks' death, she is repeatedly described as "steadfast" in her faith (van Braght 1964, 521). She even headstrongly confronts the judges questioning her, saying, "You are judges now, but the time will come when you shall wish that you had been shepherds, for there is a Judge and a Lord who is over us all, who will judge you in due time" (521), telling them that they'll one day wish they were in a menial job, like shepherding, and not taking on the job of God. While in custody, Dircks is met with two monks who unsuccessfully try to convert her, and she repeatedly sings hymns (522). The male-female dichotomy is shown in Dircks in *Martyrs Mirror* as well as the Ausbund ballad; however, this time, her courage is internal, stemming from her strong faith. She sings hymns from her cell and attracts an audience of people who are upset for her death. She also stands toe to toe with the men who will execute her and never betrays her own faith. She carries the female grace as well as the masculine steadfastness. Another feminine detail about Lijsken Dircks is that she is fertile and motherly: when she was arrested, she was pregnant, so the entire time she was enduring her torture she was carrying a child (504). Returning to the Platonic idea of the woman, she and her feminine virtues are associated with her body and its ability to carry a child. She was only executed after her delivery, yet her steadfastness to her faith during pregnancy is a direct demonstration of the male-female nature of the female martyrs in *Martyrs Mirror*.

In the year 1597, according to van Braght's telling, a "pious heroine of Jesus Christ" named Anneken van den Hove was buried alive for her faith (van Braght 1964, 1094). The "wise virgin" was buried alive, leaving her head above the dirt until the end to give her repeated chances to recant which she refused to do. However, for as many pious traits as Anneken van den Hove has, she is not without the masculine ones attributed to the martyrs in *Martyrs Mirror*. She is described as "fearless" when she enters the pit dug for her to be buried alive in. She also stands up to her executioners courageously after they tell her that she is going to burn in hell, telling them that she is confident her soul is saved (1094). Like *Martyrs Mirror's* depictions of Maeyken van Deventer and Lijsken Dircks, van den Hove is, above all, steadfast in her faith. The strength she gets here is internal and stems from her own faith and confidence in her faith. Anneken's execution was so controversial in the Spanish Netherlands that it was the last one of the sixteenth century, and a letter of justification was issued by Franciscus Kosterus, further explaining why the church believed the death of van den Hove was legal (1095). After her death, the penalty for heresy was changed from death to lesser sentences, but according to the accounts collected by van Braght, there were still executions of Anabaptists taking place in the Netherlands (1105). Not only was Anneken van den Hove steadfast in her own faith, but she was also instrumental in making some change in the severity of persecution of Anabaptists in the Netherlands.

The accusations against these women are important to point out as in the modern Mennonite church, women are rarely allowed leadership positions. The first woman was not ordained as a minister until 1911 (Mennonite Church USA 2024). However, both Maeyken van Deventer and Lijsken Dircks were arrested under circumstances that demonstrate that they may have been in some form of leadership or teaching role in the

church. Van Deventer was far from her home for reasons that are unknown, but this level of independence is unusual. Dircks was also theorized to have been a deaconess in the church which, even in the early Mennonite church was an anomaly, but did occur. As the church was persecuted and in need of followers and church leaders who were loyal and devoted, they began to turn to women to fill roles that there were not enough men to fill including the role of deacon. Therefore, it is very possible that Maeyken van Deventer was also fulfilling a role such as deaconess which justifies her distance from home. This is another way the female martyrs exemplify male and female traits: they carried out roles in the church that had previously only been reserved for men and stepped up in times of desperation and need in their church and community.

Many congregations of the modern Mennonite church rely heavily on gender roles still. For example, the Holdeman Mennonite church, of which my family comes from, does not allow women to preach in the church. However, *Martyrs Mirror* shows that women have played a vital role in keeping the church alive since its beginnings. Both men and women have roles to play in the church (and the world), and gender does not forgive them of their responsibility to maintain virtuous behavior. Virtues such as courage and domesticity may be gendered traditionally, but that does not restrict them in practice in the Mennonite church. The question arises of whether Mennonites should act according to masculine and feminine virtues. Are gendered virtues necessary for one to be a good Mennonite? I would argue that they are, but they do not have to be seen through a gendered perspective in the modern era. By transforming the perspective through which we look at traits such as strength, courage, and domesticity, we can turn them into virtues of people rather than maintaining the gender status quo. Once all Mennonites (and people) can properly display the virtues that are traditionally seen as feminine or masculine, the gendered line dividing traits begins to fade away since they are no longer separate in their roles. The traits do not change by removing the gendered aspect. Courage still means to be self-possessed in the face of hardship, and a commitment to domesticity still means one takes care of their family and home. By looking at the traits through a different lens as we move forward, we can begin to make virtue something attainable for everyone, even out roles and responsibilities in families, and teach the virtues to all children from the start rather than encouraging certain gendered traits.

All three women demonstrate both the masculine and the feminine traits that Spicher Kasdorf identifies, while also showing how the courage can come from either inner faith, or in the case of Lijsken Dircks, external and internal commitment to and help from God. A steadfast commitment to faith characterizes their actions just before death, yet they are still seen as pious women, taking on the best traits of each sex. It is important to look at where that strength that is depicted in these women comes from because in all three cases there is an internal source of strength; the women do not have to rely on others to provide them with courage, rather seeking it out within themselves. Some women are even leaders in their own church and community like Lijsken Dircks and possibly Maeyken van Deventer. And all three women were a part of the early Mennonite church's upbringing and formation that made it what it is today and formed the ideals that it stands for. Even in their final moments, these martyred women's steadfast faith and virtuous nature is featured front and center in their stories as depicted in *Martyrs Mirror*. They are not depicted as victims but as heroes of their faith.

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Commonplace Sexism in Society

Undergraduate Panel on Feminist Philosophy MPA Talk

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Abstract: *This paper explores the prevalent issue of sexism in our society, drawing from Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" in relation to the violence and exploitation that women face. Young's work extends Marx's concept of exploitation to highlight the systemic transfer of power through gender roles. This emphasizes the unreciprocated labor women provide for men and society. This paper also explores violence as a social practice in our society because of our societal norms and acceptance of misogyny.*

Keywords: sexism; society; gender roles; exploitation; violence

A problem that I've seen for as long as I can remember and faced myself is sexism in everyday society, even within my own family from other female family members. This is a problem that many women face that occurs in most aspects of life, and I suspect we'll be dealing with it in the future until we can make progress toward genuine change. For the sake of this paper though, I'm going to focus on the exploitation and oppressive violence of women as described by Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression."

Young's theory of exploitation as a form of oppression stems from Marx's philosophy regarding the exploitation of workers and "the right to appropriate the product of the labor of others" (Young 2007, 48). How this translates in our society with women and domestic labor is through our societal norms. It is common that women are assigned to uncompensated tasks in the household, which typically includes caregiving responsibilities, emotional support, and chores within the home. Because these tasks are uncompensated, they are often not viewed as a form of 'actual' labor even though these tasks are not only often on-going but can take a significant amount of time and energy. The lack of compensation and recognition of domestic labor that is automatically assigned to women perpetuates gender inequalities and hinders women in other areas of their lives; this is the appropriation of women's labor in the home. Young takes the shell of Marx's theory and applies this to society and its perpetuation of gender roles because of the parallels she sees between Marx's theory of class exploitation and the workings of women's oppression. In both cases, there is "a systematic and unreciprocated transfer of power" (50). These parallels can be seen in our society, for example, with the concept of structural inequality Marx explains in his work in philosophy how capitalism creates inequality through the exploitation of the working class; the patriarchy creates a similar system because women are systemically disadvantaged compared to men across the board.

Young's (2007) theory on violence as oppression refers to the fact that individuals that belong to certain social groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons that have no motive other than to damage, humiliate, or destroy that individual purely because they belong to that social group; this violence is considered a social practice because of its normalization in society (62). This use of violence is to keep the targeted group, in this case women, in a submissive role out of hatred and a need for male superiority. Women being subjected to violence has become a social norm in many ways.

A common trend and social norm throughout the ages is that women are the predominant caretakers of the family and other domestic duties. Many women are even taught that this is what the future of their lives will entail. As a young girl, I myself experienced this, as I heard so many times "when you grow up, you'll have your own kids to take care of; you need to know how to cook and clean to get a good husband." Little girls everywhere are essentially trained to become domestic servants, or at least that was the case with me.¹ I knew that wasn't what I wanted for my own life from a young age, no matter how many times my own mother tried to reinforce those ideals. "Women provide men and children with emotional care and provide men with sexual satisfaction, but as a group receive very little of either from men" (Young 2007, 51). Even today as the world changes, this remains the same. This is one of the many layers of commonplace sexism because of the simple fact that women from a young age are taught all about being good wives, yet the same is not done for men; in a way, they learn helplessness due to the fact that they don't grow up being taught similar expectations. This further confirms Young's statement that "women's energies are expended in jobs that enhance the status of, please, or comfort others, usually men; and these gender-based labors...often go unnoticed and undercompensated".

Another common and disturbing trend is violence against women. This violence takes place so often that it's a social practice of our society. Every day, women must be worried and have to prepare themselves to be potential targets of violence, simply by virtue of being women.

The degree of violence that women experience and how society responds is dependent on factors such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. In our society, we see this play out on a regular basis in the media, when a case where the victim is a white woman and receives significantly more attention in the media versus that of a woman of color who has gone through a similar ordeal yet receives less or no attention from media or society. Something that I've noticed in relation to this topic is that women live by a totally different set of rules when it comes to going out and socializing. There's a check list that we go through depending on the context of the social setting: if we're going out to meet someone for the first time, don't let your drink out of sight; make sure multiple people know where you are; be nice, but not too nice, so you don't get raped or murdered; and make sure you aren't followed home — have an exit strategy. The list adjusts itself in other contexts, but not by much, as these rules that we live with for our own safety are rules that men don't have to be bothered with because they don't have to worry about the threat of random violence in the way that women do. The fact that

¹ I would like to note that while this is my personal experience, this is not every woman's experience and this is not intended to universalize all women's experiences; it's important to remember that while some women may have similar experiences to mine, contextual factors such as race and socio-economic status play a significant role in affecting women's experiences.

women live with these guidelines because of how normalized the violence has become is oppression. Rape Crisis Center networks “estimate that more than one-third of all American women experience an attempted or successful sexual assault in their lifetimes” (61). The fact that this many women are victims of this type of violence is horrendous, but what’s even worse is that society appears to condone it and to perpetuate it. For example, when finding out about these crimes, people often say things like “what did she expect to happen with the way that she’s dressed?”, “she’s lying because she regretted it afterwards,” or even “she deserved it.” Statements like this condone violence against women. Out of all forms of crime, victims of sex crimes are the only victims asked to prove what happened to them out of fear of not ruining the life of the defendant. There was an incident (this is going to be a very condensed version) in May of 2014 where a college student and self-proclaimed “incel” Elliot Rodger went on to kill his two roommates and a friend they had over, but the target of his rage was a sorority where he shot three women and killed two of them because they were the embodiment of everything he hated about women. He targeted, in his own words, “stuck up blonde sluts.” (Srinivasan 2022, 81). This is one of many incidents that happen because of society’s acceptance of violence against women.

I’d like to note that in this case specifically within the incel movement, Elliot Rodgers was revered as a hero. If you’re not familiar with the term ‘incel’, it is the condensed version of the phrase “involuntarily celibate”, a phrase coined in online forums amongst groups of men, who feel entitled to sexual attention from women. The movement itself exists largely online, consisting of a group of men who despise, but want to control women. While much of this activity is online, we do see unfortunately how these men can be impacted by this ideology in the most extreme of ways, as with Elliot Rodgers and his shootings in Isla Vista. And we can see how this ideology is permeating our society, think of those men that are portrayed in today’s media that must have a woman who meets their exact standards in looks, submits to the will of their partner with no questions asked, and caters to their every whim, functioning as a human slave in his fantasy. These men are angry at the fact that women do not see them as the “good guys” they believe themselves to be. This belief of men being owed sex has become a prominent one in our society, and it is this very concept that also drives the hatred that incels have for women; it is because they feel entitled and deserving of sex and romantic attention from women and aren’t receiving it that inspires this hatred of women. So, when Elliot Rodgers killed multiple women during his mass shooting, this was viewed as an accomplishment to the incel community. After this incident, this community blamed feminism for Rodger’s actions because of women’s refusal to have sex with him.

With all of that being said, I have always wondered why our society functions in this way — why are women seemingly forced into a destiny of domestic servitude and stuck facing the constant threat of violence, just for being women? Young’s theories on this taught me that it’s because society sees it as normal; it’s what has always been in place, so why change it? Violence has stayed an oppressive social practice just as exploitation has. I’m not saying that it should stay this way, as we need to take some serious measures to change society’s view on the exploitation and violence against women. I’ve come up with a few different possible solutions for this: (1) there needs to be a petition for more legislation passed about violence against women and women’s rights. This needs to be thorough in defining what is constituted as sexual violence and

clearly state that a woman's autonomy is rightfully hers. I'm aware that there is already some legislation and laws in place, but clearly those aren't really helping all that much. In fact, certain laws that are meant to protect women from violence end up harming those who are the most vulnerable. For example, the 2006 Maria da Penha Law supported mandatory prison sentences for perpetrators of domestic violence, but such punitive measures only worked to dissuade women from reporting cases of violence since they depended on their male partners for economic support. (2) My next potential solution is compensating women for their domestic work because "it would strengthen the hand of women in their struggle against both capitalism and sexism, in turn giving them much more collective control over the processes of social production and reproduction" (Srinivasan 2022, 157). I believe that this solution would work to give more women the control over their struggle with sexism and capitalism because by providing a wage for domestic labor we're also acknowledging that domestic labor is a form of work, and in acknowledging that domestic is work that is more often than not, placed on women; women can also refuse to do this work. With domestic labor being given wages, this would also perhaps start to dissuade society from the belief of domestic labor being 'women's work.' (3) Another solution is the required teaching about sexism and gender equality in schools and all professions. This education should be *incorporated* in the curriculum as "presenting the information in a traditional lecture may result in the rejection of the information or a lack of motivation to change behaviors" (Cundiff et al. 2014). Harvard did an experiment about perception and a willingness to learn about the harm of sexism and how to recognize it and found that with "hands on methods like group games and discussions, participants were less likely to reject information and more likely to express interest to learn more about gender equity" (Cundiff et al. 2014). So, I believe that a culmination of these different solutions could really change the way society views women overall.

After doing a deep dive into "The Five Faces of Oppression," Young really had me thinking of different ways to tackle these problems with which we're faced. A lot of my solutions I honestly hadn't really considered until this project, as I wasn't sure what to do about these problems — I just know that something needs to be done. The material also enlightened me about why society functions this way and about how control (and the systemic transfer of power) works to keep women "in their place" so to speak, but it's also just pure hate or fear in the case of violence. I definitely believe now though that it can be changed, especially after researching possible solutions.

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The Other, Woman

Undergraduate Panel on Feminist Philosophy MPA Talk

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Abstract: *This paper embarks on a poignant journey initiated by a triumphant classroom debate, unraveling the layers of the 'Other' stereotype that has persistently constrained women. Grounded in Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, the study meticulously examines how women have been systematically positioned in opposition to men, perpetuating a cyclical narrative of inequality. From ancient myths to contemporary media, women find themselves confined to roles that not only reinforce harmful archetypes but also curtail their autonomy, fostering a pervasive sense of inferiority. This introspective journey underscores the profound impact of personal experiences in unveiling systemic inequalities. The classroom incident becomes a microcosm, prompting a call for broader societal reflection and collective action to dismantle ingrained stereotypes and foster a truly inclusive environment where women's autonomy is not just acknowledged but celebrated.*

The exploration extends to the intriguing 'pick-me' phenomenon, where women consciously or subconsciously distance themselves from perceived feminine weakness in pursuit of societal validation. This internalized oppression emerges as a crucial factor in perpetuating gender inequality, prompting a compelling call to disassemble ingrained stereotypes and foster an inclusive society where women need not conform to predefined norms to be recognized as equals. The paper critically engages with gendered qualifiers prevalent in various domains, such as the labels "gamer girl" and "girl boss." These qualifiers inadvertently reinforce the 'Other' stereotype by suggesting that women deviate from an assumed default male standard. Beyond undermining the achievements of women, such terms impede progress towards recognizing women without the need for gender-specific qualifiers.

Furthermore, the study bravely addresses the disconcerting phenomenon of women undermining each other for male approval, unveiling society's fixation on a restricted notion of womanhood. It underscores the urgency for a paradigm shift, urging the active challenge of oppressive structures and the creation of an empowering environment where women can explore their potential without being confined by predefined expectations. The conclusion advocates for a liberation from limiting narratives and envisions an equitable future that celebrates the boundless potential of women. By actively challenging existing norms, society can pave the way for individuals, irrespective of gender, to contribute their unique strengths to the rich tapestry of human achievement. Embracing the inherent possibilities within each person is not just an act of justice but a fundamental step towards dismantling age-old inequalities and achieving genuine equality in every aspect of life. In envisioning this transformative future, it becomes imperative to recognize that the dismantling of age-old inequalities requires a collective commitment to reshaping societal narratives. Beyond merely challenging norms, fostering lasting change necessitates the

establishment of inclusive spaces where diversity is not just tolerated but celebrated. Embracing the multifaceted contributions of women and dismantling the 'Other' stereotype demand intentional efforts in education, media representation, and policy-making. By empowering women to redefine success on their terms and challenging societal expectations, we can cultivate an environment where individuals of all genders flourish authentically. The journey towards true equality requires not only the acknowledgment of past injustices but a proactive commitment to shaping an egalitarian future.

Keywords: de Beauvoir; the Other; gender; authenticity

I stood before my class, triumphant. Debating has always come easily to me, and I had chosen a topic I knew no one class would argue against. As I said my piece, confidently and borderline arrogantly, the class grew silent. I watched my class squirm uncomfortably and knew I had won. My friend playfully raised her hand and asked a question that stopped me in my tracks. She asked me why I had referred to a group of people as 'he.' She jokingly mentioned that girls deserved to be included as well, and it was clear that she knew that my argument was bulletproof. I opened my mouth to explain that when referring to humanity at large, instead of saying 'she or he,' it was customary to use 'he.' I hesitated. I hesitated and stuttered, and the teacher moved on to the next group presenting, I had a perfect score. There was no happiness, just a sense of unease and emptiness. A decade later I decided to investigate what exactly I was feeling. After reading countless articles and books on feminism, I realized it was inferiority. Suddenly, that feeling I felt all those years ago made sense. Then, I realized, it had never left. All this time I had been grappling with my very existence being juxtaposed to that of a man's. As I kept reading, I realized that not much has changed throughout history. The thought that women are synonymous with weakness and inferiority has always been true. Throughout history, women have been viewed in relation to men, perpetually required to validate their worth, thereby fostering an internalized association of womanhood with negativity.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) defines the term "Other" as something whose identity and existence are formed in relation to the normative group. She uses this to explain how women have always been systematically positioned in contrast to men in societal constructs. An example she uses is how women are portrayed in myths. Women in these narratives seem to only exist to either lead a man into ruin or to be the object of his desire. Even in modern media, women are objectified as a goal or something to be conquered by the leading man. She is not a person with unique ideals and who is an equal, but merely the "Other" to the heroic main character. Another example she uses is the constraints placed on women to limit their autonomy and agency. Even today we are fighting against the concept that women are only proficient in housekeeping and childcare. These harmful archetypes prevent women from realizing their full potential and reinforces their position as "Other" in comparison to men.

In the quest to avoid being confined within the limiting boundaries of the "other" stereotype, some women who adopt the 'pick-me' mentality are driven by a desire to

distance themselves from what they perceive as weakness and subservience. Beauvoir's concept of "otherness" becomes particularly relevant in this context, as these women seek to disassociate from the stereotypical portrayal of femininity that has been historically assigned to them. The 'pick-me' phenomenon reflects an internalized oppression where women, consciously or subconsciously, strive to align themselves with the societal norm of maleness to gain acceptance and validation. By rejecting traditional feminine attributes, they believe they can escape the devaluation associated with being the 'other.' This internalized misogyny further perpetuates the cycle of gender inequality and diminishes the collective power of women. The urgent challenge lies in dismantling these deeply ingrained stereotypes and fostering an inclusive society where women no longer feel compelled to distance themselves from their identity to be seen as equals.

In the prevailing landscape where men continue to serve as the benchmark for most experiences, the tendency to label women in specific roles with gendered qualifiers perpetuates the 'other' stereotype. Take, for instance, the realm of gaming—when a woman enjoys video games, she is often branded as a "gamer girl" instead of simply being recognized as a "gamer" like her male counterparts. This distinction reinforces the notion that gaming is primarily a male domain, requiring a special designation when a woman participates. The same pattern emerges in professional spheres, where a woman of exceptional prowess is often dubbed a "girl boss." Despite the seemingly empowering nature of these terms, they inadvertently undermine the achievements of women by appending a gender identifier. The use of 'girl' in these titles implies an exception to the norm, reinforcing the idea that women are not inherently gamers or bosses. This linguistic habit of differentiating women from the default male experience not only reinforces the 'other' stereotype but also perpetuates the subtle bias that women's accomplishments are noteworthy precisely because they deviate from the expected male standard. The insidious impact of these labels further hinders the progress towards a society where women can be recognized and celebrated without the need for gender-specific qualifiers.

We currently live in a world where being a woman is so undesirable, that women would degrade other women for a man's approval. Society is so stuck on a singular mental image of what a woman should be that we are missing out on the boundless potential she has. Men grow up knowing they have the potential to be anything they wanted. They grow up with choices that women are not aware they had. Women are taught from an early age the box they are meant to fit in. Young girls are taught to view their achievements in relation to men and to find their worth in it. As we strive for a more equitable future, it is incumbent upon us to break free from the shackles of these limiting narratives. By challenging the status quo and fostering an environment that empowers women to explore their potential without the constraints of predefined expectations, we can pave the way for a society where individuals, irrespective of gender, can flourish and contribute their unique strengths to the collective tapestry of human achievement. Embracing the limitless possibilities that each person holds is not just an act of justice but a fundamental step towards true equality.

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