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Medusa: An Undergraduate Journal of Feminist Philosophy

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Epistemic Injustice and Nonsuicidal Self-Injury in Adolescents
Extending Testimonial Injustice and Reframing Youth as Knowers

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Abstract: *This paper argues that adolescent nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) is not solely a clinical phenomenon but an epistemic site shaped by power, credibility, and access to meaning. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's account of epistemic injustice and Kristie Dotson's framework of epistemic oppression, it demonstrates how adolescents are systematically wronged in their capacity as knowers. At early stages of help-seeking, youths' disclosures are frequently dismissed, reinterpreted, or absorbed into disciplinary frameworks, producing testimonial injustice and reinforcing credibility deficits structured by age-based identity power. Simultaneously, dominant clinical and institutional narratives marginalize adolescent perspectives, generating hermeneutical injustice through unequal participation in meaning-making. Addressing key objections concerning developmental reliability and institutional constraints, the paper distinguishes justified epistemic caution from unjust credibility discounting. It concludes that responding adequately to NSSI requires not only improved clinical practices but a transformation of the epistemic conditions under which adolescents are heard, understood, and recognized as credible epistemic agents.*

Keywords: Epistemic Injustice; Nonsuicidal Self-Injury (NSSI); Adolescence; Behavioral Psychology.

Adolescent nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) is most commonly situated within a clinical and psychological framework that prioritizes diagnostic categorization, behavioral assessment, and evidence-based intervention. Within this dominant paradigm, failures in response are typically explained in terms of logistical or institutional shortcomings—insufficient training among professionals, under-identification of at-risk individuals, or a lack of accessible mental health resources (Nock 2010, 339-363). While these explanations capture part of the problem, they leave unexamined a more fundamental pattern: many of the most consequential breakdowns in care occur *prior* to the formal diagnosis, clinical recognition, or even entry into therapeutic systems.

At these earlier stages, adolescents' attempts to communicate their experiences are frequently dismissed, minimized, or reinterpreted through frameworks that are ill-suited to capture the meaning of their distress. Disclosures of self-injury may be absorbed into disciplinary logics, framed as rule-breaking behavior, or interpreted as manipulative attempts to gain attention. In such cases, the adolescent's own account is not simply questioned but displaced, substituted by institutional narratives that prioritize behavioral control over experiential understanding (Fortune et al 2008, 96-104). Help-seeking becomes redirected away from therapeutic engagement and into systems of surveillance, punishment, or normalization.

These recurring patterns indicate that the problem cannot be adequately understood as merely clinical. Rather, they reveal a deeper epistemic failure, one that concerns how knowledge claims are recognized, evaluated, and taken up within social and institutional contexts. What is at stake is not only whether adolescents receive appropriate care, but whether they are recognized as credible knowers of their own experiences (Fortune et al, 96-104). This distinction is crucial. An adolescent may be physically present within a system of care yet still be excluded epistemically from meaningful participation in the interpretation of their own condition. When this occurs, the issue is not simply one of inadequate treatment but of epistemic injustice.

Understanding adolescent NSSI as an epistemic phenomenon shifts the focus from behavior alone to the conditions under which that behavior is interpreted. It invites us to ask not only *what adolescents are doing*, but how *their accounts of what they are doing* are received. It also foregrounds the role of power in shaping epistemic interactions: who is authorized to speak, whose testimony is trusted, and whose interpretations are taken to define reality (Klonskey 2007, 226-239). In this sense, adolescent NSSI becomes a site at which broader social hierarchies, particularly those structured by age, are enacted and reproduced. The central claim of this paper is that adolescents who engage in NSSI are not only navigating psychological distress but are also systematically wronged in their capacity as knowers, and that these epistemic harms are best understood through an integration of Miranda Fricker's account of epistemic injustice and Dotson's framework of epistemic oppression (Schön 1983).

Following Fricker, epistemic injustice refers to a distinctively moral wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. This formulation marks a significant shift in epistemology by foregrounding the ethical dimensions of knowledge practices. Rather than focusing exclusively on questions of truth or justification, Fricker's account directs attention to the fairness of credibility distribution and the social conditions under which knowledge is produced and recognized. Epistemic injustice, in this sense, is not merely about error; it is about "wronging someone in their role as a participant in epistemic life" (Fricker 2007).

Fricker identifies two primary forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker is assigned a deflated level of credibility owing to identity-based prejudice rather than evidence (Fricker 2007). This phenomenon is not reducible to simple disbelief or disagreement. Rather, it reflects a patterned distortion in the distribution of epistemic trust, one that is structured by broader social hierarchies. To understand testimonial injustice fully, it is necessary to unpack several key components.

The credibility deficit arises when a speaker is granted less epistemic trust than their testimony warrants. Crucially, such deficits are rarely arbitrary. They are structured by what Fricker terms identity power, the socially embedded authority attached to identity categories such as race, gender, class, or age (Fricker 2007). Identity power operates as a background condition that shapes how speakers are perceived before any specific exchange occurs. It influences expectations of competence, reliability, and rationality, often in ways that remain implicit or unexamined.

These dynamics unfold within what can be described as a credibility economy, a social field in which epistemic authority is distributed unevenly. Within this economy, some individuals are granted default credibility, while others must continually struggle to have their claims recognized as intelligible or trustworthy. This uneven distribution is not merely a reflection of individual bias but is embedded within institutional practices, cultural norms, and historical patterns of exclusion. Testimonial injustice thus reveals how epistemic practices are deeply entangled with social power.

Hermeneutical injustice, by contrast, operates at the level of shared interpretive resources. It occurs when there is a gap in the collective conceptual frameworks available for making sense of experience, placing certain individuals at an unfair disadvantage in understanding or communicating their own social reality. Unlike testimonial injustice, which occurs within exchanges between speakers and hearers, hermeneutical injustice is structural in a deeper sense: it concerns unequal participation in the production and circulation of meaning itself (Fricker 2007).

At this stage, it is important to clarify the specific relationship between epistemic injustice and adolescent NSSI that this paper advances. The claim is twofold. First, epistemic injustices often occur in adolescents' early attempts to communicate distress, where credibility deficits and interpretive marginalization contribute to feelings of frustration, isolation, and misrecognition. In this sense, epistemic injustice can function as a contributing condition that exacerbates or sustains self-injurious behavior. Second, and more centrally, this paper argues that epistemic injustice structures the way in which NSSI is interpreted and treated within clinical and institutional contexts. Here, the injustice lies not only in the origin of the behavior but in the systematic failure to recognize adolescents as credible knowers of their own experiences. While these two dimensions are analytically distinct, they are mutually reinforcing: epistemic marginalization shapes both the emergence of distress and the frameworks through which that distress is subsequently understood.

This form of injustice is particularly insidious because it begins to operate before explicit communication. When individuals lack access to the conceptual tools necessary to articulate their experiences, or when those tools are not recognized within dominant discourse, their experiences may remain partially or wholly unintelligible. In such cases, individuals are not simply disbelieved; they are misunderstood at a fundamental level. Their experiences fail to fit within the available categories of meaning, resulting in a form of epistemic marginalization that is both cognitive and social (Schön, 1983). While Fricker's framework provides a powerful account of these dynamics, it does not fully capture the ways that epistemic harms persist, accumulate, and become embedded within institutional systems. To address this limitation, it is necessary to extend the analysis through Kristie Dotson's concept of epistemic oppression.

While Fricker's framework allows for the identification of discrete instances of epistemic injustice, Dotson's account of epistemic oppression explains how such injustices persist, accumulate, and become embedded within institutional practices. Dotson shifts the analysis from episodic credibility deficits to durable structures of exclusion, showing why these epistemic harms are not easily corrected through individual good intentions alone. In this sense, Dotson's framework does not merely extend Fricker's account but provides the structural dimension necessary to explain the persistence of epistemic injustice in clinical and institutional contexts. The significance of Dotson's framework will become clearer in what follows, particularly in analyzing how these epistemic harms are reproduced across institutional settings.

A significant objection to the account advanced here concerns the potential overextension of epistemic injustice, particularly relating to adolescents. One might argue that what has been described as testimonial injustice is, in many cases, more appropriately understood as epistemically justified caution. On this view, credibility deficits assigned to adolescents do not necessarily arise from prejudice but from reasonable considerations about developmental stage. Adolescents, it may be argued, are still in the process of acquiring cognitive, emotional, and reflective capacities; thus, they may be less reliable informants in certain domains (Doston 2012, 24-47). From this perspective, discounting adolescent testimony, especially in contexts involving complex psychological phenomena such as NSSI, may reflect responsible epistemic practice rather than injustice.

This objection gains further traction when one considers Fricker's own caution against conceptual overreach. Fricker acknowledges that not all credibility deficits constitute testimonial injustice and introduces the notion of "epistemic bad luck" to account for cases in which speakers are accorded less credibility for reasons that are not rooted in prejudice (Dotson 2012, 24-47). If adolescents, on average, possess less developed capacities for self-understanding or articulation, then reduced credibility may, in some instances, track genuine epistemic limitations rather than identity-based bias. Extending testimonial injustice too broadly, the objection continues, risks collapsing the distinction between prejudice and rational credibility assessment, thereby undermining the conceptual precision of the framework (Dotson 2011, 236-257).

A related concern arises at the level of hermeneutical injustice. One might argue that the interpretive difficulties surrounding adolescent NSSI do not stem from structural exclusion but from the inherent complexity of the phenomenon itself. NSSI is multifaceted, context-dependent, and often difficult to articulate even for those who engage in it. As such, gaps in understanding may reflect the limits of available psychological knowledge rather than the marginalization of adolescent perspectives. In this view, the absence of adequate interpretive resources is not necessarily unjust but epistemically unavoidable. This dynamic also aligns with what Gaile Pohlhaus describes as willful hermeneutical ignorance, in which dominant groups maintain interpretive frameworks that systematically exclude marginalized knowers (Pohlhaus 2012, 715-735).

Moreover, a more institutionally oriented version of the objection maintains that schools and clinical settings must prioritize risk management and behavioral regulation. From this standpoint, the use of disciplinary frameworks or standardized diagnostic categories is not primarily an epistemic failure but a pragmatic necessity. Institutions are tasked with ensuring safety, maintaining order, and responding efficiently to potential harm. In such contexts, privileging experiential testimony over established protocols may be seen as impractical or even irresponsible. Accordingly, the filtering or reinterpretation of adolescent testimony may be understood as a function of institutional constraints rather than epistemic injustice.

While these objections raise important considerations, they do not ultimately undermine the central claim of this paper. Instead, they help clarify the conditions under which credibility deficits and interpretive gaps constitute epistemic injustice rather than epistemic prudence (Fortune et al 2008, 96-104).

First, the appeal to developmental difference does not negate the possibility of testimonial injustice; rather, it underscores the need for context-sensitive evaluation. The argument advanced here is not that all credibility downgrading of adolescents is unjust, but that it becomes unjust when it is "socially patterned, identity-inflected, and resistant to counterevidence" (Dotson 2011, 236-257). Developmental considerations may justify *some* degree of epistemic caution, but they do not warrant the systematic discounting of adolescent testimony across contexts. In cases of NSSI, adolescents are reporting on their own subjective experiences—domains in which they possess a form of first-person authority that cannot be easily supplanted by external observation (Klonsky 2007, 226-239). When their accounts are dismissed not because of evidential shortcomings but because of generalized assumptions about adolescence, the credibility deficit exceeds what can be justified by developmental considerations alone.

Moreover, the concept of identity power helps illuminate how age functions not merely as a marker of developmental stage but as a socially organized axis of epistemic authority. Within institutional settings, adolescents are routinely positioned as less credible knowers, irrespective of the content or consistency of their testimony. This positioning is reinforced through disciplinary practices, professional hierarchies, and norms of adult expertise. As a result, credibility assessments often reflect not individualized judgments of reliability but generalized expectations tied to age (Nock 2010, 339-363). Under these conditions, what appears as epistemic caution is, in fact, structured by identity-based assumptions, thereby satisfying the conditions for testimonial injustice.

Second, the claim that interpretive gaps surrounding NSSI are merely epistemically unavoidable fails to account for the distribution of those gaps. Hermeneutical injustice does not require that interpretive resources be absent in a complete sense; rather, it concerns the unequal positioning of groups in relation to those resources. Adolescents are not simply encountering a universally shared difficulty in understanding NSSI; they are disproportionately excluded from shaping the frameworks through which it is understood. Clinical and institutional narratives often prioritize adult interpretations while marginalizing adolescent accounts, resulting in a misalignment between lived experience and available categories of meaning (Klonsky 2007, 226-239). This misalignment is not incidental but reflects unequal participation in the production of knowledge, thereby constituting a form of hermeneutical injustice.

Dotson's concept of epistemic oppression further strengthens this response by emphasizing that such exclusions are not isolated but systematic (Fricker 2007). The persistence of the interpretive gaps, particularly when they consistently disadvantage the same group, is indicative of a structural marginalization rather than an epistemic inevitability. In the case of adolescent NSSI, the failure to adequately incorporate youth perspectives into diagnostic frameworks, research paradigms, and institutional practices suggests that the problem lies not only in the complexity of the phenomenon but in the organization of epistemic authority.

Finally, while institutional constraints are real and often unavoidable, they do not absolve epistemic responsibility. The prioritization of risk management and behavioral regulation may explain why adolescent testimony is filtered or reinterpreted, but it does not justify the epistemic harms that result from these practices. Indeed, this objection reinforces rather than undermines the central claim: it demonstrates how epistemic injustice can be embedded within institutional logics that appear neutral or necessary. Dotson's framework is particularly useful here, as it allows us to understand how epistemic oppression operates even in the absence of explicit prejudice or malicious intent (Dotson 2012, 24-47). Institutional practices can systematically exclude certain forms of knowledge simply by privileging particular modes of interpretation over others.

Importantly, acknowledging epistemic injustice does not require abandoning institutional protocols or professional expertise. Rather, it calls for a critical examination of how these practices shape credibility assessments and interpretive frameworks. The goal is not to replace clinical judgment with uncritical acceptance of all testimony, but to ensure that such judgment remains responsive to evidence and is not distorted by identity-based assumptions or structural biases.

In this way, the objections considered here ultimately reinforce the need for the conceptual framework developed in this paper. They highlight the importance of maintaining a distinction between justified epistemic caution and unjust credibility deficit, while also demonstrating how easily that distinction can be obscured within institutional contexts. By integrating Fricker's account of epistemic injustice with Dotson's framework of epistemic oppression, it becomes possible to navigate this complexity without collapsing into either overextension or undue restriction (Dotson 2011, 236-257).

The result is a more precise and robust account of how adolescents who engage in NSSI are epistemically marginalized, one that acknowledges legitimate epistemic constraints while still identifying the conditions under which those constraints become vehicles of injustice (Fortune et al 2008, 96-104). Adolescent NSSI, on this account, is not merely a clinical or behavioral phenomenon but an epistemic site structured by unequal distributions of credibility, institutionalized interpretive frameworks, and restricted access to meaning-making resources (Nock 2010, 339-363). Adolescents who engage in self-injury are not only navigating psychological distress but are also positioned within systems that systematically undermine their capacity to function as knowers.

The integration of Fricker's account of epistemic injustice with Dotson's framework of epistemic oppression allows for a more comprehensive understanding of these harms. Fricker provides the conceptual tools to identify moments of credibility distortion and interpretive marginalization, while Dotson explains how these moments accumulate and become structurally embedded within institutional practices (Fricker 2007). Together, they reveal that the epistemic marginalization of adolescents is neither incidental nor isolated, but patterned, persistent, and socially reinforced (Dotson 2012, 24-47).

Importantly, this analysis does not deny that developmental differences may justify certain forms of epistemic caution. Rather, it establishes the conditions under which such caution becomes unjust: when it is socially patterned, identity-inflected, resistant to counterevidence, and causally connected to epistemic harm. Under these conditions, credibility assessments cease to function as rational calibrations of trust and instead operate as mechanisms of epistemic exclusion.

If the preceding analysis is correct, then addressing adolescent NSSI requires more than improved clinical accuracy; it requires the cultivation of epistemic justice. At the interpersonal level, this involves practices that resist credibility deficits, such as active listening, reflexive humility, and a willingness to treat adolescents as authoritative reporters of their own subjective experiences. These are not merely communicative virtues but epistemic ones, as they function to recalibrate distorted credibility economies by counteracting identity-based assumptions about adolescence.

At the structural level, epistemic justice demands greater inclusion of adolescent perspectives in the production of clinical knowledge itself. This includes participatory research models, youth-informed frameworks of interpretation, and critical reflection on how diagnostic categories are constructed and maintained. Without such changes, adolescents remain positioned primarily as objects of knowledge rather than contributors to it. Epistemic justice, in this sense, is not simply a matter of being heard but of having one's contributions shape the interpretive frameworks through which experiences like NSSI are understood.

Addressing adolescent NSSI, therefore, requires more than improved diagnosis or intervention. It demands a reconfiguration of the epistemic conditions under which adolescents are heard, interpreted, and taken seriously. This includes not only the cultivation of epistemic virtues such as humility, but also the transformation of institutional practices that structure credibility economies and interpretive frameworks (Nock 2010, 339-363). Until adolescents are recognized not merely as patients or subjects of care but as participants in the production of knowledge about their own experiences, the systems designed to support them will remain, in a fundamental sense, epistemically unjust.

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Feminist Approach to Ethical Duties in Healthcare

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Abstract: *Healthcare systems operate and reinforce Individualistic Hierarchical Models of healthcare over Feminist Egalitarian Models that actively promote equitable treatment and full epistemic belief in the testimony of all patients regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Compared to Feminist Egalitarian Models, Individualistic Hierarchical Models operate as a system that reinforces a dominant majority view of social norms and biases. First, I will explain how Individualistic Hierarchical Models in healthcare can reinforce and actively engage in oppressing minority patients, which can increase their likelihood of experiencing epistemic injustice when seeking medical treatment. Second, I will argue why healthcare professionals have an ethical duty to reduce minority patients' experience of epistemic injustice in healthcare and actively promote Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models due to the principle of non-maleficence. Lastly, I will propose epistemic trustworthiness as a solution for how healthcare professionals can employ feminist epistemology as a prevention tool to reduce minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice in healthcare when assessing minority patients who may feel their testimony or knowledge is not being believed or taken seriously when they are seeking medical treatment. Overall, the aim is to highlight and argue why healthcare professionals have a duty to reduce minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice in healthcare by actively promoting Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models.*

Keywords: Feminist Egalitarian Models (FEM); Individualistic Hierarchical Models (IHM); Hermeneutical Injustice; Testimonial Injustice; Epistemic Trustworthiness.

Promoting Feminist Egalitarian Models in Healthcare

Healthcare systems operate and reinforce Individualistic Hierarchical Models of healthcare over Feminist Egalitarian Models that actively promote equitable treatment and full epistemic belief in the testimony of all patients regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Compared to Feminist Egalitarian Models, Individualistic Hierarchical Models operate as a system that reinforces a dominant majority view of social norms and biases that can marginalize and actively oppress patient minorities based on their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., by excluding their personal experiences and testimony from the dominant majority view or acceptance. Oftentimes, patients seeking medical treatment in our society will experience their symptoms or concerns being dismissed or not believed due to social biases or stereotypes that a health professional may hold. This is an epistemic injustice that reinforces systematic racism and sexism towards patients, and should be a moral concern of all healthcare professionals who encounter patients for a variety of reasons, as I will argue.

First, I will explain how Individualistic Hierarchical Models in healthcare systems can reinforce and actively engage in oppressing minority patients, which can increase their likelihood of experiencing epistemic injustice when seeking medical treatment. Second, I will argue why healthcare professionals have an ethical duty to reduce minority patients' experience of epistemic injustice in healthcare systems and actively promote Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models due to the principle of non-maleficence. Lastly, I will provide a solution for how healthcare professionals can employ feminist epistemology as a prevention tool to reduce minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice in healthcare when assessing minority patients who may feel their testimony or knowledge is not believed or taken seriously when they are seeking medical treatment. Overall, the goal is to highlight and argue why healthcare professionals have a duty to reduce minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice in healthcare by actively promoting Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models, which would greatly reduce the morally concerning, frequent issue of minority patients’ experiences of epistemic injustice, such as facing experiences of systematic racism and sexism from health professionals, when seeking medical treatment. Systematic racism is a public health crisis, and all healthcare professionals have a moral responsibility and ethical duty to dismantle and resist Individualistic Hierarchical Models that reinforce marginalization and oppression of minority groups.

Individualistic Hierarchical Models Reinforcing Epistemic Injustice

In our society, the education, government, and criminal justice systems are naturally Individualistic Hierarchical Models that also interweave into healthcare systems. Systematic racism and sexism derive from dominant majority views that put minorities as inferior to the majority. For example, a white, heterosexual, married, male doctor would not experience marginalization and discrimination based on their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., compared to an Indian, homosexual, unmarried female who has no college education, who would likely experience at some point in her life marginalization and discrimination based on minority identities that overlap. Susan Sherwin describes in her book, *No Longer Patient: Feminist Ethics and Health Care*, an influential piece in feminist bioethics literature on how healthcare systems that are

Individualistic Hierarchical Models can reinforce and actively engage in oppressing minority patients based on their race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

> "In a hierarchical society such as the one we live in, members of groups that are oppressed on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, and so forth are the people who are most likely to be poor. Moreover, not only does being oppressed lead to poverty and poverty to poor health but being oppressed is itself also a significant determining factor in the areas of health and healthcare. Those who are most oppressed in society at large are likely to experience the most severe and frequent health problems and have the least access to adequate medical treatment. One reason for this vulnerability is that oppressed individuals are usually exposed to high levels of stress by virtue of their oppressed status, and excessive stress is responsible for many serious illnesses and is a complicating factor in most diseases. Another important factor to consider, as we shall see, is that the same prejudices that undermine the status of the oppressed members of society may affect the treatment they receive at the hands of healthcare workers" (Sherwin 1992, 222-223).

To extend on Sherwin's description, I am concerned with the same prejudices that undermine the status of the oppressed members of society, resulting from frequent experiences of epistemic injustice that also may affect the medical treatment they receive from health professionals. There are two different types of epistemic injustice that can occur. The first type is hermeneutical injustice, defined by Miranda Fricker as "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experiences obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (McKinnon 2016, 437-446). The second type is testimonial injustice, defined by Fricker as "a speaker suffers a credibility deficit due to an identity prejudice (possibly arising from an identity stereotype) on the hearer's part. And this kind of harm is epistemic in nature: the speaker is harmed in her capacity as a knower" (McKinnon 2016, 437-446). I am more concerned with testimonial injustice in this argument, however, more often than not, testimonial injustice is intertwined with hermeneutical injustice by influencing experiences of credibility deficit by excluding minorities' social experiences from collective understanding due to systematic prejudices. To understand how health professionals might engage in epistemic injustices that can affect a minority patient's access to adequate healthcare, take Serena Williams' birth story as an example to highlight the issue of how "Black women are 3 times more likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause than White women" (CDC 2024). Williams has a history of pulmonary embolism, which is "a blood clot in the lungs which can affect blood flow and oxygen levels in the lungs" (Cleveland Clinic, 2024). After she gave birth, she started to experience symptoms that she was familiar with from her previous experiences with a pulmonary embolism. Williams' testimony about her concerns with her history of a pulmonary embolism was repeatedly dismissed by her nurse until her symptoms were so severe that she advocated for a CAT scan of her lungs. After having to advocate for her concerns about her symptoms to be taken seriously, the nurse asked her doctor to order the CAT scan, where they found “several small blood clots in her lungs” (Howell 2018). Williams was correct all along about the severity of her symptoms and exactly what she needed to survive. If her nurse continued to dismiss her concerns about her symptoms and not take her seriously, which is a classic example of testimonial injustice of black women's experience in healthcare, she could have very well died. For Williams, her experiences of testimonial injustice after her birth could have been the difference between life and death. For many other black women and minority patients, experiences of testimonial injustice that are reinforced by systematic prejudices that result from Individualistic Hierarchical Models can negatively influence healthcare experiences as a matter of life or death, and inadequate access to medical treatment. This leads to the next section, where it is argued why healthcare professionals have an ethical duty to reduce minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice in healthcare and actively promote Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models in healthcare.

Ethical Duties to Reduce Epistemic Injustice

In medical ethics and especially in feminist bioethics, healthcare professionals have an ethical duty to reduce and not add to patients' experiences of epistemic harms when seeking medical treatment. This derives from one of the four principles of medical ethics non-maleficence, defined by Tom Beauchamp as “the maxim primum non nocere: ‘Above all, do no harm’” (Beauchamp 2007, 3-10). These harms to patients, especially minority patients, include epistemic harms in healthcare that can be reinforced by Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) and Individualistic Hierarchical Models that contribute to minority patients' likelihood and probability of experiencing epistemic injustice in healthcare. SDOH can overlap with epistemic injustice, but does not necessarily have direct causal epistemic social harms. Robert Hahn describes the causation as essentially probabilistic, not deterministic. For example, for there to be a SDOH outcome, “it must be integrated in a societal system that enacts it and enforces it” (Hahn, 2021). Therefore, poverty can be a probable SDOH due to minority patients' social location and oppressed status, but not necessarily a deterministic outcome of health. All healthcare professionals have a duty to promote the principle of non-maleficence and Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models, which can be difficult when a minority patient's identity and epistemic experiences may not be well understood by healthcare professionals who do not share similar epistemic experiences. This is due to the systematic discrimination that Individualistic Hierarchical Models reinforce through (1) health professionals' epistemic educational experiences being superior to minority patients' educational experiences in an authoritative model of healthcare, and (2) epistemically harmful systematic prejudices and stereotypes of minority patients that exclude their testimony as believable or taken seriously when minority patients seek medical treatment. We can see in Williams' case that her nurse did not immediately promote the principle of non-maleficence until Williams had to repeatedly advocate due to the concerns about her symptoms. Williams' nurse engaged in paternalistic epistemic harms that derive from Individualistic Hierarchical Models in dominant social systems of healthcare that exclude patients' testimony due to the authoritative model of superiority of a healthcare professional over a patient (especially those who are members of minorities), often resulting in inadequate access to medical treatment. Sherwin highlights the argument about how paternalism in Individualistic Hierarchical Models in healthcare systems is epistemically harmful to minority patients.

> "The argument in support of widespread paternalism in medicine appeals to the relevance of the special scientific expertise of physicians. The authoritarian medical model relies heavily on the belief that neither patients nor healthcare professionals other than physicians possess the appropriate skills and capacities to exercise decision-making power. In particular, patients (and their guardians) are thought to be too uneducated, too emotionally distraught, or too stupid to make adequate decisions in the face of illness." (Sherwin 1992, 145)

Health professionals, especially physicians at the top of the authoritative model, have an ethical duty to reduce engagement with paternalism in healthcare due to the increasing likelihood of dismissing minority patients' concerns about their symptoms. As a health professional, when treating minority patients who have concerns about their symptoms, understanding how SDOH can affect minority patients and how Individualistic Hierarchical Models in healthcare systems reinforce minority patients' likelihood of experiencing epistemic injustice can help bridge the complex gap of not understanding minority patients' epistemic experiences that are different from those of healthcare professionals. Additionally, employing these epistemic tools can help actively promote Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models from within the healthcare system. Overall, this can be an influential way for healthcare professionals to positively use their epistemic advantage status within healthcare systems to actively promote Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models to colleagues within their epistemic circles to create vital social systemic change. This leads to the last section, where an explanation is provided of how to employ epistemic trustworthiness as a preventative feminist social epistemological tool to help provide a potential solution to reducing minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice in healthcare when assessing minority patients who may feel their testimony or knowledge is not being believed or taken seriously when they are seeking medical treatment.

Avoiding Willful Ignorance and Engaging in Epistemic Trustworthiness

Instead of intentionally or unintentionally engaging in willful ignorance as a health professional, choosing to employ epistemic trustworthiness as a preventive social feminist epistemological tool can help reduce the reinforcement of minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice when seeking medical treatment. Willful ignorance is defined as when "dominantly situated knowers refuse to acknowledge epistemic tools developed from the experienced world of those situated marginally. Such refusals allow dominantly situated knowers to misunderstand, misinterpret, and/or ignore whole parts of the world." (McKinnon 2016, 437-446). When healthcare professionals engage in willful ignorance, they reduce the ability to build epistemic trustworthiness with minority patients by being willfully ignorant and excluding their epistemic experiences. Epistemic trustworthiness can be employed as a preventive feminist social epistemological tool that helps healthcare professionals understand the complex epistemic dynamics between Individualistic Hierarchical Models in healthcare systems and how they can contribute to minority patients' experiences of marginalization and oppression through reinforcing dominant majority social norms and biases. Nancy Daukas explains how to employ epistemic trustworthiness as a preventive feminist social epistemological tool.

> "Daukas offers a broad interpretation of the virtue of epistemic trustworthiness, understanding it as a social virtue that incorporates our abilities to make sound credibility assignments of others. Epistemic trustworthiness amounts to a disposition to behave (in a given context and for a given domain of knowledge) in accordance with one's actual epistemic status" (Gary et al., 2017).

For example, misgendering a transgender patient, especially when a health professional ignores a health chart note or when a patient requests their correct pronouns and name, is epistemically harmful to transgender patients by ignoring and excluding their social identity from the dominant majority view. This is an epistemic injustice that transgender patients often experience in healthcare and at the hands of health professionals. Understanding an epistemic status as a health professional and validating the different epistemic social experiences that there may be for transgender patients' epistemic status can help build epistemic trustworthiness and positively impact a healthcare professional's ability to adequately treat a transgender patient. "Trustworthiness is possible 'only when an agent is attuned to her own, and particular others', epistemic strengths and weaknesses relative to particular context and projects.'" (Gary et al., 2017)

If a health professional wants to engage in preventive feminist social epistemological tools like epistemic trustworthiness, they will be better equipped to understand epistemic differences between themselves and the patient they are treating, to give them the adequate medical treatment they are rightly owed. If a healthcare professional prioritizes epistemic trustworthiness with minority patients, this can help prevent and reduce harmful epistemic practices that exclude minority patients' voices entirely in healthcare systems. Healthcare professionals have a duty to reduce and not contribute to systemic oppression or epistemic injustice, which can be difficult when our society has healthcare systems that operate as Individualistic Hierarchical Models. If a health professional is concerned about a minority patient's epistemically harmful experiences at the hands of healthcare professionals or the healthcare system, it is important not to be wilfully ignorant of their epistemic harms and to morally self-reflect on how to best assess the medical treatment of the patient based on contrasting your epistemic status and your patient's epistemic status.

> "Similar to Fricker, Daukas recommends that agents who wish to be epistemically trustworthy exercise a kind of "oppositional agency" that resists the social norms of credibility assignments where social prejudices play a problematic role, such that: 'the epistemic agent works from dispositions which enable her to unmask and transform epistemically unsound (and socially unjust) practices of epistemic exclusions (i.e., testimonial injustice)'"(Gary et al 2017).

Fricker and Nancy Dauka's explanations of testimonial injustice and epistemic trustworthiness provide an essential groundwork for why healthcare professionals should actively promote Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models in healthcare systems, and how we need to efficiently resist Individualistic Hierarchical Models that exclude minority patients from the dominant social view. Healthcare professionals who care about upholding their duty to the principle of non-maleficence to patients should also know preventive feminist social epistemological tools that can be helpful to make systematic social change to harmful norms, stereotypes, and biases given to minority patients when seeking medical care. The "overly emotional" patients who are (trans) women may experience frequent gaslighting when seeking healthcare, an important concept of epistemic injustice explained by Veronica Ivy in McKinnon's argument. Speakers who are (trans) women can "suffer a credibility deficit due to an identity stereotype or prejudice: (trans) women are emotional, and emotionality undermines rationality and perceptual reliability. This is classic testimonial injustice, then" (McKinnon et al, 2017). To help reduce harmful epistemic dominant social norms that influence experiences of testimonial injustice in healthcare or by healthcare professionals, exercising an "oppositional agency" can help not only reduce minority patients experiences of epistemic injustice and inadequate medical treatment, it can help dismantle the very epistemically harmful social system that reinforces minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice. When healthcare professionals mirror to colleagues and their patients (especially minorities) the importance of prioritizing resistance to reinforcing harmful social dominant epistemic harms and the effectiveness of employing epistemic trustworthiness with minority patients, this can help influence vital and overdue social systemic change of the healthcare systems to Feminist Egalitarian Models over epistemically harmful healthcare systems like Individualistic Hierarchical Models.

Conclusion

The overall aim of this essay is to emphasize the importance of the argument for why healthcare professionals have an ethical duty and moral responsibility to reduce minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice when patients are seeking medical treatment. Actively promoting Feminist Egalitarian Models over Individualistic Hierarchical Models in healthcare systems can help reduce and mirror resistance to colleagues, the morally concerning problem of minority patients' frequent experiences of epistemic injustice when seeking medical treatment, such as experiencing systematic racism and sexism. In the first section, I explained how Individualistic Hierarchical Models reinforce and engage in harmful social epistemic prejudices that often marginalize and oppress minority patients based on their membership in a minority identity, where frequent experiences of epistemic injustice can greatly reduce adequate access to medical treatment and authority in healthcare systems. In the second section, I explained why healthcare professionals have an ethical duty to reduce minority patients' experiences of epistemic injustice in healthcare systems when receiving medical treatment due to the principle of non-maleficence and known harmful social epistemic systems like paternalism and authoritative models in Individualistic Hierarchical Models. In the last section, I explained how epistemic trustworthiness can be a preventative epistemological social feminist tool only if healthcare professionals are willing to morally self-reflect and resist willful ignorance within healthcare systems and medical treatment of minority patients. The hope is that this influences healthcare professionals to engage in feminist epistemology as a prevention tool when medically assessing and treating minority patients, advocating for more egalitarian healthcare systems for all minority patients.

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Critiquing from the Kitchen: An Argument for the Socialization of Domestic Labor

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Abstract: *I argue for the socialization of housework as the most satisfactory solution to the issues plaguing this work under neoliberal capitalism. I situate domestic labor in a Marxist political economy to demonstrate the theoretical value of domestic labor. I then undertake a critical investigation of previous socialist-feminist attempts to theorize this labor to clarify my conception in relation to previous endeavors. My argument will then expose the motive to devalue this labor, namely, for capital accumulation to continue at its current scale. As the value of domestic labor is demonstrated, I examine the current iteration of neoliberal capitalism to critique the organization of domestic labor prevalent for most Americans. I then examine socialist-feminist solutions to the issue of domestic labor before arguing that socializing housework through increasing social services by the state is the strongest answer.*

Keywords: Socialist-feminist; Carework; Neoliberal Capitalism; Domestic Labor; Marxism.

In each form of capitalist organization, domestic labor has remained a necessity. Despite this necessity, domestic labor is devalued. The devaluation of domestic labor obscures its necessity–indeed, capital accumulation at its current rate depends on domestic labor continuing in its current unpaid or underpaid state. This continued demand for labor at the current unpaid/underpaid level, alongside the restructuring of women's work, creates an unsustainable situation (Fraser 2016, 112). It is evident from this that domestic labor cannot continue in its current state. Socialist feminists have long theorized on alternative possibilities for organizing domestic labor, but the vast majority of the solutions they have proposed are inadequate for our current moment of capitalism. Investigating the state of domestic labor in our neoliberal iteration of capitalist society, I argue that the socialization of housework is the most satisfactory solution posed by socialist feminists, as it covers most of the issues with this type of labor.

Before I can effectively examine the domestic labor debate, two assumptions that plague the topic must be dispelled. First, it is worth noting that the devaluation of domestic labor cannot be conceptualized as purely due to the patriarchy or determined by the presence or lack of a wage without mystifying the issue and depicting it as controlled by otherworldly forces resistant to material change. In thinking on domestic labor, we may acknowledge the historically materialist roots of the patriarchy–that women's differential position regarding social reproduction due to their capacity to have children is the root of women's social oppression (Vogel 2013, 140-151). This conception frees the devaluation of domestic work from the assumption that it is an individualistic and insulated issue. Moreover, this dispels the notion that the oppression of women is natural; this position holds that oppression is a means of controlling women's reproductive labor. Regarding the wage, we may conceptualize it as a means of obscuring the value of one's labor as well as a marker for how "valued" certain types of work are (Folbre 2001, 66). However, when we ascribe mystical significance to the wage—i.e., domestic labor is devalued because it is largely unpaid or underpaid—we ascribe too much power to the wage and risk losing sight of the social nature of what constitutes work. Domestic labor is underpaid or unpaid because it is devalued, not devalued because it is underpaid or unpaid.

To keep my analysis of domestic labor relevant to this moment in time, I must move beyond another assumption, namely, that of how domestic labor is always being performed in a family unit and is unpaid. The surging ubiquity of the two-earner household demonstrates the need for those analyzing domestic labor to look beyond the housewife as the sole subject of analysis. The figure of the housewife was created during a shift in women's labor. She was by no means a representation of all women's experiences. Angela Davis claims that, in fact, "The 'housewife' reflected a partial reality, for she was really a symbol of the economic prosperity enjoyed by the emerging middle classes" (1980, 4). She then explains that women of color and lower-class women have historically worked outside of the home. Generally, these women were unable to be housewives due to factors such as structural racism or a lack of finances, ensuring that they could not afford to stay home. It is true that all women are oppressed and that the ideology of the housewife impacted women's working conditions by marking the domestic sphere as the natural sphere, which juxtaposed "...the masculine world of the public economy" (Davis 1980, 4-5). However, a hegemonic analysis of domestic labor that examines the material conditions of only one demographic of women is not productive or practical. We cannot bring this one-dimensionality into modern attempts to theorize domestic labor without obscuring the reality of these women whose material conditions we hope to improve.

With these assumptions out of the way, I will consider material reasons for the devaluation of domestic labor. I examine socialist-feminist works that theorize the value of domestic labor by using a Marxist framework and define the boundaries of the public and private as set by Hannah Arendt, as well as clarify her distinction between labor and work. Moreover, I investigate the current organization of social reproduction under neoliberal capitalism through cuts to the welfare state, the marketization of reproductive work, and the exporting of care work to migrant women. Once I have examined the history of theorizing domestic labor and scrutinized the current crisis of care, it will be clear that capital accumulation depends on the devaluation of reproductive labor and therefore benefits from obscuring its necessity. If those performing reproductive labor were to be properly compensated, capital accumulation would take a hit. Therefore, it is in capitalism's best short-term interest to squeeze those unpaid or underpaid laborers, disproportionately women, for all that their work is worth. However, this leads to a long-term crisis of an aged population and a depleted workforce with the capacity to perform productive labor due to the needs of their care not being met. From here, I examine several socialist feminist answers to the issue of domestic labor to demonstrate why they are largely insufficient for this moment in neoliberal capitalism. I will then show that the most practical solution is the socialization of domestic labor.

The Value of Domestic Labor Ascribed Through Marx

Socialist feminists in the 1970s and 1980s did not live under our current iteration of neoliberal capitalism, but they certainly saw the exploitation of women's labor in the family unit. From this exploitation, they began to theorize using the figure of the housewife (Federici 2012, 1-5). Developed predominantly in the 19th century as industrialism proliferated throughout America, this figure began to restructure the work of white women and create a master narrative of these women as naturally altruistic and suited for domestic labor (Fraser 2016, 106). This figure was created "both to pacify male workers and support the shift from light industry to heavy industry" and was structurally established in policies such as protective legislation. (Federici 2012, 63). These policies that "excluded women from certain male-dominated occupations which offered good wages and prestige" (Baron 1981, 25) represented one effort that legitimized gender-based discrimination in the workforce. The figure of the housewife, a response to a specific historical shift in labor, persists in the collective consciousness and continues to mark women as the undertakers of this unpaid and love-motivated toil that replenishes labor power and regenerates the labor force. It is evident from the housewife's creation that women's interaction with the labor force is malleable depending on what is necessary for the perceived optimization of productivity. This disproves the idea that women's place in the domestic sphere is natural, as the ideology of the housewife claims.

The 1970s and 1980s saw the first socialist feminist attempt to theorize domestic labor using the housewife. It was at this time that socialist feminists began to look to Karl Marx for answers on domestic labor's role in a larger capitalist schema to ascribe value to work that has long been devalued. As admirable as this undertaking was, the results were rife with "ambiguity, conceptual fuzziness, circularity, and loose ends" (Vogel 2000, 154). Little is explicitly said in Marx's writings on the role of women, individual consumption, and unpaid or underpaid domestic labor (Vogel 2000, 156).

This is in part due to Marx's specific historical moment and focus (Federici 2012, 104). The ideology of the housewife was yet to reach the height of its ubiquity; his focus on industrialization and the factory-working proletariat did not extend to a thorough analysis of the figure of the housewife. Moreover, even though Marx analyzes the negative impact of capitalism on women, he does so by working within the confines of an ideology that regards women's altruism within the family as natural and therefore reproduces this ideology in his radical attempt to theorize oppression (Vogel 2013, 51-55). However, we would be remiss to write Marx off as a chauvinist with nothing relevant to say on domestic labor. Indeed, his writings on the structure of capitalism contained a wealth of concepts that socialist feminists began to theorize with, albeit to varying degrees of success.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa, for example, argued that housewives produce surplus value through replenishing the capacity of their family to work in industrial production. She argued that without the housewife, surplus value created by the laborer would not have been produced, and therefore the surplus value may be attributed to her work (Holmstrom 1981, 188-189). This is a deviation from Marx's conception of surplus value, which involves working for a certain amount of time to sustain oneself, known as necessary labor, and then working further as dictated by the capitalist to produce beyond what is needed to sustain oneself, which creates profit. This surplus value is supposedly obscured by the wage. The wage gives the appearance of a worker being properly compensated for all their labor, but in reality, the wage conceals the true value of one's work by underpaying the laborer (Vogel 2000, 160). Given that in this instance, housewives are not actually doing the productive labor themselves or receiving a wage with which to obscure surplus value, her conception seems unlikely. Furthermore, how far back can we take this line of logic? If a housewife produces surplus value when she cooks dinner for a productive laborer, does a restaurant worker produce surplus value for a customer if they provide a meal that enables one to undertake productive labor the next day? Vogel's construction of necessary labor having "two components, one with value and the other without" (Vogel 2000, 162) refers to a fiscal component and a social reproductive component that also seems dubious. The work undertaken in domestic labor certainly replenishes the individual. This conception may then be appropriate, but only if one sticks to the bare-bones definition of necessary labor and doggedly obscures the nuance and practical application of this term. This conception is a deviation from Marx's understanding of necessary labor; like surplus value, necessary labor is expressed through the wage; when a worker has labored for a certain amount of time to produce the wages necessary for them to buy the basics to replenish themself, they have completed their necessary labor (Vogel 2000, 160).

Additionally, a further challenge was created by moralism's clouding of early efforts to theorize domestic labor through Marx. Indeed, unpaid domestic labor is not productive labor in the context of Marx's work on industrial capitalism. This is because it is not in a direct relationship with capital and does not produce surplus value.

However, most early theorists did not want to call women's unpaid domestic labor unproductive due to its negative connotations (Holmstrom 1981, 190). As one can see, the lack of direct writing from Marx on social reproduction in relation to women and domestic labor has led to various interpretations of Marxist concepts and terminology from socialist feminists attempting to apply this framework to their analyses. These interpretations varied in clarity, practicality, and mastery of the terminology. Because of this inconsistency, the effort was largely abandoned in the 1980s. Lise Vogel also identifies a shift in paradigm concerning the role of theory as a reason for ending this effort. She claims theory went from embracing an abstract analysis that is not necessarily pragmatic, or in a direct relationship with reality, to a practical-minded push that created a frustration with muddying through the murky waters of Marxism. Feminists increasingly "assumed theory had to be directly pertinent to day-to-day activities and thought a given theory had determinate political and strategic implications" (Vogel 2000, 154). Regardless of the difficulties, confusion, or lack of practical application, Vogel argues that there is still merit in attempting to theorize women's oppression through a Marxist lens (Vogel 2000, 152). It is worth mentioning, however, that in her later writings, she highlights the weakness of her earlier conception of domestic labor through the concept of necessary labor (Vogel 2000, 162). It seems that for even the most seasoned theorists, this is no easy task.

Thus, I will follow Silvia Federici in classifying domestic labor as work that helps replenish labor power and is understood at a base level in Marxist theory as a worker's capacity to labor (Federici 2013, 27). As for why I am continuing the socialist feminist tradition of theorizing domestic labor within a Marxist framework, Marx's concept of labor power as a commodity helps ascribe theoretical value to domestic labor (Marx 1897, 204). Be it replenishing the workforce through generational replacement, defined as "whereby workers bear children who grow up to become workers themselves"(Vogel 2000, 158), satisfying the basic necessities of social reproduction for members of the household participating in productive labor, or fulfilling emotional needs, it is indisputable that domestic laborers replenish an individual's capacity to work. This is not to say that domestic laborers are responsible for creating surplus value, creating the value associated with labor power that Marx outlines as realized in commodities, or are in a direct relationship with capital. Nevertheless, the position of unpaid domestic laborers as outside a direct relation to capital within a Marxist framework does not make their work any less vital for capitalism's continued functioning (Vogel 2013, 163). Other interpretations of Marxist concepts among socialist feminists of the 1970s and 1980s may indicate a refusal to break with deeply ingrained capitalist ideology that marks productive work as supreme and the wage as the determinant of the value of the labor performed.

The Devaluation of the Domestic Lab

Regarding dominant capitalist ideology, Arendt's insights on the distinction between labor and work help to further clarify our devaluation of domestic labor. She classifies labor as that which is done to replenish a worker– those processes that are natural, part of the cycle of life, and marked by a necessity that humans will never be free from (Arendt 1998, 96, 100). This includes giving birth, cooking meals, and similar activities we understand as domestic labor (Arendt 1998, 119). This conception is moved by her argument that labor is marked by the lack of producing anything tangible; "Whatever labor produces is meant to be fed into the human life process almost immediately, and this consumption, regenerating the life process…" unlike work, which creates material objects described as part of the "world of durable things" intended to outlast their creator (Arendt 1998, 94). The immortality of these goods, of course, is dependent on the eyes of others and the acknowledgement of one's fellow man–without this recognition, there is no one to preserve one's memory (Arendt 1998, 95). The acknowledgement and recognition of one's fellow man, as well as the preservation of memory, are established as important for Arendt's conception of what makes one human. In contrast, labor is concerned with the necessities of life. Therefore, I define domestic labor as labor and not work–this is labor conducted in the isolation of the private sphere that produces use-values which are consumed quickly for the regeneration of life. Because of this isolation, Arendt marks this labor as separate from the work of being human; being human, for Arendt, necessitates the recognition of others in the public (Arendt 1998, 22). This conception of domestic labor as separate from the work of being human further clarifies the devaluation of domestic labor.

Additionally, her thinking on the ancient division of the public and the private, and the value ascribed to each, elaborates on the deeply entrenched idea of domestic labor as devalued. Arendt outlines the polis, or the public, as the location where people are recognized and participate among equals (Arendt 1998, 24-26). They create works acknowledged by their fellow man, strive towards immortality through creation, and are, in turn, participating in the work of being human. This idea is developed by her assertion that, in contrast to the public sphere, "…a being laboring in complete solitude would not be human" (Arendt 1998, 22). Indeed, the private sphere represents a site of animal necessity for Arendt. As the location in which the necessities of life are satisfied, the dark underbelly of death, birth, and desire that is obscured from the public in the name of privacy demarcates a sharp contrast between the spheres (Arendt 1998, 39, 72). As necessity is not governed by the aspirations for equality and civilization that rule the public sphere, "The polis was distinguished from the household in that it knew only 'equals,' whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality" (Arendt 1998, 31). Furthermore, Arendt claims the rise of Christianity relegates goodness to the private sphere and defines goodness as altruistically motivated (Arendt 1998, 74). This provides a theoretical backing for the dominant idea of labor in the home conducted out of love; the equality in the public sphere is contrasted with the inequality of the private sphere, in which work is bolstered not by a wage or obligation, but by feelings of altruism.

Arendt's theories demonstrate why domestic labor is devalued socially. Because domestic labor takes place in a private sphere and a private sphere is a site of work motivated by altruism, it need not be paid. Because of this lack of pay and the origins of this labor in a private sphere, which, as previously stated, is defined by Arendt as a site of utmost inequality, this particular kind of labor has been distorted beyond what we recognize as work. The relatively recent push to theorize on domestic labor displays that this is the case; had domestic labor been acknowledged as work, I believe it would have been investigated more broadly by economists earlier than the 1980s.

Altruism, Carework, and Neoliberalism

Conceptions of pure affection driving labor in the private sphere are attacked by economist Nancy Folbre. She argues that the value of altruism should be held by all and care work should be a society-wide effort, bolstered by the state as opposed to relying on the flimsy given of women's good nature (Folbre 2001, 18-19, 108). Outlining the benefits lost by participating in care work through her *Nice Person's Dilemma*, she charts how women have realized they risk losing individual financial gains when they perform this labor extensively (Folbre 2001, 28-31). Furthermore, women who take on this care work add an extra load to their days. Whether they are just domestic laborers or also involved in the paid workforce, taking on extra care work reduces women's time to rest, thus depleting their capacity to labor productively and producing negative psychological impacts. According to a survey done by the National Caregivers Association on its members, "… over 67 percent registered frustration" and "over 60 percent complained of depression" (Folbre 2001, 37). This extra work reduces employment prospects. Another study found "… two-thirds of those caring for elderly relatives (i.e., providing more than eight hours a week in unpaid care) had lost out on work by foregoing promotions and training opportunities" (Folbre 2001, 37). This decreases not only a woman's individual economic success but also reinforces the existing gap between men's and women's employment prospects. This gap is impacted by the fact that men do not take up this extra care work at the same rate as women, with "three-fourths of all home caregivers for people over the age of fifty are women" (Folbre 2001, 37). To address these issues, Folbre prescribes extending altruistic values out into society and developing policies that support social reproduction and care work (Folbre 2001, 108). This, however, is incompatible with neoliberal capitalism in its current state; the slashing of the welfare state and the emphasis on individual responsibility for social reproduction and care work rest uneasily with Folbre's proposal.

Indeed, a hallmark of neoliberal capitalism involves dismantling government programs supporting care work (Fraser 2016, 113). Examples of programs disparaged by proponents of neoliberal capitalism include those covering welfare, social security, and affordable healthcare. As traits of neoliberal capitalism include individualism and privatization, programs providing for the public good do not align with this system.

Accumulation of capital and corporate deregulation are disrupted by social services that have no motive besides providing for those who need them. Simply, there is no profit motive behind these public initiatives. During the development of this specific form of capitalism, those against programs for the public good manufactured fear. If the so-called "nanny state" were providing a safety net for vulnerable citizens, they would come to rely on that net, and soon we would have a population with a distaste for work, bereft of all productivity (Folbre 2001, 84). Folbre dispels this fearmongering and demonstrates that social services through the government are necessary, as the alternative is "we would essentially be telling everyone to go it alone" (Folbre 2001, 108).

One byproduct of neoliberal capitalist organization that further drives the need for a greater social security net is droves of women entering the workforce, making the two-earner household the current norm of family organization in America (Fraser 2016, 112). The effect of this is that the care work previously undertaken by women in the household is now unable to be performed at the same rate. This strain is exacerbated by the fact that this care work is, as stated, still not equally distributed between men and women. Domestic labor is disproportionately performed by women. This is true even in instances where both partners are working from home, as was demonstrated during earlier stages of the COVID-19 pandemic (Haney and Barber 2022, 29). This creates what has been coined by feminists theorizing women's work as the double shift, an issue where women are both performing paid labor for comparable hours to their partners and then performing the bulk of the domestic labor. In light of all this, one can see that in industrial capitalism, there exists a dependence on women's supposedly natural altruism and capability for care work. Given the turn of neoliberal capitalism, however, more women are in the paid workforce than ever. This enables us to ask now if a nation runs on the largely unpaid or underpaid work of individual women, what should be done when they no longer take up this work at the same rate?

Solutions to the Issue of Domestic Labor

One current yet harmful solution that aligns with the ideology of neoliberal capitalism is outsourcing care work and domestic labor to women who take up this work for wages. In *Love and Gold*, Arlie Hochschild outlines a woman's incentive to outsource care work as following a "well-known male pattern" of success in her career that involves "minimizing family work by finding someone else to do it" (2009). Although migrant women are, of course, not the only women who take up paid positions as domestic workers, a study conducted by the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor found "domestic workers are more than 2.5 times as likely to be immigrants than the typical worker" (Mitchell 2024) in which the typical worker is thought to be a laborer in professions outside of domestic labor. From this, one can see that immigrants represent a significant portion of paid domestic laborers. Hochschild believes the reason immigrant women take up this work so frequently is that they find higher wages in the U.S. for similar work they may be performing in their home country. This is a way of improving their prospects and those of their family through work they have previous experience in, and this choice is frequently motivated by economic pressures or lack of options in their country of origin (Hochschild 2009, 1-6). It must also be said that this is not the case for all immigrant women who take up work in this field, and the reasons they take up this work are multivariate. However, an issue unique to these migrant workers performing domestic labor is that of the global care chain. Women who migrate to perform domestic labor often have dependents they must leave behind in the care of another, performing their own externalizing of care work. These relationships naturally grow fraught with distance (Hochschild 2009, 1-6). This current arrangement, therefore, forces further externalization of care work, contributing to the crisis of care on a global scale. Another issue with this externalization is the racialized dynamic of this organization of labor that deepens relations of inequality between the upper-class white women outsourcing this labor and the immigrant workers performing it (Fraser 2016, 114). Moreover, this marketization does not alter the devalued status of domestic labor. Rothschild outlines that previously domestic work was “an unpaid, full-time role” and “dignified by its aura of middle-classness” (Hoschild 2009, 1-6). By shifting this work to the market, we have, in fact, increased the devaluation of this work by revealing the low wage commonly associated with it. This marks women performing this labor as doing unskilled work, which in turn lowers their status (Hoschild 2009).

An alternate option that avoids these issues is the mechanization of domestic labor, which has long been imagined as a solution to the issue of domestic labor by socialist feminists. In such utopian visions, this labor is performed predominantly or exclusively by machines and robots (Firestone 2003, 234). This would save humanity from having to waste time on the drudgery that is domestic labor. Although this sounds ideal, we know that care work is uniquely resistant to mechanization in ways that other forms of labor are not (Federici 2013, 141). Care of dependents requires anticipating needs, producing effects, and demonstrating love. In theory, machines could produce the basic needs for dependents, but they may not be able to cover these more complex emotional needs. Carework requires an affective component, meaning it requires interpersonal skills intended to anticipate desires or fears and produce positive emotions. Robots just cannot perform this component as effectively as human actors (Federici 2013, 139). Similarly, domestic labor that does not involve caring for dependents is not substantially eased by technology. After comparing weekly estimates of women’s domestic labor collected in tables from 1900 to 2000, Valerie Ramey concludes that the time women perform domestic labor is not significantly reduced by the introduction of appliances into the home (2008, 38).

Another solution posed by socialist feminists is the financial compensation of unpaid domestic laborers. Proposed by the controversial Wages for Housework movement, this call to compensate housewives originated in Italy and soon found its bearings in the U.S. through feminists such as Silvia Federici (Davis 1980, 6). Federici describes Wages for Housework as both a political framework demanding recognition of women's unpaid labor and a call for financial compensation (Federici 2013, 12). As fiery as the demand may have been in the 1970s, the necessity and practicality of this call to action have faded. In terms of the recognition of women's housework, we have seen domestic labor recently come into mainstream feminist studies. Therefore, "... the demand does not have the pedagogical and educative efforts it once did–in part because of its own success" (Forrester 2022, 11). Studies estimating the value of domestic labor have been performed, conversations on splitting the domestic and emotional load have come into vogue, and knowledge is being created through feminist studies about this field, which was once considered invisible (Folbre 2001, 67). This progression means that recognition is no longer the biggest issue facing domestic labor. As for the literal call to pay women engaging in domestic work, this demand has lost a lot of its practicality. One issue with this approach is the restructuring of women's work. Many women are already performing domestic labor in the market, and the two-earner family is now the norm regarding household organization in the United States of America. As stated earlier, it is no longer practical to theorize through the housewife as the main object of study. Even if the majority of U.S. women were still involved in unpaid domestic labor, applying this approach would only further the individualist and isolating nature of this work. Checks in individual hands do not change the inequality in the private sphere accompanying this work (Arendt, 1998, 32). Housewives are still removed from society at large and face negative psychological consequences as a result–they are almost twice as likely to claim dissatisfaction with their lives compared to women in the paid workforce. (Davis 1980, 11). Were it to be applied now, the Wages for Housework approach would change very little about the nature of domestic labor, much of which is already marketized in the rise of the two-earner household.

Socializing Housework

Utopian solutions aside, outsourcing domestic labor to individual women or performing the double shift are the options for many American women. As I have demonstrated, these options are unsatisfactory. To solve the issues that come with domestic labor in a satisfactory manner, we must socialize this labor and increase the social services provided by the state. One of the burdens that marks this particular neoliberal state of capitalism, as previously mentioned, is the defunding of social services. Once acting as a safety net for those who need assistance, the dramatic cutting of these services burdens already strained households. For example, hospitals discharge patients significantly earlier to increase profits, putting pressure on kin to take up responsibilities previously performed by paid professionals (Folbre 2001, 59). This care work, often performed by women, undeniably adds time and work to her already crammed day. Clearly, this example of early discharge puts significant strain on an individual's capacity to care. It would be beneficial to extend hospital stays in these cases not only for her continued productivity in the paid labor force or in replenishing labor power, but also for her individual well-being. Extending the rationale from this specific example into a generalization on social services in the government will show that increasing public initiatives will provide support to women who would otherwise be taking on increased domestic labor that they do not necessarily have the capacity or resources to do.

Furthermore, socializing domestic labor will provide a solution to the isolation that Arendt claims rests in the private sphere (Arendt 1998, 72). The current situation, even in the most favorable circumstances and comfortable lives, is still removed from society at large. This removes domestic laborers from one of the components Arendt identifies as creating humanity (Arendt 1998, 22). The socializing of housework would break up this isolation. As for those who perform these services, one imagines the newly communal nature of their work will allow for greater connection than if they were performing the same duties in the home; it is not the tasks themselves that pose an issue, but the isolation and lack of value ascribed to these tasks. The socialization of housework is imagined as a "range of free 24-hour state-funded, community-controlled caring and cleaning services, with a view to transforming and transcending the capitalist organization of social reproduction" (Forrester 2022, 6). Those supporting the socialization of housework recognize the demands on domestic laborers as ones that do not have to be exclusively solved in the household, for example, recognizing "hospital and service workers as 'waged houseworkers'"(Forrester 2022, 7). This recognition allows for the challenge of the narrow view of domestic labor as always taking place within a family unit by kin. Furthermore, it allows for the idea that this sort of labor can be socialized. Socializing housework brings labor in the private sphere out of isolation and frees time for mobilization during labor in the paid workforce (Davis 1980, 10). This denies one of the tenets of capitalism, namely that capital accumulation at its current scale depends on unpaid or underpaid domestic labor, but feeds the other, which is the desire to draw women into the paid labor force to increase the accumulation of labor power (Vogel 2013, 163). Despite this, it is evident that the socialization of housework will not only free women from the double shift and improve their individual well-being but will also allow them to labor effectively. While this is not a blanket solution for undoing capitalist exploitation, it is a step that would free up women's time and energy, and this practical benefit should be valued.

Faced with the perhaps daunting prospect of socializing housework, one may ask about the ramifications of socializing this work in the private sphere by bringing these tasks to the aforementioned community centers. Will altering the nature of domestic labor through socialization lead to the destruction of the private sphere? Although Arendt believes that the private sphere is a site of absolute inequality, she does believe that this sphere is necessary as there are a "great many things which cannot withstand the implacable, bright light…of the public scene" (Arendt 1998, 51). To this, I answer that the socialization of this work does not necessitate a complete overhaul of the private sphere. Under this proposal, there will still exist a physical space for individuals to separate the public and private spheres in their minds. This is the distinction between eliminating labor and private property, which are currently connected but not entirely bound to each other. The destruction of one does not necessitate the destruction of the other, and it is hyperbolic to assume so. Property rights are not secured by labor, maintenance, and upkeep–if this were true, domestic laborers hired through the market would be the rightful owners of each house they clean. From this, the private sphere would still exist in the wake of the socialization of housework, and to assume otherwise is to conflate the restructuring of domestic labor with the elimination of private property.

Although the majority of the solutions socialist feminists concocted are insufficient for addressing the issues raised by domestic labor, their work does not need to be disregarded. It is due to these early efforts that I have a foundation to critique; the knowledge they created through struggles with theory brought the issue of reproductive work to mainstream feminist studies. And this knowledge they accumulated has given me a vantage point to see that the current organization of domestic labor is socially constructed and therefore a malleable issue as opposed to an unfortunate fact of life. It is from this vantage point that I am able to critique their solutions to domestic labor and endorse the socialization of housework as the most practical solution under our current neoliberal capitalist system. The socialization of housework is the pragmatic solution that effectively solves most of the issues raised by domestic labor. It disrupts the inequality present in labor in the private sphere by bringing the work into the public sphere, navigating the double shift, and restoring social services to the state as opposed to straining the capabilities of individual women. Any other solution concocted by socialist feminists is inadequate for this specific iteration of neoliberal capitalism.

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In Defense of Casual and 'Perverted' Sex: Rejecting Mind/Body Dualism Through Kantian Sexual Ethics

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Abstract: *This paper argues that prevailing frameworks in sexual ethics are insufficient for understanding the complexity of 21st-century sexual practices. It critiques mind/body dualist, reductionist, and intentionist accounts for failing to capture the intertwined mental and bodily dimensions of sexual experience. This is particularly prevalent in 'plain sex' views and reciprocity theories. Drawing on the work of J. David Velleman and Seiriol Morgan it develops a Kantian account of relationship ethics grounded in respect for persons as ends-in-themselves. The paper defends casual and so-called 'perverted' sexual acts as potentially meaningful forms of interpersonal engagement, challenging inherited moral hierarchies rooted in mind/body dualism. In doing so, it calls for a re-evaluation of sexual ethics in light of evolving practices, arguing for a more flexible, holistic framework capable of accommodating the diversity, subjectivity, and fluidity of modern sexual life.*

Keywords: Sexual Ethics; Mind/Body Dualism; Kantian Ethics; Casual Sex; Sexual Perversion

Introduction

Mind/body dualism has damaged perceptions of love and sex through a rejection of casual sexual engagements and the label of perversion. Love and sex can both be understood as respect for the individual to varying degrees of care, specifically in a Kantian moral picture. This paper examines the relationship between love and sex through J. David Velleman's Kantian lens argues that we ought to eschew the distinction between mind and body in our understanding of sex and love. To do so, I draw upon Seiriol Morgan. I argue love is the utmost care one can give to an individual in a Kantian picture, whilst sex comes close to this even in casual and so-called 'perverted' forms. By doing this, I will give a defense for casual and 'perverted' sex acts.

The framework of mind/body dualism, which sees sex acts as either bodily gratification or mental recognition, cannot successfully conceptualise modern sexual practices, which are multifaceted and ever-changing. Such a dualism, I argue, can be seen as a holdover from an Augustinian conception of sex, later elaborated by St. Thomas Aquinas, which sees sex as goal-oriented towards reproduction (Augustine 1887, Aquinas 1920). As such, both mind/body dualism and Augustine's view of sex ought to be eschewed to effectively respond to modern sexual practice. To do this, we ought to re-examine the assumptions and theoretical frameworks we currently use to understand sexual ethics for the 21st century.

This thesis, I hope, speaks to an intersection of multiple critical disciplines, including, but not limited to, feminist, religious, ethical, and ontological backgrounds. Whilst this paper draws upon a Kantian account of ethics for its framework, I do so due to the strength of Velleman's analysis of love and its implications for my understanding of sex. However, this paper does not hinge on a Kantian ethical framework. Any ethical picture that places any significance on respect for fellow agents ought to be able to give a robust account of sexual acts, given their prevalence in everyday life. As such, this thesis is not limited to Kantian ethics but explores implications beyond this view, despite basing my theoretical analysis on Velleman's Kantian view.

In the second section, I outline our theoretical framework, with reference to Velleman. In section three, I examine both casual and monogamous sex, whilst drawing upon Morgan, and discuss the Augustinian mind/body dualist conception. I also give a defence of sexual perversion, on the grounds of Kantian recognition and a misunderstanding of perversion in the literature. Before concluding, I will give some brief considerations of implications and issues with casual/perverted sex, before concluding with remarks on the wider modern context of the paper and possible areas of further research.

Kantian Love and Velleman's Framework

Velleman's account positions love as a moral emotion, hinging on Kantian ethics for its reasoning. Immanuel Kant argues that individuals, inasmuch as they are human, ought to be respected as ends in themselves rather than merely means. As such, the baseline we ought to give any individual is respect for their individuality, personhood, and autonomy (Kant 2008, 33). Given the perception of Kantian ethics as impartial, impersonal, and maxim-centred, partiality towards and love for an individual (or individuals in the case of family) could be seen as incompatible with the nature of Kantian ethics. Velleman argues this is not the case, and Kant does have room for agent-relation partiality. Loving relationships, he argues, are a natural extension of the Kantian focus on the individual as an individual, in other words, as ends (Velleman 1999, 340-342).

In the Kantian picture, all are equally respected, but time spent with others brings a natural closeness which does not hinder our framework, so long as we utilise our closeness, care, and time in pursuit of individuals as ends. Velleman presents a case in which you are given the chance to save your wife or a stranger. You are unlikely to think, “I am ethically permitted to save my wife because Kantian ethics allows my impartiality to save her over another.” Instead, you would simply save your wife. You have spent time with her, loved her, bonded with her, and will therefore save her. This is not a violation of any Kantian maxim or commitment to impartiality. Instead, he argues this would not be Kantian at all, as his ethics are not unfeeling, but rather a feeling towards all individuals as individuals (Velleman 1999, 341-344).

Other philosophical models of love focus on a lover as creating, aiding, or expanding our aims, or their aims becoming our own. Key in this discussion is Robert Nozick, who gives an account of relationships as your own well-being tied to someone you love (Nozick 1989, 68). When their aims, wants, or needs are not met, you too are hurt or frustrated alongside them. Velleman believes, contra Nozick, that the individual you love is the end itself for which you strive, irrespective of external considerations. The individual, in being a rational agent, is a proper object of reverence. Love, as a result, involves a deeper reverence towards such individuals than we give to most, not merely a unity of aims or desires.

Velleman’s framework will be used for this reason, as he moves beyond the Freudian psychological understanding of love as purely sexual desire and gratification, unlike Nozick, who was influenced by such understanding (Nozick 1989, 68). This framework will help in moving beyond the view of sex as merely desire. To do this, however, we must first look at sex itself.

Sexual Acts, Both Bodily and Mental, Against Mind/Body Dualism

The view of sex outlined briefly above is deemed a plain sex view, which argues that sexual acts can be understood purely as the result of sexual bodily desire, akin to the desires felt by the hungry. When satisfied due to an orgasm, with intense sexual pleasure, the bodily desires go away until the pleasure returns as the object of our desire. Seiriol Morgan believes that this view of sex is severely wanting despite being the orthodox and oftentimes layman's view of sex. A deeper psychological act is at play in sexual experience; to understand this, we must reject the distinction between mind and body and affirm sexual experiences in a holistic manner (Morgan 2003a; 1-12).

The plain sex view is aptly named a reductionist view, since it ignores the deeply meaningful aspects of sex, which are coupled with intense physical pleasure. Views such as these are erroneous holdovers from a mind/body dualism that places sex into the former category, sequestered from the latter. Examples of this framework can be seen in Augustinian perceptions of sex acts. St. Augustine, and later St. Thomas Aquinas, in seeing sex as having a defined goal, such as reproduction, diminish the deeply psychological elements of sex to reduce its practice to mere bodily desire outside of reproductive purposes (Aquinas 1920). Whilst the body is not evil, sin is the result of human concupiscence, the natural inclination towards sin amongst people. For St. Augustine, the fall has led to a lack of control over our rational wills, resulting in involuntary sexual desires which ought to be eschewed, or else we damage our spirit (Augustine 1887).

In reality, whilst sex may happen to cause great pleasure, that is a shared trait between parties, not the object of our sexual desires. In this sense, sexual desire is unlike hunger, which involves one party in relation to an object of hunger. The significance of the individuals themselves is key to sexual intimacy; social traits, standing, beliefs, and history have an inescapable effect on our sexual experiences and often motivate them in ways that go beyond sexual pleasure. Our mental state when having sex, and reasoning behind the sexual encounter, matter greatly in turn for the pleasure of the experience (Morgan 2003a, 6). Put plainly, good sex happens in dynamic environments congruent with your mental desires, and bad sex can occur when these are lacking. A shift to a perspective that recognises this multifaceted nature must necessarily reject the Augustinian focus on sex as reproductive, due to the incongruity between the two.

Take Morgan's striking example of "fucking the police". In the example, when Johnny Drugs is having sex with a female police officer, his predisposition to oppose authority and get back at the police enhances his sexual experience; he cannot help but want to fuck the police because he has always thought of doing so figuratively. Bodily sensations are deeply intertwined with their corresponding mental states. This results in an incomplete picture of our experience when viewing sexual encounters on the plain sex view (Morgan 2003a, 6-8). This example demonstrates the faultiness of Augustinian accounts of bodily desire as a satisfaction of sexual urges. As Morgan outlines, sex is intensely bound to individual mental wants and needs.

On the other hand, intentionalist accounts erroneously argue that sex is a "mutual reciprocal intentionality." In this picture, sex becomes a purely mental state of affairs. Roger Scruton, for example, saw healthy arousal as focusing on the mutual recognition of each other (Scruton 1986, 344). Thomas Nagel, similarly, took sexual perversion to be the lack of recognition of an individual in the sexual experience. He believed that sadomasochism is an example of perversion since it lacks a recognition of rational agency in yourself and your partner alike (Nagel 1969, 14). These accounts, Morgan argues, mirror the extremely dualistic rationalist view, centring the mental rather than the body, rather than rejecting the framework in its entirety. Again, such examples still prioritise a goal-oriented, Augustinian view of sex. As a result, these views are conceptually lacking for modern sexual practices.

At our core, we are embodied beings with physical sensations of pain and pleasure that are constantly in flux, sensitive to both external and internal factors, and highly idiosyncratic, particularly in our sexual tastes. To reduce the breadth of our sexual experiences to 'recognition' is to exclude many sexual acts from the definition. Morgan highlights solo masturbation as a clear example of an act we ought to consider sexual, despite struggling to explain this in Scruton's picture (Morgan 2003a, 3). For Nagel, however, this would be a perverted sex act with an unsatisfactory conclusion (Nagel 1969, 10).

Bodily experiences of sex have been historically eschewed because, as Morgan puts it, they distract us “from what is truly important, God or the Good” (Morgan 2003a, 4). Whereas reductionism follows St. Augustine’s model of sex as basic bodily pleasure, intentionalism overcorrects this error while holding on to the core assumption of sex as moving towards a fixed end. Since the body has been denigrated in Christian-Platonic mind/body dualism, the intentionalist then attempts to link sexual experiences to mental states. This approach ultimately retains, Alan Goldman states, the anti-erotic opinions of pre-modern dualism and its evaluative content (Goldman 1977, 279). In attempting to avoid denigrating sex, they move it from a negative bodily experience to the higher mental realm.

Given the previously outlined mind/body dualisms of both reductionist and intentionalist accounts, an alternate view rejects both the Augustinian framing of bodily desire as sin and the overreliance of latter accounts on a reciprocal understanding between partners. Sex, instead, is best understood not in an attempt to wrestle between these two sides of the dualistic picture, but instead in rejecting dualism in its entirety.

> “It is not possible to understand many of the “bodily” elements of our nature in abstraction from our mentality, nor many of our “mental” elements in abstraction from our embodiment. We need to give up the old mind/body dualist habit of classifying experience into the mutually exclusive categories of “mental” and “physical”, and replace it with the idea that many of our phenomena of our experience form continua…” (Morgan 2003a, 6).

Sex acts are a good example of such experiences. In their diversity, the respective bodily and mental aspects differ greatly. Solo masturbation can be predominantly pleasure-seeking but is often bound up in mental desires satisfied with imagination, sex toys, or pornography. Threesomes, on the other hand, might play into a predominantly mental fantasy between Cuckolds, Cuck Queens, and Orgies, to name a few. Clearly, sexual acts are multifaceted and idiosyncratic, which are often shared and ultimately indicative of the constant interplay between mental and physical aspects of human experience. Exhibit the Cuck Queen, a woman who takes pleasure in watching her male partner have sex. In this way, it cannot be said that all sex acts are goal-oriented towards fixed ends in the Augustinian sense, or dualistic in nature. To divide the two is to divide the nature of our everyday lives.

In rejecting mind/body dualism, we avoid attempts to place sex into one or the other category and can move away from Augustinian views on love and sex. In doing so, we can view sex as a prevalent aspect of most casual, platonic, and loving relationships instead. As such, it is best to conceptualize the connection between love and sex along the lines of our aforementioned Kantian framework of love. If love goes beyond the minimum level of respect afforded to individuals, sex ought to be seen within this framework due to the connection between love and sex. For too long, love has, between friends and lovers, been detached from sex, despite its prevalence in everyday lives.

Sex cannot be conceptualized as the bodily manifestation of love. Instead, sex ought to be seen as achieving, with varying degrees of success, the same connection between individuals as Velleman's picture of love. On extreme ends, monogamous lovers might have sex as a representation of their desire for care and intimacy with each other exclusively. Here, sex creates bodily intimacy and mental reinforcement of an ongoing commitment to that intimacy. On the other end, casual sex in a one-night stand between strangers does not reach the same levels of care as a loving relationship might, but that is not to say that this is less valuable as a result.

Casual sex still speaks to an intimacy and desire that go beyond Kantian commitments to individual agent-based respect. In sex, we are connected to our partner even for a brief moment, in bodily intimacy and varying degrees of mental desire. Casual sexual partners might give us brief but intense sexual pleasure, and the thrill of a stranger excites our minds in a unique way that cannot be grasped in monogamy. This, of course, expects a baseline of respect, consent, and mutual experience, in line with Kantian ethics.

In this picture, casual sex is not seen as worse or necessarily less desirable than monogamy. It simply serves different purposes for our idiosyncratic and subjective sexual desires. Love is desirable for some, whilst eschewed by others. The advent of friends with benefits in 21st century youth culture speaks to this desire for an in-between stage between casual sex and love. Young people create connections that could become loving, but usually remain as friends. Such a framework, which allows value in both monogamous and casual sex, rejects the Augustinian account of bodily desires. We can then instead recognize the multifaceted nature of sex in both regular and situational sexual encounters, rejecting the notion of fixed ends within sex acts entirely.

Augustinian rejections of non-reproductive sexual desire have, however, remained pervasive in common conceptions of sex. The notion of 'perverted' sex acts in Nagel, for example, must be re-examined within our new framework. Perverted sexual acts, where perverted means abnormal, cannot be seen in the explicitly negative way that Nagel outlines. An account of sadomasochistic sexual acts, as an example, is given as he argues that such acts miss the necessary recognition of either your own self-awareness as the object of desire, or the recognition of your own desire for another. This understanding is faulty, however, since within the practice of sadomasochism, pain is your desire, whether to inflict or receive it. Due to the error of this misunderstanding, coupled with the new sexual framework, I argue that Nagel's reading of perversion is flawed, just as sadomasochism is not necessarily devoid of sexual desire (Nagel 1969, 13-14).

Robert Gray claims that Nagel falsely equates sexual desire to merely a feeling towards another. Sexual desire, as demonstrated, is not merely a relation between others but is bound up in bodily and mental idiosyncrasies. Nagel's view of sex is therefore too limited; the scope for perversion is too wide, encompassing too many sex acts. Sadomasochism is just one of the wide-ranging examples of sexual fantasies that could occur amongst sexual partners. In this sense, by allowing this to occur between sexual partners who happen to converge on sexual idiosyncrasies, we simply allow what they would perceive as good sex in both body and mind.

As Gray points out, such matters cannot be reduced to feeling. However, we ought to remain sceptical of his account as it still falls into reductionism when ceding the question of what perverted acts are to behavioural sciences (Gray 1978, 195-199). This would amount to an ethical mistake and would come dangerously close to committing a naturalistic fallacy. What is the state of affairs in nature does not amount to an ought. In this sense, perversion in sex acts cannot be said to amount to non-natural sexual practices, as Gray seems to concede.

Both Nagel and Gray still work within an Augustinian mind/body dualism. For both, the notion of sex acts as perverted seems to assume there is a proper way to have sex, with too narrow a view of what the proper way is. The framing of certain sex acts as perverse in itself is a holdover from the *Natural Law* and understanding sex as reproductive in function, popularised within a culturally Christian context by St. Thomas Aquinas and derived from St. Augustine (Aquinas 1920, Augustine 1887). Ultimately, such naturalistic, reductionist interpretations of perverted sex ought to be avoided in favour of the Kantian view outlined in this paper. Now, having examined its relationship to Velleman's Kantian theory of love at length and providing an understanding, I will conclude by briefly exploring a few considerations arising from these views and whether they can be easily reconciled.

Implications and Considerations

Whilst Nagel's definition of perversion is too wide, our understanding is potentially at risk of encompassing too many sexual acts within a Kantian framework. The threshold for respect is not, however, simply at the level of consent, and I ought to give some examples of sexual acts that do violate our commitment to equality and respect, to establish borders of sexual practice in my thesis.

Kinks and abnormality are permissible within a Kantian framework due to the breadth of sexual subjectivity this view allows. For most, kinks and fetishes enhance the sexual experience and subsequent pleasure significantly. It is not ethically impermissible to engage in good sex. The connections that can be made between individuals in their shared enjoyment of abnormal sexual experiences, in my view, bring further care and understanding between individuals. This brings a partnership closer to the loving maximum that an agent can give another on Velleman's Kantian framework. This is, as with all sexual acts, limited to consensual cases with clear operational parameters. Other sexual acts, however, are not as described.

As Morgan argues, certain immoral practices arise from what he calls dark desires; these acts may be impermissible even under a consensual sexual framework. When consensual sexual acts violate principles of Kantian respect, despite both consenting parties agreeing to it, the sexual act might become such a desire. Men who see women as objects, resenting them for one reason or another, whilst simultaneously desiring a sexual encounter, are morally flawed. As they do not respect women as equals, he argues this is a clear violation and an instance of dark desires (Morgan 2003b, 285-387). Consensual enjoyment of kinky or perverted sexual acts is one thing; misogyny is another.

This is fairly straightforward in the case of two or more sexual partners, but the framework of mutual respect and care causes problems for solo sexual acts such as masturbation. Despite the breakdown of mind/body dualism in sexual acts, the nature of masturbation as an example obscures our ethical picture. The question arises as to what extent the usage of pornography, for example, respects individuals as an end-in-themselves. It would seemingly go too far to say pornography involves a connection between the masturbator and individuals producing pornographic content, but to what extent these acts respect the individual on both sides is another matter.

To examine this, various cases of pornography, and specifically the ethical content of porn more broadly, would have to be examined. Just as sexual acts between individuals are idiosyncratic and varied, pornography represents a behemoth of physical and online content. A full exploration of these implications is beyond the scope of this paper, but I imagine ethical barriers ought to be put in place in the world of pornography if it is to be permissible at all. Further explorations of this question, particularly in the wake of a fluctuating and growing online environment, ought to be welcomed.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined a clearer picture of sexual acts in their relation to love, particularly on a Kantian picture of sexual and relationship ethics. Whilst Kant underlines his ethical theory with a focus on respect, equality, and a recognition of the individual, love and sex go beyond respect. Whilst this does not encompass all sexual acts, it does allow space for abnormal sexual acts and casual sex. While I focused my view on the permissibility of sexual acts, both regular and perverted, this framework is in conversation with the permissibility of 21st century sexual practices.

Our exploration of these topics also exposed flaws in a strict mind/body dualism interpretation of experience, which I argue ought to be rejected in our understanding of sexual ethics and ontology. Previous sexual theories draw too heavily upon a conservative picture of permissibility in sex acts. Such views proved faulty and overly influential within Augustinian understandings of sex. The thesis outlined pushes back against this faulty and premodern view and gives a better account of the ethics of modern sexual and relationship practices.

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Self-Trust, Self-Care, and the Voluntary Psychiatric Hold

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Abstract: *The involuntary psychiatric hold has received much review both in the clinical and bioethics fields. Concerns over efficacy, beneficence, and autonomy forefront of the conversation. Less work has been done on the voluntary psychiatric hold, which makes up the majority of holds in the United States. For this hold, someone in crisis willingly checks themselves in and, depending on the state, can leave at will or upon request and review. In this paper, I seek to reframe the voluntary psychiatric hold as a radical move of applied self-care. I will apply Tronto's framework of ethical care to the self-care relationship within mental health. I will claim that suicidal ideation and self-harm lead to a rupture of self-trust while still necessitating self-reliance. I will conclude by reviewing the existing literature on voluntary and involuntary psychiatric holds and how increased responsiveness in voluntary holds leads to a more efficacious and equitable process overall.*

Keywords: Care Ethics; Mental Health; Self-Trust; Tronto; Responsiveness

What is a Psychiatric Hold?

Psychiatric holds vary widely by state and region. A general definition of the psychiatric hold could be as follows: an individual is admitted into some sort of facility for some amount of time due to some claim of suspicion that the individual is a danger to themselves or others.[1] Psychiatric holds can either be involuntary, where they are placed under a hold against their will by someone else, or voluntary, where the individual being checked in chooses of their own volition to put themselves under a hold.

For an involuntary hold, also called an emergency hold, the definition is more specific: "a brief involuntary detention of a person presumed to have a mental illness in order to determine whether the individual meets criteria for involuntary civil commitment" (Hedman et al. 2016). In all U.S. states, police can detain someone who seems to "pose an imminent danger" to themselves or others, meaning that one could

[1] This is a definition I put together based on an amalgamation of different definitions to have it apply to all forms of hold that could be considered a psychiatric hold.

reasonably expect death or serious harm due to the actions of the individual.[2] Mental health practitioners can initiate a hold in 31 states; medical personnel can in 22 states, and "any interested person" can initiate a hold in 22 states.[3] Whereas judicial approval is required in 22 states, with a 9/13 split of before or after the hold occurs. For the involuntary hold, almost all states (44) require that there be a danger posed and that the danger be due to a mental illness.[4] The majority of states in the US cap involuntary holds at 72 hours.[5] Once the time limit is reached, the individual must have been evaluated by a medical professional and either taken into commitment or released. If commitment is selected, the hold translates into a stay, which will last a length determined by a doctor and a treatment plan. In some circumstances, there can be extensions of the time limit, but these normally require a court order (Hedman et al. 2016, 529-535).

The voluntary hold has less regulation and is less researched due to its less controversial and legal nature.[6] In this hold, the person who would pose a danger is the one who is checking themselves in. This can be done through multiple methods that vary by state, including calling the police, a crisis line, or showing up to an emergency room and requesting the hold. Similar to the involuntary hold, there is normally an assessment involved to determine whether treatment can be provided. Once it is determined that treatment can be provided, the stay lasts from 10 to 14 days since it includes both assessment and treatment (Garcia 2021). Normally, when a person seeks voluntary admission, they retain the ability to check themselves out at any time. As of 2019 in the United States, more than half of psychiatric admissions at non-state and non-forensic hospitals are voluntary (Garakani et al. 2019, 849-59).

Ethical Care

Joan Tronto, a feminist ethicist and political theorist, puts forth a method for practicing ethical care in her 1993 text *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for the Ethic of Care*. It is this framework in which I seek to center voluntary psychiatric holds as a radical form of applied self-care. For Tronto, ethical care requires that four

[2] In the cases where someone other than the police calls in a hold, it is normally still the police who arrive to the scene to bring in the person. Some states are working to replace police with mental health practitioners when responding to nonviolent mental health crisis calls.

[3] This figure can be a bit misleading, as there are often further requirements that have to be met. 10 states have no further requirements. 6 have a pre-detention ex parte hearing, where the party presents their case to initiate the hold. 5 states (including Texas) have a post-detention ex parte hearing in which the party presents the case after the fact.

[4] For the missing 6, 5 of which only require danger to others or self, with no requirement of mental illness. The last, Georgia, only requires the presence of a mental illness with no explicit mention of danger.

[5] Texas is 48 hours. Three states (Kansas, Nebraska, West Virigina) have no specified time limit.

[6] Due to the involuntary nature of an involuntary hold, there is much consideration of rights and autonomy. With the voluntary aspect of the voluntary hold, there is generally less discussion likely due to the percieved lower risk of misuse and abuse.

elements be present: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness (Tronto 1993, 127-137.[7] Attentiveness is noticing a need for care, responsibility is choosing to be the one to provide care, competence is being able to provide good quality care, and responsiveness is checking in with the receivers of care and recognizing their vulnerability. These four facets are all interconnected, with one first noticing a need for care, taking on the caregiving responsibility, having proper capacity and knowledge on how to care, and then listening and changing care methods in order to meet the needs of the individual being cared for. These facets most often occur in order, starting with attentiveness, but each is equally important since if any of the facets is absent, the care inherently cannot be ethical. All four parts must be "considered as part of an integrated whole" for care to succeed ethically, and the way in which care is given must constantly adapt to the situation at hand (Tronto 1993, 136). With that brief introduction of Tronto's framework, I will now examine each of the four facets of ethical caregiving in relation to mental healthcare and the voluntary hold.

Attentiveness

In the case of mental health struggles and the voluntary psychiatric hold, the need for care is indicated and measured by the "danger to self or others" criteria. Philosophically, this can be understood as an issue of the breakdown of self-trust. "I can't trust myself to keep myself safe" is a common sentiment among those struggling with suicidal ideation or self-harm. Some people in crisis experience themselves as dually split between one side that wants to harm and one side that does not. In common use, trust is associated with reliability and responsibility. In her article *Trust and Antitrust*, Annette Baier provides the following definition: "Trust… is reliance on others' competence and willingness to look after, rather than harm, things one cares about which are entrusted to their care" (Baier 1986, 259). This seems to align with a common-use definition of trust, but for Baier, not every instance of reliance is one of trust. As shown with this example,

> "We may have no choice but to continue to rely on the local shop for food, even after some of the food on its shelves has been found to have been poisoned with intent. We can still rely where we no longer trust" (Baier 1986, 234).

Taking these two parts of Baier's work together, we can see that what makes trust "trust" is not the reliance itself, but instead the reliance paired with the competence and willingness to do care instead of harm. There are situations where we must rely on things or people we do not trust, such as if the previously poisoned grocery store is the only grocery store available. If there were a store that was both trusted and relied on, that would be the best option. However, one cannot go without food, so one must, in this situation, rely without trust.

[7] For an in-depth look at these four facets as traditionally applied to caring for others, see Tronto's full chapter, *An Ethic Care* in *Moral Boundaries*.

Another part of Baier's definition of trust is the idea of competence, which is something that is not universal but rather requires context and discretion. She gives the example of trusting a plumber. If one trusts the plumber to fix the sink but does not prescribe "just what they should do to put right what is wrong," since how to repair is the plumber's area of expertise, not our own. Our expectation of the plumber is that they not act against our interests deliberately in their repairs, rather than requesting specific action be taken (Baier 1986, 239). A plumber is competent in repairs as long as they successfully work toward "our interest," in this case, with the sink.

In this work, Baier is concerned with the relationship between one and another (seen in the "other's" part of her definition of trust). However, we can expand this definition to cover the idea of self-trust or lack of self-trust by viewing the self as multifaceted, to the point that one can be an other to themselves. I argue that for self-care ethics, there are two "selves" at play: the self regarding safety and the self regarding desire. Only when the two selves are unaligned can this trust issue occur, since an othering feeling of difference is present. An example would be if a person wants to be safe and has no desire to harm themselves. The two selves are aligned. There are also circumstances where the person does not care about their safety and has a desire to harm themselves; the selves are aligned in a way that leads most often to suicide.[8] In both situations, no conflict arises as the self concerned with safety and the self concerned with desire are satisfied by the same action, either care or harm, depending on the case. In a third situation, a person wants to be safe but also has a desire to harm themselves. In this situation, which exemplifies many mental health cases, there is a conflict since the required action of each self is at odds with the other as a noticeably different other. This alignment or misalignment is seen as a sense of trust or lack of trust in the other. For the first two situations, there is a sense of trust, since each party can expect from the other the competence and willingness to do as desired.[9] For the third situation, there is a lack of trust since the competence and willingness to look after personal safety are dissonant.

The relationship between the two selves in terms of control of the body is, I propose, one of a shifting balance where both selves are always present, though one is more prominent than the other, given any specific moment in time, often related to environmental cues. For example, for those with self-harm tendencies, they often

[8] The idea that, in a situation where one does not care about their own safety and has a desire to harm themselves, falls into the "trust" category seems odd when applied to the "look after, rather than harm" phrase of the definition. However, this phrase is directly followed by "things one cares about." For people in this situation, they do not necessarily care about their safety. Harm is being done to themselves, but no harm is being done to the "things one cares about." As such, trust still applies.

[9] Competence for Baier is not universal, but rather the determination that one being trusted is working toward our interests. Though externally we may declare someone who wishes harm upon themselves incompetent (such as people being deemed incompetent to stand trial du to certain disorders), with Baier's definition of trust and competence, when one does not care about their own safety and has a desire to harm themselves, they are still competent since their own interest is that of harm and this is what they are working towards.

experience that the desire to harm is stronger at night, when they are more likely to be alone, tired, and have racing thoughts. Nearly two-thirds of people who undergo involuntary holds are admitted at night, while two-thirds of people who admit voluntarily do so during the day (Arnold et al. 2019). This can be read as the safety self tending to have control during the day, deciding to check themselves into a voluntary hold in order to keep that safety, versus the desire self having control at night, with external others having to keep the individual safe from their own desire. I will speak more on the concept of time later, but for now, it is important to note that the balance and influence of the two selves over physical action is subject to change. The balance between the two selves can also shift due to internal physical factors (i.e., Premenstrual dysphoric disorder, in which people have depressive symptoms leading up to their period) or mental factors (such as using meditation to calm oneself during a stressful situation). This combination of external and internal factors works to consistently shift the balance between the selves.

The misalignment of preferred action–safety or harm–is the reason for the rupture of trust in the self. When applied back to the phrase "I can't trust myself to keep myself safe," the "I" is the self regarding safety, while the first "myself" is the self in regards to desire.[10] The safety self does not trust the desire self not to commit harm. However, due to the nature of the self, any action taken by one impacts the other. This creates a necessary self-reliance, where, regardless of the lack of trust, the parts must rely on each other. It is impossible for the parts to get away from each other, just like it is impossible to go without food. As such, the safety self must rely on the desire self, just like the individual must rely on the store that has previously poisoned food. It may be intended to harm, but there is no other option but to rely on the other. Holding both the pursuit of safety and the desire to harm creates cognitive dissonance, or carrying two opposing beliefs or ideas (Harmon-Jones 2020, 3-24). Cognitive dissonance is uncomfortable to maintain and spurs a desire to resolve the opposing cognition.[11] Returning to the idea of attentiveness, I argue that the rupture of self-trust and the uncomfortable nature of this state serve as the moment of recognition of a need for care.

Responsibility

Tronto does not give an explicit definition of responsibility in her framework, instead stating "we are better served by focusing on a flexible notion of responsibility than we are by continuing to use obligation as the basis for understanding what people

[10]The nature of the second "myself" in this phrase is less clear. I am prone to consider referring to both the safety and the desire self, since to har any self would be to do physical harm to all. This ambiguity also ties into the idea of necessitated self-reliance, since actions of one self inherently impact the other.

[11] Congitive dissonance is a complicated concept, and there are many different route by which people experiencing it attempt to reduce discomfort. In all routes, though, the desire to reduce discomfort is present.

should do for each other" (Tronto 1993, 133). For Tronto, obligations are explicit, formal agreements, such as promises or rules, while responsibilities are implicit. Responsibility, when applied to care ethics, exists between the extremes of "being responsible for everyone in every way" and only caring for others when obligated or concluding "we owe nothing" (Tronto 1993, 131-132). I argue that it is fair under this flexible, implicit notion of responsibility to require responsibility to care for oneself. Without adequate care for ourselves, for Tronto, we are unable to recognize the needs of others (1993, 131).[12] As such, to not have responsibility to care for the self, we would then not be able to care for others, and thus end up on the non-caring extreme, which Tronto explicitly wants to avoid.

Initially, this may feel problematic, especially considering Tronto's feminist perspective. Many, if not most, mental health struggles are not the fault of the person with the struggle, but arise because of genetics or external situations such as abuse or neglect. To assign blame to the person with the struggle in the form of responsibility seems to only worsen the stigma that already exists around mental health. Jane Ussher, in *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience,* addresses this:

> "Self-harm and attempted suicide are clearly designated as pathology in the DSM… However, if we examine the accounts of women who have been sexually abused as children, we can reframe these experiences as coping responses to physical violation… This is not an 'adaptive' response, but it may feel like the only option to a woman who has been made to feel powerless and worthless" (Ussher 2011, 146-147).

For Ussher, the pathologizing of what she deems an understandable response fails to acknowledge "the conditions that drove them to despair" and instead moves the blame onto the women and victims who are suffering due to the actions of another (2011, 186). In her framework, there seems to be a dichotomy where "women's negative emotions and reasonable responses to daily living" cannot be medically "positioned as 'symptoms' worthy of psychiatric diagnosis" without delegitimizing the real experiences that women have faced (Ussher 2011, 100).

However, Tronto elaborates on responsibility in ethical caregiving as "something we did or did not do has contributed to the need for care, and so we must care" (Tronto 1993, 132). In other words, we can take responsibility without taking fault or blame. We can experience symptoms that we are not the cause of. With this, there is not the same moral failing that tends to be associated with fault and blame.[13] This part of Tronto's framework is why her definition of responsibility, rather than obligation, is useful for discussing mental health. Unlike obligation, in which there is a willingness to make a

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[12] Full quote: "In order to be able to recognize the needs of others, one must first be attentive to one's own needs for care" (Tronto 1993, 131).

[13] As an example, if my friend gave me a gift that cannot go outside as it will fade, but they did not tell me as such when they gave it and it would not be reasonable for me to have known without being told, if I put the item outside and it fades, it is my responsibility that it happened, but not necessarily my fault nor would it be fair to blame me for the incident.

promise or agree to a set of rules, responsibility does not hold this same requirement of willingness. If we used obligation instead of responsibility, it would hold the implicit notion that, in one way or another, an individual struggling with mental health willingly accepted their illness and symptoms, therefore causing it in some way. I argue that by taking this concept of responsibility to care for a symptom we did not cause as a core concept of self-care, we can avoid the problem posed by Ussher of treating understandable responses as symptoms, since symptoms can be understandable, but one is still in need of help because of them.[14] "For many women, the realization of the extent of their misery, and acknowledgement that it is legitimate, is also the first step in asking for help" (Ussher 2011, 199). This acceptance of responsibility to meet a need for care we see in Tronto can be the same as the acknowledgement that someone else did something harmful to you, and that the reaction one responds to trauma with is legitimate in Ussher. Viewing the self-care process with responsibility rather than obligation removes the idea that victims have culpability for their conditions.[15]

This lack of culpability while still retaining responsibility has the potential to drastically change how mental health is viewed, both for those experiencing struggles and those who do not. For individuals with struggles who internalize this framework, they would not feel a sense of guilt at needing help and not being able to deal with it themselves, which is a common stigma those with mental health struggles face. Instead, they would see their help-seeking, either through a voluntary hold or in another way, as something they can be proud of. For those with friends, family, or acquaintances who are struggling, they can see total legitimacy in what those struggling are facing, and be more patient regarding symptoms and needs since they know the struggle is not something internally created. These ideas of pride and legitimacy are not new within the mental health field, but have the potential to be more readily adopted by those who are struggling and those around them.

Competence

Competence in ethical caregiving requires the provision of good-quality care. If at the end of the caring process, the need for care is not met, it has failed the facet of competence. This, again, seems like something that unfairly places a burden on those with mental health struggles. The effort to become competent in supporting someone in a crisis is difficult, requiring extensive training and/or schooling.[16] There exist resource

[14] This additionally ties back to the idea of self-reliance without self-trust. In an ideal world, we would not have to solve problems that we did not cause. However, since we must rely on ourselves, we must also care for ourselves.

[15] I use culpability here in its legal sense of blameworthiness.

[16] Beyond difficult, it may be impossible to competently care for one's own crisis independently. The APA's guidelines for therapists prescribe that they should not be in dual relationships with their clients. (e.i, being their therapist and also their friend). To be one's own mental health caregiver seems to also be a dual relationship. However, more work needs to be done on the concept of how a dual relationship relates to the concept of the dual sself before a defminitive claim can be made.

problems, which make the availability of care inadequate. This requirement of competence from every individual with a mental health struggle seems to be one of these resource problems. For Tronto, "making certain that the caring work is done competently must be a moral aspect of care" (1993, 133). Note that this does not necessarily specify who is doing the competent care, but rather that one makes certain the care is done competently. She gives the example of a teacher who is made to teach a math class even though they do not know math. For this teacher, even though they have a resource problem due to their lack of math knowledge, this does not absolve them from making certain that the caring work is done competently. This could look like appealing to the administration for a more qualified teacher, and once that new teacher is in place, making certain that the new teacher is, in fact, competent in teaching math. Only at this point is the competence benchmark met, and the original teacher has fulfilled their responsibility to ensure (though not individually provide) quality care (Tronto 1993, 133).

For the application of this concept of outsourcing competence to mental health, I argue that this is where the voluntary psychiatric hold comes in. When a person gets to the stage where they cannot trust themselves to keep themselves safe (attentiveness), and acknowledges a responsibility to solve the care needs they face (responsibility), but are not competent in providing good care to themselves, they can check themselves in on a voluntary psychiatric hold. This will ensure their safety in their crisis and provide them with the resources of competent individuals who have undergone training in providing good quality care, such as the nurses, doctors, and psychologists they will see while in the hold. Like the example of the teacher who appealed to the administration, who at the end of the day still does not know math, the individual seeking mental health help is still not the expert on competent self-care. However, they have made sure that the care given to them is given competently, and as such, fulfilled the competency facet of ethical caregiving. To choose a voluntary psychiatric hold while in crisis is a way to maintain overall competency and ethical caregiving while lacking individual expertise in mental health care.[17]

Responsiveness

The concept of responsiveness requires that instead of assuming what the other needs based on what we would want in their position, we consider the other's position as that other expresses it" (Tronto 1993, 136). This can be difficult to conceptualize in cases like this one, where the self who desires safety and the self who desires harm are the same physical person, just with the stronger desire changing at different points in time.

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[17] There is some evidence that through the voluntary psychiatric hold, the person in crisis does gain skills in the area of mental health care. This can be seen in the decrease in readmission rates for holds when better quality care is given, which will be discussed in more depth in the *Efficacy* section of this paper.

However, I suggest that the not-in-crisis self and the self in crisis can communicate with each other to meet the responsiveness requirement of ethical caregiving. To exemplify this, I turn to the care method of a "safety plan." A safety plan is a document used by people who struggle with suicidal ideation and self-harm, which lists warning signs that a crisis is developing, coping strategies, people to provide distraction, and the location of the closest emergency department (SAMHSA 2025).[18] To return to the idea of conflicting selves, the safety plan is a method to avoid the environmental triggers that allow for the self that desires harm to become the predominant self. This plan is created while in a calmer state, such as during treatment in a voluntary or involuntary hold, for easy reference if a crisis recurs. For someone deep in crisis, where the self that desires to harm is much stronger than the self that desires to be safe, it is often too much cognitive load to seek out the resources that can help. Instead, the competent resources that are available when you do not trust yourself are ready at hand. Following a safety plan while experiencing a crisis that was created by the self not in crisis is, as I see it, a consideration of the other's position as the other expresses it directly.

As previously mentioned, the power of the desire self and the safety self is in constant flux depending on the environment. As such, a self in crisis, where the desire to harm oneself has control, and a self not in crisis, where the safety self has control, are different selves that have different wants and needs. The self not in crisis creates a plan of what they need to stay safe, and the self in crisis is responsive and follows what the other wishes to be done. Additionally, the self not in crisis is responsive to the self in crisis since the safety plan is made for someone in crisis, setting out steps clearly that one can follow easily, even while under extreme stress.

The question of patient autonomy is often raised in discussions surrounding involuntary holds, but it is relevant to the voluntary hold as well. As proposed, the idea that an individual is composed of multiple selves with competing motivations complicates the question of autonomy. If we are to take this idea of multiple selves to be true, it follows that to privilege only the desire to harm undermines individual autonomy, since there is a large portion of the person whose autonomy in seeking safety is being denied. The voluntary hold and the crisis plan can be seen as an extension of autonomy, ensuring that the safety-self retains autonomy in a future moment of diminished control. Additionally, the competence aspect seems to decrease autonomy as the individual experiencing a crisis must inherently rely on experienced others to provide competent care. However, given the active willingness to use the voluntary psychiatric hold rather than the obligation or forced nature of an involuntary hold, this is again an extension of autonomy of the safety-self.

Responsiveness is not a straightforward, singular process but rather an ongoing one. There are points in treatment where it will be easier and harder to self-reflect helpfully. For example, a safety plan should, in most cases, be created while in a calmer state and not in the midst of a crisis, but what is to be done when a person is in crisis

[18] See SAMHSA for a downloadable safety plan template.

without an already-made safety plan? This is one of the moments where responsiveness will be most difficult, if not impossible. In moments like this, I argue that it is ethical to forgo responsiveness and accept treatment that may lead to being in a calm enough state to access responsiveness. For example, perhaps an individual is in such a crisis that they request medication to calm them down, even though they know they do not want to take medicine regularly. In this, they are ignoring their own desire not to rely on medication and are failing the responsiveness component of Tronto's framework. However, this momentary lack of responsiveness allows them to reach a calmer state in which they can make a safety plan and set up a system where they will not need to rely on medication in a future crisis. In this, I hold a more flexible view of Tronto's definition of ethical caregiving, since, when applied to mental health, I claim that it is ethical to momentarily forgo one aspect of ethical care to have more opportunity for ethical caregiving later in the treatment process.

Research Findings on Efficacy and Equity

While the impacts of specific mental health treatments are difficult to study due to the internal nature of many mental health problems and the multitude of confounding factors, some research findings regarding outcomes and patterns exist. Overall, these findings confirm the positive outcomes expected from the voluntary hold succeeding at all four facets required for ethical caregiving.

Efficacy

Since the 1970s, much research has been done to discern the best ways for psychiatric holds, whether voluntary or involuntary, to have positive patient outcomes. Common themes that lead to better outcomes are open communication between staff and patients, patient participation in treatment planning, and retained autonomy through decision-making. As a general pattern, the shorter the length of a stay and the more similar to an outside environment (such as frequent communication with the outside community and an open door in the facility), the better the results (Glick and Hargreaves 1979).[19]

Let us move now from general patterns of efficacy in holds to the voluntary hold in particular. In some countries, such as the Netherlands and Portugal, hospitals allow patients who were originally under involuntary holds to convert to voluntary holds. Those who chose to convert to voluntary status had better outcomes than their counterparts who did not opt to convert to voluntary status (Castro et al. 2025,

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[19] Part of the issue with researching mental health treatment is that correlation does not equal causation. These results are, at least in part, because those who only require short stays are likely the ones who are bound to have better outcomes anyway due to less severe symptoms and more external support. Still, research tried its best to control for these factors and still sees correlations between lower length of stay and better outcomes.

785-894). Compared to those who were admitted under a voluntary hold originally, there was no difference in length of stay (Durns et al. 2021). Additionally, there was no change in readmission rates for those who converted to voluntary status (Castro et al. 2025, 785-894). Since, as discussed above, shorter lengths and fewer readmissions are both markers of better results in holds, it can be predicted that opting in to voluntary care leads to greater efficacy in treatment.[20]

Equity

Mental health treatment historically has not been equitable. From the history of asylums to modern-day studies, there exists a large body of research showing that care for those who have historically been at risk of abuse in the system, including women, children, and minorities, receive less and poorer quality mental health care (Rodgers et al. 2022, 915-925). As such, it is crucial when considering the care ethics of the voluntary hold to examine how these equity issues interact with the involuntary hold.

There is some early evidence that the voluntary psychiatric hold does not exhibit the same disparities that involuntary holds do. A survey of involuntary and voluntary psychiatric hold patients in a Swiss hospital found that even though the numbers of male and female involuntary admissions to the hospital were relatively equivalent, there was a notable disparity in patient response. Nearly twice as many women as men appealed their involuntary admission, suggesting it was primarily women who felt that they had been hospitalized unfairly. In contrast, voluntary admissions were 48% male and 52% female, which showed relative equity about gender and an absence of disparity in responses (Arnold et al. 2019). Though only one study, this presents a case that the voluntary hold has the potential to avoid the treatment disparity regarding the involuntary hold. There exist, however, many alternative explanations for these results. It is possible that the reason more women than men appeal their admission is that they have better legal knowledge of the system and are aware of their right to appeal. Additionally, "persons with low insight into their illness (e.g., in an acute phase of a schizophrenia spectrum disorder) might be more prone to appeal" (Arnold et al. 2019). This study does not preclude the possibility that those who choose a voluntary hold and those who face involuntary holds are predetermined groups as a result of a wide range of factors. Returning to the idea of the desire to be safe and the desire to harm, it is possible that only those where the desire self is the majority get placed into involuntary holds, while those where the safety-self and desire-self are about equal place themselves in voluntary holds. However, to draw conclusions about equity concerning voluntary and involuntary holds, more research has to be done with larger sample sizes, where

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[20] Of course, these studies are done in two countries that have universal healthcare, which could impact the strength of the relationship to quality outcomes. The results of a program like this in America would likely look different, but until is done it is difficult to predict exactly how different they would be. See the section *Cost Pressures* for implications of the US's healthcare system.

factors such as legal education and severity of symptoms can be statistically accounted for.

An additional benefit of the voluntary psychiatric hold is the ease with which a patient can leave if they decide that they are not receiving proper care and their needs are not being met. Unlike the involuntary hold, which requires an appeal to get released, the voluntary one does not have to rely on the slow and potentially biased process through which appeals pass. This increases the ability for the responsiveness care ethic factor, since at each moment the person undergoing treatment can check in with themselves, see what is working, and adjust or leave if their needs are not being met by the care team around them. The patient's participation in the treatment plan has been shown to increase the efficacy of treatment (Glick and Hargreaves 1979, 100).

Systemic Issues: Misuse and Cost Pressures

Though preliminary research results regarding the voluntary psychiatric hold seem promising, as stated by Tronto, “the kinds of [care] judgments that I have described require an assessment of needs in a social and political, as well as a personal, context” (Tronto 1993, 137). As such, it is crucial to examine the limitations of the voluntary psychiatric hold in its social and political context. To put forth that the outcomes of mental healthcare are not tied closely with the broader systemic constraints of the United States political and healthcare system is a fallacy. For our purposes, we will focus primarily on two issues: misuse of the voluntary hold and economic limitations due to the United States’ insurance structure. Overcrowding and lower-quality care are common results of both issues.

Misuse

For both voluntary and involuntary holds, “overcrowded EDs, limited psychiatric beds, and staff shortages can result in prolonged detentions” (Brown et al., 2025). This causes an increase in the time spent waiting to be seen and evaluated. This long wait to be seen is often paired with suboptimal treatment during the stay itself, after evaluation, due to pressure from hospital administrators to clear beds and reduce said overcrowding. Due to these two forces, patients get stuck waiting to be evaluated, but once they are evaluated, they are moved through the inpatient system as quickly as possible. Another common issue is a lack of aftercare, also known as post-hold care pathways, or guidance on next steps after inpatient treatment is planned to end. Without a plan in place, readmission rates become higher, which only adds to the original overcrowding issue (Brown et al. 2025).

This problem of overcrowding and suboptimal treatment exists in part due to a lack of mental health care infrastructure and resources in the United States to handle the increasing demand for it. However, it also exists because of a trend of misuse of the voluntary psychiatric hold, where people check themselves in for reasons other than the intended mental health crisis concern.[21] There is evidence that, especially in more rural communities, many voluntary hold patients reported that they would not need hospitalization at all if they had stable housing or disability income. Some patients who either have no psychiatric diagnosis at all or have psychiatric diagnoses that can be coped with by proper resource availability use emergency department hold beds as a temporary shelter by reporting more severe symptoms to gain admission (Oyetunji et al. 2025, 1299-1305). This is not a problem at the level of the individual, but rather at the level of the state. For those who are unhoused seeking shelter, it is a societal issue that it is easier for them to turn to an emergency voluntary psychiatric hold than to some other form of shelter. With proper resources allocated to provide shelter and care to those seeking a hold for this reason, there will be more beds available to allocate to those needing acute mental health care, regardless of their housing status.

For a treatment plan to be effective, it must be "based not only on the correct diagnostic classification, but on the personal needs and desires of the patient" (Glick and Hargreaves 1979, 102). Currently, neither those with genuine acute mental health crises nor those simply seeking shelter are having their needs properly met. For those simply seeking shelter, they are placed under an inaccurate diagnostic classification to get their personal needs met. Whereas those with mental health crises are not getting their personal needs met due to the lack of quality care because of overcrowding. Creating a system in which those seeking shelter can find it outside of the psychiatric hold will improve outcomes for acute mental health crisis patients since they will be able to be seen more quickly, have more optimal care, and have well-suited post-hold care plans. It will also improve outcomes for those simply seeking shelter, as they will be able to get help suited for their specific situation, not designed for the inaccurate diagnosis they were given.

Cost Pressures

Another issue with the current usage of the voluntary psychiatric hold in the United States is that even if a patient and care provider agree on a treatment plan, due to the influence of economic concerns, this does not always mean the plan will be implemented.

> "Hospital programs are also increasingly controlled by insurance limitations; reimbursement covers only a brief hospitalization…The increasing influence of insurance practices on the delivery of treatment services is being felt in most sectors of medical care, but more dramatically in mental health… The most obvious opportunity for cost savings in mental health care is to suppress the use of hospitalization" (Glick and Hargreaves 1979, 100).

[21] I use the word "misuse" not to place any judgement on those who use the voluntary hold system in these ways, but rather to indicate that it is not the prescribed purpose of the voluntary hold system.

This quote, while still timely, was published in a treatment review in 1979. On the patient end, insurance remains a large barrier for those who would otherwise use the voluntary psychiatric hold. For some, at times when they would otherwise seek admission, they choose not to due to worries about the out-of-pocket costs.[22] Those with mental health problems are less likely to have insurance in the first place, which can lead to even higher average out-of-pocket costs (Rowan et al. 2013). On the provider side, there is pressure to have shorter stays even when longer stays would be beneficial. As discussed, this can be in part due to a desire to free up beds for the next patient, but it can also be due to a desire to suppress hospitalization as a cost-saving measure. This, like the misuse, is not an issue of individual doctors but rather the result of a healthcare system designed with a focus on profit and privatized insurance. Doctors who decide on a course of action to best help their patient commonly face an insurance denial of this action plan and must resort to a less suitable treatment that the insurance opts for (Glick and Hargreaves 1979, 100).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to prescribe how best to fix the issue of for-profit healthcare in America concerning improving mental health treatment. In the case of the voluntary psychiatric hold specifically, for most people who have gone through the steps of deciding to check themselves in and request treatment, a case could be made that treatment be deemed essential for health and thus be covered by insurance. Overall, there is a clear barrier preventing the voluntary psychiatric hold from being its most useful; this barrier is due to a systemic situation outside of the concept of the hold and thus does not reflect an issue with the hold itself. Due to the interdependence of care required to meet the competency claim of ethical caregiving, social and political contexts must also be addressed in order for the voluntary psychiatric hold to meet its potential.

Conclusion

While there remain issues with the voluntary psychiatric hold due to its contextual situation within the broader political and social system, there is an early promise that this mechanism can be harnessed as a method through which ethical self-care can take place. As opposed to involuntary commitment, which perpetuates the inequalities and bias already existent within the flawed mental health infrastructure, the voluntary hold can provide a direct opportunity to practice ethical care as put forth by Tronto. When a person is struggling to keep themselves safe, they are experiencing an internal conflict between two selves, one that desires harm and one that seeks safety. These two selves must necessarily rely on each other, despite their counteractive motivations and lack of trust in each other. Due to the nature of the human body, these two conflicting selves struggle for control over the body's actions, with the primary self

[22] This has increased over time, especially for those without insurance (Rowan, McAlpine, and Blewett 2013, 1723-30).

depending on the current environment and triggers. When the self that desires harm has prominent control, a person undergoes a crisis.

While I have focused primarily on those who face suicidal ideation and self-harm, this radical self-care framework has potential broader implications for others with large conflicts between internal selves. For example, people in abusive relationships may feel a conflict between the desire to stay with a person whom they love (equivalent to the harm self in the mental health example) and the part of themselves that seeks safety. These same four facets of ethical self-care could be applied, with small changes (like instead of relying on hospital staff for competence, one can rely more on the support of family or friends). Or, for those who face issues with substance abuse, they may face an internal conflict between their safety and the desire to use a substance. For them, the multiple selves might be even more obvious than those within mental health (take the phrase "I'm not me when I'm high," for example). These cases, while needing further examination, have broader implications for how care is practiced on the whole. While care must necessarily remain something that is socially and politically bound due to its interconnected nature, individuals can participate in and shape their own care in moments of internal conflict. Rather than self-care ending at the rupture of self-trust, through Tronto's framework, that rupture can serve as the impetus for a new self-care process.

Applying Tronto's framework of ethical caregiving to mental health, the voluntary hold can implement all four facets of necessary care for the self. The rupture of trust, but recognition that one must rely on oneself due to the embodied nature of the conflicting selves, shows attentiveness. The idea that, while we are not obligated to care for ourselves, we do have a responsibility to do so, even though we did not create the mental health condition that is causing the need for care, allows for an interpretation of responsibility that allows us to proceed with self-care without accepting culpability for creating the need for care. Though the individual themselves does not have the skills to care for themselves, the act of checking oneself into a voluntary care hold means they meet the competency requirement by surrounding themselves with a care team that is trained and experienced in mental health crisis intervention. Lastly, the voluntary hold allows for direct responsiveness, where the in-crisis self and not-in-crisis self communicate their needs through notes and plans. In the case where the treatment is not what either self needs, the person can revoke themselves from the treatment without involving the biased system in which mental health care has typically been housed. The skills learned and methods produced while in the hold, such as the safety plan, allow for future bi-directional responsiveness to the self in the case of a crisis reoccurrence. If the social and political situation allows for the voluntary psychiatric hold to meet its full potential, it is a possible care route in which all the facets required of ethical caregiving are met.

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Reconstructing Congress: Feminist Publicization and the Good Life

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Abstract: *This paper argues that women's participation in the United States Congress operates as a form of feminist publicization that reshapes legislative institutions and advances the conditions necessary for a good life. Drawing on Judith Squires' account of the public–private divide, Audre Lorde's insistence on lived experience as a source of political transformation, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, the paper develops a theoretical framework for understanding women's legislative attention as institutionally consequential rather than merely symbolic. This framework is illustrated through Michele Swers' analysis of women in the United States Senate, which demonstrates that women legislators consistently prioritize policy areas related to social welfare, health, family policy, and civil rights. The paper contends that by bringing marginalized experiences into legislative debate, women legislators challenge patriarchal norms embedded in congressional practice and expand the boundaries of legitimate political concern. In doing so, women's representation strengthens democratic institutions by fostering more inclusive and responsive policymaking*.

Keywords: Feminist Political Theory; Good Life; Women in Congress; Intersectionality; Public/Private Sphere; Visibility; Attention

The presence and power of women in Congress are vital to secure a good life for all. In this paper, the "good life" is understood as a set of political and social conditions that enable individuals to exercise freedom, access meaningful representation, and have equal opportunities to pursue their well-being. Rather than a singular ideal, it refers to institutional arrangements that recognize diverse identities and support equitable participation in policymaking. Representation of women in Congress is not just a representation of female issues. Women look beyond their singular identity as 'women' to propose legislation and debates that promote equity for often marginalized or underrepresented groups. Women bring in new perspectives and show attention to policy areas that intersect in a variety of ways due to the complexity of their identities. In this paper, evidence from political scientist Dr. Michele Swers will be used to provide support for the theoretical demands made by Dr. Judith Squires, Audre Lorde, and Kimberlé Crenshaw through an analysis of women in the United States Senate.

Women's perspectives represent a powerful and unique force for change. Women's participation in politics and attention to underrepresented policy areas force the political institution of Congress to confront legislative and institutional barriers to having a good life. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is used to understand the wide variety of perspectives women bring to Congress through their participation in governance. Lorde's theory is used to connect women's participation in the legislative institution of Congress as a demonstration of disrupting gendered political practices by dismantling systemic structures of oppression from within. Women participating in politics are creating a gateway for visibility to marginalized groups and underrepresented policy areas. A good life cannot be achieved without access to equity or legal protection. Women in the United States Congress aid in creating a good life for all through their legislative agendas and behavior due to their intersecting identities, their presence as women in office, and their attention to policy areas that dismantle and reconstruct the institution of the United States Congress from within.

Publicization

Prior to modern feminist movements, women historically took on roles in the home while men held job roles outside of the home. Women could not move freely in society as they were financially dependent on their fathers and partners. A good life is not one where one's livelihood is dependent on others, nor is it one that is limited by the government. Professor of Political Theory, Dr. Judith Squires writes in *Gender in Political Theory* about the political involvement of women leading to a good life:

> "If government is to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of personal freedom and to remain neutral towards disputed and controversial ideals of the good life, it ought not to continue to support, or even to allow gendered practices that deny personal freedom to women and children within the family" (Squires 1999, 47).

For equality to exist within governments to ensure the good life of all citizens, the private sphere must join with the public sphere. When women participate in politics and bring private sphere issues into public debate, they expose why gender norms perpetuate restrictions on freedoms and well-being. A government committed to securing a good life for all cannot remain neutral when privacy hides inequality. The societal norms of women staying at home prevent them from holding positions in institutions that make the policies affecting their lives. Joining the public sphere through political involvement allows women to participate in policymaking, giving them a voice in the decisions made that affect their lives and interests. This involvement in policy change reverts the systematic focus from the sole interests of men who do not address issues outside of their personal scope of interest.

Dismantling Through Visibility

Audre Lorde's *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* was written after a women's conference where few groups of women were actually represented. While Lorde's paper is a critique of an academic conference, the ideas connect to broader ones about the good life by dismantling the patriarchy. This work shows how institutional structures intended to represent all are based on a privileged few.

The 'master's tools' are not literal but, rather, ideas which maintain unequal social structures. Relying on the same limited perspectives cannot produce change because the people who built the system are unwilling to see the harm it causes. When applied to politics, Lorde's warning becomes a reminder that Congress cannot meaningfully address equity and justice if the voices shaping legislation only act in favor of their group that has always held power. Real transformation in politics includes people whose lived experiences challenge assumptions in policy areas that have been neutral or undiscussed. These transformations require the inclusion of women whose experiences challenge dominant perspectives. Lorde states, "our personal visions help lay the groundwork for political action". (2003, 27). Women have unique experiences and paths that they can use to effect change towards equality.

Lorde acknowledges that women have been kept suppressed in maternal roles under the patriarchy. These roles are often limiting and assume women are supposed to work in the private sphere. She argues that underneath "a patriarchal structure, maternity is the only social power open to women" (Lorde 2003, 27). Connecting to Squires' theory on the publicization of women, the patriarchal structure of the United States is what has forced women into the private sphere throughout history. Women holding a place in politics and speaking out against injustices ensure a good life because these new ideas and thought processes are being added to the institutional operations of Congress. Women are dismantling the United States' systematic oppression by having a place in politics and using their unique voice for policy change.

Identity Politics

Women in Congress exemplify descriptive and substantive representation. The way women represent in Congress is not limited solely to their identity as women. They represent the interests of their constituents, women like them, and of people who may have a similar background to them. Kimberlé Crenshaw's *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* introduces the term 'intersectionality'. This is the idea that humans are not made up of one singular identifying factor such as gender or race, instead, their race and gender can contribute to their experiences and views. This theory is written in a critique of identity politics. Crenshaw strengthens Lorde's argument by showing why visibility and representation must go beyond adding women to political spaces. She explains that identities such as race, gender, and class overlap, shaping one's life experience (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). At the time it was written, Congress as an institution did not represent the interests of women of color; it represented either women or people of color. With Crenshaw's intersectionality, these identities cannot be separated. Discussion of these two identities as separate by male congressional members is insufficient and does not fully encompass all factors of racism and sexism when making legislative decisions. When policymakers assume that all women share the same lived experience, they unintentionally silence groups that are vulnerable and need legislative protection.

Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality helps prove that representation is about more than just the number of seats women hold in Congress, it is about what these women are doing while in office. Women foster conversations and perform legislative duties that bring attention to the intersection of identities.

> "Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in group politics" (Crenshaw 1991, 1299).

A government dominated by cisgender white men cannot fully understand or legislate for a diverse nation with overlapping and intersecting identity groups. Ignoring these layered identities leads to a policy that only benefits those in power and ignores the needs of the people. Intersectionality expands the scope of what lawmakers consider when writing policy, which widens the path to a good life. Bringing intersectional identities to political institutions through women's representation ensures that policy does not leave the vulnerable behind.

Just as Lorde demands new voices to shape the political landscape, Crenshaw explains how institutions limit these voices because they were built without the inclusion of women ever being considered. When a woman enters Congress, she is not just a member who happens to be a woman, but she brings forward the realities of communities long excluded from political conversation. Women's political agenda creates institutional barriers that prevent people from having a good life to their fullest potential. When these inequalities are shown, it then allows space for Congress to make inclusive policies. This shift sets the stage for understanding Congress itself as a gendered institution in need of structural transformation.

Gendered Institution

Political institutions do not exist in a vacuum; they are shaped by the world around them, reflecting the norms and assumptions of the society that created them. The United States Congress operates as a 'gendered institution.' For most of its history, it was designed entirely around the lives and values of its male-only members. Committee assignments, leadership hierarchies, and debate practices were all created in an environment where women were not allowed to participate. This resulted in

Congress's male-centered foundation that created an environment that reinforces systemic disadvantages towards women.

These patriarchal norms are embedded in both formal and informal structures of Congress. Including leadership hierarchies, expectations around work-life balance, and longstanding networks of political influence that have historically excluded women. Such norms shape who holds power within the institution and also what types of issues are considered legitimate subjects of legislative debate. As a result, policy areas associated with the private sphere, such as caregiving, reproductive health, and family welfare, have often been marginalized or deprioritized on the legislative agenda.

When women enter political institutions, they begin to disrupt these established structures not only through their presence but through the issues they raise and the perspectives they introduce in legislative debate. Their participation challenges the political foundation created for and by men. Women's visibility forces the institution to adjust its system. The legislative behavior of women creates even more change. By raising attention to issues previously viewed as private matters, women make it harder for Congress to ignore the lived realities of its constituents. Women's growth in politics is a symbolic and structural shift. Increasing the number of women in office changes how policy is discussed, whose experiences are centered, and what Congress understands as necessary for a good life of equality for the people.

The United States operates as a representative democracy. Eligible voters can choose to elect officials who will represent their interests at the federal and state levels. The United States Congress operated for 128 years with male-only members. The first woman elected to Congress was in 1917. Women remained widely uninvolved and did not hold office for decades. Feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s started to advocate for gender equality and opportunities for women in social spheres. Women remained underrepresented until a monumental turning point in 1992.

Few women held office at the national level until the 1992 election. The 1992 election for the 103rd Congress changed everything. There was a drastic increase in the number of women elected to office. Women went from holding 35 congressional seats to 61. The 1992 election was coined as the Year of the Woman, ushering in a new era of political representation. The Year of the Woman marked a drastic shift in public awareness towards the inequalities faced by women in politics. This surge of women elected to Congress was a cultural and institutional shift towards equality. By electing women because of their presence in the institution and the support received by voters, electing them to positions allows them to advocate for change.

Women continued to increase in representation. As their numbers grew, political scientists began to research their impact. In 2005, Dr. Mary Hawkesworth, former Director of the Center for American Women and Politics, Distinguished Professor of Political Science and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, wrote the journal article *Engendering Political Science: An Immodest Proposal*. Hawkesworth states, "Gender as an analytic category illuminates gender power and gendered institutions and delineates a research agenda that quite literally did not exist 30 years ago" (2005). Women studying political science in the early 2000s and late 90s were the first to propose this concept and have been fostering future research since. Continuing to research this gives a better understanding of how and why political behaviors happen.

Research in political science has shown that women legislators tend to devote greater attention to certain policy areas than their male colleagues, often referred to in the literature as 'women's issues.' While there is no definitive list of what constitutes women's issues, existing analyses of congressional bill sponsorship indicate heightened attention by women to policy domains including civil rights, health, labor, housing and community development, law, crime, and family-related issues (Wiseman and Wittmer 2018, 63). This pattern suggests that policy attention varies by gender and that women's presence in Congress expands the range of issues treated as legitimate subjects of legislative concern. In doing so, women legislators bring visibility to marginalized communities and policy areas that have historically received less attention within Congress.

Women in the U.S. Senate: Evidence from Dr. Michele Swers

Dr. Michele Swers' *Women in the Club: Gender and Policy Making in the Senate* provides a foundational account of how gender shapes legislative behavior within the United States Senate. While much of the early literature on women in Congress focused on the House of Representatives, Swers demonstrates that gender also plays a meaningful role in agenda-setting and policy prioritization within the Senate's distinct institutional context. Through analysis of bill sponsorship and interviews with Senate staff, Swers shows that women senators are more likely to expend political capital on issues related to social welfare, health, family policy, and civil rights. Her work offers an empirical foundation for understanding how women's presence in legislative institutions translates into substantive policy attention rather than symbolic representation alone.

The engendering of political science and dismantling the patriarchal structure of Congress had been a growing topic of discussion among feminist political theorists over the past decade (Hawkesworth 2005, Squires 1999). Much of the research discussed in the above section, Gendered Institution, reviewed the actions of women in the House of Representatives. The Senate is composed of a much smaller number of members than the House of Representatives.

While previous research focused on the House of Representatives, Swers' work shows that the U.S. Senate offers a unique lens for studying gender and its connection to policymaking. The Senate is much smaller and has shorter terms. Influences on policymaking are more observable. Swers demonstrates that women do indeed show attention to areas that men do not, these areas being 'women's issues.'

A large portion of *Women in the Club* is an analysis of interviews with congressional staffers. Drawing on these interviews with Senate staffers, Swers argues that women senators' policy priorities are shaped in part by gendered life experiences. "Gendered life experience can make women more sensitive to the problems faced by female constituents and expend political capital advocating for a legislative solution" (Swers 2013, 63). Swers believes that women's attention to certain issues is linked to their identity. Following Squires' theory, women in the Senate bring attention to issues that concern them because of their identity as women and the social conditions that come with that. Life experience is not only used in legislating women's interests but is also extended to other groups as well. This reinforced Crenshaw's point that intersectional experiences bring new visibility to a system of overlapping disadvantages.

Swer's findings also support Lorde's argument that lived experiences can form the foundation for political change. Gendered differences in legislative behavior help explain why women legislators are often more likely to prioritize policy areas related to social welfare and feminist concerns, with research suggesting that "women are more likely to begin with a predisposition to pay attention to the social welfare and feminist concerns that constitute women's issues" (Swers 2013, 77). Gender can shape legislative priorities, but it does not determine them. Political behavior is also influenced by party affiliation, constituency demands, and individual ideology. Many women in the Senate draw on personal experience to bring sustained attention to social and feminist policy areas that have historically been marginalized within Congress.

While these patterns are significant, they should not be interpreted as suggesting that all women share the same political priorities. As Swers emphasizes, women legislators do not hold a monolithic perspective. Their positions are shaped by party affiliation, constituency demands, and individual ideology (Swers, 2013). In many cases, party alignment plays a more decisive role than gender, particularly on highly polarized issues such as reproductive rights. Women across party lines may fundamentally disagree on what constitutes 'women's issues' or feminist concerns, illustrating that representation alone does not guarantee policy consensus. Recognizing this variation avoids essentializing women while still acknowledging that lived experience can influence legislative behavior.

Swers argues that "women senators do not share one monolithic point of view on these issues. Instead, their views are shaped by personal life experiences, constituent opinion, and strategic political calculations" (Swers 2013, 100). Women do not simply assimilate to gendered norms of the Senate; instead, they reshape the legislative agenda by raising attention to issues rooted in lived experiences and their constituents' needs. Their presence challenges patriarchal assumptions embedded in the Congress and expands what is encompassed by political and policy behavior.

Swer's work demonstrates that women's representation in the Senate is not just symbolic, but institutionally transformative. Women's representation reshapes the institution of the United States Congress and broadens the policy foundations necessary for securing a good life for all.

Throughout this paper, the theories of Squires, Lorde, and Crenshaw demonstrate that achieving the conditions necessary for a good life—understood as freedom, representation, and equal opportunity—requires dismantling structures that confine women to the private sphere, silence marginalized identities, and sustain patriarchal policymaking. Women in Congress challenge these constraints by publicizing issues historically seen by men in power as private matters. This reveals how inequality is supported in our nation by family structure, employment, and communities. Women's participation forces the institution of Congress to confront gendered assumptions embedded in political life and expand the range of perspectives considered legitimate in policy debate.

Evidence from Swer's *Women in the Club: Gender and Policy Making in the Senate* illustrates how women legislators translate lived experience into political action in ways anticipated in theory by Squires, Lorde, and Crenshaw. Lorde explores the lived experience of women and the impact that has on change. Squires discusses bringing private matters to the public eye in her analysis of women's involvement in politics and what it could mean for liberty. Crenshaw expands on ideas of women's representation by explaining that they are made up of multiple identities and experiences that are used to advocate for policy priorities. Swers' research confirms that women in the United States Congress exercise these theoretical demands into political action. Women prioritize issues affecting vulnerable communities, broadening the legislative agenda of Congress, where men have not. Women's representation strengthens democracy by ensuring Congress reflects the complexity of the American people and advances institutional conditions that support freedom, inclusion, and equal opportunity for all.

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Hanging Out with Pigeons: Birds as Queerness

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Abstract: *Birds have permeated the most ancient stories humans tell (and retell) to understand ourselves, and the many associations we have with birds vary wildly, ranging from apocalyptic to heavenly and from doom to absolute freedom. Thus, whether through fear or hope, the extremity of human projections onto birds is always connected to futurity. In this paper, I argue that depictions of birds in literature and visual art are uniquely positioned to engage with utopic queerness, capable of unsettling the boundaries of possibility. I draw on two contemporary speculative fiction novels, "The 30 Names of Night" by Zeyn Joukhadar and "The Swan Book" by Alexis Wright, as well as two visual art pieces, "Columba" by Kiki Smith and "Boarders at Rest" by Annette Messager, to configure the border-crossing capability of birds, as they fracture straight-time and shatter anthropocentric logic – and, in the process, allow for radical hope.*

Keywords: Birds; Queerness; Borders; Future; Hope.

Birds traverse horizons, cutting across the planes of sky that humans can only crane their necks to look upon. Perhaps because the aerial is so inaccessible to us wingless folk, spiritualities are often tied to the sky or a transcendent, "above" realm. Various religions conceive of divine rewards and retributions as raining down from the sky, and as aerial agents, birds have become patrons of swift, spiritual intervention. In the Bible, the flight of a dove released from Noah's hands over a quiet[23], flooded Earth is a safe passage to follow, leading humanity into a new world washed pure. Rock doves (or pigeons) in the Qur'an nest above a cave to aid Muhammad on his migration, offering divine respite to the weary prophet[24]. The gentle coo of the pigeon in Sufism is a call from the natural world to worship one's soul. Doves are particularly trustworthy spiritual guides as we believe that they lead us toward peace—a warm hollow for the night, a safe haven—or perhaps they simply draw us closer to the shivering nakedness of ourselves. Either way, following doves leads us toward somewhere we ought to be.

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[23] Genesis 6-9 (Authorized King James Version, Oxford University Press).
[24] The Qur'an. (Translated by M.A.S. Abdel Halemm, Oxford University Press).

Vultures, too, stick their bald heads into religious texts. Although less common now, threatened by metropolitan constraints and declining vulture populations, traditional Zoroastrian death rites involved laying the body upon a dokhma,[25] or the Tower of Silence, to be consumed by vultures and nurture new life. In the Torah, God carried Jewish people from Egyptian enslavement into freedom "on the wings of eagles" (translated from Nesher, also meaning vulture).[26] Although the scavenging nature of vultures is dogged by malign accusations, the process of the living feeding on the dead wraps embodied, temporal forms into spiritual eternities; all life awaits digestion by scavengers or soil, equalized in nourishment.

After all, the image of the vulture is only so menacing as death itself. Although still spiritually and profoundly unknowable, death and mass destruction are constant afflictions in postmodern consciousness, as humanity witnesses the starvation and murder of the earth and its inhabitants. Susan Sontag suggests that it's "not 'Apocalypse Now' but 'Apocalypse From Now On'" (1978, 176). We have long passed the point of no return for climate change and are only waiting for our turn to be swooped upon and picked clean. Cities are leveled with present war technology, and institutions of power attempt to scrub away at genocides in headlines. Apocalypse is not just a looming condition of the future; it's now. Amid decades of Israel's settler-colonial occupation of Palestine and mass displacement, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish writes amid the conditions of ongoing apocalypse, asking "Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly after the last sky?" (1984).

As primordial creatures and outlasting survivors, birds are present in the apocalypse from then, the apocalypse of now, and the apocalypse to come. The circular vortex of carrion birds predisposes doom; in the Book of Revelations, they encircle the carnage of final divine punishment, the "great supper of God.[27]" In this reading, vultures themselves are God (1998, 315-316). The apocalyptic imagery of birds remains foreboding in the punishing clot of Hitchcock's *The Birds*[28] on the horizon. Within the self, "wearing an albatross around one's neck" refers first to Samuel Coleridge's albatross, which hung from the neck of the sailor who killed it, a bloodstain as a karmic punishment (1798). Charles Baudelaire's albatross is shame animated, wobbling, and ridiculed on a ship deck, the immortalization of "essentially satanic" laughter (1855). Shakespeare's murder omen of choice was the raven, and years later, Poe's iconic, macabre raven joins the doom and gloom party. Birds taunt us with their illegible squawking; they seem to know of the greatest of unknowns—death itself.

Feared as it is, death is also the greatest liberator. Various spiritualities can only conceive of peace as a quality of post-life; thus, the very concepts of freedom and peace,

[25] Dokmas (or dakhmas) are circular, raised structures used for excarnation to keep water and soil clean, common during the Sassanid era until the 20th-century.
[26] Ornithologists such as Henry Tristram hypothesize that the biblical "nesher" could be a griffon vulture, native to Palestine and the Mediterranean area.
[27] Revelations 19:17-18, (Authorized King James Version, Oxforship University Press).
[28] *The Birds* was based on a Daphne DeMaurier 1952 short story, *The Birds*.

through death, are philosophically entangled. It should come as no surprise, then, that death is absorbed in the feathered imagery of angel wings, final flight, and the soul's ascension. The angelic quality of doves is starkly opposite the winged shadows of doom, and yet, these birds are similarly connected to an immense unknowability, one that humbles humans. Emily Dickinson's sweet little bird is hope directly embodied, "the thing with feathers / that perches in the soul / and sings the tune without the words / and never stops at all" (1981). Yet, Maya Angelou's caged songbird with clipped wings is itself hoping, "for the caged bird sings of freedom" (1983).

Flight, or the ability to explore the expanse of sky, is flagrantly linked to freedom in our language; idioms like "spread your wings" and "the sky's the limit" litter corny greeting cards intended for quite wingless humans. The simple image of a bird taking flight is emblematic of the natural right to exist wherever, however, and for whatever purpose, a freedom that upends all structures of control. Political mobilizations picked up on the strength of the bird-freedom-linkage, particularly in feminist conceptions of freedom[29]. Pablo Picasso's doves also became a staunch symbol of peace for the Communist Party and later a global symbol for the disembodied concept of peace itself, as banal as flashing a peace sign. Activism that advocates for feathery freedoms and peace must be a utopian venture, as absolute achievement is unavailable to life-forms tethered to the Earth.

It is precisely for their incomprehensibility that stories about birds soar through our spiritualities, literatures, languages, and all the various, peculiar, diverse ways we make sense of ourselves. Whether overtly or vaguely tied to meaning—making, belief systems, and subliminal messaging surrounding birds is overwhelming and always extreme. After all, birds are dinosaurs, an ancient lifeform that has survived the conditions of the apocalypse, time and time again, and yet, they are constantly warning, beguiling, and ushering us into the future. Their presence predisposes either the end of the world as we know it, or the beginning of a new one; a safe haven or an omen; a new flight or "a special providence in the fall of the sparrow" (Shakespeare 2016), Hamlet bowing to the great unknowable written upon the birds' wings.[30] In fact, the category of "birds" carries greater cultural weight than other general lifeforms – such as mammals or amphibians. Their relationship to movement, both that of time and of flight, erects literal, psychological, and spiritual representations of an inaccessible aerial realm. Thus, literary and visual relationships with birds are uniquely positioned as sites of radical hope, transgressive imagination, and queer futurity, fracturing straight-time, anthropocentric rationality, and the ever-negotiated boundary between the possible and impossible.

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[29] Feminist "birders" have set a historical precedent of intertwining feminist activism with environmental conservation. The Feminist Bird Club (founded 2016) and the National Audubon Society (founded 1905) point to the deep-seated and ongoing intersectionality.

[30] Hamlet refers to "augury" in the prior line, an ancient Roman divination practice conducted by priests who looked at birds to tell the future.

Birds are always implicitly tied to the future. Perhaps the most acute visualization of the inaccessible is the horizon, something that exists only so far as one cannot reach it; as you approach, it flies forward, an endlessly infantile game of tag that'll never end, no matter how we cry "uncle," or how the unknown haunts humans attempting to conquer all knowledge. Clasping queerness with hope, José Estaban Muñoz envisions "queerness as horizon," a utopian principle of futurity that we may brush against in moments of "ecstasy," but can never truly grasp (2009). Utopia itself is an ideal of hope that is constantly rearranging, constantly out of reach; not only is living in utopia unattainable, but the very concept of utopia resists definition, as mutable as the horizon. Thus, rendering utopia is inherently queer, an impulse which necessitates shedding categorized knowledge, "a sort of ontologically humble state, under a conceptual grid in which we do not claim to always already know queerness in the world" (Muñoz 2009, 22). The exhilaration of interacting with the unknowable, the formless, the so-called deviants and radicals, representations of queer relationships to gender, sexuality, and the body, and all that bends boundaries of existence allows utopia to twinkle.

This utopic freedom of bird movement lends itself to a critical intersection with the unknown future. The freedom of flight resembles, in acute moments of startlement, a dizzying, incomprehensible wonder that allows humans to imagine shooting straight up into the sky and into Muñoz's utopian queerness. If this spell of frenzied hope only lasts a fraction of a second before fading into temporal rationality, it doesn't matter. Queerness glitters in plain sight, upon telephone wires and tree branches, at the beach and outside the subway station, encircling the world. The ambiguities of queerness oppose a world that demands form and, further, legible forms. But, for Muñoz, "queerness is not quite here… queerness is still forming, or in many crucial ways formless" (2009, 29).

Shifting ambiguously between ghostly and temporal forms, the birds in Zeyn Joukhadar's magical realism novel *The Thirty Names of Night* make a giant, ecstatic, mournful, miraculous mess of things, splintering time in the process. Set in New York City, the novel follows Nadir, the trans son of Syrian immigrants, whose dead-name is scratched out with heavy blots of ink on the page, until he names himself "Nadir[31]," all the while, "Wishing there was another way to exist in the world than to be bodied… where a soul could hum unburdened and unbound… a different softness: the stems of orchids, maybe; the line of sap running up the trunk of a maple; the first of a fox's heart" (Joukhadar 2021, 3).

Considering the performative artifice of gender essentialism and the nebulous binarized constructs of masculinity and femininity that congeal the compulsion to perform heteronormativity with innate gender attributes, "destruction is thus always restoration—that is, the destruction of a set of categories that introduce artificial divisions into an otherwise unified ontology" (Butler 1990, 152). Gender is a kind of

[31] Nadir is an Arabic name meaning "rare."

violence only humans must answer to. So, imagining a world without the constraints of gender is “done from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such” (Butler 1990, XX). Turning to the non-human to conceptualize gender queerness, Nadir particularly imagines himself clothed with wings because “it is one thing to have a body; it is another thing to struggle under the menacing weight of its meaning” (Joukhadar 2021, 137-6).

Mourning the loss of his mother, an ornithologist and community activist killed in an arson hate crime, the city draws “birds the way an open wound draws flies” (Joukhadar 2021, 99). A "shimmering plague” of goldfinches descends, a murder of crows bruises the sky with a funeral, owls fly high and silent, encircling death sites, and the novel begins five years to the day of her death, when “forty-eight white-throated sparrows fall from the sky” (Joukhadar 2021, 1). The novel tugs at the thread of what is real and alive, with these mystical birds not explained away as hallucinatory or supernatural, resisting neat confinement to either ghostly or fleshly forms. They simply exist. Nadir’s late mother is similarly present in the text, sitting at the breakfast table, urging: “don’t believe them when they tell you who is dead and who is living” (Joukhadar 2021, 50), as if to say, instead, ‘believe in me.’

Her life was dedicated to finding a species of rare, almost-mythologized birds no one else thought existed, a flock that had never stopped flying with their backs always to the sun; “the last of their kind, these birds encircled the world like an unbroken ribbon” (Joukhadar 2021, 62). Always on the horizon, submerged in night, nearly invisible but for the eye searching without rationality, the birds are queerness. That is, “queerness in its utopian connotations promises a human that is not yet here, thus disrupting any ossified understanding of the human” (Muñoz 2009, 26), in one’s gendered, racialized, bodied form. In fact, queerness resists any ossified understanding of life itself, human or otherwise.

Both Nadir and his grandmother Teta, who immigrated from Syria as a young woman, revere the freedom of winged creatures when their own “body came with borders” (Joukhadar 2021, 233), surviving xenophobic violence, the gentrification of the city’s Syrian enclave, mounting hospital bills, crushing economic oppression, and a painful estrangement from home. Not only are they not free to move about the world, but they are also being systematically strangled out of the home they currently occupy. And, unlike the mythologized birds, their movements are quite visible and policed. After all, Nadir’s mother was murdered for simply remaining and attempting to restore a Syrian community center and bird sanctuary in the city. As spoken and unspoken borders throttle inward, they are at once immobilized and persecuted for that immobility.

The borders that stifle their existence are also metaphorical. Nadir’s transness distances him from Teta, as he believes his “insufficient, unnamable suffering” must be born alone (Joukhadar 2021, 4). However, Teta, too, suffers from her illegibility. When Nadir discovers the old journal of the mysteriously missing avian-obsessed Syrian artist

Laila Z, he learns that the two women were each other's first loves before Teta left Syria. Although they reunite in old age, the violence of what could have been, their love torn by heteronormative expectations and the very borders of nations that stood between them, lingers knife-like. Laila addresses each entry to Teta, writing to her across decades and oceans, without ever intending to reach an audience. The "autonaturalizing temporality" of straight time sneers, "there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life" (Muñoz 2009, 22). And yet, as the narration flips back and forth between Nadir and the journal entries, Laila's undying love is laid "on the broad backs of these thirty birds" flying relentlessly onward (Joukhadar 2021, 228). If the birds have always flown, fly now, and continue to fly, then their queerness collapses the flimsy movie-set of linear time, balls it up, and implodes it into fragmented glimpses of utopia, lodging themselves into the conscious where stories ripen, memory shifts, and so-called reality trembles. In the then and there of queer time, the hope of their love is undying.

Perhaps the most poignant desire in the novel is the most impossible: flight. Laila witnessed the enduring miracle of "The Bicycle Woman" in her village in Syria, chasing after a woman who built a flying machine by attaching cloth wings to a bike and actually flew, only to crash to her death. For just a moment, however, she can imagine, "for just one instant, to be so close to God" (Joukhadar 2021, 69). Laila recounted the event to Teta, who carried the story with her to America, passing it on to her daughter and grandchildren, until they, too, believed in the so-called impossible. This is a more wild, troubling hope, one worth dying for. And indeed, there is inherent risk involved in probing beyond the borders of linear time and colonial logics. Yet, borders are not absolute limits, and transgression is not only possible but inevitable. Borders are crossed, re-crossed, and crossed again, transness is perpetually fracturing impositions of gender and heteronormativity, and state borders are always contested, even as they are dogmatically policed.

In contrast, queerness is itself a non-border, the liminal horizon at the very edge of possibility – unreachable, uncrossable, non-linear, and in constant flight. The dream of taking flight allows queerness to pulse in the very moment of ecstasy mid-air, the flights "no longer" and the flights "not yet," transcending such literal and metaphorical borders that ensnare existence, to touch the warm face of utopia once before death. The Bicycle Woman became something else impossible during her flight; she was unbodied, unbound, defying the very definitions of human capability. In that moment of freedom, she was more bird than woman.

Of course, birds cannot molt the catastrophic effects of climate change like feathers, nor remain unscathed by the pollutant disease of militarized, global capitalism, but the relative freedom of flight provides the ability to speculate on alternate modes of engaging with fluidity and borders. Simply put, birds are freer than us, they need not die to touch the horizon. Although the Bicycle Woman ultimately sacrificed herself, the story in the novel is one of hope. Perhaps this is because the queer "death drive[32]", as Lee Edelman suggests, is the only true opposition to the abject meaninglessness of bordered, gendered violence, in which heterosexual reproduction is simply product potential, at the expense not only of queer survival, but the very capacity for queerness amid inescapable imitation. Through systemic, even subconscious, faith in the nuclear family unit and the romance of "living on" through offspring, queer existence that resists such ideation becomes inefficient, capitalist waste. For queer theory, "a particular story of where storytelling fails," to "tend precisely toward such a redefinition of civil order itself through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity" (Edelman 1998, 19, 23), queerness must disengage from reproductive fantasies of "survival" in a flightless future. Queerness must dance over any possible future that is "reborn each day to postpone the encounter with the gap, the void, the emptiness" (Edelman 29). It must also be useless to the very logic of use. In other words, queerness must fly, even if that flight demands death. But, even as queer, anti-futurity theorists such as Edelman dare "to insist that the future stops here" (Edelman 1998, 30), they are still (perhaps inadvertently) investing in future unsettlement.

Just as Nadir and Laila's bird-oriented art ruptures their temporality, Kiki Smith, a fiercely imaginative feminist artist whose work is similarly haunted by birds, hand-drew massive wing-splayed pigeons/doves[33] in clay and later cast them raw in bronze, titling the work *Columba*, which means dove, pigeon, or even Holy Spirit in Latin.[34] Smith's creation process is captivated not only by replicating flight out of stillness, but also by capturing the life behind the startlement. Her tough bronzed birds are mottled with fire-forged scars. Working toward animating the impossible, playing her hand at molding life from clay, the birds bloom larger-than-life, brutal and blistering from the violence of casting, hardening clay to metal, tracing the soft beginnings of lifeforce into the fire and brimstone extinction. The birds are unborn and undying, imaginatively pregnant with the potential of not yet and the lost potential of no longer. Beyond the bronze, the soft clay longs to writhe. Beyond the clay, the birds themselves shudder. It's impossible to look at the birds—born from Smith's decade-old drawings of Columba, in turn born from photographs of doves and pigeons[35] —and not, if only for a moment, believe in the potential of their life. What if the bronze melted into feathers

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[32] Sigmund Freud coined the term "death drive" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), referring to a drive toward self-destruction, a counterpart to the "life drive." Jacques Lacan later theorized that, rather than literally seeking death, the drive seeks to go beyond language and symbolism, endlessly and unsuccessfully pursuing jouissance (excess pleasure) repetitively to the point of extreme suffering. Edelman is drawing on Lacanian theory, referring "to an energy of mechanistic compulsion whose structural armature exceeds the specific object, the specific content, toward which we might feel that it impels us."

[33] Smith pointedly has not clarified.

[34] The epistemological origin of the name "Columbus" can be traced back to the Latin-stem "Columba" invoking the violence of colonization.

[35]This includes the now extinct passenger pigeons .

and they took flight? This impulse is not rational, precisely the opposite. It is irrational, illegible, and queer.

The irrationality I attempt to invoke is not simply a new rationality or an alternate sense-making machine to bracket existence. To radically reject any stifling future that reproduces rationality, Lee Edelman urges us to stray from ideating "a new politics, a better society, a brighter future, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, through displacement, in the form of the future by construing futurity itself as merely a form of reproduction" (1998, 29). Muñoz emphasizes a similar peril in resting at inclusion through neo-liberal assimilationist politics[36]. This is precisely why queerness must be formless and nameless, why it must keep flying into the horizon. It must always be anti-temporal, anti-linear, unknowable, and unconquerable. It must always waver at the outermost edges of possibility, possible only so far as its own impossibility.

Speculating on such queer (im)possibility flickering like a trick of the light in the conscious invokes Franco Berardi's response to this present catastrophe, in which "capitalist rule is liquidating modern civilization. He must act even if it is just in case (Keeling 2019, 14 qtd Beradi). This is not a practice of optimism that seeks to ignore violence to spare feelings, this is anchored hope, which bears witness to temporal realities and still resists. In a capitalist world that has charged caring for the world, as well as its non-human and human inhabitants, with inefficiency, there can be no ethic of care without imagination. This is to say, capitalist logics place no value on life, so we must first imagine radical love to practice it. And everything "not yet conscious" is deemed impossible until, of course, the Bicycle Woman's wheels leave the ground. Kara Keeling describes imagination as "among the weapons on offer in societies of control," particularly for Black radical imagination in art and activism that can dismantle hierarchical institutions that limit their own realities (2019, 14). Imagination is a tool that can quite literally shape the future and reach back into the past, thus, "imagination makes temporality possible" (Keeling 2019, 33).

Acting "as if" can neither raise Lazarus nor the *Columba* birds from the dead, nor erase the violence or the reproductions of violence tangled in social order, language, and institutions of knowledge. But by acting as if, by committing to irrationalities that do not serve colonial structures that would render the dead or dying useless, queer speculative possibilities are unveiled. Poet Diane di Prima sharpens the stakes with her profession, "the only war that matters is the war against the imagination / All other wars are subsumed in it" (Di Prima 1971). From our imagination springs freedom, queerness, utopia wavering on the horizon, and, in the meantime, survival. No wonder such societies of control fear it.

Engaging with radical imagination and its capacity to mobilize a sense of responsibility for the world and its inhabitants, Allison Mackey describes contemporary Afrodiasporic, African, Indigenous, and Aboriginal speculative fiction as "shifting the site of grief away from the human… from a place of destruction to a place of repair"

[36] Such politics of inclusion include gay marriage and the right to serve in the military.

(2018, 531). Mackey references Aboriginal-Australian Alexis Wright's spec-fic novel, *The Swan Book*, as an imaginative work that attends to Indigenous resistance from a non-human perspective.

Set in 2088 in a world ravaged by climate catastrophe, including brutal dust storms, acidic rain, and raging floods, an Aboriginal swamp is converted into an Australian military-controlled dumping ground for toxic pollutants and climate refugees. One such refugee, Bella Donna, who immigrated from what used to be Ireland, rowed across the ocean guided by a single white swan. She settles in the swamp, yet she never stops dreaming of finding the swan again.

The novel begins after Bella Donna rescues Oblivia, an Aboriginal girl who was gang-raped as a child and absorbed "suspended in time" into the depths of a gum tree, where she remained unageing for years. Although Bella Donna becomes Oblivia's surrogate mother and they live a reclusive life together, reading poetry and telling stories about swans, Oblivia refuses to speak ever again, at least not to humans, for "this country would never hear her voice, or the language she spoke" (Wright 2013, 157). When a herd of black swans settles on the swamp, later dubbed Swan Lake, Oblivia learns their language and unlearns all other destructive logics "linked to some other kind of madness" (Wright 2013, 57). Bella Donna also tends to the black swan herd, her obsession with pursuing the lost white swan, and perhaps the construct of "whiteness" itself, as well as her lost homeland and the erosion of colonial control by climate apocalypse, preclude her from truly dismantling hierarchy and becoming a swan in the way that Oblivia does.

In fact, the swans are drawn not only to Oblivia's lifeforce but to an ancient, eternal wound that still bleeds within her. Oblivia's memory of her rape and her time in the tree is tangled, but her body remembers, rejecting language, legibility, "gender," and humanity itself. There is no moving on from this violence. Her story echoes that of Philomela[37], illegible in the afterlife because of such monstrous violence. Indeed, the swans are Oblivia's own miracle, and although "utopian dreaming was either too much or too little… at least she recognized that the swan was an exile too" (Wright 2013, 12).

Although she dreams of escaping "as freely as they had been able to take flight" (Wright 2013, 59), Warren Finch, a powerhouse politician later to become the first Aboriginal Prime Minister of Australia, kidnaps Oblivia, claiming her as his promised wife and marrying her. Warren, groomed by the Aboriginal elders to liberate all Indigenous people in Australia, believes the land is his to inherit from the elders as one of its senior caretakers. They urged him to listen to the wisdom of birds, but the language was eclipsed by his hunger for domination, nursed in his youth by the dream

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[37] Philomela was a princess in Greek mythology who was raped and mutilated by King Tereus, her sister's husband. Tereus then cut out Philomela's tongue to silence her and escape punishment for his crimes. However, Philomela weaved the story of her rape into a tapestry and sent it to her sisters, who punished Tereus by feeding him his own son; upon discovering what he had been fed, Tereus chased the sisters with an axe and, to save their lives, the gods transformed the sisters into birds. Philomela was transformed into a nightingale, and her sister, a swallow.

of a “black angel,” validating an obsessive desire for ownership over a “bird of the daytime; woman of the night… He did not want to listen to reason from the old brolga birds above, that the swan did not belong to him at all” (Wright 2013, 98). Seduced by compulsory masculinity and colonial logics of possession, Warren’s savior image is just that; he becomes a Tereus-esque puppet for performative neoliberal pursuits, assaulting, murdering, and possessing life, all the while ensuring the silence of Oblivia and the old brolgas, for they could surely testify to his violence. In fact, Warren does not listen to the brolgas dancing in Swan Lake and gives the order to destroy the swamp, displacing its human and non-human inhabitants.

Exiled, the black swans fly overhead following Oblivia’s abduction across the country into a polluted metropolis, where she is locked inside Warren’s castle-like penthouse, towering over homeless encampments and starving gangs of orphaned children. While Warren tours Australia as a liberal “freedom-fighter,” Oblivia nurses weary, injured swans, sneaking out to release them into the sky, where they remain circling, refusing to abandon Oblivia, who is at once dehumanized and immobilized by her own humanity. Ironically, Warren is assassinated by enemies supposing his specific politics of control were too “radical,” giving Oblivia the chance to flee.

Amid national chaos, genies, ghosts, and swans swarm to Oblivia to guide her through ravaged wastelands, illegally crossing state-borders amid a state-wide manhunt for Warren’s widow, to return home and “Oblivia thought that she was in the sky, flying, and could not remember the journey. She and the swans were caught in the winds of a ghost net dragged forward by the spirits of the country” (Wright 2013, 293). One by one, the swans fell, dead from exhaustion, until Oblivia settled again in the decimated swamp with only Stranger, the lone swan remaining.

However, the novel ends with a striking image of surviving myna birds in the swamp’s dried-up ruins, “creating glimpses of a new internationally dimensional language about global warming and changing climates for this land. Really listen hard to what they were saying” (Wright 2013, 329). In the grief-stricken wasteland, Oblivia recalls that “this might be the same story about some important person carrying a swan centuries ago, and it might be the same story in centuries to come when someone will carry a swan back to this ground where its story once lived.” (Wright 2013, 300). There is no beginning or end to this story, the myna birds pick through dust, the brolga birds dance, and “swans might come back. Who knows what madness will be calling them in the end?” (Wright 2013, 301). Much like Joukhadar’s birds, the swans are a queer kind of hope, flung around the rising tides of the world, invisible and unconquerable, glimmering on the horizon.

Oblivia’s silence and reclusive madness are mystifying simply because grieving nature is “physically ‘ungrievable’ within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge non-human beings, natural environments and ecological processes as appropriate subjects for genuine grief” (Mackey 2018, 33, qtd. Mortimer-Sandilands). Her commitment to the swans, despite the nervousness of her neighbors, who “acted as though she never existed, were too unimaginable, unable to be recognized and named" (Wright 2013, 51), is an ethic of care for not only non-human subjects but all that dwells in the no-longer and in the not-yet.

French visual artist Annette Messager holds this madness in her series *The Boarders*, arranging taxidermized sparrows in different tableau vignettes; one portrait, *Boarders at Rest (Le Repos des Pensionnaires),* features the dead birds in knitted sweaters, almost unrecognizable as birds but for the flare of wings at a certain angle, a protruding beak, or the skeletal frame of a bird claw raised mid-air. Braiding feminist attention to crafts by her knitting[38], Messager displays a similar ethic of care for the sparrows that Oblivia shows to her swans, rendering scenes of complex, private, illegible worlds in which each sparrow is arranged anew and clothed differently, in ambiguous shapes. This speculation employs what Saidiya Hartman describes as "critical fabulation," imagining what will never be known, "to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling," which Hartman utilized to fill archival and historical gaps about the individual lives of enslaved individuals (2008, 11). Similarly, Messager was attempting to reconcile with the unfathomable violence of the Holocaust, the genocide of Jewish people, and the millions murdered. Not only does she grieve their death, but she also grieves the impossibility of truly mourning each individual, for the death toll dehumanizes the individual into a statistic; this is a second death within a collective memory. She herself dehumanizes the dead, quite literally, by aligning humans with birds, but also figuratively, dwelling in a kind of reparative grief-work that will never truly grasp the weight of violence and never truly honor who was lost. And yet, the alternative is doing nothing. Dismembering, easing comfortably into the violent gaps of silence, making death quantifiable and human beings tally marks. The tenderness with which Messager attempts to care for the dead, and her attention to deceased sparrows, a common bird so often forgotten, is radical precisely for its abject uselessness in capitalist societies. As knitting clothes for taxidermy birds serves no utilitarian purpose, and even arranging the birds to tell a story will never tell the true story in the right way. That is the point, she must try anyway.

However, an unsettling, unavoidable doubt haunts the work. Does Messager have the right to display sparrow bodies and use them to make up their stories? Who could have possibly granted that right? How can she swap one dehumanizing violence for another? Is this instance another human meddling in the life and death of the non-human, casting aside their knowledge, language, dreams, and inner worlds for only what we can digest? Is anthropomorphizing the queer individuality of each bird the only way for humans to grieve them? Does a certain morbid fascination with displaying the bird corpses point to the human "illusion of disembeddedness" in nature? That is, would this speculative care read as exploitation, or worse, if the sparrow bodies were human

[38] This was a part of the Pattern and Decoration (P&D American avant-garde feminist movement from the 1970s–80s that moved to recognize traditionally female-associated "crafts" (such as knitting, quilting, and textiles) in high art circles.

bodies instead? To ask those questions, one must also ask: How do you grieve the ungrievable? How do you care for what cannot be cared for? It's a troubling affair.

But Donna Haraway suggests the madness is where the fun begins. In *Staying With the Trouble*, she introduced us to the "speculative fabulation" of "Terrapolis… for multispecies becoming with… a chimera of materials, languages, histories… not 'posthuman' but 'com-post'" in which heteronormative, masculine politics of inclusion are no more and species are "full of kinds-in-the-making, full of significant otherness" (2016, 11-12). She urges us to sit in the discomfort of not knowing, without categorization, definition, or predictability, and care anyway. Whether we embrace the mess of existence or not, "trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it" (Butler 1990, XXVII). It's not only asking how we can cross borders in a bordered world, but also where we should hope to go. It's not only about asking which risks to take toward unsettlement but what we hope to unsettle. Such a task requires radical imagination, attention, and care, but it also requires irrational, improbable hope.

Haraway turns to pigeons for answers and ends up with even more troubling questions. Pigeons were formerly adored pets of humans, employed as messengers, military spies, and show birds, before being turned into vermin, "rats with wings." Western media braids the world with stories that seam neatly into a larger colonial story, the stale fictions of white supremacy, humanity's disembeddedness from nature, manifest destinies, gender itself, and all kinds of hoaxes of power, such stories were molded alongside the birds. Pigeons migrated with colonists across the globe, and yet "belong to kinds and breeds indigenous to many places, in uncounted configurations of living and dying" (Haraway 2016, 15). Pigeons are creatures of vast intelligence, and they are also pecking at a bagel in front of your feet. No story seems to fully contain them.

Unlike almost any other animal, pigeons are wild and living amongst humans, dive-bombing alleyways, moving into cities without permission, and carving out space. The parallel nature of our existence with pigeons disrupts any illusion of human separation from pigeons. Moreover, our entangled histories and proximity lends itself to all kinds of curious, queer trouble. Haraway cites pigeon-racing as a metropolitan sport that fosters collaboration, even camaraderie, between people and pigeons; she also analyzes a radical art activism project called *PigeonBlog*,[39] that straps a GPS backpack onto a pigeon to conduct air-pollution research, and a lofty hang-out spot for pigeons, researchers, and activists that emerged from their collective. Both instances urge a madness-making practice that must "reinvent the conditions for multispecies flourishing" (2016, 130).

Hanging out with pigeons is not only to work toward inventing new ways of "multi-species becoming-with" but to stay perpetually becoming, humbling oneself

[39] PigeonBlog is a project by artist-researcher Beatriz da Costa along with her students Cina Hazegh and Kevin Ponto.

before the unknowable is to engage with the vastness of queerness, the unfathomable brightness on the horizon, and the language of birds, as they dip and soar past our own sensibilities. By admitting that we will never know everything, we are necessarily questioning everything we think we know already. To reinvent ourselves, we must first consider the conditions for inventing, in particular with storytelling, “to re-member, to com-memorate, is actively to reprise, revive, retake, recuperate” (Haraway 2016, 25). All of the fearsome, fantastical stories we tell about birds are jumbled with the future, because their winged silhouettes are always moving farther, flying overhead, and yet, like queerness, they still settle on telephone wires and street corners. For brief moments, birds can tumble the sky right into our lives, unsettling madness into a miracle, if only for one startling utopian moment. Becoming-with necessitates recognizing the entanglement of limbs and wings with the here, now, then, and there, all the while, the myna birds pick through the soil, and people keep crossing borders, inventing new (or very old) ways to fly. The Bicycle Woman pedals immortally onward to somewhere we cannot follow. But we can dream of new skies with new achingly unreachable horizons. We can pause work and watch a dove dance on a fire escape. We can look to the birds and hope.

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Seeing and Being Seen: Gender, Labor, and the Politics of Being Perceived

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Abstract: *This paper examines contemporary feminist interpretations of three songs–"The Hand," by Annabelle Dinda, "Labour," by Paris Paloma, and "I'll Make a Man Out of You," by Donny Osmond (featured in the Disney animated film Mulan)–as sites for theorizing gender. Drawing on Judith Butler's account of performativity, Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as Other, and work by Debra Bergoffen, Kate Manne, and Megan Burke, it argues that gender operates as a system produced through norms of perception, labor, and performance. Through close analysis of these songs and their reinterpretation in digital contexts, the paper shows how women are persistently marked as gendered subjects, how femininity is sustained through expectations of emotional and relational labor, and how the embodiment of traits coded as masculine fails to yield ungendered personhood. Gender, on this account, is an ongoing interpretive and material system that structures what bodies can mean.*

Keywords: Gendered Subjectivity; Gender Preformativity; Gendered Visibility; Emotional Labor; Otherness.

In recent years, feminist-leaning trends on social media have increasingly interpreted and repurposed music as a medium for articulating shared experiences of gender. Songs are circulated, reframed, and paired with visual narratives that reimagine their meanings, transforming them into sites of collective reflection and critique. Contemporary digital spaces have transformed music from a fixed artistic medium into an ongoing site of interpretation. Through platforms such as TikTok, songs are detached from their original contexts and reassembled through personal narratives, visual representations, and collective commentary. These reinterpretations are philosophically significant because they reveal how abstract structures of gender are experienced in everyday life. Songs such as *The Hand* by Annabelle Dinda, *Labour* by Paris Paloma, and *I'll Make a Man Out of You* performed by Donny Osmond have been widely engaged in this way, used as tools for expression and exposure of patterns in how gender is lived and understood. Across these interpretations, recurring themes emerge: the unequal reception of men's and women's voices, the normalization of women's emotional and relational labor, and the tension between the characteristics used to define masculinity and the bodies expected to embody them. Altogether, these patterns suggest that these songs are doing more than reflecting individual experiences; they are revealing underlying structures that construct how gender operates. This paper argues that contemporary feminist interpretations of these three songs reveal gender as a system produced through repeated norms of perception, labor, and performance. By examining how these songs circulate and are reinterpreted digitally, this paper extends feminist theories of gender by showing how contemporary media spaces expose the everyday mechanisms through which gender becomes visible, enforced, and contested. Rather than simply representing individual experiences, feminist reinterpretations transform them into shared frameworks for recognizing patterns of gendered experience. A song about personal frustration becomes a collective language through which individuals identify structures that may otherwise appear isolated or natural. These songs expose how women are persistently marked as gendered subjects rather than neutral persons, how femininity is sustained through expectations of emotional and relational labor, and how even the embodiment of traits coded as masculine fails to grant access to ungendered personhood.

Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as Other, Debra Bergoffen's notion of the "eternal feminine," Kate Manne's analysis of misogynistic enforcement, and Megan Burke's account of gendered visibility, the paper shows that gender–often assumed to operate as a stable identity–functions as a continuous interpretive and material system that both produces and constrains what bodies can mean. The analysis proceeds in three parts: first, by examining how perception itself is structured through gendered norms in *The Hand*; second, by showing how these norms materialize as expectations of labor and obligation in *Labour*; and finally, by exploring how the instability of gendered traits in *I'll Make a Man Out of You* reveals the persistence of gendered interpretation even where categories appear to break down.

In order to understand how these songs reveal gendered structures, it is necessary to clarify how gender itself is produced. Rather than reflecting a natural or inherent difference, gender is constituted through repeated norms that regulate how bodies are perceived and how they are expected to act. As Butler argues, gender is a phenomenon that is actively produced and reproduced over time. It is not a singular expression but "a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body" (Butler 2011, 191). Over time, these norms consolidate an impression, sedimenting into what appears to be a natural and stable distinction between masculine and feminine. In this way, gender is grasped as an effect of ongoing social practices that organize how individuals are recognized and understood.

Although gender is produced through repeated norms, it does not typically appear as such in everyday life. Rather, these norms are experienced as natural, inevitable, and self-evident. As Bergoffen explains, the idea that women possess an immutable nature suited for some roles and not others has long structured philosophical and cultural traditions, positioning femininity as a fixed and limiting condition (Bergoffen 2019, 121-126). This "eternal feminine" operates as a background assumption that shapes how women are perceived and what is expected of them. Since these expectations operate at the level of lived experience, they do not explicitly present themselves as external constraints but as part of how the world simply is. This sense of naturalness is continuously reinforced through everyday social practices. At the level of public regard, gendered value is reflected in patterns such as persistent wage gaps, the disproportionate burden of household labor placed on women, and the relative attention given to men's and women's contributions (Halim et al. 2025, 1). These patterns are not solely a reflection of individual bias but actually help uphold a larger system in which women's labor and voices are systematically devalued. As a result, gender norms are not experienced as imposed rules but as features of how the social world is already organized. Furthermore, explicit enforcement is not always evident or even necessary, because gender norms are already built into the frameworks through which individuals interpret themselves and others. What appears as a neutral or immediate intelligibility is therefore a byproduct of these preliminary structures built by accumulated norms. This structuring of perception becomes especially visible in moments of expression, where the same act can be interpreted differently depending on the gender of the speaker, as illustrated in *The Hand*.

The Hand by Annabelle Dinda reveals that perception is not neutral: the same expressive or reflective act is interpreted differently depending on gender, such that women's speech and self-presentation are consistently reframed as excessive, illegible, or complicit rather than authoritative. The song begins by contrasting the ways masculine and feminine expressions are received. When men speak or create, their expression is framed as world-constituting, as if they "hold out the world in [their] palm" (Dinda 2026). By contrast, feminine speech is not granted this interpretive space; instead, it collapses into self-surveillance, where speaking becomes "a loud noise" rather than a form of authority. This contrast suggests that the meaning of expression is not located in the act itself, but in the gendered framework through which it is perceived. The song then turns inward, revealing that this differential interpretation is also anticipated and internalized. Expressions of emotion or critique are preemptively destabilized—"this isn't rage, it's too specific," "this is a fake internal tension" (Dinda 2026)—as if articulation must already defend its legitimacy before it can exist as meaning. Even the possibility of making a "statement" is refused through self-identification as "complicit," suggesting that agency itself is structurally undermined at the level of expression. The song ultimately extends this instability beyond perception into the structure of subjectivity itself. By framing experience as "a dream, God put me in it" (Drinda 2026), agency is displaced onto an external author, suggesting that even selfhood is not self-generated but assigned. The question "Does that make me His daughter?" (Drinda 2026) further highlights how even metaphysical belonging is gendered, indicating that identity is more than just socially interpreted; it is ontologically positioned through gendered categories that precede individual articulation. From this perspective, *The Hand* illustrates what Beauvoir describes as a woman's position as Other. As Beauvoir argues, "humanity is male," such that man represents both the positive and the neutral, while woman is defined only in relation to him (Beauvoir 2015, 5). Women's speech, therefore, is not received as a neutral expression but is consistently interpreted through gendered expectations. While Beauvoir explains women's position as Other in relation to men as the universal subject, *The Hand* reveals a contemporary dimension of this condition: the ongoing social negotiation of visibility itself. The problem is not only exclusion from neutrality, but also the constant demand to explain, justify, or anticipate how one will be interpreted.

This dynamic is further clarified by Burke's account of gendered visibility. Since perception is shaped by what Burke describes as the "habitual body," experience unfolds through familiar and sedimented patterns rather than neutral observation (Burke 2025, 94). As a result, women are not granted anonymity in their expression and are persistently marked and over-interpreted. Gendered meaning is thus not subsequently imposed, but built into how expression itself is immediately understood. This is reinforced through patterns of public regard, in which social interpretation consistently filters women's actions through gendered frameworks, regardless of context or content. As *The Hand* demonstrates, gendered norms structure how women's expressions are interpreted before they can be understood on their own terms. However, these interpretive frameworks extend beyond perception, applying to the organization of everyday life, influencing what is expected of women. This becomes particularly evident in the expectations of emotional and relational labor explored in the song *Labour*.

If gendered norms shape how women are perceived, they also shape the expectations ascribed to them. The interpretive lens that renders women hyper-visible and non-neutral also produces patterned forms of obligation, particularly in the domain of emotional and relational labor. *Labour* brings this dynamic into focus by revealing how femininity is understood through ongoing expectations of care, endurance, and availability. Thus, labor can be grasped as the materialization of gendered norms: what begins as a framework of perception becomes a system of lived demands that organize how women's time, energy, and emotional capacities are distributed.

Labour by Paris Paloma exposes how these expectations take the form of ongoing, unpaid emotional and relational work that is treated as a natural obligation rather than a choice. This is immediately reflected in the song's framing of intimacy as bodily and emotional strain, as when the speaker describes how "the capillaries in my eyes are bursting" (Paloma 2023), linking relational distress to physical exhaustion rather than isolated feeling. The song first frames "labour" as a continuous condition of being available to others' needs, where care is constant. The repetition embedded in the language of labor suggests not completion but accumulation, where nothing is ever fully finished or returned. This is intensified through the piling of roles—"therapist, mother, maid, nymph, then a virgin, nurse, then a servant" (Paloma 2024)—which compresses feminine identity into an excessive sequence of functions that cannot be sustained as separate or voluntary. Rather than discrete social roles, this accumulation reveals labor as structurally endless rather than intermittent.

Beyond its intensity, the song discloses how this labor is normalized through its entangled association with femininity itself. Care, emotional regulation, and relational maintenance are not recognized as additional burdens; rather, they are presented as constitutive of what it means to inhabit a feminine role. This normalization is further underscored by the reduction of the speaker to "just an appendage" (Paloma 2024), suggesting that relational life is structured around attending to another rather than mutuality. Even prospective domestic life is implicated in this logic, as the image she paints of picket fence dreams situates this expectation within normative heterosexual life planning, where women are positioned as the infrastructure enabling male stability. This renders labor invisible as labor, transforming obligation into identity. The song also implies that this labor is expected and enforced through moral and relational consequences. The claim that "it's not an act of love if you make her" (Paloma 2023) directly destabilizes the framing of care as voluntary, exposing coercion as structurally embedded within what is presented as affection. The refrain "you make me do too much labour" (Paloma 2023) thus registers not only as exhaustion but as constraint, where refusal is not intelligible as neutrality but as relational failure. *Labour* contributes to feminist discussions of obligation by showing that domination does not always appear through explicit coercion. Instead, it can operate through expectations embedded in intimacy, where unequal labor becomes difficult to recognize precisely because it is framed as care. In Manne's terms, this reflects a system in which deviation from expected feminine labor is read as transgressive and is met with policing, reinforcing the structure that produces it.

The normalization of this uneven dynamic is therefore structurally reinforced. Manne explains that sexism often functions by naturalizing gender differences, making unequal arrangements appear inevitable rather than constructed (Manne 2019, 79). Within this framework, the expectation that women provide care and emotional labor and that men are entitled to it without enforced reciprocity comes to seem like a natural extension of femininity rather than a socially imposed demand. The song also reveals that this labor is not merely expected but enforced through social and relational consequences. As Manne notes, women who do not orient their actions toward serving men's interests are often perceived as "abrasive and threatening," explaining why refusal of care is read as a violation and how women are expected to remain continuously available to others (Manne 2019, 61). Collectively, the song's depiction of labor reflects a broader structural pattern in which femininity is associated with care, relational maintenance, and immanence. Arlie Hochschild's account of the "second shift" clarifies how this labor extends beyond visible work into emotional and domestic domains, while Bergoffen's analysis explains how such expectations come to feel natural rather than experienced as an external imposition. The expectations revealed in *Labour* are therefore not isolated but form part of a larger system that organizes how women are both perceived and required to act. However, while this system appears stable in its expectations, the categories that sustain it are not as fixed as they seem.

While the song *Labour* demonstrates how gendered expectations are stabilized through obligation and enforcement, this does not mean that the categories of masculinity and femininity themselves are coherent or fixed. As the reinterpretation of the song *I'll Make a Man Out of You* (performed by Donny Osmond for the Walt Disney animated film Mulan) divulges, the traits used to define gender often exceed the categories meant to contain them. Contemporary uses of the song, which pair its lyrics with images of women excelling in physically and socially demanding roles, expose a central tension in gender norms: the qualities associated with masculinity are neither inherently male nor exclusive to male bodies. The song initially presents masculinity as both superior and necessary, as captured in the line "Did they send me daughters when I asked for sons?" (Osmond 1998), which frames femininity as a failure to meet expectations of strength and capability. The song therefore treats masculinity as both naturalized and manufactured: it is presented as an ideal women fail to meet, while also something that must be actively produced through discipline. At the same time, the repeated refrain of the song's title suggests that masculinity is not innate but something that must be produced through discipline and transformation. Masculinity is thus treated as natural and desirable, yet it must be actively constructed. This tension becomes more pronounced in the song's description of what it means to be a man, which is articulated through imagery drawn from natural forces: "swift as the coursing river," "with all the force of a great typhoon," "with all the strength of a raging fire," and "mysterious as the dark side of the moon" (Osmond 1998). Rather than grounding masculinity in biologically or socially specific traits, the song defines it through qualities such as strength, fluidity, intensity, and mystery. Even within the symbolic imagery the song draws on, such as forces of nature and relational concepts associated with yin and yang, these qualities are not fixed to one gender but are understood as dynamic and interdependent (Shen and D'Ambrosio 2014). This further complicates the song's attempt to present masculinity as a stable set of traits. When these lyrics are paired on social media with images of women succeeding in athletics, leadership, and other demanding domains, this tension becomes even more visible. Women are shown fully embodying the very traits the song presents as constitutive of manhood. This dynamic reflects Butler's account of gender as performative, in which traits come to appear natural only through the production of particular norms. As she argues, gender achieves its effect through the ritualized repetition of norms over time (Butler 2011). When women fully embody the traits used to define masculinity, this repetition is disrupted.

Yet, the instability of gendered traits does not dismantle the system of gendered interpretation established in the analysis thus far. As *The Hand* demonstrates, women cannot achieve neutral subjectivity, and as *Labour* shows, they are bound by expectations of care and obligation. These structures persist even when women embody traits coded as masculine. The ability to perform strength, endurance, or authority does not grant women access to being read as ungendered subjects; conversely, these traits are actually reinterpreted through a gendered lens. This persistence reveals a crucial limitation in the destabilization of gender categories. While the traits associated with masculinity and femininity may be fluid and transferable, the interpretive frameworks that organize how bodies are made intelligible remain intact. Women who perform masculinity are not absorbed into a neutral category of personhood alongside men. Instead, they remain marked as women performing masculinity. For this reason, gender categories rely on traits that exceed them, yet still structure how individuals are recognized and evaluated. This reinterpretation of *I'll Make a Man Out of You* exposes this contradictory nature, as gender is both unstable in its content and yet persistent in its effects. It complicates Butler's account by demonstrating that disrupting gender performance does not necessarily disrupt gender recognition. Even when the performance changes, the interpretive framework through which bodies are understood remains intact. Thus, it becomes evident that the categories themselves cannot fully contain the traits they invoke, yet they continue to shape the conditions under which those traits are perceived and valued. This tension underscores the paper's central claim: rather than operating as a fixed identity, gender functions as an ongoing system of interpretation and constraint that persists even in the face of apparent disruption.

In sum, the interpretations of *The Hand*, *Labour*, and *I'll Make a Man Out of You* do more than illustrate isolated experiences of gender; they reveal the underlying structures through which gender is continuously produced and sustained. As *The Hand* demonstrates, perception itself is not neutral but structured through norms that position women as visible, interpretable, and non-neutral subjects. *Labour* extends this insight by showing how these perceptual frameworks materialize as expectations, organizing women's lives through ongoing demands for emotional and relational labor that are treated as natural rather than imposed. Finally, the reinterpretation of *I'll Make a Man Out of You* exposes a tension within this system, disclosing that the traits used to define masculinity are not inherently tied to male bodies, even as the categories that organize those traits persist. What emerges from this analysis is a conception of gender as a dynamic system of repetition, interpretation, and enforcement, rather than a stable identity. Gender norms shape how individuals act, how they are perceived, evaluated, and made intelligible within the social world. Even in moments where these norms appear to break down, when women embody traits coded as masculine or resist expectations of care, the interpretive frameworks that structure gender remain operative. In this way, instability at the level of traits does not dissolve the system itself. Recognizing this dynamic shifts how gender can be understood philosophically. Instead of asking whether gender categories are true or false, stable or unstable, the more pressing question becomes how these categories continue to organize perception, obligation, and possibility in lived experience. These interpretations demonstrate that feminist philosophy is not confined to theoretical debates about identity categories, but is also concerned with the everyday mechanisms through which people become recognizable to one another. Digital reinterpretations of popular music reveal that gender is continually reproduced through ordinary acts of perception, expectation, and storytelling. By examining these songs as philosophical texts, this paper shows how contemporary culture provides new sites for understanding both the persistence of gendered constraints and the possibilities for challenging them. The widespread circulation of these songs makes this system visible by exposing its operations from within. In doing so, they reveal both the persistence of gendered constraint and the tensions that unsettle it, highlighting the ongoing interplay between structure and disruption that defines what bodies can mean and what lives can be lived.

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Rolling in the Mud: Intersections and Cleavages in Animal Rights and Feminist Activism

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Abstract: *Marti Kheel founded Feminists for Animal Rights (FAR) in 1981 as a response to the patriarchal shift of the animal rights movement, yet this group is largely forgotten. A year prior, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) was formed by Alex Pacheco and Ingrid Newkirk, and it remains the largest animal rights organization globally. While the obvious connection between these groups is their concern regarding animal lives, conversations of the second-wave "feminist sex wars" were being debated between these organizations. This paper will explore the interactions between the feminist movement and the animal rights movement, as well as the conversations that happened between FAR and PETA during PETA's famous "I'd Rather Go Naked than Wear Fur" campaign. This historical account of the animal rights movement will develop a cohesive understanding of the inseparability between these movements and the pervasive role played by sexism in social justice advocacy.*

Keywords: Feminism; Animal Rights; People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA); Feminists for Animal Rights (FAR).

Introduction

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is the largest animal welfare organization internationally, yet their single-issue approach to animal welfare cannot be overlooked. This insularity has granted PETA the ability to both diminish and appropriate the endeavors of other advocacy groups. Feminists for Animal Rights (FAR) was founded a year after the start of PETA, with a heightened focus on decentralized organizing, intersectional thinking, and coalition-based advocacy. By tracing the conversations held within and between the two groups, it becomes evident that feminist discourse regarding sexuality—best known as the "feminist sex wars" in the 1980s—heavily informed animal rights discussions and practices. PETA's campaign against fur, which was mobilized on the bare backs of female advocates, quickly gained traction due to its strategic arrival during a tumultuous time in feminist politics. This controversial campaign was monetarily successful, as the group continues to benefit from the political neutrality and single-cause advocacy, even when it contradicts the group's messaging. Through a historical analysis of these two groups, I argue that liberatory activism requires resisting the push to divide movements and building coalitions grounded in a shared analysis of how oppressions are structured.

Feminists for Animal Rights (FAR) and the Female-Animal Connection

When Marti Kheel and her collaborators began organizing as FAR, they did so in response to a lack of support from feminist organizations regarding animal rights, as well as a lack of concern from animal rights groups regarding women's issues. Kheel, seemingly inspired by the large mobilization of second-wave feminists, wanted to create a space where intersecting identities were at the forefront of the movement. The Combahee River Collective was a popular example of this restructuring of the feminist movement. They insisted that an injustice to any was an injustice to all, sought to dismantle power hierarchies, and make decisions together in a politics of coalition, rather than having a ranked system for their group organization (Combahee River Collective 1997). This became a space where black women could come together to understand and combat the implications of each injustice. These early groups articulated a praxis that would later be termed "intersectional," which likely influenced Kheel to look at animal rights mobilization through a new lens. At the same time, Kheel was following the stream of thinking derived from second-wave cultural feminists, such as Mary Daly, who emphasized the value of a shared femininity as a type of empowerment. In her text, *The Metapatricarchal Journey of Exorcism and Ecstasy*, Daly states, "Women and our kind – the earth, the sea, the sky – are the real but unacknowledged objects of attack, victimized as The Enemy of Patriarchy – of all its wars, of all its professions" (Daly 1978, 156). FAR believed in the biological similarities between women and nature, as well as their similar societal treatment. In their first newsletter, they wrote, "Since the exploitation of animals and women derive from the same patriarchal mentality, our struggle is for women as well as animals" (Feminists for Animal Rights 1983). This connection between women and animals is further displayed by the art shown in their materials.

The following image was drawn by Sudie Rakusin, and it was featured in FAR Volume 12, Numbers 1-2 in 2000. A woman is seen with a pack of wolves, howling at the moon. Standing in solidarity with non-human animals highlights their unity, solidarity, and protection of one another. There are many pieces from varying female-identified artists in the publications that further this connectivity between women and the natural world. In addition, Kheel was driven by a realization she had at the 1983 Mobilization for

Animals, a nationwide event that kickstarted modern animal rights advocacy through hosting events to raise awareness about animal welfare issues in different cities around the country. The West Coast event was organized by men and featured a speech from Bob Barker, the host of the game show *The Price is Right*, whose celebrity status was used to legitimize and popularize the movement. Barker, however, was also a reputed sexual harasser, which meant that some women protested the entire mobilization due to his central position at the event. Some women who attended hissed when he took the stage to object to his centrality (Feminists for Animal Rights 1983). But despite the outcry from the female protesters, the event still carried on, leaving women to decide between two causes— feminism and animal rights—that seemed in tension.

Instead of leaving one of these causes at the door to uplift another, Kheel began FAR to address both issues and uplift the voices of women who fight for animals. Although she felt that feminist organizations were not doing enough for animals, she attributed this lack of concern to a lack of support for feminism from pro-animal groups. FAR's approach was, and still is, unique for an animal rights and liberation movement. Through adopting characteristics from feminist mobilizations, Kheel created a framework that extracted core parts of each movement to create one dynamic group. To share her ideas and the ideas of other female animal rights advocates, she created a newsletter that shared writings from anyone who was a part of FAR. These texts went beyond logical debates and philosophical topics that were previously highlighted by hierarchical animal rights groups. The newsletters encouraged poetry, drawings, art, expressions of thoughts and feelings, and still credited the women who were thinking about animal rights and feminism more analytically. This was a rebuttal to what Kheel and others saw as a "patriarchal shift" in animal rights mobilization, which prioritized logic over compassion, used celebrities and those of higher class to establish credibility, and where the ruling structure of one elite group governed the entire movement, dictating that those below them must do the "grunt work." When she adopted the principles of feminist groups, Kheel structured FAR to combat many of these issues. For example, Kheel took on the controversial separatist position of radical feminists when she did not allow men to join FAR[40]. She argued for the importance of coalition building with groups that had male members, but she wanted to reinforce the importance of women holding positions of power and not dedicating the majority of their energies to fighting oppression within their own social justice group. Kheel argued that while organizations with hierarchies and patriarchal quotas may have an easier time growing, they ultimately use one group's oppression to fight another, which is not an effective tactic for lasting change. Although there was a concern regarding slow growth, FAR developed into a larger group with chapters located in multiple areas across North America. These chapters were composed of women who held similar ideas about fighting for two causes they held close, rather than being forced to prioritize one over

[40] Feminist separatism is the theory that women's release from patriarchy can be achieved through their separation from men.

another. Formal positions were given to those who wanted to be more involved in the brainstorming process of the group's journal. However, this was not a requirement, as feminists frequently do not have a significant amount of allotted time for advocacy. Members operated as volunteers, contributing in ways they were able to do so.

Concerns Regarding Multifaceted Movements from Feminist Advocates

FAR sought to understand how oppression is structured and how the oppression of separate groups shared the same root cause. In FAR's journal, the complicated relationship of these movements is highlighted. For example, in the summer of 1991, FAR's editorial desk received a letter from a NOW (National Organization for Women) member who was concerned about FAR's call for animal rights action from feminist advocates. The writer felt as though it was inappropriate to ask feminists to attend an animal rights rally. According to this NOW member, feminist organizations were already being stretched too thin, so requesting that women attend another protest was out of touch. Isle Polonko immediately called the writer to respond and responded to this individual with a deeper understanding of how these two movements are connected and why it is important to protest any injustice when you are able, which is what the original call to action wished to accomplish.

The issue of burnout is real, and the writers of FAR acknowledge this fact, but if group members from one cause have the capacity to protest another injustice, then why shouldn't they? Polonko argued the importance of understanding what feminist ideology is built upon, which for her is the theory that women and men should be able to share egalitarian relations, where one is not dominating the other due to sex characteristics. The domination that feminism seeks to eliminate is constructed through hierarchies reinforced by the patriarchy. The patriarchal hierarchies that construct our society grant higher worth to those of higher social class, such as economically well-off, white, heterosexual men, and assign uselessness to those of lower importance, such as women, individuals with disabilities, and animals. Since women and animals alike are facing an oppression brought upon them by the patriarchy, Polonko emphasizes the importance of removing hierarchies completely. The patriarchy determines what can and cannot be granted value, she explains. Rather than marking animals as less valuable than humans due to a lack of communication, reasoning skills, and other characteristics that are only valued by humans, she proposes that animals have value because they can experience suffering. Although animals have different abilities than humans, she believes that humans, nature, non-human animals, and another life force on Earth are interconnected and cannot be understood apart from one another.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Mass Approach to Animal Advocacy

In 1980, one year before FAR was founded, the organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) was formed by Alex Pacheco and Ingrid Newkirk. Newkirk is now the president of PETA; Pacheco left the group in 2000 due to differing desires regarding tactics, interpersonal struggles, and wanting alternative approaches to animal rights advocacy (PETA). When PETA began, it was described by Newkirk as "five people in a basement." However, due to the Silver Springs Monkey Case, when PETA exposed the abuse of monkeys in the laboratory of neuroscientist Edward Taub, who was subsequently charged with animal cruelty, the group quickly gained notoriety (1981). Although Taub's convictions were ultimately overturned, the first criminal prosecution of a laboratory researcher for animal cruelty became a sensationalized case. It garnered attention from many concerned individuals, as well as celebrities, which helped to mobilize the animal rights movement in a way that had never been seen before. PETA's status as a leader in animal rights advocacy was cemented. Almost a decade later, the group began its infamous campaign against wearing fur, which generated mixed feelings from feminists. Although this was not the first time that animal rights and feminist movements were in tension, it was the first time this tension became broadly discussed outside of academic and activist spheres.

"I'd Rather Go Naked"

In 1990, to protest the still commonly worn fur coats, mostly by women, PETA began one of their most controversial campaigns to date. This was the dawn of the "*I'd Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur"* campaign. This campaign featured many famous women and, eventually in its later years, men. One of the most iconic individuals who worked with PETA on this campaign was Pamela Anderson, a known model, actress, writer, and now animal rights activist. Posing nude, Anderson gave the viewer the "cold shoulder," revealing her uncovered backside. This campaign garnered mixed reviews, but it was ultimately credited with the end of selling fur coats in department stores. Billboards, physical protests, pamphlets, and other media were distributed with the *"I'd Rather Go Naked"* images.

The campaign was started by PETA's Vice President, Dan Matthews. Matthews envisioned the movement in the streets, as scandal was his specialty. He led the first nude protest in Japan, as he wanted this to be a global controversy. Then, celebrities such as the band The Go-Go's demonstrated interest. A new way to fundraise and bring attention to this cause was born. In an interview with *The Drum*, Matthews states,

"At the time, charities were known for either doing stuffy dinners or angry protests. *'I'd Rather Go Naked'* proved there was a third way of raising awareness, and that way was stylish, sexy, and cool" (Deighton, 2020).

Alongside this proliferation came criticism, largely from quarters of the feminist movement and particularly from feminists who were against the usage of female nudity, which they saw as a form of sexual objectification. Critiques from feminist organizations came flooding in, primarily targeting PETA's spokesperson, Ingrid Newkirk, even though the campaign was championed by Dan Matthews. Perhaps those against the campaign expected something different from a female leader, or they were simply targeting the main figure of PETA, whom they were aware of. In response, Newkirk defended this method of advocacy, stating that sexy is not necessarily sexist, seemingly adopting a stance aligned with pro-sex feminists after the feminist sex wars. Arguably, the appropriation of this message to support her measures is a direct reflection of PETA's usage of feminism, rather than a meaningful connection bridged between the movements. PETA's approach elicited tensions between some feminist and animal rights advocacy groups rather than solidarity, which can be understood through the conversations of the Feminist Sex Wars, which still echo today.

Barnard Conference

The climax of the feminist "sex wars" can be illustrated through the reactions of the Scholar and Feminist Conference IX, which took place on April 24, 1982, at Barnard College in New York City. The theme of the conference was centered around female sexuality. This event was widely publicized due to its heaping amount of controversy, generated by anti-pornography feminists who picketed the event. These groups felt the theme of the conference belittled the danger of sexualized violence, domination, and objectification. In the aftermath of the conference, one of the organizers, Carole S. Vance, edited *Pleasure and Danger*, an anthology that compiled many of the papers that were presented at the conference. It included, at its closure, a petition to protest the harm caused by anti-pornography feminist groups, notably Women Against Pornography, Women Against Violence Against Women, and the New York Radical Feminists. The petition argues against these groups' claim that "anti-feminist" versions of sexuality were included on the conference itinerary and takes issue with these groups' tactics, which included the distribution of leaflets attacking the speakers, allegedly by name, to attendees (Vance, 1984). This led to a loss of funding from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation and various attacks on the Barnard Center for Research on Women, which sponsored the conference. In addition, the conference was moderated closely by the college administration. This included the confiscation of a "Conference

Diary," which detailed sixty pages' worth of contextual information about the event. Tensions were fraying as miscommunication and foundational disagreements ate away at the women trying to gain a sense of control over their sexuality. This response from the administration created a strained relationship with the Barnard Center's ability to engage with the New York City feminist community. The details of the controversies of the conference in historical memory are as heavily contested as the controversies themselves.

The Barnard Conference and feminist debates over sexuality need to be placed in their wider historical context. Throughout the 1980s, the publisher of *Hustler* magazine, Larry Flynt, painted himself as a champion of free speech as he faced a series of court battles on charges of obscenity, including one, Flynt v. Ohio, that reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1981. At the same time, the period saw the increasing influence of organizations like the Moral Majority and Focus on the Family, which often opposed pornography (and, often, feminist and queer causes) through the politicization of evangelical Christianity. The conversation around sexual liberation and anti-pornography was dominated by figures and organizations like these who, it can be argued, never had women's liberation at heart. This meant that these topics became especially heated within the feminist movement, where both pro-sex and anti-pornography feminists could be seen as allied with anti-feminist forces.

This historical context is addressed in one take about the conference by Elizabeth Wilson. Wilson did not attend the conference physically. However, she had a colleague who provided contextual information to support her analysis of the event. In *The Context of 'Between Pleasure and Danger': The Barnard Conference on Sexuality,* Wilson explains the events leading up to the conference, how the controversies surrounding the conference played out in its aftermath, and the larger historical relevance of the conference. This was the period, she notes, when wider conversations about pornography in the United States peaked. This, elevated along with the already significant rift over issues of sexual liberation in the Western feminist movement, caused organizers of the conference to err on the side of caution when deciding which voices would or would not participate in the gathering. Wilson contends that anti-pornography feminists were less concerned with the types of conversations held at the conference and more bothered by the fact that the conference lacked significant engagement with the anti-pornography perspective. Wilson ends the text by emphasizing the "wild and desperate attempts as feminists tried to gain some control over our own sexuality" (Wilson 1984).

The divisions of the feminist sex wars are echoed in the conversation of PETA's *"I'd Rather Go Naked"* campaign, nearly a decade after the Barnard Conference. Is female nudity empowerment, or is it feeding into the hierarchies that feminists advocate against? Can something that is commonly viewed as a main source of oppression be reclaimed by feminist advocates? What are the implications of telling one who identifies as a woman what to do with her body, especially regarding her activism?

FAR took an anti-pornography approach, arguing against a “patriarchal” vision of female sexuality being harnessed for the animal rights movement. PETA argued against this perspective to validate their powerful advocacy technique. It can be argued that, due to PETA’s limited concern regarding other feminist causes, they are appropriating pro-sex feminist rhetoric to justify their own means. Emily Gaarder, the writer of *Women and the Animal Rights Movement*, interviewed female animal rights advocates and documented their responses to this movement and other similar imagery harnessed for animal advocacy. In addition to this, FAR’s message to PETA and the lasting harm of the campaign will be analyzed to understand the harms of these shocking tactics.

“Women and the Animal Rights Movement,” and Their Response to PETA’s Campaign

Gaarder began her research by asking the women for their initial reactions to the PETA campaigns featuring unclothed women. The largest group of women did not support the advertisements (44%), the middle group supported these approaches (30%), and the smallest percentage was of those who held mixed feelings about these campaigns (26%). The group that did not support the PETA images held a few consistent critiques: They preferred ads that could support women and animals at the same time; they mentioned taking issue with the “type” of woman being portrayed in these advertisements; and lastly, they claimed that using sexualized depictions of women is abusive and subordinates women and their role in rights movements (Gaarder 2011, 121). The issue regarding a specific “type” of woman was with the usage of women who fit the strict beauty standards prioritized by patriarchal standards, such as slender, blonde women with large breasts. Gaarder extends these observations by making a connection between the exploitation and abuse of women that mirrors the oppression of animals. In a society that places value on one’s relevancy to patriarchy, animals will not be able to achieve liberation (Gaarder 2011, 121). Gaarder also explores the power dynamic created between PETA and its supporters when the group asked its members to undertake street protests in little to no clothing “for the animals.” While a seductive protest is great for drawing attention, when heeding this call, women were often the ones wearing bikinis for their activism, while men were handing out pamphlets and providing educational content about vegan lifestyle choices (Gaarder 2011, 122). For Gaarder, this reinforces the idea that women are valuable for their sexual objectification, while men are the ones with the knowledge and politically legitimate thought.

Not all women, however, fully rejected PETA’s methods. As Gaarder’s research shows, some saw the objectification of women as a compromise made based on expediency and the potential effectiveness of doing so. Gaarder elucidates her point through the idea of “traumatic knowledge,” a term Carol Adams used to explain the urgency felt by those who are a part of social justice movements (Adams 2018). Traumatic knowledge may cause someone to make a less calculated decision based on feelings in response to oppression. Rather than using this knowledge to formulate a more cohesive or beneficial plan, one may act out in a way that feels impactful. When she explains how to negotiate traumatic knowledge, Adams emphasizes the importance of taking care of oneself in response to world-changing stimuli. This is not only for those trying to process ongoing grief, but also better for the social movement or social problem that one is fighting (Adams 2003). When someone takes the time to consider their response to traumatic knowledge, they are more likely to adopt an empathetic approach that considers multiple issues, rather than clinging to the attention-seeking modes of activism, such as the *"I'd Rather Go Naked"* campaign. This creates a space where discussions can occur, rather than one where drastic measures are valued. Short-lived wins are a result of these extreme methods, rather than true structural change. Carol Adams responded to these tactics directly in FAR's 1995 Newsletter, alongside other members who were interested in alternative forms of advocacy and coalition building.

FAR's Response to *"I'd Rather Go Naked"* Campaign

FAR released its response to PETA's campaign in a 1995 newsletter. In an article written by twin sisters Cathleen and Colleen McGuire, they begin by acknowledging PETA's valuable work in the animal rights movement, while raising concerns regarding "PETA's acceptance of money generated by soft-core pornography" (McGuire and McGuire 1995). The twins emphasize their acceptance of nude women, depicting virility and strength for bare-breasted women who are feeding their offspring in public spaces. However, the feminists draw the line at the exploitation of women through "another tired cheesecake shot of a naked woman flat on her back with a lobotomized 'come hither' look" (McQuire and McQuire 1995). The message of PETA's campaign is not always clear, they argue, and could be reduced solely to the sexualization of women. The writers ask us to consider the viewers of PETA's billboards more inclusively—which means taking into account those viewers who may be illiterate, whether they are children, adults with physical or intellectual disabilities, those without access to education, or non-native English speakers, as their only definitive perception of these billboards would be the naked women. The same newsletter included a response to the campaign from Carol Adams. Adams takes a theoretical approach to explain how PETA is feeding into the very dualisms that "other" animals, as well as women. There is a connection between the treatment of women and animals through the epistemological framing, where the subject comes to understand themselves through the objectification of those whom they can identify as below them.[xv] Adams begins with Descartes' "Mind/Body Dualism," which is how Western society has determined the "good" and the "bad" (Adams 1995)[41]. She argues for the value of the mind over the body in this framing,

[41] Carol Adams expands on this idea on her website which was used in tandem with her article that appears in FAR's newsletter. https://caroljadams.com/a-feminist-vegetarian-ethic

as the one who is reduced simply to a body is dominated. When nudity is the highest valued form of advocacy for women, while men can be seen as more than their bodies, it creates a hierarchy within the movement that constructs women as usable. The othering of women has furthered the dualism that splits into "active/male and passive/female" (Adams 1995). This creates a pleasurable experience for the active male who engages in subjecting the passive female. Lastly, Adams warns readers of women within the animal rights campaign who "don't get it." The women who "don't get it" are the women who are okay with PETA's campaign, the women who defend it, and the women who partake in it. Adams expects these women to understand the harm of othering themselves, as they inherently understand the harm of othering animals. However, the support for this campaign from female animal advocates, as well as feminist animal advocates, is deeply concerning for Adams and reflects enduring and timely issues in the feminist movement. The division of the feminist sex wars—and the division between animal rights and feminism—is inadequate for undoing oppression, which takes more coalitional thinking.

The End of FAR and the Question of Single Cause/Broader Understanding

In the early 2000s, FAR faced multiple issues that brought the group to an end. The first issue was one of naming; some members felt as though the "rights" language reflected the very hierarchies they intended to dismantle, whereas other members felt that rights language gave a framing to the organization that could be effective in their advocacy. The group decided to rename itself "Feminists for Animal Rights, an Ecofeminist Alliance." This change was announced in the 2000-2001 newsletter, published after the group returned from a brief hiatus. Subsequently, the group appeared to grow, even beginning a new chapter in Toronto, Canada. Momentum was strong, change was underway, and discussions within the group were vibrant. The group also formalized its policy on "women-only meetings." Previously, events such as potlucks or other social gatherings with group members would decide whether to permit or disallow interested males. However, in this newsletter, men were officially barred from entering even these social spaces because of the dynamics created by their presence.

Although the group took a hiatus to reposition their stances, their return with new ideas was seemingly mutual. When this newsletter announced these changes and new chapters, it seemed like the group was thriving—yet this was the last of its publications. The core group folded in 2002, with the organization and its branches ceasing communications in 2011[42]. In an interview with long-time member Carol Adams, Adams discussed the decline of the group as one stemming from some of the more fractious issues being dealt with by feminist organizations more broadly. This idea

[42] This is not certain but the most recent traces of FAR's archived materials end in 2011.

was further supported through communications between board members who struggled to reach a consensus on heavily contested subjects within the group's framing. These individuals were still uncertain about the name of the organization, as conversations regarding the usage of rights language were heavily contested during this time. The board members grew concerned about the group's relevance to those who are developing more progressive modes of activism and thinking. FAR's connection to the oppression of women and animals was built upon their shared experiences under patriarchy. However, feminist conversations were developing the depth of intersectionality and the linking of oppressions. Some board members were following these lines of thinking, while others felt it was important to stick to their unique cause, as FAR was frequently the only animal rights group to highlight the connections between sex-based oppression and animal oppression. Questions about inclusion, hierarchies, funding, and other opportunities for the group to stretch one way or another were ultimately the demise of the collective.

PETA's Success

While FAR was declining, however, PETA seemed to be gaining ground. Currently, they are the largest animal welfare organization in the world, with chapters and missions all around the globe. How has PETA managed this while other groups falter and fade? The answer may lie in PETA's relatively uncomplicated—and perhaps rigorously non-intersectional— approach to animal welfare. One example of this is when activists who connect feminist issues and animal rights issues have raised concerns to PETA about their use of "pro-life" arguments in making claims for animals. Interested members asked PETA to take an official stance on the issue of abortion. The organization replied that,

> "PETA does not have a position on the abortion issue, because our focus as an organization is the alleviation of the suffering inflicted on non-human animals. There are people on both sides of the abortion issue in the animal rights movement, just as there are people on both sides of animal rights issues in the pro-life movement. And just as the pro-life movement has no official position on animal rights, neither does the animal rights movement have an official position on abortion" (PETA).

However, after the recent repeal of Roe v. Wade and state-wide bans and limits on abortion access, as well as efforts to enshrine abortion access into state constitutions, PETA began positioning billboards in battleground states. In states that were pushing anti-abortion legislation, they put up signage that read, *"Pro-life? Go Vegan!"* In states where abortion protections were more popular, the group put up a contradictory sign that read, *"Pro-choice? Go Vegan!"* This tactic is another example of PETA appropriating a prominent feminist cause for its own interest. This tactic, as the framework of Adams proposes, perpetuates the very hierarchies the organization seeks to fight by uplifting one cause through the subjugation of another.

While this tactic might be ideologically short-sighted, it has, in the near-term, been profitable. It has undoubtedly benefited the group monetarily, as they continue to be the most well-funded animal rights group in the world. PETA has strength in numbers, finances, and legislative victories. It has failures, though, in meeting the goal of true liberation for all creatures. The group frequently uses emotional appeals that pander to both feminist and anti-feminist concerns while simultaneously failing to address feminist concerns raised by members and nonmembers alike.

The Harm of PETA's Approach

Indeed, while PETA is financially successful, their tactics have proven to be ethically inconsistent. The group has appropriated many social justice causes to support their limited scope, while neglecting to address critiques of the movement's tactics. This problematic approach is detailed in the essay *Being a Sistah at PETA* by Ain Drew in the collection of essays *Sistah Vegan*. In her essay, Drew shares her experience as a black woman working for PETA and the organization's resistance to intersectional thinking. She discusses her experience with criticisms from her own community, from which she consistently received questions such as: "With all of the discrimination that my mothers and I have endured and continued to suffer, how dare I spend my days standing up for animals?" (Drew 2010). It was common for Drew's black interlocutors to question her allegiance to her race due to her animal advocacy, therefore implying that fighting for one cause means one is not fully supporting another. Not only did Drew feel alienated from her own community, but she also dealt with alienation from the animal rights movement.

When she was given a job at PETA as a blog editor, it began as a pleasant experience. She had a space where she could highlight the enmeshment of her Black identity and her veganism. However, as her time with PETA continued, she felt a lack of support from the organization. Her intersectional approach to activism was not met with enthusiasm in the organization, and ultimately Drew felt like a token to the group, someone who was there only for representation rather than for her ideas. There was no tackling of systemic issues for Black Americans by PETA. Overall, Drew argues that the group would rather opt for shock value than foster a deeper understanding of the communities they insincerely engage with.

Conclusion

PETA refuses to take a stance on socio-political issues that may be permitted to exist through the same hierarchies that impact the existence of nonhuman animals. While PETA is largely successful, questions of the ethics of their success are raised due to their lack of participation in movements outside of animal welfare demonstrations, their usage of shock tactics, and their response to concerns regarding the usage of these methods. This inattention to the formulation of oppression directly harms their own supporters and fosters a hostile environment that alienates potential allies. By ignoring the interconnectedness of various systems of oppression, PETA reinforces a narrow, exclusionary approach to activism—one that fails to recognize how other forms of discrimination shape the very industries they oppose. This lack of intersectionality not only weakens their advocacy but also undermines efforts to build a truly inclusive movement for collective liberation.

While PETA's strategies have undoubtedly brought animal rights to mainstream attention, their methods often risk perpetuating the very hierarchies they aim to dismantle. Conversely, FAR offered a different approach by connecting some of these issues. However, FAR still placed value on separatism and biological essentialism, which have proven to be ethically inconsistent with the development of liberatory thought. As liberation movements continue to evolve, so does the necessity of fostering spaces where interconnected struggles are recognized and addressed. Animal rights groups that extend themselves to human liberation are faced with important considerations. Moving away from hierarchies, dismantling dualistic thinking, and understanding the historical context of movements prove to be integral to truly liberatory advocacy.

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The Dialectic of *The Dialectic of Sex*: A Critical Examination of Artificial Reproduction

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Abstract: *This paper reexamines The Dialectic of Sex by Shulamith Firestone in light of contemporary reproductive technologies. Firestone predicted that artificial reproduction would dismantle the biological foundations of gender hierarchy and liberate women from the constraints of motherhood. However, the emergence of IVF, commercial surrogacy, and global fertility markets has (re)produced rather than eliminated inequalities, transferring reproductive burdens onto economically marginalized women and intensifying cultural expectations of motherhood. The paper argues that technology alone cannot dissolve gendered domination because reproductive norms are sustained by cultural institutions, legal frameworks, and economic incentives. Drawing on feminist theorists including Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler, and Sophie Lewis, it contends that meaningful reproductive liberation requires both technological innovation and a broader cultural transformation in how societies organize care, gender, and kinship.*

Keywords: Reproductive Technology; Feminist Theory; Gender and Motherhood; Surrogacy and Inequality.

Shulamith Firestone argued in *The Dialectic of Sex* that women could never be fully liberated so long as reproduction remained tied to the female body. For her, only artificial reproduction, technology capable of removing the biological foundations of gender difference, could dismantle the family structures that sustain women's oppression. Today, many of the reproductive technologies she envisioned have since become realities. However, they have emerged in forms she never predicted: global surrogacy markets, fertility tourism, and predatory reproductive industries that often deepen inequality and exploitation rather than undo them.

This divergence raises two central questions: if reproductive technology now exists, why has it not produced the liberation Firestone envisioned? And will technologies that replace or supplement reproduction free women from traditional obligations, or merely impose new constraints on their autonomy? In answering these questions, I posit that technology alone cannot remake gender or dissolve systems of domination. The cultural revolution, Firestone believed, would naturally follow technological change, which has not begun. Without a broader shift in social attitudes toward gender, care, and autonomy, reproductive technologies risk reinforcing old hierarchies under a new guise. Recognizing this tension is essential for imagining the future of reproductive technology and the forms of freedom it might enable.

I will approach *The Dialectic of Sex* in a dialectical spirit, developing the discussion in three parts. First, I will examine Firestone's vision of ending gender oppression through artificial reproduction. Second, I will assess how reproductive technologies have actually developed in recent decades and the power relations they have (re)produced. Finally, I will turn to the missing cultural revolution in Firestone's account, analyzing why it has stalled and what cultural shifts may be necessary to realize the liberation she imagined.

To contextualize, the relationship between womanhood and motherhood has long been a central concern of feminist theory. Early thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir argued that women are subordinated because they are socially assigned to reproduction and childcare, roles that reflect patriarchal expectations rather than biological necessity. Shulamith Firestone radically expands this insight. For Firestone, oppression is not simply cultural; it originates in the biological organization of reproduction. As she writes, the problem "always goes deeper" (Firestone 2003, 3). Gender inequality is not merely imposed by cultural expectations; it is built into the fundamental division of reproductive labor. Firestone situates her analysis alongside Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, admiring their "scientific approach" to tracing the history of economic injustice (2003, 5), but she insists that their framework fails to locate the true origins of hierarchy. The original hierarchy, she argues, emerged not from economic relations but from sexual biology. She redefines Marx and Engels' historical materialism, the view that material conditions and economic relations drive the course of history, around the "division of society into two distinct biological classes for procreative reproduction" (Firestone 2003, 12). The biological family—with its maternal dependence and paternal authority—constitutes the first form of class structure, and natural reproduction is foundational to the formation of social inequality itself: it generates labor asymmetry, legitimizes women's dependency on men, and naturalizes the cultural myth that caregiving is an "innate" feminine destiny. Pregnancy lies at the center of this structure. Firestone calls it "barbaric," a "temporary deformation of the body for the sake of the species" (2003, 180).

It is within this theoretical framework that Firestone turns to ectogenesis (or artificial reproduction) as the technological means by which women might finally be freed from the biological conditions that anchor their oppression. While many feminist thinkers do not share Firestone's characterization of pregnancy as entirely "barbaric," there is broad agreement that pregnancy imposes profound physical, emotional, and social burdens on the women who undergo it. Adrienne Rich captures this with striking clarity: "to mother a child implies a continuing presence…first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage" (1976, 11), and then through irreversible changes that reshape a woman's future. The burdens of motherhood do not end with birth. Once a woman becomes pregnant, patriarchal norms assume that she will continue to serve as the primary caregiver, that her "mind will never be the same" (Rich 1976, 11), and that her life is expected to revolve around maternal duty. In this sense, gestation does not simply shape the body. It shapes destiny. It places a disproportionate burden on women that structures their lives long after pregnancy ends. Artificial reproduction promises to transform the patriarchal assumptions that have long shackled women. Ectogenesis has the potential to liberate women from familial obligations in two primary ways: by severing the conceptual and biological link between womanhood and motherhood, and by easing the practical (and economic) burdens of pregnancy.

Currently, a self-reinforcing normative logic binds womanhood to motherhood, and subsequently motherhood to caregiving (Mackay 2020, 348–349). Cultural expectations insist that women should derive fulfillment from motherhood and even glorify the suffering bound to pregnancy. Women who refuse motherhood risk being labeled "unfit" (Firestone 2003, 181–182), revealing how intensely reproductive expectations are policed. These norms suppress open discussions about the realities of pregnancy, leaving women without the discursive space to question or resist its demands. Ectogenesis dismantles the very framework that conflates womanhood with motherhood. When gestation occurs in an artificial womb, the symbolic and biological ties between pregnancy and femininity weaken significantly. Motherhood quite literally becomes the function of a machine rather than the destiny of a sexed body. Hence, the cultural pressure on women to actualize their identity through childbearing, and the guilt imposed on those who choose otherwise, lose much of their force when motherhood is no longer biologically inscribed (Mackay 2020, 349). By eliminating women's exclusive biological role in gestation, ectogenesis also weakens the broader patriarchal logic that uses reproductive anatomy to justify why women should shoulder the bulk of caregiving. When men and women are equally incapable of gestation, the central argument used to pressure women into familial obligations begins to crumble (Power 2010, 145).

Furthermore, in Firestone's framework, reproduction forms the material basis of women's economic inequality. The labor market is structured around a patriarchal assumption that pregnancy inevitably interrupts a woman's career, shaping workplace norms and wage patterns that position women as less reliable workers. Meanwhile, men can father children without facing comparable health complications or employment disruptions, leaving the financial and professional costs of reproduction to fall disproportionately on women (Cavaliere 2019, 77). These inequalities persist even for women who remain continuously employed, as cultural assumptions about maternal commitment translate into wage penalties. Ectogenesis directly confronts this inequality. By removing the physical demands of gestation, artificial reproduction enables women to have children without incurring the health risks or career setbacks that pregnancy currently imposes. It offers a form of "positive freedom"—the capacity to reproduce without sacrificing bodily autonomy or professional opportunity (ibid. 78). In eliminating the biological interruption uniquely imposed on women, ectogenesis disrupts the rationale sustaining gendered labor inequities. Therefore, in theory, artificial reproduction could significantly alleviate the economic and social burdens the patriarchy has long treated as natural.

Despite the imaginative force of *The Dialectic of Sex*, feminist theorists have criticized Firestone's analysis as oscillating "between grandiose technofuturism and baseless speculation" (Power 2010, 152). Her vision of liberation depends on the assumption that technological change will automatically unravel the social structures built upon reproduction, even though she offers little account of the political or material conditions that could bring about such a transformation. Absent this grounding, her utopia hovers without a pathway to realization. This conceptual gap makes her argument especially vulnerable to scrutiny. Some feminists argue that her portrayal of pregnancy as inherently degrading reflects a patriarchal gaze, interpreting gestation only as service to men and ignoring the diverse meanings it holds for women (Margree 2018, 47). Others, such as Jane Alpert, insist that biology can serve as a source of empowerment rather than solely the foundation of oppression (Margree 2018, 48). These critiques instead highlight the speculative nature of Firestone's project. Because ectogenesis does not yet exist, its emancipatory potential cannot be empirically evaluated. If feminist liberation is to be pursued under present conditions, however, it must rely primarily on cultural and institutional transformation as opposed to technological innovation alone. Moreover, if many women experience pregnancy as meaningful and empowering, then realizing Firestone's vision of liberation would require a fundamental shift in cultural understandings of motherhood, reproduction, and gender. This creates a temporal and conceptual impasse that leaves her vision suspended between aspiration and impossibility.

The aforementioned critiques become even more pressing when we examine how reproductive technologies have actually developed since *The Dialectic of Sex* was published. Contemporary technologies often intensify the social expectation to reproduce. IVF, surrogacy, and egg freezing reinforce the cultural belief that women should become mothers by any means available. Those who cannot conceive naturally are now expected to pursue medical intervention, and young women are encouraged to freeze their eggs so they can advance in their careers and still fulfill their presumed maternal destiny. Reproductive technology, in its current form, "creates and promotes a culture in which women…are asked to relate to themselves as baby-incubators," carrying an intensified sense of biological responsibility and their "dwindling ability" to meet it (Margree 2018, 117). Far from initiating the cultural transformation Firestone predicted, these developments have often prompted reactive and religious retrenchments of traditional family norms (Power 2010, 144).

Moreover, many methods of artificial reproduction simply shift reproductive burdens onto more vulnerable women. Commercial surrogacy transfers the physical risks of pregnancy onto economically marginalized women while wealthier clients purchase access to their bodies (Margree 2018, 119). Rather than transforming reproduction, the surrogacy industry "does nothing at all to solve the problem [the risks and burdens pregnancy imposes on women] of pregnancy" (Lewis 2019, 10). It simply meets the market demand for genetic parenthood by applying a familiar capitalist "logic of outsourcing" (Margee 2018, 119) to gestation. In practice, surrogacy becomes "a logistics of manufacture and distribution where the commodity is biogenetic progeny" (Lewis 2019, 19), a global market built on unequal exchanges of bodies, labor, and risk. This dynamic reproduces gendered hierarchies along global and economic lines. More broadly, the fertility industry has developed into a commercial enterprise that serves corporate interests over individual autonomy, demonstrating how reproductive labor has become commodified. Unregulated surrogacy markets and predatory fertility tourism lay bare how sharply the reality of reproductive technology has diverged from Firestone's emancipatory hopes.

Concerns regarding reproductive autonomy further expose the political dangers of ectogenesis under present conditions. Contemporary defenses of abortion rights hinge on the pregnant person's bodily autonomy and the right to refuse the physical burdens of gestation. Once gestation occurs outside the body, however, this central justification may lose much of its force, allowing legislators to prioritize the fetus's "right to life" over parental choice (Horn 2020, 4). If bodily autonomy no longer provides the primary legal basis for terminating a pregnancy, individuals may nevertheless be legally obligated to assume the emotional and financial responsibilities of parenthood despite never having undergone gestation. In this scenario, ectogenesis could erode reproductive freedom by removing the legal and moral foundations upon which abortion rights have traditionally been defended. The widening gap between Firestone's speculative utopia and the realities of contemporary reproduction makes clear that technological change, by itself, cannot dismantle gendered oppression.

If technology cannot transform gendered oppression alone, then the question insistently returns to culture: what must shift in our collective imagination and in our institutions for liberation to become thinkable at all? One of the illuminating insights offered by feminist theorists post-Firestone is that the problem of motherhood is not only biological but profoundly institutional. Adrienne Rich draws a crucial distinction between the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood, the latter designed "to ensure that [women's] potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (Rich 1976, 13). For most of recorded history, this institution has "ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" (Rich 1976, 42), embedding maternal sacrifice, selflessness, and obedience into the very definition of womanhood. Motherhood is not simply something women do; it is something patriarchal culture demands they be. The institution survives precisely because it disguises itself as nature, reproducing itself across generations as daughters learn "what it means to be a woman" by watching mothers whose lives have been delimited by "womanhood" (Rich 1976, 243). Even if pregnancy were relocated outside the body, these social scripts would remain intact unless actively dismantled.

Rich's institutional critique finds a powerful complement in Judith Butler's account of gender, which explains how gendered "scripts" infiltrate and shape embodied life. Gender, Butler argues, is not a biological essence but a performance—"a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (1988, 274). The pairing of what is deemed natural sex with a fixed gender and heterosexual destiny is "an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs" (Butler 1988, 275) shaped to serve reproductive interests. From this perspective, the inequalities Firestone attributes to biology are sustained through cultural performances of nature, carried forward by norms and expectations that anchor women within the institution of motherhood. If gender is reproduced through acts, then liberation requires disrupting the forms of doing, relating, and identifying that keep these acts intact. Firestone sought to abolish the biological foundation of gender; Butler reveals that biology's meaning is already socially produced. What is needed, hence, is not only technological change but a discursive transformation: a collective reimagining of what bodies, genders, and kinship can be.

Sophie Lewis offers one potential version of this reimagining, extending the critique of motherhood from cultural norms to the organization of reproductive labour. Contemporary society elevates gestation into an exceptional act of care, one that must be "forcibly naturalized" (Lewis 2019, 12) to appear meaningful. Naturalization masks the capitalistic and patriarchal interests invested in keeping pregnancy private, individualized, and feminized. Lewis argues that true reproductive freedom requires denaturalizing gestation entirely—transforming it into a collective responsibility. In her vision of "full surrogacy," we recognize ourselves as the makers of one another and begin to behave as such (Lewis 2019, 20). Care becomes a shared practice rather than a privatized obligation, and children become the responsibility of many rather than the burden of one. Such a reimagining challenges both the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the capitalist exploitation of reproductive labor. If babies were understood as "anybody and everybody's responsibility" (Lewis 2019, 142), she argues, the logics of ownership, profit, and gendered duty would begin to dissolve.

Taken together, Rich, Butler, Lewis, and even Firestone in her most utopian moments reveal that no single account of reproduction or motherhood can capture the full complexity of women's oppression or liberation. Any serious feminist project of emancipation must, therefore, grapple with this plurality of meanings and experiences. It is also important to note that the arguments I have mentioned in this paper only touch the edges of a much broader terrain: one shaped by race, colonial histories, class, disability, and the parenting experiences of queer and transgender communities. These dimensions equally shape (as much as gender) who is empowered to reproduce, who is exploited through reproduction, and whose kinship formations are recognized or denied. Thus, a fully transformative vision must be considerate enough to hold the many ways of mothering and the many ways of kinship, acknowledging that struggles against domination emerge from different identities and can take different forms.

To conclude, the failure of reproductive technology to deliver Firestone's promised liberation reveals a simple truth: there is no single technological or political prototype that will free women from reproductive oppression. Liberation will not come from artificial wombs alone, nor from cultural critique alone, but from the convergence of both—technology stripped of patriarchal purpose, and culture stripped of its naturalized myths of gender and motherhood. Perhaps freedom lies not in one sweeping revolution but in a constellation of transformations:

gentle shifts in how we imagine care for children and for one another,
radical reconfigurations of gendered roles,
collective practices of raising and nurturing,
economic rearrangements that distribute reproductive labor,
and technological innovations accountable to justice and individual autonomy rather than profit.

These transformations move us toward a world where reproduction no longer binds women to hierarchy but becomes, finally, a shared terrain of possibility, "allowing love to flow unimpeded" (Firestone 216).

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Poet-Philosophess: Lorde and Cixous as Critical Phenomenologists

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Abstract: *Utilizing Lisa Guenther and Mariana Ortega's conceptions of critical phenomenology, this essay argues that Audre Lorde's Poetry Is Not a Luxury and Hélène Cixous's The Laugh of the Medusa both practice a critical phenomenology through how they value the intersubjective experience, bracket the quasi-transcendental, and work towards promoting praxis for the disenfranchised. Using their poetry alongside their essays, this essay will not only make arguments on aesthetic praxis and bracketing through poetics, but it will also resolve one of the most contested issues within critical phenomenology: the possibility of bracketing the quasi-transcendental as the oppressed.*

Keywords: Lorde; Cixous; Critical Phenomenology; Poetry; Intersubjectivity.

Both Classical and Critical Phenomenology study lived experience, yet classical phenomenological practices, like bracketing the natural attitude and the study of the intention and the intentional object, are augmented differently by its contemporary successor. Critical Phenomenology goes beyond subjective transcendental reflection, utilizing historical archives, considering third-person experiences, and recognizing while bracketing the quasi-transcendental to achieve its goal of praxis. Audre Lorde, in her essay *Poetry is not a Luxury,* commits to this, as does Hélène Cixous in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*. In this essay, using Lisa Guenther's *Six Senses of Critique for Critical Phenomenology* and her paper *Critical Phenomenology*, and also Mariana Ortega's *Critical Impurity and the Race for Critical Phenomenology*, I will explain how Lorde and Cixous promote critical phenomenology and the implications of their doing so.

Guenther in *Critical Phenomenology* utilizes Audre Lorde's reflections on individual experience (and the scrutiny of these reflections) to argue for critical phenomenology. I, however, will use Lorde's focus on the intersubjective experience, bracketing of the colonial perspective, and her call for praxis to make aesthetic conclusions. While Guenther doesn't discuss Cixous, many of her works follow closely with what Guenther was arguing, so we will also form conclusions from the differences between Lorde and Cixous's practices.

The Intersubjective Experience – Lorde

Guenther primarily discusses scrutiny and experience when talking about Audre Lorde. Phenomenology studies experience, and Guenther, in *The Six Senses*, states: "The phenomenological method cuts through the dogmatism of psychologism, positivism, and abstract rationalism, opening up a middle path that is both theoretically systematic and also grounded in lived experience" (2023, 10). To her, Lorde's critical scrutiny and poetry are shown to be "a descriptive practice of illuminating and articulating one's experience and also a transformative practice of changing the conditions under which one's experience unfolds" (Guenther 2020, 14). In Lorde's work, experience is utilized for promoting the intersubjective - a combination of multiple experiences and subjective states. She describes poetry collaboratively in her essay, stating "it is the skeleton architecture of our lives" (Lorde 1984, 38). Poetry, to Lorde, scrutinizes experience to build a better world for multiple people: to improve the lives of the intersubjective.

This emphasis throughout *Poetry Is Not a Luxury* on the intersubjective is why Poetry is not a luxury. Through its collaborative usage, poetry can create spaces where many feelings that were previously unacknowledged are now explored. Lorde juxtaposes "sterile word play" with moderated experience: poetry as "a revelatory distillation" (1984, 38). Poetry can not just be unobserved listings of one's own feelings; one has to dig deep and find oneself despite the systemic perpetuations of who one is. This experience can be one person creating a poem, but for Lorde, it is multiple experiences distilled through their own subjective experiences. Thus, her essay promotes *Critical Phenomenology*'s study of experiences.

Breaking the Quasi-Transcendental – Lorde

Bracketing the quasi-transcendental is one of the primary reasons for Critical Phenomenology's existence. Guenther uses Simone de Beauvoir, Frantz Fanon, and Jean-Paul Sartre as examples of phenomenologists who bracketed "the specific aspects of the natural attitude—sexism, racism, colonialism, classism—to follow the traces of these contingent, historical structures in the world" (Guenther 2023, 12). The quasi-transcendental, by definition, are contingent social structures that are generative of meaning and ways of perception while antagonizing and erasing others. They are 'quasi' in the way that they are historically created, and are subject to change and social nullification, but 'transcendental' in the way they produce ideology and natural attitudes beyond those of typical phenomena that can be studied empirically– they affect meaning, and must be bracketed if critical phenomenology wants to discuss lived experience for the purposes of praxis.

Lorde, in her insistence on poetry as liberation, states that it is a way for her "non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with" (Lorde 1984, 37). She calls removing the European voice, the white voice, a way to "encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply" (Lorde 1984, 38). This is a way of bracketing the quasi-transcendental - the colonial perspective. The structure being bracketed would be lethal if it were accepted, due to its reduction of the feelings and perspectives of the disenfranchised. In the colonized world, it can not be cogito et sum for the suffering. Instead, it is "I feel, therefore I can be free" because "for within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institution dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive" (Lorde 1984, 38). Poetry is anti-dehumanization in a society focused on reduction—and through bracketing the beliefs structured by this society—poetry as liberation can be realized. If this is not practiced, emotional and literal death ensues.

There is much discourse, though, on whether the oppressed experience can be bracketed, brought up by thinkers like Fanon, Gloria Anzaldúa, Alia Al-Saji, and Mariana Ortega. Anzaldúa notoriously could not remove her lived embodied experience and her art from the oppression she faced (1987). Al-Saji, working with Fanon, states, "Critical phenomenology cannot stay at the level of the constitution of sense, for colonization already structures the phenomenological field of sense and draws the borders that differentiate sense from non-sense" (2020, 211). There is ultimately a pessimism that pervades major theory in critical epoché regarding whether the quasi-transcendental can be bracketed, and by whom. Lorde may have an answer to this in what she calls the "distillation of experience" (Lorde 1984, 36). To distill is to strenuously evaporate and then condense; to let the vapor fill the air and then to filter through with scrutiny until the desired liquid is left. We can observe this in how Lorde describes writing: in scrutinizing one's own experience and 'bracketing out' the meaning and beliefs generated by the quasi-transcendental, it allows a focus on what is within the brackets - the focus on the experience itself. This allows for ethical bracketing, done by the experiencer herself, which will be discussed further in the essay.

Praxis — Lorde

Lorde continuously states that action is dire. "Experience has taught us that action in the now is... necessary, always" (1984, 37). Guenther, in *The Six Senses*, states this ideology as well; critical phenomenology desires to "restructure the world" (2023, 18) through promoting praxis. There are two forms of praxis that Lorde commits to with her poetry. First is the poetry itself, which will be discussed later. Second is what the poem does for the artist. For the women Lorde writes about, their possibilities are reduced and belittled. Poetry is not a luxury because it is the praxis that is needed to fully realize one's struggle. "In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real" (Lorde 1984, 38). Poetry, the act of its creation—through moderating one's experience and bracketing the oppressive society one lives in—can fully realize liberation. Through poetry, good poetry, the transfer of language to idea, to action can be seen (Lorde, 1984, 37). The focus on intersubjective experience is very important here - the experience is moderated through many voices of Black women and broadcast for the purposes of restructuring the world. The restructuring comes from the realization itself here; the realization of a better world makes a better world for Lorde.

I have shown how Lorde, in her essay, utilizes poetry as a tool whose usage shares similarities to critical phenomenology. Poetry is an art form, and any position on what poetry is and what it should do has aesthetic implications. These will be discussed below.

Poetry as Philosophy – Lorde

Philosophy is the search for the truth. Poetry does not have to be this: it can search or dawdle or describe anything it wants. Lisa Guenther, in *Critical Phenomenology*, says, "Lorde shares some core insights with classical phenomenology: namely, that experience is lived, that it presupposes a subject whose perspective matters, that this perspective is partial, and that it is both possible and necessary for a subject of experience to scrutinize or reject on the meaning and motivation of its experience" (2020, 15). Lorde's essay can be seen as philosophy, and her positions on what art should be are valuable, but can her poetry be philosophy? Below is an example with Audre Lorde's poem, *The Black Unicorn*.

"The black unicorn is greedy.
The black unicorn is impatient.
The black unicorn was mistaken for a shadow
or a symbol
and taken through a cold country
where mist painted mockeries
of my fury.
It is not in her lap where the horn rests
but deep in her moonpit
growing.

The black unicorn is restless
The black unicorn is unrelenting
The black unicorn is not
Free" (Lorde 1978, 3).

Guenther uses Wendry Brown's explanation of *kritike tekhne* to explain the move from crisis to written work. "[*Kritike tekhne*] involves recognizing an objective crisis and convening subjective critics who then [pass] a critical judgment and [provide] a formula for restorative action" (Guenther 2020, 9). The author is moved by a crisis and, in response, passes judgment by describing what the situation appears to be. This translates in the poem as the creation of the symbol of the black unicorn, an entity that in its entrapment becomes realized.

A metaphor, to the phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur, can analyze reality more so than an empirical observation (1983, 148). "Poetic Discourse brings to language aspects, qualities, and values of reality which do not have access to directly descriptive language and which can be said only thanks to the complex play of metaphorical utterance and of the ordered transgression of the ordinary meaning of the word" (Ricoeur 1983, 147). The metaphor in Lorde's poem represents the dehumanization and the restrictiveness of the black experience in an oppressive system, in which the only liberation she can achieve rests in the emotionality of her body and mind. All descriptions of the black unicorn, a figure representing Lorde herself, are inhuman and trapped—reduced to shadow, symbol, or animal—and the horn that makes her the unicorn lies in her moonpit, an elusive representation of the place she keeps her love and fury. This poem discusses the black experience in a way that philosophy could not, and it specifically uses phenomenological techniques to achieve this.

For the black unicorn, the white perspective is both addressed and not considered. The black unicorn is in this trapped position for a reason, but the natural attitude when she wrote this was in favor of the white experience - the one doing the trapping. This poem announces itself as not free, and that she feels fury due to this; we can see this as an approximate call for praxis. Through writing about experience through the crisis, observations made by Ricoeur on metaphor, and bracketing for the sake of praxis, Lorde's poem about truthful experience is distilled to say something about this experience achieves critical phenomenology.

Poetry as Praxis – Lorde

We have explored above that the creation of a poem in an oppressive system can be an act of Praxis. The act of cherishing your feelings through poetry propels liberation by demanding the reality of this feeling. I argue, though, that it is also praxis through how it creates something material out of the author's feelings. The poem is material and mandatory. It must be created and formed through (subject) matter and form. Creating a poem is creating something lasting. *The Black Unicorn* was published in 1978, and yet it exists then as it exists now, interpreted differently, of course, but its material presence is the same. Lisa Guenther uses Sartre to define praxis, stating: "Sartre builds on this Marxist account in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, defining praxis as human activity that alters the material-historical context in which it unfolds by producing structures with enough stability to constitute a new sense of social and historical reality" (Guenther 2020, 17). Audre Lorde's poem is structured, and what it does when read is announce itself within the context of how black women are treated, to reveal the social reality of oppression.

Combined with how the creation of the poem itself is praxis, we can see the poem as two situations of material alteration. First is the creation, second is the poem itself. What this double praxis does is not only legitimize Lorde's insistence on action throughout her work but also legitimize poetry as actual praxis. Largely, there can be a misconception of art as materially superfluous and unnecessary in real politics, that we must organize our lives before we commit to aesthetic practices. Lorde combats this, not only within her essay, but also through her poems as well. We can see art, and the creation of it itself, as necessary political action.

The Audience Experience — Lorde

The poem above affects the reader: it is made of a political call to action (which we must undertake ethically), it is made of a metaphor we use to address the speaker, and it discusses a suffering we must address. There's also an aspect of the poem that scrutinizes and implicates us. We are led to ask: what are the implications for a reader in reading Lorde's work, what are the implications of living in the same (or similar) society as her and receiving her work, and what must we do?

The audience is implicated within these structures that Lorde has set up by their own experience. The poem allows for the distillation of the audience's experience by viewing it in the light provided by Lorde's poem. We cannot only reckon with how we treat the black unicorn societally - dehumanizing and making a mock of its fury - we can also recognize these experiences within us. The experience of the disenfranchised is not monolithic; it is made up of many different groups who have many different needs. While these needs and desires may be different, we can recognize disenfranchisement within other groups of people and recognize how our experiences both align with and differentiate from Lorde's experience. For a white audience, it is reckoning with the system they receive privilege within, and Lorde mandates that they must confront this brutalization of an entity that they have benefited from. Both the experience of the franchised and the disenfranchised have implications for how we must receive Lorde, and Lorde reciprocates this by having her experience on the level of our own. The praxis of the poetry—our praxis—is that we must see, as the audience, the poem changing the historical-societal context. It must start with us as the audience, as well as for the speaker, for political action, by not only working towards a society where the black unicorn is appreciated and her fury acknowledged (and not mocked), but also by creating a world in which the black unicorn does not have to exist. Lorde's praxis implicates us, and through this confrontation we must commit to a praxis of our own.

Hélène Cixous is a French writer who primarily worked through essays and creative work to promote her philosophy on Women. Her hallmark work is *The Laugh of the Medusa*, an essay made to promote women's writing within the zeitgeist. The purpose of the work is simple: women's writing, to Cixous, should work to counter the phallogocentric sublations that run the Western tradition. In Sigmund Freud's corpus, women are a dark continent, the fear of castration in the reflection of men, which is seen in the figure of Medusa to Perseus (the man frozen in fear by his own castration). Instead, however, we can view Medusa as laughing and going beyond the phallocentric tradition (Cixous 1976a, 885). Utilizing the same framework that Guenther used on Audre Lorde, we can see whether Cixous promotes a critical phenomenology, and if her poetry does the same. Then, we will draw conclusions from this.

The Intersubjective Experience — Cixous

Cixous values the subjective experience of other women. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, she writes about the amazing description a woman gives her of a world all her own. It is a world based in knowledge and eroticism; built with masturbation, it is the artful prolonged form of pleasure and creation, “a veritable aesthetic activity, each stage of rapture inscribing a resonant vision, a composition, something beautiful” (Cixous 1976a, 876). It is important to view the aesthetic aspect of this declaration. Not only is creation centered within this description, but we can also observe this as an experience that counters that of previous aesthetic conventions. The world of women, including the pleasure of women, has never truly been focused on, but in this moment it is the most beautiful thing. Therefore, beauty, to Cixous, isn’t a philosophical tradition that is mandated to the world, art, and logic of men, instead, it is something that is inherent in women.

This leads Cixous to say, “I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of song” (1976a, 876). To Cixous, the announcing of one experience leads to the desire for other perspectives that are as radical as the one stated above. The experience of women has been repeatedly reduced to unimportant, but with these lenses, it can be viewed as subversive and mandatory. Cixous makes a space to promote multiple women’s writings, not just hers.

The intersubjective women’s experience is a historic goal by Cixous, not just through the individualized effects of women’s writing, but with re-establishing oneself in one's body, and giving one’s body the space to speak and also through the historic implications of many women writing like women (1976a, 880). To write, for many women, is a weapon against the oppressive system that didn’t allow for their speech, and very specifically, it only works this way if there are multitudes of women writing. “An act that will also be marked by women seizing the occasion to speak, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression… It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language (Cixous 1976a, 880). Cixous directs this demand to every woman because this absolution will only be found through the discovery of what women’s writing could be. Cixous, therefore, falls within the focus of intersubjective experience that critical phenomenology calls for.

How Lorde calls for the intersubjective is similar to how Cixous calls for it. Both connect the multifaceted practices of women as beneficial to a socio-historic project; it is mandatory for both that multitudes of women represent themselves. Uniquely, Cixous may call Guenther's description of critical phenomenology as the "[attunement] to the relation between lived experience and the stuff of life: the materiality of the world from which we live, the relationships that support or undermine our flourishing, the infrastructure that distributes life chances equitably or inequitably" (Guenter 2023, 8) as a feminine practice, almost making the argument that critical phenomenology may be a practice that is uniquely woman's, while Lorde makes no such claims.

Bracketing the Quasi-Transcendental — Cixous

We continue this discussion with how Cixous brackets the quasi-transcendental. There is clearly an opposition Cixous has to the patriarchal system that has kept women quiet, and she speaks about the effects of this on women. "Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great—that is, for 'great men,' and it's 'silly.' Besides, you've written a little but in secret. And it wasn't good, because it was in secret, and because you punished yourself for writing, because you didn't go all the way" (Cixous 1976, 876-7). She passionately tries to separate men's writing and women's writing throughout the whole essay and insists that women must write beyond systems made by men to truly discover their own writing. "Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery" (Cixous 1976a, 877). We must go beyond, somehow, and write despite generative oppressive structures (patriarchy intersected with capitalistic ideology). We must bracket the natural attitude inspired by and generated by oppression.

Unlike Lorde, though, it seems as though there isn't a focus on (a distillation of) the experience itself to bracket the quasi-transcendental. Instead, Cixous just works to oppose men's writing and seeks to write counter to it. Below is a note left by Cixous after insisting that men must write men's writing, and women must write women's. Here, she further emphasizes what men's writing means.

> "Men still have everything to say about their sexuality, and everything to write. For what they have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity, from the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequential phantasm of woman as a 'dark continent' to penetrate and to 'pacify.' (We know what 'pacify' means in terms of scotomizing the other and mis-recognizing the self.) Conquering her, they've made haste to depart from her borders, to get out of sight, out of body. The way man has of getting out of himself and into her whom he takes not for the other but for his own deprives him, he knows, of his own bodily territory. One can understand how man, confusing himself with his penis and rushing in for the

attack, might feel resentment and fear of being 'taken' by the woman, of being lost in her, absorbed, or alone" (Cixous 1976a, 877).

For Cixous, there seems to be a process of viewing men's writing as oppressive and women's writing as contrary to this project. In bracketing the quasi-transcendental and the troubles with it, there is a worry about who does the bracketing. Mariana Ortega poses this question and logically asks whether, if the oppressed cannot bracket out their own oppression (as Anzaldúa and Al-Saji write), then are the people who function as benefiting from oppression within oppressed systems better for this project, or are they damned to never bracket as well (Oretaga 2023, 22)? In deep consideration of this dilemma, we must observe the note as commenting on this, possibly. Clearly, to Cixous, women's writing is not the standard, it is men's writing and men's fear of women that have continued to dominate the literary and philosophical tradition. To Cixous, men cannot write women's writing (although they may simulate women's writing occasionally), and women must continue women's writing: Men fear women's writing and thus can not write through their experience. Therefore, she would conclude that bracketing sexist ideology generated by patriarchy cannot be done by men and is resolved purely in the realm of women's writing. Cixous utilizes her knowledge of the patriarchal structure's tendency to objectify, belittle, and oppress women to write texts about female experiences that both admit this structure's existence while trying to reduce it. In combination with Lorde, they both show that the quasi-transcendental can be bracketed by the oppressed, through focusing and distilling their own experiences, and by countering writing done under the natural attitude of oppression.

Praxis — Cixous

Apparent that women's writing promotes praxis, Cixous states: "Because the economy of her drives is prodigious, she cannot fail, in seizing the occasion to speak, to transform directly and indirectly all systems of exchange based on masculine thrift. Her libido will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think" (Cixous 1976, 882). It is very interesting how this practice promotes praxis, though, and we will utilize Ortega's conception of Maria Lugones's *Lover of Purity* to proceed with this discussion.

Cixous believes that men's logic is core to why women have been reduced and ignored within the zeitgeist. It is a cumulative practice of belittling. In using psychoanalysis, it is men's hatred and ignorance of women that have led them to stem the dominant unifying logic. Ortega utilizes Lugones to say something similar, stating that in Lugones's "view, this logic is fundamentally tied to the assumption that there is unity underlying multiplicity—an assumption that posits an understanding of the heterogeneous as capable of 'split-separation,' that is, as parts that are internally separable and divisible and thus in need of unification" (2023, 13). Ortega continues in stating that the practice for critical phenomenology should be to practice what Lugones calls a “curdling” (2023, 13), moving away from purity and instead demanding multiplicity within critical phenomenology, whether it be refuting an origin or going beyond logical binaries. Cixous states repeatedly that women are multifaceted, describing anyone who identifies with the label as “infinitely rich” (1976a, 876). She views men’s writing as the reduction into unification and resolves that, within a historical context, women’s writing must do good in the way of bringing back multiplicity.

> “Because she arrives, vibrant, over and again, we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather of a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another. As subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places. Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield” (Cixous 1976a, 882).

In a phallocentric system, women’s writing is necessarily seen as liberating. For critical phenomenology, we must observe this declaration as one that historically calls for women’s voices to counter those of an oppressive history – Cixous’s ‘women’s writing’ as a type of praxis. Cixous states: “[women’s writing] will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination” (1976, 883). Lorde shares in this assessment, very specifically, the European man’s world that she must write through to change. Lorde does not operate on the logical aspects that may be changed, but instead focuses on the historical aspect of what change would look like and how it would be represented. Poetry for Lorde partly works as praxis due to how it realizes the dream of liberation, a dream that could not be realized in any other way, as this dream's realization has historical implications. While Lorde focuses on the individualized effects of multiple women writing, Cixous focuses on the broad scope of what will be changed when this writing is made public: it will change men’s logic. Both demand socio-historical material change, and therefore both align closely with the goals of critical phenomenology.

We were able to observe whether Audre Lorde’s poetry promoted the same critical phenomenology her essay did, and we will do the same with Hélène Cixous and her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Cixous is known primarily for her essays, but dispersed within them, there is a series of short prose and poetry. Below is her freeform poem from the collection, *Coming To Writing,* titled *A Girl Is Being Killed.*

> In the beginning, I desired.
> “What is it she wants?”
> “To live. Just to live. And to hear myself say the name.”
> “Horrors! Cut out her tongue!”
> “What’s wrong with her?”
> “She can’t keep herself from flying!”
> “In that case, we have special cages.”

> Who is the Superuncle who hasn't prevented a girl from flying, the flight of the thief, who has not bound her, not bandaged the feet of his little darling, so that they might be exquisitely petite, who hasn't mummified her into prettiness? (Cixous 1976b, 41)

An analysis of this poem finds that it achieves all three of the desired outcomes of critical phenomenology. Firstly, the author is moved by crisis—a very clear crisis—into writing this poem. She begins with a desire that has not been fulfilled within the system that has kept her in cages. She speaks of the Superuncle (a Freudian phallo-centered element) that binds her, a force that takes away her freedom. This is the force that compels her to write. Secondly, we can see the poem as resisting the phallocentric perspective she finds permeating throughout literature, specifically using language that she finds ultimately to be women's. Meaning that the way she writes presents itself as bare, as felt in the body (the imagery of the bound feet, the clipped wings). Cixous writes that when a woman speaks, "she doesn't 'speak,' she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the 'logic' of her speech" (1976a, 881). This is represented within the poem, countering those of the patriarchal men's perspectives, the perspectives that must be bracketed. We can also see the dialogue structure as one that is both in horror of and mocks the oppressive structure that is being bracketed as a girl is being killed, but purely for the reason that she desires. This poem works as a distilled experience, one that not only works on the level of praxis at its creation and conception but also through the audience's reaction, similar to Lorde's.

Where Lorde and Cixous diverge is crucial. *The Black Unicorn* is a pivotal poem about the issue of racialization and women's oppression. The structures that the audience is implicated in are not as universal as what Cixous writes about, but it is a continuous intersectionality that permeates Lorde's poem. This lends the effect of not only deeper consideration towards Lorde's writing but also of implicating more people within the system that created the black unicorn, including white women. Effectively, in one poem (Lorde's), the white voice is both bracketed and yet still considered. With Cixous, the white perspective is arguably not considered at all. Though both poems deal with the infantilization and humiliation of the female figure, one is ultimately maintained within her dehumanization, contrary to Cixous, who still arrives at humanity despite getting her wings clipped. So, what can this say about critical phenomenology?

A successful distillation of one's experience becomes more realized when more quasi-transcendental structures are confronted and bracketed. In consideration of the ideologies and beliefs generated by many oppressive structures that overlap and build on each other, we must consider every angle of oppression that affects our self-reflection and self-experience as we write, resulting in not only more accuracy in describing our lived experiences, but also more realized critiques which lead to better praxis. Guenther states: "To the extent that critique is situated or contextual, such that one is moved to think critically by a particular relation to the given and to a history in which one is implicated, critical phenomenology is a practice of immanent critique" (Guenther 2023, 14). For the purposes of critical phenomenological art, we must observe every experience and its material manifestation as affected by multiple quasi-transcendental structures, the structures that we are implicated in, are victims of, and must bracket (meaning confronting while reducing) to criticize. Cixous universalizes women, not only in a way that results in an unrealistic binary between the genders and their expressions (resulting in an inflexible insistence on only women doing the work women's writing can) but also by universalizing the results of the alienation of women of color's stories and experiences. Their concerns are not admitted but are instead hushed under the umbrella of 'women's issues' and 'women's writing.' Put simply, her criticism is not critical enough.

Art can be praxis, and arguably aesthetics are where critical phenomenology is eventually heading, with Ortega (a prominent figure in critical phenomenological studies) stating: "I also see an opening here toward the aesthetic, in the possibility of alternative modes of aesthetic production being capable of changing the affective tonality" (Ortega 2023, 24). What we learn from Audre Lorde and Hélène Cixous is not only the efficacy of this move to aesthetics but the success of every aspect of Guenther's critical phenomenology, including one of the most controversial: bracketing the quasi-transcendental. Through following the core values of critical phenomenology, like being moved by crisis, focusing on the subjective and, more importantly, the intersubjective experience, studying and writing despite power systems working against the experience, and writing for the purposes of praxis, we can observe art as the possible saving grace for the problems critical phenomenology has run into.

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A Philosophical Investigation of Loneliness in Transitioning: Trans Loneliness

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Abstract: *Contemporary philosophical accounts of loneliness often characterize it as the absence of social goods or the frustration and confusion of one's desires. While these frameworks explain many experiences of loneliness, they fail to capture a distinct form of loneliness that can emerge within the experience of trans and gender nonconforming folks. This paper argues that trans loneliness is an intrasubjective form of loneliness based on transitioning that cannot be fully reduced to unattainable social goods, misidentified desire, or lack of acceptance.*[43] *My aim is not to just explain why transness can be lonely, but why transitioning in this case is inherently lonely. Engaging with Roberts and Kruger's account of frustrated pro-attitudes and Qiannan Li's concept of clueless loneliness, I show that trans loneliness can persist even with supportive relationships and communities where one's person is understood. This is not to deny or diminish the joys of being trans. Instead, I aim to show that trans loneliness emerges through the convergence of identity doubt, bodily alienation, and community limbo during the process of gender transition. These experiences are not individually unique to trans people, but their combined experience in transitioning produces a distinct form of loneliness grounded in the ongoing process of transitioning.*

Keywords: Trans; Loneliness; Body; Identity; Community.

Introduction

There are many accounts of loneliness, yet they fail to fully capture a form of loneliness that emerges within trans and gender nonconforming experiences. I am writing this paper to better understand and articulate a foundational aspect of the experience of transitioning that is often overlooked or insufficiently understood.[44] I aim to offer both a philosophical investigation of loneliness through a trans perspective

[43] Related to one's subjective experience, based within themselves.

[44] 'Trans' instead of 'transgender' is purposeful. As the term restricts trans people into certain categories. This term has also been changed several times, but the term 'trans' can encompass all, including transgender, transsexual, gender queer, etc. Similar to the use of queer instead of lesbian for example. Columbia Journalism Review writes on the use of queer and how it's been adopted in mainstream media to signal a sexuality that is not heterosexual.

supported though a reflection of my own experience of transitioning, as well as the trans community that has helped me become who I am. I recognize that no single account can capture the diversity of the trans experience or the evolving challenges that accompany transition. Rather than presenting a universal account of transness, my goal is to propose a philosophical framework for understanding one particular dimension of it: what I call trans loneliness.

Contemporary theories of loneliness tend to understand loneliness through relational deficits. I argue that trans loneliness is a distinct form of loneliness that cannot be fully reduced to either a lack of social goods or a confusion of one's desires. Instead, it emerges through an amalgamation of three components: identity doubt, bodily alienation, and limbo of recognition. While these components are not individually unique to trans people, their convergence through the lived experience of gender transition gives rise to a distinctive form of loneliness.

Unlike Tom Roberts and Joel Kruger's account, which centers on the absence of social goods, and Qiannan Li's account, which focuses on uncertainty surrounding one's desires, I argue that all three components are necessary for understanding trans loneliness. My claim is not that these experiences are exclusive to trans people, but that their particular intersection during gender transition produces a form of loneliness that contemporary theories do not fully capture. These theories also focus on social relations as a necessary component of loneliness, but I argue that social conditions cannot fully understand and encapsulate trans loneliness. Additionally, the gap in scholarship regarding trans identities becomes apparent when many philosophical accounts fail to include trans perspectives, while existing research on loneliness and social isolation among transgender and gender-diverse people often relies on contemporary measures of loneliness rather than examining the structure of the experience itself (Barreto, Doyle, and Maes 2025, 55-64).[45]

Contemporary Theories of Loneliness

In *Loneliness and the Emotional Experience of Absence*, Roberts and Kruger argue that loneliness arises when important social goods are absent or out of reach. On their account, loneliness is a persistent experience of not obtaining something one desires from one's relationships or social world. This framework effectively explains many familiar experiences of loneliness, including social isolation, rejection, exclusion, or the inability to find meaningful connection. I am not arguing that trans people do not experience this form of loneliness. Rather, I argue that it does not fully capture the kind of loneliness that trans folks face during their transition.

[45] In *Researching Gender and Loneliness Differently* they wrote largely on the trans community, citing a psychological description of loneliness. This study does address an issue, that a large portion of the trans community is classified as lonely and depicted particular theories of gender inequality in society. But there were certain components that overlooked transness as the cause of loneliness. With this paper, I hope to create a model that focuses on the trans community.

Roberts and Kruger do recognize identity expression as one such social good. For them, "being able to express and cultivate those aspects of one's identity" (Roberts and Kruger 2020, 185-204) is essential for full social connection. Their examples include race, religion, and sexuality, identities through which people often find community, recognition, and belonging. This insight is valuable, particularly because affirmation and acceptance can significantly reduce social loneliness. However, even within affirming communities, there remains an uncertainty surrounding one's identity, body, and becoming that cannot be resolved solely through recognition from others. This does not just extend to transness, but to identities that face similar experiences. Ultimately, while Roberts and Kruger's account is a foundational text for understanding loneliness, it fails to capture a nuanced experience where acceptance, affirmation, love (or any other social goods they listed) may not be what someone requires to ease their loneliness. In many cases, loneliness is based on social factors, but what if social goods are not the solution? While I do not have a clear answer, I can point out a viable weakness we use to understand loneliness.

In a similar frustration, Li develops this discussion further in *Clueless Loneliness: Loneliness Beyond Frustrated Pro-attitudes*. Responding to Roberts and Kruger, Li argues that loneliness does not always stem from an identifiable absence. Instead, she describes "a specific type of loneliness known as clueless loneliness, wherein a person feels lonely without experiencing a salient frustration of pro-attitudes" (Li 2024, 438-52). Someone may have close friendships, a supportive partner, and a fulfilling career, yet still experience loneliness without knowing exactly why. Li's account is particularly helpful for understanding moments of uncertainty, such as the early stages of questioning one's gender identity, where an individual senses that something is wrong before fully understanding what that feeling signifies.

Despite their differences, both accounts ultimately remain grounded in social goods. Roberts and Kruger explain loneliness through the absence of what one desires, while Li explains it through uncertainty about those desires. My account departs from both. Trans loneliness can persist even when one's desires are clear and when meaningful social support is present.

This distinction can be illustrated with a simple analogy. Imagine someone who has gone several days with little food or water, at that point, survival becomes their only concern. They know what they need and understand that reaching it requires moving somewhere else. Likewise, a trans person may recognize that transition is necessary for stability, yet the process of pursuing that stability remains deeply personal. The loneliness does not arise because the need is misunderstood or because others refuse to provide support. Rather, it emerges through the lived experience of becoming. Within this analogy, Roberts and Kruger's account resembles needing water but being unable to reach the glass, while Li's account resembles mistaking thirst for hunger. Trans loneliness, by contrast, resembles knowing what is needed while having to undertake a journey where one is deprived of water, food, and nutrients.

Components of Trans Loneliness

A possible reason these theories overlook the trans experience is that they begin from perspectives that do not fully account for the relationship between identity, embodiment, and social recognition, in relation to gender. Cis accounts often overlook trans experiences, even when their focus is gender. Marginalized groups, the trans community for my specific focus, must often pick up the burden of explanation. For many trans people, the sexed body is not merely a source of insecurity but a constant evaluation of self to oneself and society. The tension between one's identity and one's body is not simply social, nor is it entirely internal. Rather, it unfolds through the lived experience of becoming.

As I alluded to earlier, this is not to suggest that gender only shapes trans lives. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, gender is a social structure that extends to everyone through the expectations, norms, and performances that organize everyday life (1990). Trans, cisgender people, and gender nonconforming people all navigate these structures differently, but each does so within a world where gender shapes how they are perceived, recognized, and expected to move through society.[46] My concern in this paper is not gender as a universal phenomenon, but the particular experience of negotiating those expectations through gender transition. Nor is my argument that trans people are the only group whose experiences warrant their own philosophical concepts. Disability studies, feminist philosophy, and critical race theory have each developed specified vocabularies that dive into dimensions of experience overlooked by broader theories. I believe trans experience deserves the same philosophical attention. My aim is therefore not to claim that trans loneliness is unlike every other form of loneliness, but to argue that the combination of identity doubt, bodily alienation, and recognition limbo during gender transition gives rise to a distinctive form of loneliness that existing theories do not fully explain.

I posit that these components create an intrasubjective form of loneliness: (1) identity doubt, the uncertainty of whether one is making the right decisions or whether those decisions are valid, having to navigate one's own understanding of gender, and the doubt of an unfamiliar journey;[47] (2) bodily alienation, the experience of feeling tension between one's identity, one's body and how that body presents to others; and (3) limbo of recognition, the unstable process of seeking affirmation and belonging during transition. The lived experience of navigating transition shapes each of these components, producing a form of loneliness that is not entirely reducible to social conditions or the presence of social support. I aim to contribute to a growing body of work that treats trans lives as sites of philosophical inquiry rather than solely as objects

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[46] Notably, Butler's *Gender Trouble* discusses "gender performativity," how this not just affects trans and gender non-conforming people, but extends to cisgendered people. Looking at the system rather than examples,

[47] Arising from oneself, related to oneself.

of political or psychological discourse. The existence of similar experiences among other marginalized groups does not diminish the importance of articulating the particular structures of trans experience.

Transition does not occur without support, intimacy, or community. Friends, partners, family members, and other trans people may accompany an individual throughout the process, offering affirmation, care, and understanding. However, like all lived experiences, transition contains a foundational solitude: the fact that each person encounters their own existence from within their own lived experiences. I want to clarify that trans loneliness is not a theoretical “one size fits all,” but to showcase that the very unique experiences that trans folks face (mainly in relation to identity, body, and community) are themselves a lonely journey. A trans person with a supportive community, especially one consisting of other trans people who are also transitioning, may experience significant affirmation and understanding. These communities are essential and may provide one of the closest forms of shared understanding available. However, an important distinction remains: others cannot transition in another person's place. Those closest to a transitioning person may undergo their own forms of change as they learn how to support their loved one, but they do not experience transition from the same embodied perspective.

This distinction does not mean that others are incapable of understanding or relating to a trans person's experience. Rather, understanding is not identical to inhabiting the experience oneself. Because of this gap, trans people are often placed in the position of explaining their own experiences and making their lives intelligible to others. Trans existence can become a ‘bridge’ that others must be guided across, placing the burden of interpretation on the individual and adding another dimension of emotional labor. Donna Kate Rushin, in *The Bridge Called My Back*, captures this dynamic through her metaphor of the bridge as a constant role of explanation and education imposed upon marginalized identities:

"I explain my mother to my father
my father to my little sister
my little sister to my brother
to the white feminists... I'm sick of fillin in your gaps" (Rushin 1981).

Rushin's account emphasizes that the difficulty lies not only in being misunderstood, but also in being required to continually make one's experience understandable to those who have not lived it.

Understanding is not the same as inhabiting an experience. For example, a Hispanic trans person may share meaningful similarities with a Black trans person navigating gender transition, but their racial experiences shape the process of transition in different ways. Even with another Hispanic trans person whose experiences closely mirror their own, there remains a distinction between recognizing another person's experience and living through it. Similarly, one cannot say that two members of the same race must experience similar struggles due solely to their race. This quickness to assign similarity sometimes ends up with a person seeking a community and then feeling ousted due to another factor of identity. Someone may deeply understand aspects of another person's transition, but they cannot occupy that person's exact relationship with their own identity, body, and social position. This is not to say that trans communities fail to provide connection. In fact, trans communities may be one of the most important sources of support, but it highlights a particular tension: even those who understand someone most deeply may still encounter the limits of their own perspective.

The same applies to those who are not trans, including partners, family members, and close friends. These individuals may participate in transition through meaningful acts of care, such as helping someone navigate gender expression, accompanying them through medical procedures, or learning how to support their changing identity. These forms of intimacy are essential and should not be overlooked. However, participating in another person's transition is not the same as undergoing that transition itself. Others may support and understand aspects of the process, but they do not experience every moment of negotiating one's changing relationship with their body, identity, and social recognition.

Therefore, my argument is not that trans loneliness requires a lack of community or that trans people are inherently isolated. Rather, trans loneliness emerges from the irreducibly personal dimensions of transition. Others may provide guidance, affirmation, and support, but certain moments of becoming remain the individual's own to navigate. For example, others may support someone through the process of coming out, but only the individual can take the first step of disclosing their identity and confronting the uncertainty that follows. It is within this journey of acceptance, self-disclosure, transformation, and recognition of self that I locate trans loneliness.

Identity Doubt

The first component of trans loneliness is identity doubt. For many trans people, the process of transition can involve persistent questioning and reevaluation of oneself. Although this doubt is shaped by social expectations and cultural understandings of gender, it cannot be fully reduced to them. The desire to pass, for example, is inherently connected to social recognition; however, the uncertainty I am examining is the ongoing internal negotiation of identity, decision-making, and self-understanding that remains even when external affirmation is present.

Recalling Butler’s argument, gender is not merely a personal identity but a social structure that organizes how individuals are recognized and expected to move through the world (1990). Cisgender people also experience pressures to conform to gendered expectations, but for many trans people, transition involves directly confronting the relationship between these expectations, one's body, and one's sense of self. Before and during transition, an individual may navigate a tension between how they have been understood by others, how they understand themselves, and how they hope to be recognized in the future.

This process involves navigating the unknown: determining how to transition, understanding one's relationship to one's body, and confronting the possibility of being questioned, misgendered, or misunderstood. At the same time, transitioning also involves negotiating new relationships with gendered expectations. The individual is not only seeking recognition from others, but also developing an understanding of what their gender means to them.

Take, for example, Alex, a transmasculine person who has undergone gender-affirming care.[48] Alex is often recognized as a man, yet he may continue to experience insecurities, such as his voice, chest, hips, or other physical characteristics. He may pass, but passing alone cannot permanently resolve questions of identity or self-recognition.[49] The absence of doubt cannot be mediated solely through external affirmation. Rather, Alex remains engaged in an ongoing process of understanding himself and developing a relationship with his changing body and identity.

Alex's experience is not simply about whether others perceive him as a man. It also involves confronting the meanings he has inherited about masculinity and determining how he relates to them. Some behaviors or expectations from his past may carry feelings of discomfort or remind him of his pre-transition (actions he may consider feminine). As he navigates masculinity, Alex is not only learning how he wants to be recognized but also questioning what masculinity means to him apart from external expectations.

Identity doubt emerges not from a failure of recognition alone, but from the ongoing work of becoming. Alex may receive affirmation from others and still face questions that require personal negotiation: whether he made the right decisions, how he understands his own gender, and how he wants to inhabit masculinity and femininity in a way that affirms him. It is this internal process of self-recognition and transformation that creates the structure of trans loneliness.

Bodily Alienation

Bodily alienation, often discussed through the concept of gender dysphoria, is one experience that can shape the process of transitioning and, for some trans people, may serve as a catalyst for seeking change.[50] The body can become both a host and a source of tension: it is necessary for one's existence, yet it may also feel disconnected from one's sense of identity. However, bodily alienation does not look the same for every trans person. Not all trans people experience dysphoria in the same way, and not all

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[48] Transitioning from biologically female to a masculine presentation.

[49] The ability to present as one’s desired gender, without explanation.

[50] Where one feels hate towards an aspect of their sex that perpetuates an undesired gender identity.

choose to pursue medical transition. Some may experience discomfort with aspects of their body but decide that the emotional, physical, or financial labor of medical transition is not something they wish to undertake. Whether someone pursues medical transition or not, their relationship between body, identity, and recognition can remain a significant part of navigating the trans experience.

These experiences of bodily alienation may arise from a desire to be recognized as one's identified gender, to have been born into a body that feels more aligned with one's identity, or to understand how to navigate gendered expectations. My argument is that trans loneliness includes an internal dimension that cannot be fully reduced to external circumstances. Questions of uncertainty, self-recognition, bodily acceptance, and identity may persist even within affirming environments. Social conditions shape these experiences, but they do not completely account for the individual's relationship with their own body.

While bodily dysphoria can contribute to loneliness, the uncertainty of inhabiting a changing body may be where alienation becomes most apparent. Passing does not necessarily eliminate this tension. Before or after medical transition, an individual may still experience their body as unfamiliar, changing, or requiring continued negotiation. For those who do pass, alienation may shift toward navigating the expectations associated with being perceived within a particular gender.

As Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, gender operates through social expectations that determine how bodies are interpreted and recognized (1990). For example, Alex may be recognized as a man, yet remain aware of how his voice, body, and behavior are interpreted by others. He may question whether he embodies masculinity in the way society expects, or whether he will be challenged in gendered spaces such as public restrooms. These concerns are undeniably shaped by social conditions; however, they are also intertwined with Alex's ongoing relationship with his own body, identity, and safety. Bodily alienation, therefore, cannot be fully explained through social recognition alone. Rather, it emerges through the intersection of social expectations and the lived experience of inhabiting a changing body.

I cannot discuss bodily alienation without acknowledging the relational dimension of the body. Partners, family members, friends, and other trans people may experience transition alongside the individual in meaningful and intimate ways. A partner may notice that someone's voice has changed before they do, celebrate their top surgery, or help care for them during recovery. These moments are not insignificant as they represent forms of intimacy, support, and shared experience that can profoundly shape a person's transition. However, participating with another person's transition is not the same as inhabiting that transition oneself.

A partner hears the changes in someone's voice, but the person transitioning hears that voice every time they speak and must navigate how it affects their relationship with their body and the world around them. A loved one may celebrate a person's new chest, but the individual must relearn how their body feels, how clothing fits, and how they understand themselves through that body. These experiences are deeply connected, but they remain distinct forms of engagement with transition. The distinction is not meant to diminish the importance of those who transition alongside a loved one. Rather, it highlights the difference between a shared experience and an embodied experience. Even within trans communities, where there may be significant understanding and recognition, each person encounters their own transition through their own body. Others can provide guidance and affirmation, but they cannot fully inhabit another person's changing relationship between identity and embodiment. It is within this embodied dimension that I locate bodily alienation and the particular form of loneliness that accompanies it.

Alex, for example, may worry about whether others perceive him as a man or whether someone may question his presence in a public restroom. These concerns are undeniably shaped by social conditions. However, Alex might also question whether he recognizes himself, whether he will ever feel fully at home in his body, or whether pursuing certain medical interventions is the right decision for him. These questions are not resolved simply through external affirmation. My claim is not that trans loneliness exists independently from society. Rather, trans loneliness is an intrasubjective experience that develops within a social world structured by gender norms and expectations. Social conditions provide the context in which trans experiences become intelligible, but they do not fully account for every dimension of the experience. Alex may experience loneliness not only when he is misgendered, rejected, or challenged by others, but also in private moments in the mirror when confronting his own relationship with his body.

Both forms of loneliness are real and often overlap. However, the former requires an external interaction, while the latter emerges from the internal process of being. Trans loneliness, therefore, cannot be understood solely through social conditions, nor can it be separated from them entirely. Instead, it emerges through the intersection of social structures and the individual's ongoing negotiation of identity, embodiment, and recognition.

Recognition Limbo

The final component of trans loneliness is the limbo of recognition. Community and affirmation are important social goods, but what I examine here is the experience that every trans person must undertake: the anxiety of coming out and the possible instability between acceptance and non-acceptance. Relationships are affected by transition, and recognition is not always clearly present or absent. Instead, it can exist in an uncertain and shifting state that creates its own form of tension.

First, Alex must navigate through identity doubt and bodily alienation to understand and articulate his gender identity. In many cases, coming out becomes the moment where a person must present that understanding of themselves to others and hope it will be recognized. The person coming out often wants to be as certain as possible that what they are presenting reflects the ‘truth’ of their identity, yet they must simultaneously confront the uncertainty of how others will respond. Their response may be supportive, rejecting, or somewhere in between. Alex may spend days, weeks, or years imagining conversations, preparing for the worst while hoping for acceptance. Complex family dynamics, cultural expectations, and personal relationships can make this decision even more difficult. Some individuals may choose not to come out, prioritizing their safety and stability while continuing to experience the burden of not being fully recognized as themselves. For those who do come out, vulnerability is often followed by explanation and the expectation to educate others about their own existence. They may encounter support, but they may also encounter frustration or denial.

The experience of coming out therefore represents a significant aspect of trans loneliness because it places the individual in a position of seeking recognition while knowing that recognition is not guaranteed. Even in spaces where someone is consistently recognized as their gender, this uncertainty can reappear. For example, Alex may be fully known at work as a man, with coworkers using his correct name and pronouns without question. However, an official document with his deadname may reveal information he did not intend to disclose, creating confusion, accidental outing, or fear of being treated differently. This specific case of being outed is not necessarily a constant expectation of rejection, but rather the recurring possibility that recognition can become unstable. The anxiety surrounding coming out is therefore not simply a fear of others’ reactions, rather, it is the emotional burden of repeatedly placing one's identity before others and navigating whether it will be acknowledged. This uncertainty is a significant part of the recognition limbo that contributes to trans loneliness.

When coming out as trans, people face three forms of acceptance: positive acceptance, negative acceptance, and non-acceptance. Positive acceptance occurs when family members, friends, or communities understand what transition entails and actively support the steps necessary for their loved one transitioning. These individuals respect a trans person's chosen name and pronouns, acknowledge their identity, and support aspects of social or medical transition. In this case, many of the social needs associated with recognition and belonging are fulfilled.

Negative acceptance occurs when someone understands that a person is transitioning but chooses not to support it. These individuals may refuse to use a person's chosen name or pronouns, reject aspects of transition, or distance themselves from the person entirely. Although painful, this form of relationship contains a degree of certainty. The individual knows where recognition and support stand, even if that position is one of rejection. Both positive and negative acceptance can be understood through Roberts and Kruger's account of loneliness, where loneliness emerges from the absence of social goods necessary for flourishing (Roberts and Kruger, 1970). In both cases, the individual encounters a clear relationship to recognition: either it is provided, or it is withheld. However, non-acceptance occupies a different position within my account because it exists in a state of uncertainty.

Non-acceptance does not necessarily involve explicit rejection. Instead, it describes relationships where recognition fluctuates. A family member, partner, or friend may use the correct name and pronouns at one moment, creating a sense of acceptance, but later revert to previous patterns, creating uncertainty and disappointment. The tension does not come only from the absence of recognition, but from not knowing whether recognition is genuinely present.

This uncertainty often creates a form of emotional labor in which the trans person must repeatedly explain, clarify, or negotiate their own identity. The person transitioning may be placed in the position of making their experience understandable to others while receiving inconsistent recognition in return. This dynamic resembles Li's account of clueless loneliness, where loneliness can involve confusion, uncertainty, and difficulty identifying the source of one's dissatisfaction (2024, 438-52).

The limbo of recognition and affirmation, particularly in the form of non-acceptance, is not unique to trans experiences. Unstable or wavering acceptance can arise in many contexts, including pregnancy, abortion, interracial relationships, disability, sexuality, religious differences, career choices, etc. In each of these situations, individuals may experience uncertainty when navigating relationships where support is conditional, inconsistent, or dependent upon certain expectations being met. The significance of non-acceptance within this account, however, does not rest on its uniqueness. Rather, it lies in how it interacts with transitioning.

Unlike many situations in which acceptance centers primarily on approval of a decision, circumstance, or action, non-acceptance within the trans experience concerns recognition of identity itself. Family members, partners, or loved ones may express care and affection while inconsistently recognizing a person's gender through names, pronouns, or other forms of affirmation. The instability therefore lies not only in whether support is present, but in the uncertainty of whether one is being recognized as the person they understand themselves to be. This creates a liminal social position where recognition is constantly negotiated rather than consistently affirmed.

This distinction also clarifies the relationship between trans loneliness and contemporary theories of loneliness. Roberts and Kruger characterize loneliness through the absence of social goods, while Li emphasizes uncertainty surrounding one's desires. Non-acceptance introduces a different form of uncertainty: uncertainty surrounding recognition itself. Therefore, the significance of recognition limbo emerges from the way uncertain recognition converges with the other components of transness. During gender transition, questions of identity, embodiment, and social recognition become intertwined, producing a form of loneliness that cannot be fully reduced through either the absence of social goods or confusion about one's desires.

Objection

A potential objection to my account is that existing theories of loneliness, particularly with Roberts and Kruger's account and Li's framework, can be extended to explain trans loneliness without requiring the introduction of a distinct phenomenon. On this view, trans loneliness does not represent a unique structure of loneliness, but rather applies existing theories to a particular social experience, transitioning.

However, trans loneliness cannot be fully reduced to either the absence of social goods or uncertainty surrounding one's desires. Existing theories are valuable for explaining aspects of loneliness that trans folks feel, particularly experiences involving rejection, lack of recognition, or social isolation. Yet these accounts become limited when considering cases in which trans individuals experience loneliness despite having affirming relationships, supportive communities, and access to social goods.

A second objection is that the components of trans loneliness are not unique to trans people. Experiences of bodily alienation, uncertain recognition, and identity instability can occur across many marginalized and embodied experiences. I accept this limitation. I hope that I have consistently recognized that these components don't exist exclusively within the trans experience. Rather, what distinguishes trans loneliness is the way these experiences converge through and alongside transitioning. Gender structures how individuals are recognized, understood, and expected to move through the world, and the process of transitioning requires negotiating their relationship with not only society, but themselves as well. While psychological and sociological research has increasingly examined loneliness and social isolation among transgender populations, philosophical discussions of loneliness have rarely addressed the internal and embodied experience of transitioning. Trans loneliness provides a framework for articulating this dimension that has been underexplored and unconsidered in mainstream philosophy and psychology.

This objection also raises a broader philosophical question concerning the relationship between trans loneliness and social conditions. Would trans loneliness exist in a society without gendered expectations? I am inclined to think that it would not exist in the same form, since transness itself is intelligible only within a world where gender carries social meaning. While I wish I could dive deeper into that certain phenomenon and cultures that expand outside of Western gender roles, this current project is to examine transness and loneliness as it exists within the world we inhabit, mainly that of a Western experience. Within this reality, social conditions are necessary for understanding trans loneliness, but they are not sufficient to explain it. Like other embodied forms of marginalization, trans loneliness emerges through an interaction between social structures and individual experience. My claim is not that trans loneliness is the only form of intrasubjective loneliness, but that transitioning produces a distinctive relationship between identity, embodiment, and recognition that warrants philosophical attention in its own right.

Conclusion

In conclusion, loneliness cannot be fully reduced to the absence of others or the social goods they provide. Contemporary accounts of loneliness successfully explain many experiences of social deprivation, rejection, and uncertainty; however, they do not fully capture the particular form of loneliness that can emerge through the lived experience of transitioning. My argument is not that transness is inherently lonely, nor that transition cannot exist alongside intimacy, affirmation, and supportive community. Rather, I have argued that trans loneliness emerges through the convergence of these three essential experiences: identity doubt, bodily alienation, and community limbo, which together create a distinct experience of navigating transition.

None of these components are individually unique to trans people. Experiences of bodily alienation, uncertainty, and unstable recognition can occur across many forms of embodied and marginalized life, even regarding gender. Although trans loneliness emerges as an intrasubjective form of loneliness that cannot be fully explained by either the absence of social goods or the misidentification of one's desires. Social conditions undeniably shape the experience of trans loneliness, but they do not exhaust it. Even within affirming relationships and supportive communities, there remain aspects of gender and transitioning that only the individual can navigate.

Trans loneliness therefore offers a framework for understanding a dimension of transition that has been overlooked within philosophical discussions of loneliness. Existing theories illuminate the importance of social relationships and recognition, but they often overlook the process of unique realities that theory itself cannot put into words. The loneliness I have described is not the absence of community, but the solitude that accompanies the deeply personal process of transformation. The loneliness that Alex feels, nor his journey through transition, may be what other trans folks experience, but all are considered trans loneliness. The contemporary understanding of loneliness is an umbrella of causes and symptoms that the phenomenological experience of being trans cannot fit under.

Transition does not occur without support, and trans communities remain one of the most important sources of understanding and affirmation. However, support cannot eliminate the fact that each individual must ultimately inhabit their own changing body and identity. There are moments of transition that can be shared and supported, but never fully experienced by another person. The decision to come out, to pursue transition, to accept oneself, and to navigate an uncertain future all contain moments of solitude that belong uniquely to the individual.

By identifying trans loneliness as a distinct form of intrasubjective loneliness, this paper aims to broaden contemporary discussions of loneliness while contributing to a richer philosophical understanding of the trans lived experience. Trans loneliness is not simply the pain of being rejected or the absence of social connection; it is the uncertainty, transformation, and solitude involved in becoming oneself.

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