

Splijtstof
Jaargang 54, nummer 1

Colofon

Splijtstof

Een uitgave van Stichting Splijtstof, ISSN 0928-8139.

Op 15 september 1972 werd Splijtstof opgericht als maandblad van de Filosofenbond. Op 7 november 2013 werd de Stichting Splijtstof opgericht.

Redactie

Sophie Ingle, Charlie Chowdhry, Angie Bonett (hoofdredactie), Noah Warink (beeldredactie), Gijs Wortelboer (vormgeving), Luca Bemporad Whitehead, Jacque Marliin, Yula van Nederveen Meerkerk, Emiel Wielemaker, Kurt Zammit (eindredactie), Mirte Debats, Jesse Germans, Marleen van Haalen, Trine Linke, Fleur van Schaijk.

Bestuur

Marleen van Haalen (voorzitter), Isabella Baiardini (secretaris), Dominik Amrik (penningmeester), Kristof Raduly (commissaris PR).

Adresgegevens

Postbus 9103

6500 HD Nijmegen

redactie@splijtstof.com

Gelieve kopij per mail aan te leveren.

Splijtstof heeft tevens een eigen kantoor (MM 02.083) binnen de Faculteit der Filosofie, Theologie en Religiewetenschappen aan de Radboud Universiteit.

Prijs

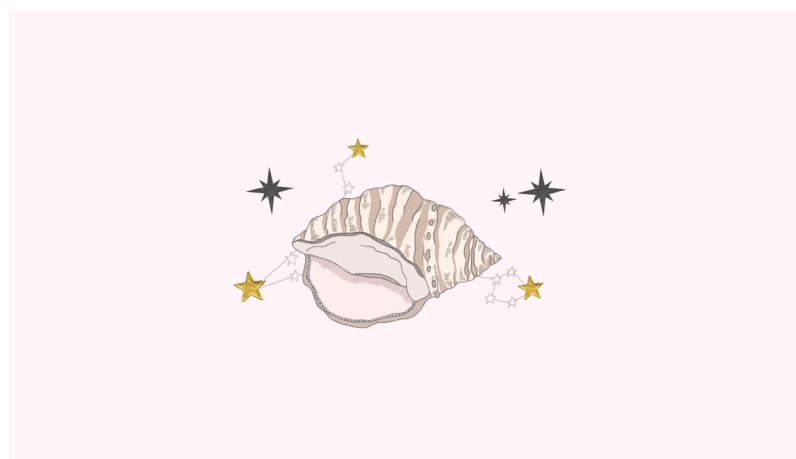
Splijtstof is open access! Alle artikelen verschijnen vanaf dan gratis op www.splijtstof.com. Een fysiek abonnement houden kan.

Niets uit deze of eerdere uitgaven mag zonder toestemming van de redactie worden overgenomen.

Het logo van Splijtstof is ontworpen door Ted van Aanholt.

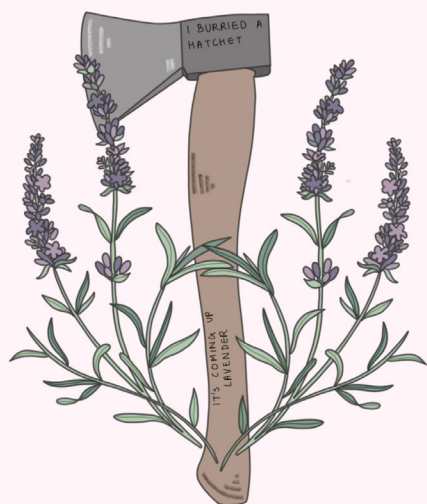
Illustratieverantwoording

De illustraties in deze editie van Splijtstof zijn gemaakt door Noah Warink.



Inhoudsopgave

Editorial	7
<i>Charlie Chowdhry</i>	
I'm a Weirdo	9
<i>Marleen van Haalen</i>	
Book Review: <i>Posthuman Feminism</i>	23
<i>Fleur van Schaijk</i>	
The Mystery of Eros and Intergenerational Ethics	29
<i>Jesse Germans</i>	
To Take Up The Nighttime	45
<i>Yula van Nederveen Meerkerk</i>	
You See, Suddenly	59
<i>Sophie Ingle</i>	
Transformation, Social Death and the Discovery of the Self	61
<i>Trine Linke</i>	
De weg naar bevrijding	85
<i>Fleur van Schaijk</i>	
Why Do We Travel?	107
<i>Mirte Debats</i>	
Queering Victimhood	111
<i>Charlie Chowdhry</i>	



Editorial

Queer Dear reader,

Usually, philosophers wait until after they're tenured to start writing about love. With this edition of *Splijtstof*, we have invited our editors to get a headstart on the topic. You are about to read a collection of philosophical papers, reviews, poems and memoirs themed around 'Love & Queerness'. Dare I say they're written with love?

The 'Love & Queerness' symposium was a delight to attend. We started the day with a love letter workshop by author-in-residence Benny Lindelauf. It turns out that I'm not emotionally stunted—I just need to pretend to be an elephant who's unrequitedly in love with a camel, and the words start flowing. We then enjoyed a brilliant lecture from Dr. Guilel Treiber titled "Queer Experiences: Rereading Foucault's History of Madness". I have never seen so many enthusiastic Bachelor's students packed into a room for a lunch-time lecture; I suspect that the secret to high attendance is Guilel himself. We then heard a thought-provoking talk from Dr. Rae Aumiller titled "Queer Hesitation and Sensation: Navigating Embodied Consent and Doubt", which prompted intriguing questions from the audience that Rae and I enjoyed exploring together in the follow-up discussion. Next, Michael Grooff recited some poetry for us (and didn't even need to pretend to be an elephant in order to compose something thought-provoking, emotional and reflective). The symposium ended with a presentation on "What is Platonic Love? Eros in the Lysis, Symposium, and Phaedrus" from Ilyasse Ouanani who was, as always, amusing and erudite in equal measure.

When I initially pitched the theme 'Love & Queerness' for the F.C. Sophia x *Splijtstof* symposium and theme edition, I encountered a little bit of hesitation about the 'Queerness' aspect. This was not due to any bigotry or bias on the part of those who

hesitated, but rather due to concerns that the theme would be too narrow. After all, 'queer' has come to be synonymous with 'LGBT+' in everyday language, and LGBT+ issues usually fall outside the purview of philosophers who do not specialise in queer studies. Some people worried that they would not have anything to add to an edition about 'Queerness', due to their positionality as heterosexual and/or cisgender people.

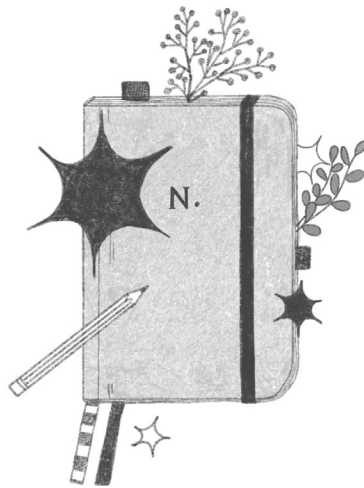
There are many ways to understand 'queer'. It is often used as an umbrella term for all non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identities. But to me, 'queer' is not necessarily always the opposite of 'heterosexual/cisgender', but is always the opposite of 'normative'. I know plenty of heterosexual and cisgender individuals who individually, philosophically and/or politically eschew the privilege and safety of normativity in order to be true to their curious and ever-evolving selves. As they philosophise, they do not assume that everybody is "normal", that everyone thinks or feels the same way, that there is a 'right' way to exist, that variation and aberration are perfect synonyms. In this way, their commitments are queer. I consider them to be my queer philosophical allies.

And in any case, even if queer was a synonym for LGBT+, I have always been expected to write authoritatively about non-queer philosophy, without being permitted to gingerly dance around the topic due to my lack of first-hand experience. Why, then, should my non-queer colleagues feel like they can't write about queer philosophy? With this edition of *Splijtstof*, we invite you to philosophise queerly with us. We have so much to learn from each other.

To conclude this Editorial, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for the editorial team at *Splijtstof*, our designer Gijs, our board, and my fellow Editors-in-Chief. I am proud to be part of such a hard-working and talented team, and I am especially proud of this edition. The authors in this edition, whether or not they identify as queer, have earnestly put their hearts and minds into it. You are about to read something truly special.

With love,

Charlie Chowdhry
Editor-in-Chief



I'm a Weirdo

A OOO Analysis of Gender Euphoria as an Instance of Allure

Marleen van Haalen

Introduction

I distinctly remember seeing an Instagram post of one of my favourite actors a couple of years ago. It was a photograph of them sitting and smiling, with the words 'gender euphoria' mentioned in the caption. Although the notion of 'gender euphoria' was familiar to me, this was the first time I not only just knew what it meant, but I also felt what it meant – I seemed to recognise the actor's feeling in the picture, it really resonated with me. As I was enchanted by this simple photograph, I realised I had experienced gender euphoria myself, even though I didn't reflect on it as such at the time.

Gender euphoria is a kind of experience that "refers to positive emotions resulting from affirmation of one's gender identity or expression and can include a wide variety of emotions and experiences" (Jacobsen and Devor 2022, 139). For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to maintain that gender euphoria can be generally thought of as a sense of joy, relief, or happiness experienced by a person when they feel like their internal sense of gender aligns with the way their gender is perceived or encountered by themselves, and maybe also by others. But what exactly is this feeling of alignment between 'inner sense of gender' and 'perceived gender'? More specifically, how does this alignment work when it comes to the encounter of one's own gender – how can a person feel like their relation to their own gender feels right, and why is this not always the case?

In order to answer these questions, I will examine the experience of gender euphoria through the lens of Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO),¹ since OOO's notion of withdrawal seems exceptionally suitable for explaining the rift between the

¹ Pronounced 'Triple-O.'

inner sense of gender and the perceived gender. Additionally, following eco-philosopher and OOO-adherent Timothy Morton, I maintain that OOO is a queer ontology that is well-equipped to conceptualise and analyse gender and gender-related issues. The aim of this paper is to show that the experience of gender euphoria can be understood as an instance of what Harman calls allure. In order to make sense of gender euphoria as an instance of allure, I will first explain how entities, including humans, are ontologically structured according to Harman. Then, I will explain what Harman means by allure, and show how this notion can help make sense of the experience of gender euphoria – which, in turn, might provide insights into gender and gender related issues that are often ignored or abandoned in dominant philosophical theories about gender.²

Queer Objects and Weird Essentialism

It may seem strange to argue that a feminist and queer ontology would involve a kind of essentialism. Did feminist theories and movements not just distance themselves from the essentialism that has for so long been used to justify the superiority of certain people over others, and over nonhuman beings? How can an essentialism possibly contribute to the 'queering' of binary gender categories that seem to be derived precisely from essentialist views? After all, as Morton has pointed out themselves, "[q]ueer theory is a nonessentialist view of gender and sexuality" (2010, 275).

But the rejection of the essentialist view of gender and sexuality is based on essentialism as "defined according to the law of non-contradiction" (Morton 2015, 2). This "law" states that something cannot be true if it is contradictory, e.g., a thing cannot be moving and not moving at the same time, or it cannot be in two places at once. By defining essentialism according to the law

² I am referring to 'relationist' philosophies, whose theories about gender often centre around anti-essentialist notions, e.g., Judith Butler's notion of 'performativity.'

of non-contradiction, essence becomes static, unchanging, and constantly present. By contrast, and in line with Harman, Morton advocates a weird essentialism, which is "essentialism minus the metaphysics of presence" (4). In other words, the essence of weird essentialism is neither completely static, nor present. On the contrary, the essence of a being, which is also called 'substance,' is withdrawn. As Harman writes:

The problem with individual substances was never that they were autonomous or individual, but that they were wrongly conceived as eternal, unchanging, simple, or directly accessible by certain privileged observers. By contrast, the objects of object-oriented philosophy are mortal, ever-changing, built from swarms of subcomponents, and accessible only through oblique allusion. This is not the oft-lamented "naïve realism" of oppressive and benighted patriarchs, but a weird realism in which real individual objects resist all forms of causal or cognitive mastery. (Harman 2012, 188)

To clarify, Harman uses the term 'object' to refer to anything that exists, including humans. The term can easily be exchanged with terms like 'being' or 'entity,' but throughout this essay I will mostly stick to the term 'object.' According to Harman, an object can never be fully accessed – there is always some excess, i.e., something that eludes all relations. No object can ever get into direct contact with another object, nor with itself. Instead, objects relate in an indirect manner. The idea that objects are "withdrawn from access yet sparkle with appearance" (Morton 2013, 62) leaves room for them to be self-contradictory. In other words, the withdrawn object differs from its appearance, yet the appearing object is a manifestation of the withdrawn object.

While Harman has developed interesting arguments for why he thinks objects must be withdrawn, these arguments are not directly relevant for the purpose of this paper and thus I will not

explain them here.³ For now it suffices to mention that Harman distinguishes the *real object* from the *sensual object*. The real object withdraws from all direct access and relations, even from access to itself, while the sensual object is precisely what is encountered by other objects. The sensual object is always an object-for-another-object: it is its *appearance*. This is much like what Husserl calls 'intentional object,' viz., the phenomenological object "which is nevertheless only partially given through specific profiles or 'adumbrations.'" In Harman's work, these object and quality poles come to be referred to as the sensual object and sensual qualities respectively" (Young 2025, 202). The sensual qualities of the sensual object nonetheless emanate from the real, withdrawn object, but more on this later. For now, it is important to note that "there are real objects that exist apart from their relations, such that objects are uncanny and contradictory" (Morton 2013, 63).

What OOO emphasises, then, is the autonomous reality of individual objects. Real objects can never be directly accessed. Thus, they can be contradictory and queer, since "objects themselves refuse normative categories in order to reveal an ontological autonomy that cannot be named or known" (Connell 2016, 4). Here, queer is not merely gender-related, but refers to the "multiple, uncontainable and unlocatable mode of being that both eludes and resists the imposition of hegemonic identity categories" (5). Objects are queer because they elude and resist rigid binary distinctions such as material/immaterial; active/passive; animate/inanimate; and, indeed, subject/object, due to their being withdrawn from direct contact with other objects.

A small point of clarification is in order here. It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that, since Harman argues that real objects are withdrawn from all access, objects are not in relations with other objects at all. However, as Niki Young and Jon Cogburn note:

[I]t is in a sense true that Harman denies all forms of direct relational accounts according to which relationality is at best assumed in advance, or at worst taken to be the sole defining feature of all entities. Nevertheless, OOO also identifies two specific modalities of indirect contact between entities, namely sincerity and allure. (Cogburn and Young 2024, 3)

In other words, while Harman takes the autonomy of objects as a starting point instead of its relations, he also acknowledges that objects are in relations with one another, albeit indirectly. As mentioned above, I will argue that gender euphoria is such a modality of indirect contact between one entity and itself.

Sincerity

According to Harman, objects interact in an indirect manner either through what he calls *sincerity*, or through *allure*. Whereas sincerity is a common and universal way for objects to relate, allure is occasional. In order to understand allure – of which I think gender euphoria is an instance – it is necessary to understand the normal way of experiencing objects, i.e., sincerity, and how this differs from the exceptional way of experiencing objects.

In sincerity, the usual state of experiencing or interacting, a real object is concerned with sensual objects. Harman also sometimes refers to this state as the real object being *absorbed* by the sensual object it relates to (Harman 2007, 199). What happens in sincerity is that the real object (RO1), encounters a sensual object (SO2) with sensual qualities (SQ2). While the sensual qualities encountered by RO1 emanate from another real object (RO2), instances of sincerity remain in the realm of manifestations: RO1 only directly relates to SO2 and SQ2. In the state of sincerity, the sensual qualities are fused to the sensual object, i.e., the gap between the objects and its qualities is not at issue here. The

³ For arguments against undermining, overmining and duomining, see Graham Harman's *The Quadruple Object* (2010).

sensual object seems to be as it is encountered by the real object, viz., in this encounter there is no attention drawn to the real object lying beneath the sensual appearance.

For example, I, as an experiencing person – i.e., the real I who is withdrawn – am in front of my closet, trying to choose what clothes to wear. What I see in my closet are the left sleeves of my blouses that I neatly hung up. I see the textures, the colours, and the patterns of these fabrics. Even though I see some of the features of the blouses while others remain hidden from my view – e.g., their buttons, their right sleeves, their molecular makeup, etc. – I am not concerned with them as a ‘bundle of sensations,’ i.e., as a sum of sensual qualities. Instead, I am concerned with the blouses as unified objects. Note that even though some of these qualities can change, for instance, their colours, I still perceive the blouses as the *same* blouses. Nonetheless, I do not experience the blouses separated from these qualities either. Additionally, although the sensual qualities of the blouses that I encounter emanate from some real objects withdrawn from my access, in this encounter I am merely concerned with the blouses as they appear to me, i.e., as sensual objects. I am not concerned with that which withdraws from my access, but only with objects insofar as they appear to me, as I am just trying to figure out which one to wear today.

Allure

Unlike sincerity, allure is a state of experience in which the real experiencer-object is not merely concerned with the experienced object as it *appears*, but with the withdrawn, real object that lies beneath its sensual surface. This special kind of experience “put[s] the very sincerity of a thing at issue, by somehow *interfering with the usual relation between a thing and its qualities*” (Harman 2005, 141, emphasis in the original). This usual relation between a thing and its qualities refers to the fusion of the sensual qualities – which are emanated by the real object – to the sensual object, as described above. In allure, this usual relation of fusion is disrupted or disturbed, viz., the sensual object and its qualities are

separated. Yet the withdrawn objects remain just that, withdrawn. Even in allure, this special kind of encounter between objects, the real object cannot be made directly present.

This is why Harman chose the term ‘allure,’ which “suggests the related term ‘allusion,’ since allure merely alludes to the object without making its inner life directly present,” it “alludes to entities as they are, quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world” (Harman 2007, 215; 2012, 187). It may also be said that the term ‘allure’ refers to the verb ‘luring,’ since the withdrawn object lures other real objects “into their orbit via shimmering sensual facades” (Young 2025, 204). In other words, in allure one real object alludes to another real object, which nonetheless remains withdrawn, while that withdrawn object also ‘lures’ the other real object towards it. Its reality is translated and reflected in a distorted way, not making it present to the other object but hinting at it nonetheless as some kind of “dark agent at work beneath” the sensual qualities that are directly present to other real objects (Harman 2005, 150). Thus, allure concerns an *indirect* relation.

Some of Harman’s own examples of allure include metaphors and instances of beauty. In the case of metaphor, Harman uses Max Black’s example of the statement ‘man is a wolf.’ In this metaphor – man obviously *is not* a wolf, but is *like* a wolf – wolf-like qualities are severed from the wolf and ascribed to a man. By severing these sensual qualities from the wolf and placing them on man, the wolf-like qualities ‘take on a human air’; the qualities which are normally visible now seem withdrawn, as if they become objects in their own right (Harman 2005, 165). In the case of ‘man is like a wolf,’ the elements that are wolf-like qualities with human overtones allude to a real object lying hidden from view beneath the sensual man in everyday encounters. On the topic of beauty, Harman writes that “an object is not the sum total of beautiful colors and proportions on its surface, but a kind of soul animating the features from within, leading to vertigo or even hypnosis in the witness” (2007, 216). The features that seem to mesmerise us

in instances of beauty are the features that stand out and draw our attention to the object beneath the superficial surface. For example, features of a person that are not usually seen as immaculate draw our attention, such as a crooked nose, a quirky laugh, a speck in the iris of an eye, a characteristic habit, and these bring about the experience of beauty because they allude to the person beneath the surface. In the experience of beauty, a fissure is produced between these qualities and the sensual object precisely because these qualities stand out due to them being 'inessential' to the object.

Gender Euphoria

Like beauty and metaphor, gender euphoria is also an instance of allure. In the experience of gender euphoria, attention is drawn to inessential, sensual qualities, freeing them from the sensual object they are fused to in experiences of sincerity. These qualities could be physical features, such as one's jawline, haircut, posture, the shape of one's eyebrows, or the veins in one's hands. They may also be one's sense of humour, the way in which someone moves, talks, or communicates. Attention can be drawn to these qualities in several ways, e.g., by seeing oneself in the mirror when putting on certain clothes or applying make-up, by performing a certain activity, or by being addressed and treated in a certain way by others. For the person experiencing gender euphoria, these qualities allude to their own withdrawn being, i.e., they bring about the feeling of these qualities matching the person's inner experience of their gender, alluding to the withdrawn real object that the person is.

It might already be clear how this experience of gender euphoria – the feeling of alignment between one's inner sense of gender and perceived gender – is an instance of allure rather than an instance of sincerity. For, in sincerity, the sensual qualities are fused with the sensual object, meaning this experience is not concerned with the real object beneath the surface qualities that we perceive. More often than not, a person's experience

of themselves is an instance of sincerity, i.e., there is no fission between the sensual object and its qualities until something happens to disrupt this everyday experience. When a person goes about their business, e.g., doing laundry, cooking, taking a walk, chatting with friends, or doing their job, they are generally not concerned with themselves as a real object – there is no fissure between how they experience themselves as sensual object and their sensual qualities. Only when attention is drawn to those qualities in such a way that they seemingly become withdrawn themselves, pointing to something animating them from beneath the surface, are people concerned with themselves as real object via those qualities.

Although gender euphoria might point to the real person beneath the surface through gender, this is a special case of allure, because it is not about the indirect contact between two objects, but rather it concerns only one object, viz., it is about the experience one object has *of itself*; the experiencing object and the experienced object are the same real object. It must be stressed, however, that the experiencing object cannot experience itself *directly*. It is withdrawn from all access, including from its access to itself. Gender euphoria is one of those instances in which an object can experience itself indirectly; it is this being simultaneously the experiencing object and the experienced object that makes gender euphoria a special and phenomenologically interesting instance of allure.

Gender euphoria might also suggest that gender is something withdrawn – not merely relational and subject to social and material practices – and it is obvious that gender euphoria relates to the question of what gender is in general. However, the experience of gender euphoria does not necessarily allude to a withdrawn object that is gender – if indeed such an object exists – but to a real aspect of the individual person experiencing gender euphoria. In other words, this special case of allure is not about the object gender as a whole, but about the gender of the individual person, and thus it is about the person's relation to themselves. This also

explains why gender euphoria can be described as a person's relation to their own gender feeling 'right'; a person's inner sense of gender and the way they perceive their own gender align in the experience of gender euphoria.

What gender euphoria shows, then, is that a person's gender might be something more robust than relationist accounts of gender imply. That is to say, it is a feeling that something withdrawn, viz., an aspect of one's inner reality that is not perceivable nor directly accessible, aligns with what is emanated and what one does perceive. Moreover, we can imagine that gender euphoria's counterpart, viz., gender dysphoria, shows that gender is something more robust than some kind of performative fluidity, precisely because the relational aspects of a person *do not* coincide with one's inner sense of gender. However, this claim needs elaboration, and the topic deserves to be researched more extensively.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to show how gender euphoria is an instance of what Graham Harman calls allure. According to Harman, objects are withdrawn, i.e., they cannot be reduced to their relations, nor their component parts. The withdrawn nature of objects implies that real objects can never be in direct contact with one another. However, this does not mean that objects do not have relations at all. While two real objects cannot be in direct contact with one another, they can be in relation indirectly. Harman describes two ways in which objects can interact: through sincerity and through allure. Whereas in sincerity a real, withdrawn object is merely concerned with another object's surface, i.e., the sensual object, in instances of allure one real object is concerned with another real object lying beneath the surface. Since, according to Harman, one real object can never be made fully present to another object, this encounter concerns only the allusion of entities as they are apart from their relations, shimmering beneath the surface. Some examples of instances of allure that Harman offers include metaphor and the experience of beauty. I have argued that gender

euphoria is an instance of allure by showing that this experience brings about a sense of a right kind of relation to oneself. Namely, in the experience of gender euphoria, the inner sense of gender and the perceived gender seem to align for the experiencing object. Not only is gender euphoria an instance of allure, but it is also a special kind of instance of allure, since it doesn't concern the encounter between two separate real objects, but between one object and itself. Thus, while an analysis of gender euphoria as allure may contribute to an understanding of gender from a OOO perspective by pointing to an individual's gender being part of said withdrawn individual, the experience of gender euphoria does not allude to gender itself as a withdrawn object. The broader question of what gender is remains an interesting topic that might be explored in further research, as it is beyond the scope of this paper. I think OOO – it being a weird essentialism, and a queer ontology – might have some adequate tools to analyse, and offer new perspectives on gender and gender-related issues.

References

- Cogburn, Jon, and Niki Young. 2024. "Revisiting the Notion of Vicarious Cause: Allure, Metaphor, and Realism in Object-Oriented Ontology." *Open Philosophy* 7 (1): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2024-0047>.
- Connell, Katherine. 2016. "Objects in Human Drag: The Queerness of Object-Oriented Ontologies." Master's Thesis, OCAD University. OCAD University Open Research Repository. <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/777>.
- Harman, Graham. 2005. *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Open Court.
- Harman, Graham. 2007. "On Vicarious Causation." *Collapse* 2 (26): 187–221. WordPress.
- Harman, Graham. 2010. *The Quadruple Object*. Zero Books.
- Harman, Graham. 2012. "The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer: Object-Oriented Literary Criticism." *New Literary History* 43: 183–203. <https://doi.org/10.1353/NLH.2012.0016>.

Jacobsen, Kai, and Aaron Devor. 2022. "Moving from Gender Dysphoria to Gender Euphoria: Trans Experiences of Positive Gender-Related Emotions." *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies* 1 (1-2): 119-143. <https://doi.org/10.57814/ggfg-4j14>.

Morton, Timothy. 2010. "Guest Column: Queer Ecology." *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 125 (2): 273-282. <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1632/pmla.2010.125.2.273>.

Morton, Timothy. 2013. "Treating Objects Like Women: Feminist Ontology and the Question of Essence." In *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism*, edited by Greta Gaard, Simon Estok and Serpil Oppermann. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203520840-4>.

Morton, Timothy. 2015. "This Biosphere Which Is Not One: Towards Weird Essentialism." *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 46 (2): 141-155. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00071773.2014.960745>.

Young, Niki. 2025. "Passion and Allure: Mundane and Disruptive Experience in Harman and Lingis." *Rivista di Estetica* 88: 195-208. <https://journals.openedition.org/estetica/18348>.

Book Review: *Posthuman Feminism*

Fleur van Schaijk

Braidotti, Rosi. 2022. *Posthuman Feminism*. Polity Press. €19,80. ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-1807-4

In *Posthuman Feminism* Rosi Braidotti (1954-, Utrecht University) continues to build on her earlier monographs written about posthumanism, namely *The Posthuman* (2013) and *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019).

In this 2022 monograph, Braidotti gives an overview of posthuman feminism. She offers, in her own words, a "navigational tool" and a "conceptual toolbox" to deal with challenges of our time (2022, 13). Braidotti subsequently argues that the strength of feminism today lies in its ability to tackle contemporary issues, e.g. the climate crisis and continuing inequality between the wealthy and the non-wealthy. More particularly, the book aspires to make the reader familiar and comfortable with feminist ideas rooted in posthumanism. In her view, posthuman feminism differs from other forms of feminism (like liberal or socialist feminism). It is an alternative framework in which one can analyse contemporary issues outside the binary framework of gender, race and (dis)ability.

This version of feminism is labelled 'posthuman' by Braidotti because it critically reflects on humanism instead of simply embracing it as many other feminisms do. Humanism needs to be criticised, according to Braidotti, firstly because it upholds anthropocentrism. This means that the human (and in many cases, as Braidotti argues, 'man') is seen as the centre of *everything*. Secondly, it upholds an implicit and partial definition of 'the human,' even though humanism *claims* to provide a universal and neutral representation of all humans (Braidotti 2022, 20). Braidotti argues that the dominant idea of 'the human' was and still is an idea that assumes the superiority of a subject who is male, white, Eurocentric, heterosexual, not-disabled, and who

speaks a “standard” language (be that English or any other of the Western languages) (20). Posthuman feminism is thus a feminism that steps away from this incomplete view of the human and looks to form a more inclusive, diverse, and non-anthropocentric view on humanity.

Part I: Posthuman Feminism as Critique

The book is divided into two parts. The first is “Part I. Posthuman Feminism as Critique,” which consists of chapters 1 to 3. The second is “Part II. Posthuman Feminism as Creation,” which covers chapters 4 to 7, and ends with an epilogue to the entire book.

In chapter 1, called “Feminism Is Not Only a Humanism,” Braidotti argues that humanism is so built into our system that it needs to be critically assessed (2022, 17). This is to face contemporary challenges like climate change and social inequality that seem to be our heritage from the *old-school* anthropocentric and exclusive form of humanism (41).

Subsequently, in chapter 2, “The Critical Edge of Posthuman Feminism,” Braidotti shows that neoliberal feminism and neo-socialist feminism are both built on these dominant humanist ideas of ‘Man.’ She shows how posthuman feminism can present an alternative which might be more fruitful in contemporary debates, because it entails a more inclusive and less anthropocentric definition of “human” (2022, 43-67).

In the final chapter of Part I, chapter 3, “Decentering Anthropos: Ecofeminism Revisited,” Braidotti delves into the most pressing contemporary issue of our time: anthropogenic climate change. Braidotti argues that feminism and most importantly its subfields of ecofeminism, indigenous feminism, and queer theory paved the way for post-anthropocentric humanism, in which the human is no longer the benchmark against which everything is measured (69). Furthermore, they stepped away from the standard definition of “human,” making space for, and bringing attention to, women and indigenous people in their theories. Finally, ecofeminists looked not only at humans but also at our environment and

our relationship with it. That is why, according to Braidotti, they are the “pioneers in post-anthropocentric practices” *par excellence* (2022, 69).

Part II: Posthuman Feminism as Creation

In the first chapter of the second part, chapter 4, “New Materialism and Carnal Empiricism,” Braidotti argues that new materialism can be seen as a foundation for posthuman feminism. New materialism is characterised by Rosi Braidotti as a philosophical approach which seeks to redefine our conception of the material world. This paradigm argues against essentialism, anthropocentrism, and dualism.

According to Rosi Braidotti, new materialism gives us a framework in which we can steer a course between the downfalls of biological essentialism and technological determinism (2022, 137). While biological essentialism takes the distinction between the sexes for granted, new materialism critically investigates this distinction without denying the biological reality completely. Technological determinists, on the other hand, uphold that technology is at the center of social movements and change. Technological determinism not only investigates the relationship between humans and technology but goes so far as to conclude that humans are defined by technological advancements. This is a view that gets opposed by feminist new materialism because, in Braidotti’s view, the latter rejects any form of dualism. Namely, feminist new materialism states that man and technology are not opposites (dualism) but are rather defined and formed by one another, and coexist together without any one party having the upper hand (137).

In the following chapter, chapter 5 “Technobodies: Gene- and Gender-editing,” Braidotti introduces us to cyberfeminism. In her view, cyberfeminism paved the way for posthuman feminism. Cyberfeminists critically investigated the relationship between technology and gender. Cyberfeminists explored and continue to

explore the erosion of the gender binary through the virtual, and criticise the absence of the female voice in debates around technology.

Braidotti mentions that cyberfeminism can be seen as the ‘precursor’ of posthuman feminism because it too argued against technological determinism. At the same time, it did not and does not shy away from underlining the relationship between humanity and technology, redefining the ‘human’ at the centre of humanism. In the following chapter, chapter 6, “Sexuality Beyond Gender: A Thousand Little Sexes,” Braidotti makes a case against the sex-gender distinction and shows us, with the help of posthuman feminism, how the two are more intertwined than one might think (2022, 177).

In the final chapter of part II, chapter 7, “Wanting Out,” Braidotti delves into the different genres of speculative feminism that all work to offer alternatives to the male heteronormative narrative which is ever present in science, history, philosophy, and society (2022, 311-235).

In the Epilogue to this book, titled “Get a Life,” Braidotti concludes her monograph by addressing the difficulty of staying optimistic in troubling times. She argues, however, that posthuman feminism can contribute to solidarity and collective imagination in order to tackle the issues of the present and to produce “new visions” for the future (2022, 237).

Review, Relevance and Recommendation

This book is innovative because it tries to give an (almost) complete overview of the topics discussed in posthuman feminism up until now, which no other author has done before. This book thus stands at the frontier of posthuman feminism, a rapidly developing field. Braidotti’s research is thorough, and she draws from numerous academic publications, as well as art, poetry, and many forms of literature. Braidotti looks at recent political and societal

debates and shows us how we can use posthuman feminism to analyse, conceptualise, and, in a way, solve certain contemporary problems, though it may not always be necessary.

Braidotti has provided an accessible book for any (non)scholar wanting to become acquainted with posthuman feminism. It is accessible to a member of the general public who is interested in the topics of feminism and posthumanism. As said above, the book builds upon earlier books by Braidotti. It is, however, not mandatory to have read these books in order to understand and grasp the message of Braidotti’s *Posthuman Feminism* (2022). The perspectives developed in these earlier books just gives extra depth and meaning to this publication.

Braidotti’s research is thorough, and her argumentation is sound. She is in this sense the first to have given an overview of the field of posthuman feminist philosophy up until now. The text might, however, be a bit too surface-level for scholars well-acquainted with posthuman feminism. Because the book tries to give an overview of all the elements of posthuman feminism, it is not able to delve too deeply into these elements. For readers new to the field of posthumanism, for those just getting acquainted with it, and for those already interested in feminism, queer theory, or ecofeminism, this book is nonetheless a must-read.

To conclude, in this book Braidotti enthusiastically and convincingly takes us with her in a plea on behalf of posthuman feminism. She shows the reader that this might be just what we need to deal with contemporary debates surrounding *hot topics* like gender, sexuality, ecology, and issues beyond these topics, giving a new view on humanity and humanism in which the human is not defined by the standard of the white heterosexual male, but is instead defined as a human that is not the center of the universe, is diverse, situated in an environment, and shares the world with all kinds of species (animals and plants). She acquaints us with a *post-human* who is not defined by technology or biology but integrated with it.

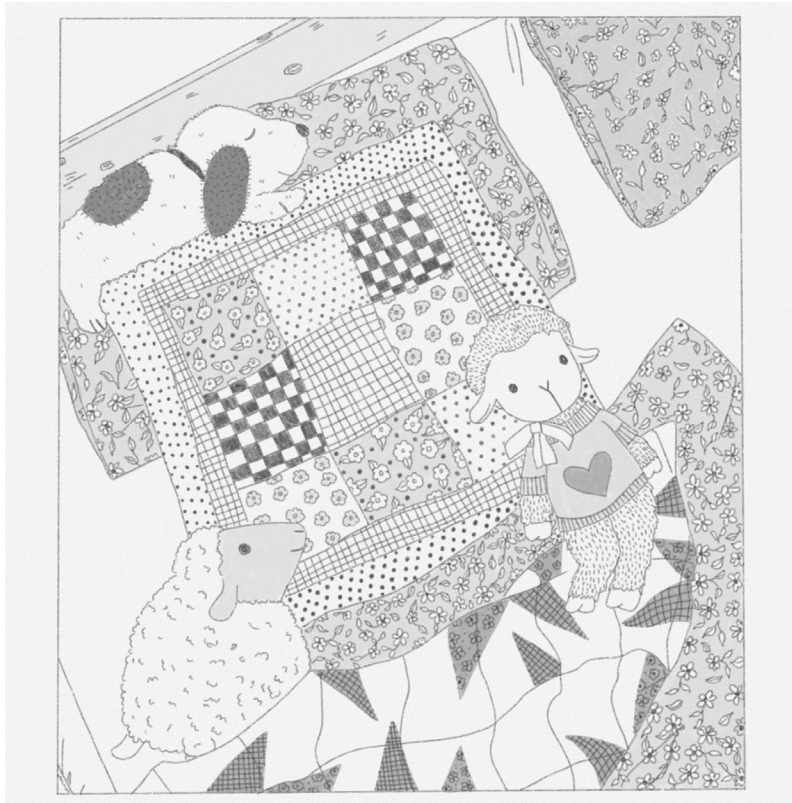
The Mystery of Eros and Intergenerational Ethics

Jesse Germans

Introduction

Following Levinas' claims concerning the impossibility of murder—grounded in the appeal of the face of the Other made upon the I—one can question, in light of our contemporary predicament, what the face of the future Other is and whether it can make an appeal upon us. Such an appeal would have ramifications for intergenerational ethics and prompts us to think differently about our disastrous ecological behaviours. Hence, I will carefully re-assess the claims put forward by Levinas, in order to reveal the profanation of Eros as a hidden face of the future, the *not-yet* which enters into being, or rather, is *faced* in the erotic encounter. Hence, notwithstanding the well-known feminist critiques of Levinas account of the erotic, I will trace his thoughts on Eros and love from the urgency of intergenerational ethics.

In order to ponder on the prospects of intergenerational ethics within Levinas's thought, I will first provide a thorough discussion of his thoughts on love—the relation between the I and the Beloved—as developed in section IV: Beyond the Face of *Totality and Infinity* (1979), with particular emphasis on the concept of profanation. Afterwards, I will elaborate on the impossibility of murder which consists in the epiphany of the face of the Other, and how it can render the I free from its obedience to Being (40–7). This will allow us to draw a comparison between the mystery that Eros profanes and the impossibility of murder, since Levinas hints that this profanation seems contrary to the epiphany of the Face. This insight grounds the final step of this essay, namely to ponder the relevance and importance of Eros for intergenerational ethics, and to ultimately ask the question whether Eros can provide us with a face of the future.



Note that I will not provide a detailed re-assessment of the feminist critiques put forward by, for instance, Luce Irigaray (cf. Ince 2020). The underlying current of patriarchal notions in Levinas seems, at first glance, not to obstruct our inspiration from Eros's mystery to argue for an intergenerational ethics. Frankly, a feminist critique of such an account falls beyond the scope of this endeavour, but lingers as a promise for the future.

Beyond the Face: The Ambiguity of Love

In section IV of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas shifts his focus from the epiphany of the Face towards beyond the Face. Hence, section IV is titled *Beyond the Face*, and involves a riddled exposition of love in Chapter A: *The Ambiguity of Love*, and Chapter B: *Phenomenology of Eros*. I will first elaborate on his thoughts concerning the relation between the Lover and the Beloved, focusing on the importance of voluptuousness and the mystery that Eros profanes.

The issue Levinas is dealing with concerning the erotic relation, is that he has to maintain a relation of separation in which the alterity of the Other is preserved. For the Other transcends—reminiscent of the Infinite—any conceptualization. In other words, the separation that preserves the alterity of the Other is crucial for Levinas in order to uphold his notion of transcendence that grounds the infamous claim that Ethics precedes Ontology (Levinas 1979, 40–7). This necessary emphasis on separation runs counter to a rather dominant thread of thought in Western philosophy concerning love. Namely, the one of unification: the idea that love constitutes a phenomenon in which two parts are united into one, such as Aristophanes argues in Plato's *Symposium*.¹

Hence, the perhaps counterintuitive idea takes root that, even in love, the alterity of the Other has to be preserved. This

¹ Notably, Levinas was deeply inspired by Plato for his concept of transcendence and placing alterity at the heart of Being rather than a figure of the One. For a detailed and recent account of the *Platonica* in Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* see Zhang 2025a.

entails that the relation between the Lover and the Beloved is one of separation. As Paul Moyaert (2000, 40) neatly illustrates in his *The Phenomenology of Eros: a Reading of Totality and Infinity IV. B* reducing oneself into an object before the Beloved results in masochism, whereas reducing the inaccessible Other (i.e. the Beloved) to an object in the erotic relation results in sadism. In both masochism and sadism, the erotic relation becomes one of unification in which the alterity of the Other is not preserved. Consider the following passage by Levinas (1979, 254–5; italics in the original):

Love remains a relation with the Other that turns into need, and this need still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority of the other, of the beloved. But love also goes beyond the beloved. This is why through the face filters the obscure light coming from beyond the face, from what *is not yet*, from a future never future enough, more remote than the possible.

One of the essential aspects of love is that it establishes itself retroactively, for it is a movement in which a being seeks what it is bound to before even having taken the initiative of the search (254–5). In other words, to say that you are meant to be together, you have to be together in order to be 'meant to be' in the first place, thereby retroactively establishing this apparent necessity of being together. Furthermore, Levinas writes in the quoted passage there is a certain 'light' coming from beyond the face, from what is *not yet* and what is more remote than possible. To grasp this *not yet* in terms of possibilities will therefore not suffice, nor can it be anticipated, for it belongs to a future *never future enough*.

Indeed, this *not yet* in the erotic encounter is the unborn child, which is a future never future enough—an infinitely future, which is what love aims at. The aim of love is not a unification of the same and the other, rather, the aim is the engendering of the child (Levinas 1979, 266). For Levinas, love thus aims beyond

the face towards the child *to be*. In this sense we can understand his language whenever he speaks of a future not future enough or a *not-yet*. Importantly, the erotic encounter thereby constitutes a peculiar kind of temporality, a nonpresent which is nevertheless encountered in the present; we will come back to this in the final section on intergenerational ethics (Zhang 2025b).

Moreover, as Levinas claims, the relation with the other turns into a need, one can not live any longer without the beloved. However, it is crucial to note that this need ‘still presupposes the total, transcendent exteriority,’ as within this need the beloved thus still maintains their alterity, preserving the dynamic of separation (Moyaert 2000, 49–51). If it would be a need that does not presuppose this radical alterity, love would no longer be a relation with the other—the beloved—but rather a relation with a certain object, which would result in sadism or masochism. Nevertheless, the relation with the other still turns into a need. Hence, Levinas speaks of the ambiguity of love, for it is both need and desire at once, which constitutes the originality of the erotic and renders it ambiguous (Levinas 1979, 254–5).

Phenomenology of Eros: the Caress and the Tender

Another important aspect of the beloved, for Levinas, is his or her frailty. Since love is aimed towards the Other in their frailty, there is a certain fear that the other might break. Thus, the Lover comes to the aid of the Beloved’s frailty (Levinas 1979, 256). In this light, Levinas speaks of the frailty of femininity, the simultaneity of this apparent frailty and that which is coming from beyond the face, together constitute the frailty of femininity (257).² The lover expresses and is absorbed by this aim towards the frailty of femininity via the caress. On which Levinas writes the following:

The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. (257–8; italics in the original)

The caress thus tries to ‘seize’ the unborn child, the not-yet being, that always slips away. In addition, the caress seeks to ‘seize’ the alterity of the Other, which as the Infinite escapes any seizing per definition, as such it is solicited via the caress as that which slips away. It is important to stress that the caress therefore does not constitute a failed grasp or something along those lines, rather its whole aim is a “seizing upon nothing.” Indeed, the true failure would be when the alterity of the Other is grasped, which would entail a collapse of the structure of separation and betray the transcendence of the Other. Furthermore, this expression of the caress suffers from an inability to tell, for it can never say what it intends, since it intends a future never future enough, a not-yet, a less than nothing (Levinas 1979, 256–8). The lover can merely express this non-signifyingness through caressing.

What the caress aims at, according to Levinas, is the tender. For it is through tenderness that the caress can reach towards the essential frailty of the Beloved—thereby constituting the Beloved as vulnerable, which moves the lover through the tender (Levinas 1979, 259). Levinas continues:

Being moved is a pity that is complacent, a pleasure, a suffering transformed into happiness – voluptuousness. And in this sense voluptuousness begins already in erotic desire and remains desire at each instant. Voluptuousness does not come to gratify desire; it is this desire itself. (259–60)

Through the caress, the tender, and the experience and fear of the frailty of the Beloved, the Lover reaches the *experience* of voluptuousness which is in erotic desire and is desire itself. Therefore, the frailty of the Beloved constitutes a positivity, for it enables volup-

² Let it be noted in passing that, as the critical reader no doubt will remark, this is a very patriarchal conception of femininity, and is also what received heavy critique from Irigaray and De Beauvoir.

tuosity that transforms the suffering of this frailty into happiness. In other words, it is the frailty of the Beloved, in combination with a future never future enough that constitutes the femininity of the Beloved and the desire of the love for the Beloved in the eyes of Levinas.³ This brings us to the crux of the matter, for according to Levinas, such voluptuosity profanes, for it is regarded as an *intentionality without vision*, since it discovers a hidden that is not a matter of signification, the *not-yet* (260). It is precisely that which cannot be expressed, in this sense the face of the Beloved presents a face that goes beyond the face. At which point one might wonder what sense it makes to still speak of a face at all. Importantly, voluptuosity is therefore a pure experience:

In this sense voluptuosity is a pure experience, an experience which does not pass into any concept, which remains blindly experience. Profanation, the revelation of the hidden as hidden, constitutes as model of being irreducible to intentionality[.] (260)

It is clear that the experience of voluptuosity can not pass into any concept, for this would entail that the caress does grasp what it is soliciting and the whole structure of separation and transcendence collapses. It is in this sense that, voluptuosity can be regarded as an intentionality without vision, if it would fit in a concept it would no longer be without vision. A critical point might be raised in passing, for if it is an experience that does not pass into any concept, why conceptualise it under the term voluptuosity in the first place. However, what remains crucial is the aspect of revelation that occurs as profanation in the erotic encounter. It reveals the hidden *as* hidden, it thus stumbles upon the hidden without discovering it. It is a stumbling because there is no intention to reveal the hidden as hidden. Recall: it is the *not-yet*, the future never future enough, beyond any possibility. In that sense,

³ The earlier remarks on feminist critique apply here again as well.

it is essentially hidden. Therefore, Levinas speaks of profanation, for it is the mystery of Eros that is profaned by being revealed as hidden. One may speak with Husserl (n.d., 144) here in claiming that the mystery of Eros by its profanation gives “access to that which in an original sense is inaccessible”. For, the hidden *as* hidden is in its original sense inaccessible, but through the profanation there is some sort of access nonetheless.

The Impossibility of Murder and the Epiphany of the Face

It is now clear how the relation between the Lover and the Beloved centres around what Levinas has called voluptuosity. What is yet unclear, is how the secret of Eros—that remains a mystery—is opposed to the impossibility of murder. As Levinas (1979, 262) writes:

The principle “you shall not commit murder,” the very signifyingness of the face, seems contrary to the mystery which *Eros* profanes, and which is announced in the femininity of the tender.

We can already hint at the *seeming contradiction*, since the face is the signification *par excellence*, and the mystery that is profaned by Eros is the very non-signifyingness of a future never future enough, the *not-yet*. But, let us pause briefly to consider the impossibility of murder even further. Earlier on in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas states the following:

The effort of this book is directed toward apperceiving in discourse a non-allergic relation with alterity, toward apperceiving Desire – where power, by essence murderous of the other, becomes, faced with the other and “against all good sense,” the impossibility of murder, the consideration of the other, or justice. (47)

It is about establishing this non-allergic relation with other, and in order to do so Levinas moves against the primacy of ontology within philosophy, for ontology—in his eyes—consists in the urge to comprehend and grasp the other, thereby depriving them from their alterity, which is thus an allergic relation with the alterity of the other. For Levinas, ontology affirms the idea that my being is primary to any other existent and thereby decides that the relation with the other is already subordinated to the relation of myself with my being, thereby asserting freedom—Being—over ethics—the relation with the other (44–7). However, the comprehension of Being cannot dominate the relationship with the Other, for it is the Other that commands the comprehension of Being. It is the face of the Other that enables the I to his *Sinngebung*,⁴ for it appeals to the I destroying the I's idea of existing for its own Being.⁵ In a way, the face of the Other reveals the possibility to enter into a relation with the Other—it makes an appeal—thereby rendering the I free and enabling *Sinngebung*. Because one can only achieve meaning through the eyes of the Other, by answering the appeal of the Face. This appeal of the Face makes the I responsible, even commands the I. It is therefore not Being that commands the Other, but the Other that commands Being. Hence, there is also an asymmetry that renders the I infinitely responsible for the appeal the Other makes, which the I is ultimately never able to completely satisfy. Such satisfaction would again result in a certain totality, which betrays the character of the Infinite that belongs to the Other. As Levinas puts it fittingly: “Freedom comes from an obedience to Being: it is not man who possesses freedom; it is freedom that possesses man” (45).

All this comprises the epiphany of the face—the relation with the Other as an ethical relation that can enable the I to *Sinngebung*, rendering the I free from the obedience to Being, but responsible

⁴ Which literally means sense-giving or meaning-giving.

⁵ Thereby removing the issue of solipsism as well.

for the Appeal the Other does upon the I via the Face (Levinas 1979, 50–1). Now, let us return to the mystery that Eros profanes and its *seeming* contradiction with the impossibility of murder.

The Profanation of Eros and the Impossibility of Murder

The Face reveals to the I the impossibility of murder, and reveals the possibility of justice—making the I responsible. We have to understand the “signifyingness of the face” as this appeal the Other does upon the I “you shall not kill me.” Hence, Levinas states that, while faced with the Other murder is an impossibility. This impossibility is what is signified by the face of the other. Or, even stronger, murder is an impossibility for it goes against signification itself, since the Face is signification for Levinas.

Now, concerning the mystery that Eros profanes and which is announced in the femininity of the tender (Levinas 1979, 262). This mystery Eros profanes by stumbling upon the hidden as hidden—the profanation is the fact that the hidden is discovered as hidden rather than remaining undiscovered. It is an opposition to the signifyingness of the Face, for what is hidden is the unborn child, the future never future enough which comes from beyond the Face. While the impossibility of murder is expressed in the appeal the Face of the Other makes upon the I, Eros itself goes beyond the Face (264). The contrariness is also present in its manifestation, the impossibility of murder is signifyingness, a revelation via an appeal of what was first hidden, and now enters into vision as a light that can be seen. Indeed, this is the very light that one kills when one commits murder. Whereas the mystery which Eros profanes is something that is stumbled upon, the discovery of the hidden as hidden via the pure experience of voluptuousness. It is important to recall that, for Levinas, voluptuousness as pure experience is an *intention without vision*. The mystery that Eros profanes does not have the structure of an existent that can be intended, it is—and essentially remains—a mystery (266).

However, Levinas does not claim the signifyingness of the Face *to be* contrary to the mystery which Eros profanes, rather, he writes it *seems* contrary. This is due to the intermingling of need and desire that occurs within the erotic relation. The enjoyment of the Beloved's naked body runs the risk of reducing the alterity of the Other to one of physical sensation and plain physicality, thereby losing the transcendence of the Other. Hence, the awkward situation of the erotic within Levinas' philosophy, for this dimension of enjoyment is present in the erotic encounter, is the dimension of need which undermines the transcendence of the Other. In other words, due to the importance of the body in the erotic relation, the Face alone does not suffice: it vanishes as the naked body takes centre stage. Perhaps, this is the true mystery that Eros profanes, as the tender and the voluptuous are the richness and overabundance of the plain flesh, the caress ceaselessly solicits a future never future enough, the child to be engendered, the mystery that is thereby profaned is the presence of transcendence in the body of the Beloved.

So, the awkwardness resides in the attempt to maintain the radical alterity of the Other in the erotic relation. Part of this is done by introducing a face beyond the Face, upon which one stumbles, the future never future enough, the *not-yet*, the child to be engendered. In that sense, the mystery that Eros profanes *does not* contradict the impossibility of murder. However, we are faced here with a different appeal, the appeal done by a mystery, of a hidden, a non-signifyingness that lies beyond any possibility. In passing, it was already mentioned that this *not-yet* constitutes a peculiar kind of temporality. I will now offer some final reflections on how the erotic in Levinas proves to be fecund for intergenerational ethics because of this aspect.

The Mystery of Eros and Intergenerational Ethics

The field of intergenerational ethics is rapidly developing due to the urgency to think about contemporary moral responsibilities towards future generations in the light of ecological developments.

The emphasis in intergenerational ethics lies in understanding how contemporary lives are connected to future generations in morally significant ways (Fritsch et al. 2024, 7). Phenomenology proves its relevance when it comes to these matters, as it can help to show that "the meaningfulness of the present lifeworld depends on nonpresent times that are co-implicated in the present" (7). Perhaps puzzling at first, this means nothing other than the implications of the *not-yet*, as we have been discussing thus far, for the meaning of constitution of the present. In other words, the *not-yet* plays a meaningful role in the erotic relation and perhaps also has the potency for further ethical implications. Additionally, as was mentioned in passing, the peculiar temporality that is encountered in the phenomenon of the *not-yet* is a kind of nonpresent time that is co-implicated in the present. Indeed, the nonpresent, co-implicated by the present, is precisely the mystery that Eros profanes in the erotic encounter according to Levinas. It is a "non-anticipatable diachronic character of a time of the Other who emerges in this connection" (Liebsch 2024, 88). Non-anticipatable, because it is a possibility beyond mere possibility, a necessary radical alterity and anonymity that constitutes the future as future and not as an endless repetition of the present, preserving the core of transcendence. It is this generative experience of time, the *not-yet*, that renders the "authentic future of Others and their descendants to be co-present in our own life here in the present, whether we want this to be so or not" (98). Hence, there is a direct line to be drawn between Levinas' writings and the emerging field of intergenerational ethics, with special regard to the mystery that Eros profanes. As the editors write in the introduction of *Phenomenology and Future Generations: Generativity, Justice, and Amor Mundi*:

Here, as in Levinas fecundity, present selves live on in future others whose alterity cannot be wholly appropriated. The face of the future can neither be separated from, nor reduced to, today's living faces. (Fritsch et al. 2024, 10–1)

At this point, I do not seek to establish a full account of Levinas' thought, in light of intergenerational ethics.⁶ Rather, I want to use the prospects of intergenerational ethics to think through the limits of Levinas' account of Eros.

As mentioned in passing, Levinas' account of the erotic encounter is filled with troublesome notions that are rightfully critiqued from feminist perspectives. This opens up the following question that lingers after the account and reading that has been put forth in this essay: to what extent does the *not-yet* require the erotic in order to be constituted? In other words, is there also a face-beyond-the-Face, a future within the present, outside of the erotic and outside of Eros? Or, rather—and this is perhaps a more fruitful avenue to think through—are Eros and the mystery that it profanes necessarily restricted to the erotic encounter? If such an avenue proves to be fecund, the feminist critique of Levinas account can be taken onboard, while the temporal dimension of the *not-yet* is cleared, in this sense, of its problematic patriarchal connotations. Indeed, if Eros and its mystery can be found outside of the erotic encounter, and the realm of love is opened up, instead of being restricted to the carnal interplay of bodily sensations. However, this would demand a concept of generativity that is not connected with procreation, which at first glance might seem hard to account for. Nevertheless, Waldenfels (2024, 59) already hints at such a direction: “we are not restricting “generation” of new life simply to the corporeal reproduction and propagation of living beings”. Thereby providing a renewed grounding of Levinas's notion of fecundity for our interaction with the earth itself, confronting the ecological disasters and outlining our intergenerational responsibilities in a proper human sense. Indeed, we might conclude that the mystery that Eros profanes is already present in the seeds we sow and the trees we plant. Perhaps, Levinas' emphasis on frailty and fertility proves particularly useful for ecological thinking

⁶ See the entries from Vergani, Waldenfels and Liebsch in *Phenomenology and Future Generations: Generativity, Justice, and Amor Mundi* (2024).

and intergenerational ethics, if we shift the focus from the carnal, bodily sensations of the erotic encounter, to a more holistic account of the Beloved as the (sur)face of the Earth.

Conclusion

First, we discussed the ambiguity of love in Levinas's thought, emphasizing the importance of separation in order to preserve the transcendence of the Other. After this, a detailed exposition of the concepts that are put forward by Levinas was provided in order to grasp the mystery that is profaned by Eros, with particular focus on the *not-yet*. Indeed, the future never future enough, was revealed to be the mystery that is profaned by Eros. Furthermore, a brief exposition concerning the epiphany of the Face and the impossibility of murder was provided. Consequently, a comparison could be made in order to ascertain the differences and the similarities between the profanation of Eros and the impossibility of murder. Or, in other words, between the mystery of the beyond-the-Face and the epiphany of the Face. Hence, the ambiguity of love and its essentially awkward position within Levinas' thought were revealed. This opened up the possibility to emphasize the fertility of Levinas' notion of the *not-yet* in regards to intergenerational ethics, thereby asserting the relevance of his thought in light of the contemporary issues concerning the question of responsibility towards the generations to come. Finally, we pressed upon the limits of Levinas' ideas concerning Eros and the erotic encounter in the light of intergenerational ethics, by questioning whether the mystery that Eros profanes is restricted to the erotic encounter, or can also be encountered outside of it. Ultimately, it was hinted that such an account of Eros would demand a concept of generativity that is not connected with procreation, nor restricted to the carnal interplay of bodily sensations. Therefore, a new avenue of thinking—with, against, and beyond Levinas—becomes possible, in which one can encounter the mystery Eros profanes outside of the erotic.

References

Fritsch, Matthias, Ferdinando G. Menga, and Rebecca van der Post. 2024. *Phenomenology and Future Generations: Generativity, Justice, and Amor Mundi*. State University of New York Press. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=3867294>.

Husserl, Edmund. n.d. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Translated by David Carr. Northwestern University Press.

Ince, Kate. 1996. "Questions to Luce Irigaray." *Hypatia* 11 (2): 122–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1996.tb00667.x>

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1979. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

Liebsch, Burkhard. 2024. "Generativity, Generations, and Generative Intergenerational Solidarity: Untimely Reflections on the Way We Live After One Another, With One Another, and For One Another, in Its Unforeseeable Historicity." In *Phenomenology and Future Generations: Generativity, Justice, and Amor Mundi*, edited by Matthias Fritsch, Ferdinando G. Menga, and Rebecca van der Post. State University of New York Press.

Moyaert, Paul. 2000. "The Phenomenology of Eros: A Reading of Totality and Infinity, IV.B." In *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. Edited by Jeffrey Bloechl. Fordham University Press.

Waldenfels, Bernhard. 2024. "Responding to the Claims of Those Who Shall Come After Us." In *Phenomenology and Future Generations: Generativity, Justice, and Amor Mundi*, edited by Matthias Fritsch, Ferdinando G. Menga, and Rebecca van der Post. State University of New York Press.

Zhang, Huaiyuan. 2025a. "Desiring the Good for the Other: Extending Levinas' Platonica in Totality and Infinity towards an Ethics of Eros." *Human Studies: A Journal for Philosophy and the*

Social Sciences 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-025-09800-6>.

Zhang, Huaiyuan. 2025b. "'The Future of Death in the Present of Love': Eros as an Ethical Pas Encore in Levinas's Totality and Infinity." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.70032>.



To Take Up the Nighttime

Structural Time-Ordering in Urban Spaces

Yula van Nederkerk Meerveen

Since its emergence in the 1970s, the 'Reclaim the Night' (RTN) or 'Take Back the Night' movement has continually called attention to women's right to occupy public space after dark. Recently revived in the Netherlands in response to repeated incidents of sexual violence (Wij Eisen De Nacht Op n.d.), the movement brings women together to march through city streets at night, collectively asserting that safety should not depend on appearance, company, or time of day (Andreola et al. 2025, 204). These marches represent not only a protest against patriarchal control, but also an act of courage: an embodied refusal to accept fear as a natural condition of womanhood. Broadly, the RTN movement seeks to confront three interrelated issues: inequality in access to urban space, the unjust burden placed on victims to ensure their own safety, and the need to promote genuine security, generally via redesigning urban spaces.

Yet, despite its decades-long history and global reach, the movement's core concerns remain unresolved. Women continue to adjust their behaviour to the possibility of danger by avoiding certain areas after nightfall, dressing conservatively, or relying on male companions for safety. The persistence of such practices suggests that the barriers keeping women off the streets at night are structural. Understanding these enduring constraints requires a deeper examination of how urban life itself is temporally organised.

This essay therefore proposes an understanding of 'structural time-ordering': the systematic organisation of urban temporality that renders nighttime inaccessible to certain groups, particularly women. This is done in order to show that incorporating a temporal perspective is necessary for understanding women's oppression in the city, and finding ways to challenge this. Part I defines structural time-ordering and analyses how it is sustained

through social norms, fear, and the embodied effects of patriarchal control. Part II argues for the necessity of incorporating the temporal perspective into politics and urban theory by relating it to the RTN movement's three objectives and by considering possible interventions. These solutions vary from critical reassessments of urban design to reimagining how women might resist both fear and self-confinement. Ultimately, this essay calls for women to gain the confidence to take up time.

Part I: The 'What' and 'How' of Structural Time-Ordering

When considering the workings of time in urban spaces, one might initially think of daily routines, shop hours, or the need for planning ahead. Yet, as sociologist Barbara Adam (1990) observes, "many more aspects of time form an integral part of our lives" (1). Though often regarded as abstract, time is a multifaceted concept shaping nearly every dimension of human experience. It is therefore unsurprising that its various forms have been examined across numerous disciplines.

This essay engages with a particular manifestation of time I term *structural time-ordering*: a phenomenon that appears universal yet remains largely invisible. The following section outlines its defining characteristics and distinguishes it from the temporalities identified by Adam in *Time and Social Theory* (1990). I then reflect on why fear is often assumed to sustain this temporal structure, before turning to Iris Marion Young's (1990) analysis of bodily confinement as a concurrent explanation.

A Shape of Time: Structural Time-Ordering

Adam's *Time and Social Theory* (1990) challenges social theory's treatment of time as a neutral backdrop, arguing instead that time is a socially produced, politically charged, and lived phenomenon. She identifies multiple temporalities: (I) linear, measurable clock-time (54); (II) bodily, biorhythmic time (98); (III) institutional time structured by timetables and curfews (107); (IV) natural cycles

such as seasons and life rhythms (72); and (V) accelerated time shaped by access to technology and mobility (110). These understandings of time are considered politically relevant and inform urban organisation, from public transport schedules and spatial planning to housing design and policies addressing the needs of ageing populations.

However, when taking these forms into account separately, one neglects how time itself operates as an instrument of social ordering and exclusion. According to Adam, no single temporality accounts for how time intersects with power and inequality; rather, it is their interplay—where institutional and technological developments suppress bodily and ecological cycles, for instance—that exposes time as a mechanism of domination (154). Sitting at the intersection of the five understandings of time, structural time-ordering denotes the structural enforcement of temporal oppression and exclusion. It operates through clock and institutional temporalities that structure daily life, while simultaneously erasing bodily and natural rhythms; under accelerated time, these hierarchies deepen as technological privilege determines who can safely inhabit the city after dark.

Structural time-ordering can consequently best be described as a pervasive, apparently global practice in which urban spaces become inaccessible after nightfall to groups of specific social identities. In other words, "places that are usually sensed as safe during the day become unsafe at night, pointing to the centrality of time in this discourse of urban safety and accessibility" (Biswas 2025). Crucially, this unfreedom affects only certain marginalised communities which are not seen as the 'true users' of public spaces—such as women, queer people, and people of colour—and this it does *structurally* (Andreola et al. 2025, 195). A case could

be made for the exclusion of all these social identities and indubitably more but, as this paper takes the RTN movement as a starting point, it will solely focus on the exclusion of women.¹

The term ‘structural time-ordering’ explicates that time is unequally ordered in urban spaces. As geographer Doreen Massey (1994) explains, “space and time are inextricably interwoven. [...] [T]he distinction we do make needs to hold the two in tension” (261). Hence, discussing the spatial dimension alone is not enough to illuminate why women are kept particularly immobile at night (150). As such, ‘structural time-ordering’ is explicitly four-dimensional and demarcates a realm of structural injustice.²

Fear and Self-Confinement

When debating which factors keep women off the streets at night, scholars almost unanimously identify fear as the primary cause (Andreola et al. 2025; Biswas 2025; Coe and Sandberg 2019; Kern 2020). Yet, men are statistically more likely to be victims of crime in public spaces (Andreola et al. 2025, 195). Why, then, do women perceive nighttime as fundamentally dangerous? Are they being irrational?

Feminist geographer Leslie Kern (2020) explains this discrepancy through the nature of perceived threats: whereas men fear robbery, women fear sexual violence (130). Such violence is not only profoundly traumatising—heightening anxiety and distrust in public—but also largely unreported and unresolved (Andreola et al. 2025). As a result, many women impose self-restrictions:

-
- 1 It should be noted, however, that in recent years queer and racialised people have also been accepted to march with the movement.
 - 2 Urban time-ordering need not always involve (direct) oppression – e.g., making more public transport opportunities available during rush hours, imposing noise ordinances at night, and organising seasonal events. What makes *structural* time-ordering unique and a pressing issue is that it, ipso facto, does.

avoiding going out late, walking alone, or entering certain areas, thereby limiting their freedom, employment opportunities, and social life.

The fact that women across cities respond similarly indicates that this fear is not individual but structural. Women are socially expected to stay indoors, unless accompanied by a man who can ‘protect’ them. Those who defy this expectation are labelled reckless or are blamed in the event of assault. Fear is further reinforced through narratives that depict women as inherently vulnerable and immigrants and people of colour as perpetual sex offenders—forms of ‘othering’ that reflect social imagination rather than empirical reality (Biswas 2025, 175). Such narratives are internalised, disciplining women’s sense of safety and belonging in public space. As Kern succinctly puts it, “fear restricts women’s lives” (2020, 130).

An important dimension of this restriction, however, remains underexplored in the literature on the RTN movement. Women’s lack of access to nighttime is not purely psychological; their bodies themselves have been rendered ‘out of place’ (Coe and Sandberg 2019, 633). Young’s essay “Throwing Like a Girl” (1990 [1978]) illuminates this embodied limitation. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Young argues that women move as if constrained. They keep their gestures small, tentative, and rigid, and experience the body as both burden and object of vigilance (146–9). In space, these inhibitions persist: women tend to avoid the public eye, and at night often withdraw entirely into the home,³ as if the Victorian domestic ideal still prevails.

Whether this self-confinement is socially ingrained or (also) a response to continual objectification is secondary here. What matters is that it remains invisible until a woman crosses these implicit boundaries, at which point public outrage ensues. She is

3 See Massey’s “A Woman’s Place?” in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994).

blamed for her own endangerment, her actions recast as transgression, her suffering as consequence: why did she not stay in place?

Fear alone, then, cannot explain women's exclusion from the night. Temporal inaccessibility is both psychological and embodied. The internalisation of 'a woman's place' materialises in how women move, occupy, and withdraw from space. Fear expresses the feeling of restriction; physical self-confinement enacts it. Only by reading them together can we see how women's exclusion reveals structural time-ordering as a system operating through both the mind and the disciplined body.

Part II: Equalising Nocturnal Access

Whereas Part I defined structural time-ordering and examined how it operates within urban spaces, this part explores why an understanding of this phenomenon is necessary and how it could, in part, be resolved. It does so by critically analysing the three central objectives of the RTN movement: addressing unequal access to the city at nighttime, disburdening the victim of responsibility for violence, and redesigning urban environments as safe spaces for women. The following section considers the moral implications of the first two objectives, demonstrating how the framework of structural time-ordering clarifies and challenges their underlying assumptions. The subsequent section turns to the practical complexities of urban redesign promoting safe spaces. The closing section calls for a reclamation of confidence: how might women come to embody safety, allowing themselves to take up both space and time?

Inequality and Burden

Up until recently, feminist geographers have mainly focussed on combatting spatial inequality. As Massey (1994) argues, spatial arrangements are never neutral, but rather reflect and reproduce power relations (155). Part I of this essay suggests that extending this insight temporally reveals that time, too, is unequally distri-

buted, with women's access to the city diminishing after dark. The inequality of access to nighttime space is not merely material but moral: women's absence from public space is interpreted not as exclusion but as propriety (Kern 2020, 21).

Evidently, a society that claims to value equality should not allow gendered (in)accessibility to the nighttime to persist. Yet such inequality is rarely perceived as structural, precisely because time has long been treated as neutral, universal, and detached from power. I propose that recognising structural time-ordering exposes how temporality itself is organised in ways that reproduce social hierarchies: the day belongs to productivity and visibility, the night to danger and withdrawal. Within this order, men have been moving freely across both worlds, while women are temporally confined to the safety of daylight and domesticity. What appears as a natural rhythm of life is, in fact, a mechanism of regulation, a social contract that quietly dictates when and where women may exist. Understanding this temporal inequality is therefore essential, as it makes visible the invisible structures that sustain gendered exclusion.

Moreover, as previously stated, women do not just experience limitations in access to the city at night, but are even blamed when they do enter this space. Upon rational reasoning, this reaction appears completely misplaced. After all, women are the victims in this case: why should they carry the burden of adjusting their behaviour when they are not at fault? Young (2003) calls this phenomenon the 'logic of masculinist protection,' whereby women's safety is contingent upon their compliance with patriarchal constraints. Her theory argues that patriarchal societies condition women to accept subordinate positions in exchange for 'protection' from male violence (4). As such, protection has become understood as something chivalrous and to be adored, thus erasing the fact that, without rape culture, there would most likely be no need for it (hooks 2015 [2000]).

Women, in this case, are innately fragile and bear the responsibility to stay safe by complying with the rules. In short, they are

obligated to avoid trouble. It is not difficult to see how this logic plays out when a woman makes the choice to head outside alone in the dark: she defies the patriarchal constraints on her autonomous decision-making, fails to see the necessity of masculinist protection, and is hence to blame for supposedly acting out.

If society genuinely seeks to dismantle sexism, it must cease to perpetuate both temporal inequality and the logic of masculinist protection. A recognition of structural time-ordering within the objectives of the RTN movement reveals that it is the culture of domination, not individual women, that must change. The following sections explore how such change might be achieved: first, by examining the limitations of urban design as a solution, and then by considering alternative ways for women to ‘take up time.’

Designing Safety

The final and perhaps most ambitious objective of the RTN movement is to make nighttime not simply accessible, but genuinely safe for women to move freely through the city. One proposed means of achieving this goal has been to redesign the city in ways that better accommodate women’s needs. Kern (2020) explains that, since men have historically been the primary decision-makers in urban planning, the city inevitably reflects their perspectives. This ‘city of men’ often neglects women’s most basic needs—adequate bathroom stalls, space for strollers, and ‘safe lighting’—concerns long noted by feminist architects, planners, and geographers. In response, they have sought to increase visibility in narrow streets and dark corners, install emergency phones in unsafe areas such as parking lots, and add security cameras to reduce crime (134). Yet, despite these efforts to ‘feminise’ the city, “a woman will still cross the street at night if a stranger is walking behind her” (19).

Evidently, feminist initiatives to create safer spaces seldom achieve their intended effect, or do so only partially, because they treat safety as a matter of spatial design rather than temporal and structural order. The mental and embodied mechanisms that sustain both unequal nocturnal access and the internalised sense

that night belongs to others constitute a deeper wound that cannot simply be ‘designed out.’ Within my framework of structural time-ordering, these persistent fears are understood not as irrational, but as the lived effects of a temporal regime that renders nighttime inaccessible to women.

Moreover, Kern explains that the very notion of safety is essentially unstable: women fear both open and enclosed spaces, busy crowds and empty streets, bright lights, and cloaking darkness (2020, 138). Preferred safety measures also differ across age, race, class, sexuality, gender identity, and ability, complicating any universal design solution.

A further concern arising from the feminisation of space is its unintended consequences for other marginalised groups. The city houses diverse communities with distinct needs, many of which remain neglected – ‘womanhood’ being only one identity among them, and far from a uniform category. Yet, feminisation efforts thus far have largely centred one particular subject: the bourgeois, white, cisgender woman. Kern illustrates this process through the transformation of a neighbourhood where grimy bars and porn shops frequented by working-class men were replaced by yoga studios, nail salons, and cafés with play corners for children catering to middle-class women (2020, 94–5).

These developments are not wholly negative, as they have made some urban areas more accommodating for groups such as mothers. However, such changes often accompany gentrification and economic exclusion, transforming safety from a right into a privilege. Convenience is secured for affluent women at the expense of others whose access to the city becomes further restricted. These contradictions reveal that spatial interventions alone cannot dismantle structural time-ordering; initiatives to redesign cities not only risk ostracising minorities even further, but may also fail to adequately address how women experience and inhabit time itself.

Take Up Time: A Call for Confidence

If the feminisation of urban design cannot sufficiently address the issue of structural time-ordering, the most logical course of action would be to reexamine the core of the problem. What needs to be changed is not (just) the layout of the city, but the behaviour of its inhabitants. Dark corners do not make urban spaces unsafe, perpetrators do. Inadequate lighting does not confine women to the house at night, embodied fear does. Solving the insurmountable, pervasive issues of the former is far beyond the scope of this essay: I believe that would take tackling rape culture, fragile masculinity, and ultimately uprooting all of patriarchy. The latter, however, could be somewhat alleviated by cultivating awareness and reconfiguring embodiment.

As discussed in the section ‘Fear and Self-Confinement,’ structural time-ordering sustains itself by conditioning women to feel inherently vulnerable and to occupy as little space as possible. Initiatives such as the RTN movement directly confront this conditioning by encouraging collective presence in nocturnal spaces. Yet, as Sandberg and Coe (2020) recount, “on the subway train home, [participants] sat just as tensely as always” (1051). Similarly, smaller projects, such as community mapping of unsafe areas (Andreola et al. 2025) or zine-making to articulate women’s experiences of fear (Lamond et al. 2024), do not yet dismantle the structures of fear, but they do perform a vital function: they render the invisible visible. These acts of collaboration and expression transform private anxiety into collective consciousness, laying the groundwork for change.

To reclaim the night, women must not only occupy space, but also inhabit time with confidence. This shift does not require the denial of fear, which remains real and embodied, but rather its re-situation as a socially produced affect—one cultivated through gendered warnings, anticipatory vigilance, and the persistent framing of public space as male by default. Feminist phenom-

nology has long shown that such fears shape bodily comportment and temporal habits, encouraging women to hurry, restrict their movements, and apologise for lingering (see Young 2003).

Awareness alone does not dissolve these patterns, but it renders them politically intelligible. By shifting from defensive navigation to moments of affirmative presence, such as walking at one’s own pace and lingering without apology, women engage in small but meaningful refusals of the temporal discipline imposed upon them. Change begins not in fearlessness, but in recognising fear as a collective condition, rather than an individual failing. In daring to take up both space and time, women begin to erode the structures that seek to contain them.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that women’s exclusion from the nocturnal city is an outcome of structural time-ordering, a pervasive system of temporal inaccessibility. The city’s rhythms, rules, and expectations determine who belongs in public space and when. Women’s absence from the night is thus not natural, but produced: produced through the fear and the bodily restraint that turn time itself into an instrument of control. Acknowledging these causes reveals that freedom cannot be won by spatial redesign alone. For what is at stake is not only where women move, but when they are allowed to exist. Fear and self-confinement sustain this order. Fear shapes the mind; it warns, disciplines, and convinces women that darkness is danger. Embodied confinement translates that fear into posture and practice—the bowed head, the hurried walk, the constant awareness of one’s own fragility. Together, they reproduce a cycle that keeps women immobile while the city continues to pulse around them.

Reconsidering the objectives of the Reclaim the Night movement through this lens makes their urgency clear. True equality must extend into space as well as time, to undo the invisible social hierarchy of temporal access. Disburdening victims requires dismantling the logic that tells women to modify

themselves instead of the structures that endanger them. And thirdly, genuine safety must arise from confidence and collective resistance, not surveillance or spatial control. Becoming aware of structural time-ordering is therefore an act of political defiance. It is to see the invisible scaffolding that orders our nights, and to refuse it. To reclaim the night is not only to walk the streets after dark, but to inhabit time differently: boldly, deliberately, without apology.

While this essay has focused on the inaccessibility of the nighttime for women, the mechanisms of structural time-ordering extend far beyond gender. Racialised, queer, disabled, and economically marginalised bodies also navigate cities whose temporal structures render them out of place. Recognising these layered exclusions only strengthens the urgency of reclaiming time itself as a site of resistance. For only when all those who have been kept from the night can move through it freely does darkness become an instance of collective empowerment.

References

- Adam, Barbara. 1990. *Time and Social Theory*. Temple University Press.
- Andreola, Florencia, Azzurra Muzzonigro, and Laura Da Re. 2025. "Reclaim the Night: Tools Against Women's Fear in Public Space." In *Designing Gender Sensitive Spaces for Consenting Cities*, edited by Jess Berry, Nicole Kalms, Timothy Moore, and Gene Bawden. Routledge.
- Biswas, Ritwika. 2025. "Untangling the Relationship of Fear, Safety, and Accessibility in Night-Time Kolkata." In *Designing Gender Sensitive Spaces for Consenting Cities*, edited by Jess Berry, Nicole Kalms, Timothy Moore, and Gene Bawden. Routledge.
- Coe, Anna-Britt, and Linda Sandberg. 2019. "Gender Beliefs as a Dimension of Tactical Choice: The 'Take Back the Night' March in Sweden." *Social Movement Studies* 18 (5): 622–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1599280>.

hooks, bell. 2015 [2000]. "Ending Violence." In *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. Routledge.

Kern, Leslie. 2020. *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*. Verso. Online edition.

Lamond, Ian R., Kate Dashper, Michelle Lanham, Hannah Rossmorris, and Dan Lomax. 2024. "Reclaim the Night(Life) – Sexual Harassment in the Night-Time Economy: Zine Making as Method and Participant-Led Data Analysis." *Sociological Research Online* 29 (4): 1097. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804231211723>.

Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, Place and Gender*. Polity Press.

Sandberg, Linda, and Anna-Britt Coe. 2020. "Taking Back the Swedish Night: Making and Reclaiming Space." *Gender, Place & Culture* 27 (7): 1044–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1693339>.

Wij Eisen De Nacht Op. n.d. "Home." Accessed October 24, 2025. <https://www.wijeisendenachtop.nl/>.

Young, Iris Marion. 1990 [1978]. *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Indiana University Press.

Young, Iris Marion. 2003. "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State." *Signs* 29 (1): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1086/375708>.



You See, Suddenly

Sophie Ingle

You see, suddenly one day I'm not only counting the magpies through the window,
I'm thinking about how my friend calls them 'tuxedo birds'; I'm seeing another's favorite flower, bingo.

And as I'm putting on my sunglasses, I'm reminded of the loved ones who borrow them from time to time,
And suddenly, summer nights are lighter, they're easier; a vision in orange, lemon and lime.

Maybe it's the smile on the face of Mars when there's cranberry tea left in the flask,
Maybe it's our miscellaneous quests—oh, how moments live in a silly little task.

The way the sun hits ringlets of curls that laugh when I share some half-baked anecdote,
"Better together," we smile, as if suspended in time, space, keeping one another afloat.

We left pieces of our minds out of sight, in a jar, scribbled in ballpoint,
"The jar is vulnerable," we laugh, and it's true, but isn't that the whole point?

One of my favourite writers taught me to stay with the trouble,
And it's helping, there's so much intricacy and love beyond my own bubble.

Speaking of good writers, another loved one shared a story about their new book,
"I can't wait to read it," I tell them, and there is so much warmth in a single look.

I shared a difficult memory that I'd only ever told to one or two others before,
A tear was shed for me, such beauty in the caring vulnerability
spilling out onto the floor.

Then, before I know it, there's some event on campus and they're
playing our song,
Which is funny, because I'd never heard it before you shared it,
and now we're singing along.

Maybe it's the reassurance that follows the spirals that trickle
down like a monsoon,
Maybe it's the ease of feeling safe to open up like a flower coming
into bloom.

The way the longest months feel shorter on a Wednesday afternoon,
"That's iconic," she says, and how great it feels to be associated
with a tune.

Oh, how my heart feels so full even after giving much of it away,
To see and be seen, to love and be loved, I wouldn't want it any
other way.

You see, suddenly I'm on the rollercoaster home again and I feel
okay,
The weight of turbulent thoughts starts to lift because you were a
part of my day.

And three more dice roll across the floor because we had another
games night,
We're all just trying our best, and I think it's going to be alright.

Transformation, Social Death and the Discovery of the Self

Trans Vulnerability and Identity in "I Saw
the TV Glow" (2024)

Trine Linke

In November of 2024, Donald Trump won his second presidential election. One of his first actions in office was to denounce the legal existence of transgender people (Thoreson 2025). Not many weeks after, special government employee Elon Musk announced his support for German right-wing party AfD during their election campaign, who echoed Trump's famous MAGA war cry with "Make Germany Great Again" ("Musk bei AfD" 2025). The AfD, who was the second strongest party to the Christian-conservative CDU in the 2025 elections, may even be able to overcome the political firewall sworn on by the CDU and other major parties ("Bundestagswahl" 2025).¹ Right-wing politics like Trump's or AfD's swear to end the madness of queer people and legally attack the already thin support that generations of activists have been fighting for. Young trans people go into hiding, never come out to their communities, commit suicide, or are martyred in starkly increasing cases of anti-trans violence (Zandt 2024; Price et al. 2024, 289).

My hometown voted against my existence as a queer person, so when I watched Jane Schoenbrun's "I Saw the TV Glow" (2024), it struck a chord. The film tackles themes of denying one's identity and suffocating under hegemony, as well as the liminal experience of queerness in suburbia. Writer-director Schoenbrun describes "TV Glow" as "[t]he tension between the space that you exist within, which feels like home, and the simultaneous terror and

1 Since writing this article in March 2025, chancellor Merz has likened the flying of a pride flag on the German parliament for pride to turning the Bundestag into a circus tent (Hecht 2025). This falls in line with other, earlier opinions on queer people, such as demanding additional hurdles to changing one's sex on legal documents (FAZ 2023).

liberation of understanding that that space might not be able to hold you in your true form” (Grierson 2024). The guiding question for this reading of “I Saw the TV Glow” is one of urgent relevance, considering increasingly hostile legal and social attitudes towards trans and queer people. How can one transition and discover one’s identity in a hostile environment?

The supporting theories for my analysis will be Judith Butler’s essay “Violence, Mourning, Politics”, Nietzsche’s ideas on the aesthetic self and identity, and Sartre’s thoughts on existentialism and choice. First, I will outline the plot of “TV Glow” and explain the trend it spawned. Secondly, using Butler, I will analyze the language of social death in the film. Thirdly, the labor of discovering oneself according to Sartre and Nietzsche will be recontextualized through the trans lens of “TV Glow”, using the concept of the Epimethean. Fourthly, this labor of discovery will be nuanced with statistical data on the impact of the environment on trans mental health. Lastly, the role of community in self-discovery will be emphasized.

1. Introduction to “I Saw the TV Glow”

“I Saw the TV Glow” follows two teenagers, Owen and Maddy, in an American suburb. The two outsiders bond over their shared love for a Buffy-the-Vampire-Slayer-esque show called “The Pink Opaque” (fig. 1). Owen, whose dad does not want them² to watch the show because he considers it too girly, receives tapes from Maddy that they watch in secret. Throughout “TV Glow”, the main character Owen often fades into and parallels the main character of “The Pink Opaque”, Isabel. Both Owen and Isabel are “scaredy cat[s]”, as described by Maddy, who more closely resembles the second member of The Pink Opaque, Tara (“TV Glow” 00:17:39). Maddy’s and Owen’s life seem to revolve around their favorite show, which acts as an escape from the abuse and “othering” both

² I use they/them pronouns for Owen here, and she/her following the revelation that she is trans.



Figure 1. Still from Schoenbrun, "TV Glow" (00:15:11)



Figure 2. Still from Schoenbrun, "TV Glow" (00:26:03)

experience in their home and at school. Schoenbrun constructs an eerily hostile environment, with messages like “Carpe diem”, “To thine own self be true” and “Pain is weakness leaving the body” looming over Owen; the motivational messages almost act as a threat onto Owen, who wastes away in denial of themselves and their pain (fig. 2). At one fateful sleepover, Maddy makes the decision to run away from her home which, to her, seems less real than “The Pink Opaque”, and begs Owen to join. Owen is paralyzed by the fear of losing home and runs from Maddy’s place before she can take them along on her escape. Maddy disappears, burning her movie set and only leaving a melting TV frame, and “The Pink Opaque” is cancelled. After a time skip, Owen now works a dissatisfying job, unable to connect with others. When Maddy suddenly reappears to Owen, she claims to have escaped the false reality Owen inhabits and has awoken as Tara in “The Pink Opaque”. She urges them to rewatch the final episode of “The Pink Opaque”. Arriving at home, Owen rewatches the ending, in which Tara and Isabel are caught by the show’s antagonist, and buried alive, imprisoned in a false reality called the Midnight Realm. Owen suffers a mental breakdown, watching their true self be robbed of her heart and buried. Consequently, Owen attempts to escape into the hungry static of their TV, only to be violently pulled out and washed clean by their father (fig. 3). It is in this moment that Owen seems the closest to accepting that her reality as Owen is untrue, that her father is not her father, and the undead suburbs are not her home—she is Isabel, trapped in the Midnight Realm as Owen. The next day, Maddy shares that she buried herself in order to reawaken in “The Pink Opaque”. Maddy urges Owen to follow in her footsteps and abandon the life she has known. Owen once more cannot overcome her fear and runs away from Maddy, who has left her one last message: “There is still time”, written in chalk on the street (fig. 4).

The following eight years drain Owen into a husk-like state. Her father passes, and she starts a family—one we never see—in the very same house she grew up in. The last time we see her, her



Figure 3. Still from Schoenbrun, "TV Glow" (01:04:57)



Figure 4. Still from Schoenbrun, "TV Glow" (01:21:15)



Figure 5. Still from Schoenbrun, "TV Glow" (01:27:28)



Figure 6. Still from Schoenbrun, "TV Glow" (01:29:50)

hair has greyed and her asthma has worsened to the degree that she is constantly wheezing. Suffering one last mental breakdown at a children's birthday party, she cuts open her torso in a bathroom (fig. 5, 6, 7). After witnessing her insides glow, she returns, and "TV Glow" ends with Owen apologizing for her breakdown (fig. 8).

In an interview, Jane Schoenbrun explains that "TV Glow" is an "egg-crack"³ film, posing the central question "whether Owen will follow Maddy to the other side" (Seidlitz 2024). Schoenbrun connects this metaphor of burying yourself alive, as Maddy did and urged Owen to do, to the feeling of grieving the previous 35 years of their life lived before coming out (Siedlitz 2024). While the film's ending is rather grim, with Owen apologizing as her true self is suffocating, Schoenbrun still pushes a more hopeful message through the haunting chalk Maddy leaves Owen. "There is still time" to start a journey of self-discovery and overcome suppressive gender stereotypes and limitations (Grierson 2024). After its release in November of 2024, "TV Glow" saw a trend inspired by its central message and title on TikTok. Queer TikTok users would describe their status and history of coming out or remaining closeted with the state of the TV, letting it glow, turning it off or attempting to dim it in fear of repercussions of coming out (Hamilton 2024).

2. The Vulnerable Pre-transition Self and Transphobic Social Death

In Butler's 2003 essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics", they posit the idea that not everyone is afforded a life worth grieving. Grieving someone publicly, for example through an obituary, is a structural and cultural discourse which bestows the lost life with worth. This distribution of who can be mourned is tied to the status of *vulnerability*. *Vulnerability* here is not the ability of a life to be harmed, but

3 "Egg" is a term in the trans community, referring to someone who has not yet realised their trans identity. When an egg cracks, it is their moment of realizing their gender.



Figure 7. Still from Schoenbrun, "TV Glow" (01:29:50)



Figure 8. Still from Schoenbrun, "TV Glow" (01:31:11)

rather the mechanisms that acknowledge and condemn the harm being done to said life. This also means that the potential of harm is something the individual must be shielded from, and can be used as a justification for violence.

Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as "grievable". (Butler 2003, 20)

To be grievable, an individual must first be considered *vulnerable*. According to Butler, vulnerability can be recognized and instigated in part through its utterance to an Other, at which point one "stakes one's own being" in this process of recognition (Butler 2003, 33). Thus, as an utterance, vulnerability is dependent on our being as socially constituted bodies—they are a site of agency and the perception by an "Other" (Butler 2003, 10; 15). To have vulnerability then, means that this second, presumably already vulnerable party considers one's life worth protecting. The Other recognizing one's proneness to harm is a "precondition for humanization" and strongly depends on preexisting norms of humanness and modes of recognition (Butler 2003, 30). Therefore, if one is already not legible as a human subject, for example because of an unintelligible performance of gender, the recognition of one's susceptibility to violence and vulnerability will also be denied. Through a discourse of vulnerability and dehumanization, a privileged group may weaponize their own perceived and recognized vulnerability as an excuse to inflict harm on those not considered human. To Butler, this is evident in the modes of dehumanization occurring to victims of the military:

There is no obituary for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be. If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, *a life that qualifies for recognition*. Although we might argue that it would be impractical to write obituaries for all those people, or for all people, I think we have to ask, again and again, how the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. (Butler 2003, 22–23, emphasis added)

The dehumanization here is most clearly expressed in the lack of acknowledgment of individuality through obituaries. Consequently, one's ability to be mourned and grieved is dependent on their vulnerability and grievability is a result of the discourse of who can be vulnerable. In this way, grief is not only an acknowledgment that one has lost a part of their social constitution, but also the ascription of value to the life that has been lost.

Transphobia has the power to deny *vulnerability* to openly trans people and instead allocates it to the idea of a separate, pre-transition self. Butler (2003, 20–21) writes that grief is hierarchical, and that queer lives are often “tidied up and summarized, humanized, usually married, or on the way to be, heterosexual, happy, monogamous”. In this way, the only life worth grieving is the one that has not yet come out—or whose coming-out can be denied—as they have not destroyed that initial barrier of hegemonic recognition: gendered heteronormative intelligibility. Consequently, the queer life is dehumanized, it is beyond and after the cishet⁴ life that has to be mourned—and is therefore not a life that “exists”. This dehumanization is furthered by repeated violence, as Butler explains.

4 “Cishet” is the abbreviation for cisgender and heteronormative—a person who is heterosexual and whose sex assigned at birth aligns with their gender.

They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never “were,” and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object. The derealization of the “Other” means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral. (Butler 2003, 22)

In other words, structural violence casts a condition of derealization, which denies the facts of one's existence, which Butler describes with “spectral” states of being. Instances of physical violence against people that are “spectral” can then be considered the expression of the discursive dehumanization of culture (Butler 2003, 22). The cultural status of trans people as “already dead” seems to linger around them, starting as early as the moment they are first named—a trans person's birth name is often referred to as their “deadname”. Yet this deadname, as opposed a trans person's chosen name, is sometimes the only name mourned when trans youth commit suicide or are killed in hate crimes (Rummler 2024). In such instances, the legal name is discursively decided to be the one attached to a life (despite having already ‘died’), whereas the chosen name of a person is erased from the process of mourning, along with their queer identity.

This misalignment of vulnerability and exposure to harm is also present in “TV Glow”, where Isabel is a fictional, dream-like character to Owen, only accessible to them through self-martyrdom. Owen's unwillingness to bury themselves alive, i.e. transition, is deeply connected to the social alienation and loss of connection trans people may experience after coming out. One cannot be recognised as *vulnerable* and be denied a life by being *spectral* at the same time. Ideally, a life could be recognized as a continuous whole, independent of one's queerness, but as mentioned before, social legibility is dependent on preexisting norms. Violating these norms through transition signals the abandonment and death of the “pre-transition” self, and one cannot inhabit a life

that is considered dead. This “social death” both ends the access to the community and life one had before coming out, and pushes the openly trans person into a state of denied existence. Mourning their own, now inaccessible life is something Jane Schoenbrun describes as a major influence on the script of “TV Glow” (Seidlitz 2024). Owen’s choice mirrors one many trans people face: will they risk the relative stability of “home” for the uncertainty of becoming Isabel, someone they admire, who is beautiful and strong?

Vulnerability and grievability are modes of bestowing a life with recognition of its value. Cultural discourse has the power to claim one life as worthy of protection, and support dehumanizing violence onto those it considers un-vulnerable. Transphobic discourse separates a trans person’s life into two lives, of which only the pre-transition life is grievable. This creates a sort of “social death” of the pre-transition self, in which only the cis het future is and can be mourned. Because of this separation created in transphobic communities, transition is often connected to abandoning the life one has built before coming out. It also means that, after losing the connections and safekeeping of one’s former community, one is newly exposed to transphobic violence seeking to finalize the cultural denial of their existence. In this way, a transphobic social death is one of the barriers of transitioning safely, and regaining the recognition of one’s vulnerability is key in establishing a socially constituted identity.

3. The Labor of Discovering Your (Trans) Self

The establishing of one’s identity, however, is an entire labor of its own, contingent on decisions, working through memories and reflecting on oneself. To Sartre, one “is nothing else than which he makes of himself” (Kaufmann 1989, 3). The essence of one’s being is fully in one’s own hands, and a choice should be made in the recognition that one is fully autonomous and responsible for it. Sartre emphasizes that there is no higher, infallible moral code but that of the choice-maker; and that “[e]verything is indeed

permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself” (Kaufmann 1989, 5).

Thereby Sartre describes this forced self-dependence as ‘abandonment’, and the necessity to make choices with total freedom but no guidance as ‘anguish’ (Kaufmann 1989, 7). Maddy personifies an almost ideal choice-maker, who experiences the abandonment of parental abuse, and opts to free herself from the oppressive structures. Her choice to leave is entirely her own, and it is in search of her true identity. Maddy takes the “leap towards existence” by burying herself—the only way she can achieve that transition to the plane of reality she considers true (Kaufmann 1989, 3).

In contrast to Owen, Maddy does not deceive herself about her sense of belonging to the Midnight Realm of the suburbs. Sartre describes self-deception, such as the declaration that “values are incumbent upon” the self, as “dissimulation” of one’s freedom to independent choice making and commitment (Kaufmann 1989, 12). To Sartre, claiming to be bound by imposed values is a contradiction of the self, and the harm of that can be seen with Owen. Owen’s deception is the idea that she still has a home in the suburbs which alienated and oppressed her through their transphobic values.

In comparison to Maddy, Owen is prevented from action mainly by her inability to overcome anguish. Sartre claims that “one need not hope in order to undertake one’s work” but should rather just do what is realistically possible (Kaufmann 1989, 8). While both teens face hopelessness and abandonment, their coping strategies to their anguish differ strongly. Maddy’s only inspiration is her future self Tara, and where Owen succumbs to self-deception, Maddy chooses to rediscover herself and create a future that is defined by her own actions. For Owen, the labor of rediscovering herself cannot be undertaken without hope. Where Maddy writes her own rules, Owen tends to follow Maddy’s lead, and in her absence, the rules imposed by the societal values of

the suburb. Under Sartre's understanding and in the context of the movie, Owen is a coward, who "hide[s] from this total freedom" of escaping with Maddy (Kaufmann 1989, 8).

To say Owen is only a coward for not braving the loss of her home would be reductive. Throughout "TV Glow", we see Owen attempt to take control, but her father's presence keeps her down from the very beginning. The first time we see him is when he scorns Owen for wanting to watch a show he considers "for girls" (fig. 9), and his transphobia lingers in Owen's decisions long after his passing. Consequently, we see Owen hide any aspects that could betray her trans identity to her father, including the show itself.

Nietzsche names this mode of self-construction as "guilty", and defines it as the deception of others through concealing aspects of one's identity (Franco 2018, 65). In this way, Owen's Sartrean self-deception overlaps with Nietzsche's. Owen's deception is a coping mechanism for ensuring her survival in the suburbs, but it prevents her from living authentically as Isabel.



Figure 9. Still from Schoenbrun, "TV Glow" (00:24:15)

The mode of self-conception Nietzsche considers more authentic relies on preexisting, personal traits such as passions and drives to build a "unique and productive system that is more reflective of our whole self" (Franco 2018, 65). This innocent self achieves what Nietzsche later notes as qualities of becoming who you are—"no longer being ashamed of oneself" by integrating all aspects of the self (Franco 2018, 71–72). Like Sartre, Nietzsche claims that we have agency over how we construct ourselves, and he compares it to the work of an artist or a gardener. Instead of concealing an aspect of ourselves, we should arrange them all—no matter if we like them or not—to create a harmonious whole and nourish what is already there (Franco 2018, 70). By focusing on arranging all our inner drives and passions for ourselves rather than for conformity, we avoid deceiving ourselves and alienating us from our true, authentic selves (Franco 2018, 60).

This reorganization process is something a trans person might struggle with, considering the processes of dismantling internalized gender norms and suppressed interests. However, to recreate and rediscover yourself is a vital part of surviving and constructing your identity. The idea of fully accepting yourself and not being ashamed of yourself is something not only mental for us trans people, but also something physical and interpersonally performative—we may change our names, our pronouns, and other socially gendered cues of behavior. There, the aesthetic self mirrors the work some trans people may perform on themselves in an embodied manner; through medical transition, body modification, and other markers of gender expression. To deepen this analysis, I want to consult Charlie Chowdhry's (2026) concept of the Epimethean body, which he coined in his essay "Sharing in the Act of Creation". In short, Chowdhry uses the Epimethean body in describing the physical alterations trans people perform in the process of finding wellbeing in their socially perceived bodies. This term supports itself in the myth of Epimetheus, who was tasked to supply every living creature with resources and skills to aid its survival, but had none left for humans once he reached

them, prompting Prometheus to bless humans with wisdom and fire stolen from the gods (Plato 321c). Chowdhry writes that, metaphorically, “our physical form was designed by the god Epimetheus (321c), but our condition had to be altered after our ‘Epimethean’ bodies were created, in order to ensure our survival”—without this physical change, the Epimethean cannot sustain itself (2026, 126). Transformative acts of transition are a manner of identity-shaping in nature, creating a body—the transsexual body—that is reflective of trans identity (129).

In other words, the Epimethean is similar to the internal “gardening” of the aesthetic self, and acts as the rough material for the transsexual body. Similarly to the innocent self, the transsexual body is the creative outcome of an idea of radical inclusion and focus on the inner values of the self, rather than hegemonic pressures of conformity (Franco 2018, 64). For this transition, the trans person is required to recognise its proneness to harm—the Epimethean’s inability to survive without transition. Giving *vulnerability* to the Epimethean in recognition of its inability to survive is, however, denied by the hurdle of social death. Social death, and the hegemonic urge to sum up trans people’s lives to fit the cisheteronormative ideal, separates the Epimethean from the existence of the transsexual body and outright denies the possibility of the transsexual body itself. Since the pre-transition Epimethean is considered separate from the transsexual, a change beyond recognition into an identity which no longer reflects the imposed ideals poses a threat to the perceived cishet Epimethean. Consequently, the idea that the pre-transition self is dying inherently positions the transsexual body as a threat, which causes social death and kills the Epimethean body. In contrast, the recognition of the *vulnerable* state of the Epimethean instead understands the necessity of transition and welcomes the transsexual body as a shelter from harm for the trans person who is yet to transition, portraying the two as a connected continuum.

In “TV Glow”, we see both the Epimethean body and the transsexual body. Owen is a strong example of the former, as she is physi-

cally unable to survive without the transsexual transformation into Isabel. Owen’s asthma is portrayed as a direct consequence to the experience of her true self being buried alive, and Owen is decaying rapidly because of her ignorance towards Isabel’s condition. Another Epimethean is Maddy, but she manages to transform herself early and arrives within her transsexual body Tara. Nietzsche’s idea that one needs to lose oneself to satisfy genuine self-knowledge can be found in the act of self-burial that Maddy undergoes (Franco 2018, 73). In this instance, Maddy losing herself through her burial represents the beginning of her unveiling her trans identity by discarding and revisiting the knowledge she has of herself. She accepts the possibility of losing herself fully, as she stands to gain nothing from continuing in her Epimethean body.

The labor of discovering oneself from a trans perspective then, is a synthesis of Nietzsche’s thoughts on the innocent self and Chowdhry’s Epimethean body. It requires a process of understanding of which the drives and passions are in accordance with your trans identity, the unlearning of harmful norms and the creative act of transitioning your Epimethean body into a transsexual body. For this transition, it is necessary to recognize the vulnerability of the Epimethean body and its need to be transformed in order to sustain the life of the trans person.

4. Action Within Your Own Possibilities

Ideally, this creative labor of self-discovery and transformation would only require introspection and unlearning. However, as established in the second section of this essay, trans identities cannot be recognized in an environment that denies them legibility. Further, under culturally sedimented attacks, such as queerphobia for the sake of ‘traditional family values’, the introspection and transformative labor might take second place to surviving, as a visibly trans identity might pose risks of being attacked. To make an ideally autonomous choice about how one wants to transition,

one must still carefully evaluate if one's current environment is a safe place to transition in, and allows the recognition and legibility of a trans self.

In recent years, the difficulty about navigating a trans identity has worsened, with increased legal and cultural transphobia. To contextualize my argument, I chose three recent studies on transphobia and the trans experience in the US. Maggie Price et al. (2024) focus on the correlation of structural transphobia and psychological distress in transgender individuals, Wilson Lee et al. (2024) connect recent transphobic laws to increased suicidality among trans and nonbinary youth, and Jack Turban et al. (2021) investigate reasons for detransitioning. The common message between these three studies is one of increasing transphobia and lack of support for the trans people suffering under it. Maggie Price et al. (2024) noted that transgender adults have the "highest rates of suicide attempt of any demographic group in the US" as a consequence of exposure to transphobia (289). Lee et al. noted that trans people, especially young ones, are more strongly impacted and thus at higher risk of suicidal inclinations as a result of transphobic laws.

Such laws may exacerbate social isolation, hinder educational access and achievement, and as a result, limit economic opportunities through wage and other systemic disparities. The laws that pose barriers to quality healthcare, especially gender-affirming care, may undermine overall life satisfaction by reducing access to necessary healthcare that could save lives. (Lee et al. 2024, 2102)

Another effect of interpersonal and legal pressure on trans individuals is detransitioning. While the term has become a politicized tactic to further limit necessary healthcare for trans individuals, most people1 detransitioned due to at least one external factor. External factors here describe "any forces outside the person [...]" e.g. pressure from family, pressure from an employer, and loss

of health insurance coverage for gender-affirming hormones" (Turban et al. 2021, 274). In their study "Factors Leading to 'Detransition'", Turban et al. (2021, 277) emphasize that these external factors not only cause poor mental health in trans individuals but also pose "obstacles to safely living in one's gender identity and expression". Detransitioning more strongly affected trans women, bisexual, and nonbinary people. Turban et al. (2021, 274) suggest a connection to the breaking of heteronormative monogamous societal expectations these identities entail. This hypothesis mirrors Butler's ideas on *vulnerability*, with the aforementioned groups having to detransition into an identity that is considered more legible to their surroundings, in order to protect their wellbeing and shield themselves from dehumanization. Another common answer for reasons of detransitioning was lacking family support, which supports Price et al.'s findings on interpersonal transphobia (Turban et al. 2021, 277). Schoenbrun thematizes this tension of family acceptance and estrangement in "TV Glow":

I think many people, even if they are sympathetic to narratives of biological-family estrangement, still want to believe in resolution or restorative reparative work. And I think this does a disservice to queer people who are not in control of whether that work can be done. (Schoenbrun qtd. in Seidlitz 2024)

Neither Maddy nor Owen are ever shown to have positive relations with their trans identities to their respective fathers. With the film's ending, it is uncertain if Owen ever manages to break the hold her father's idealized concept of home has on her, and if she will break out of her cycle of appeasing and apologizing for her transness. Schoenbrun, with their quote, emphasizes the specific difficulties in navigating queer life that paint Nietzsche's ideas on autonomy and suffering for self-knowledge as privileged. While he claims that one should not remain in a life that limits you, he also does not acknowledge the privilege necessary to simply move

away (Franco 2018, 64–65). Trans people like Owen might need to abandon their home fully, and the mental and material resources of recovering from the suffering that Nietzsche highlights as an important tool of self-discovery are hard to muster up in a system set out to de-humanize you. In short, the possibilities of action for self-discovery are greatly dependent on how supportive or transphobic the legal and personal structures around a trans person are.

5. The Importance of Community

As a creative process, transitioning is highly influenced by one's position as a socially constituted body, and one's environment may take an active part in harming and hindering transition. Self-discovery in a state of non-vulnerability or un-reality is difficult. Overcoming the hurdles of transphobia is then, first and foremost, an issue of community, as community affects the status of one's *vulnerability* and therefore the recognition of one's humanness. Butler (2003, 16) suggests that a struggle for autonomy should invariably also be a struggle of "a conception of myself as invariably in community, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well". One's environment should positively impact oneself, but one cannot neglect the effect that one also has on joining a community. In deliberate choice of trans-friendly environments, vulnerability may be restored within the community first. This vulnerability is necessary for the work of transforming the Epimethean body in both a mental and material sense. Queer networks go beyond mental support, ranging from theoretical debates and political actions to parties, movie nights, and networks about queer-friendly medical practices. Furthermore, local queer organizations ease the creative work of transitioning by placing the Epimethean in a community of fellow "artists". Defining yourself with the support of a community whose metaphorical language you speak also means that there is space to fail and reattempt. As Nietzsche said, inspiration is sometimes necessary, and an environment that encourages experimentation is equally necessary to create an existence which has yet to take form. The

importance of community is also present in "TV Glow", with Owen and Maddy, as well as Isabel and Tara, acting as the guardians to each other's vulnerability. Maddy encourages Owen to play around with gender expression, and together, they have faced the antagonist before. It is only through separation that they lose themselves and are thrown into the oppressive world of the suburbs. Furthermore, Owen and Maddy's companionship in the Midnight Realm also reflects the possibility of persevering through transphobic structures by finding smaller safe spaces which act as refuge.

Conclusion

In this essay, I investigated the question of how one can safely transition in a transphobic environment. To tackle this question in an analysis of the 2024 film "I Saw the TV Glow", I employed Nietzsche, Sartre, and Chowdhry to navigate transitioning, and Butler to understand mechanisms of transphobia. Because of the socially contextual and dependent nature of identity formation, I have concluded that transitioning in a hostile environment is not safely possible. Due to a lack of humanization afforded to outed trans people, social death prevents a contingency of the trans person's life. They are metaphorically split off from life after they come out and are at risk of physical violence due to their lack of vulnerability. This does, however, not mean that transitioning itself is not possible. Instead, seeking refuge in queer communities may offer a safe space to be trans, and may help in assembling a community for support in a change of environment. Reinstating one's vulnerability is of primary importance for transitioning and living as a trans person, and can be achieved by joining these spaces. This is especially important, since not transitioning is not an option for many trans people either due to its mental health consequences. This argument of the necessity of transitioning most directly relates to Chowdhry's concept of the Epimethean body, where transitioning is a life-sustaining act of creative self-making. In accordance with Nietzsche, this self-making should not be forced by a hegemonic power, but be an individual, free decision of inclu-

sion and acceptance. Because this inclusion fashions all parts of the self, the condition of social death must be overcome. Overcoming social death requires the recognition that the mere existence of the Epimethean is not sustainable and requires transitioning into the transsexual. Thus, bestowing vulnerability onto the Epimethean as a body explicitly in need of transition also gives vulnerability to the trans person. The end goal of transitioning as a means of self-discovery is to no longer feel the shame perpetuated through cultural habits and behaviors, to create a transsexual body which reflects the inner self. These conclusions are also present in the object of analysis, Jane Schoenbrun's film "I Saw the TV Glow". Their film reflects trans experience of those who are in a hostile environment, and feel as though they are trapped and suffocating due to the impossibility of their existence. "TV Glow" also offers reassurance and recognition to trans viewers, showing the importance of community and emphasizing the fact that "[t]here is still time".

References

- Butler, Judith. 2003. "Violence, Mourning, Politics." In *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4 (1): 9–37. doi.org/10.1080/15240650409349213.
- Chowdhry, Charlie. 2026. "Sharing in the Act of Creation." *Splijtstof* 53 (3): 123–33. <https://www.splijtstof.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Splijtstof-53-3.pdf>.
- ZDFheute. 2025. "Elon Musk Bei AfD-Wahlkampfveranstaltung Zugeschaltet." *Politik: Deutschland*. January 26. www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/afd-elon-musk-wahlkampf-100.html.
- Franco, Paul. 2018. "Becoming Who You Are: Nietzsche on Self-Creation." In *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 49 (1): 52–77. doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.49.1.0052.
- Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ). 2023. "Merz Fordert Hürden Für Geschlechtsanpassungen." FAZ.NET, September 16. www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/merz-fordert-huerden-fuer-geschlechtsanpassungen-19179071.html.
- Gebhard, David, and Patricia Hoffhaus. 2023. "Abgrenzung Zur AfD: So Bröckelt Die CDU-Brandmauer." *ZDFheute*. www.zdf.de/nachrichten/politik/deutschland/afd-cdu-zusammenarbeit-brandmauer-100.html.
- Grierson, Tim. 2024. "'I Saw the TV Glow': Sundance Review." *ScreenDaily*, January 24. www.screendaily.com/reviews/i-saw-the-tv-glow-sundance-review/5189598.article.
- Hamilton, Phillip. 2024. "What Is the 'I Saw the TV Glow' TikTok Trend? The Meaning Behind the Viral Trans Acceptance Trend Explained." *Know Your Meme*. knowyourmeme.com/editorials/guides/what-is-the-i-saw-the-tv-glow-tiktok-trend-the-meaning-behind-the-viral-trans-acceptance-trend-explained.
- Hecht, Patricia. 2025. "Friedrich Merz' Queerfeindlichkeit: „Zirkuszeit“-Aussage Erntet Kritik." *Taz*, July 2. <https://taz.de/Friedrich-Merz-Queerfeindlichkeit/!6094716/>.
- Kaufman, Walter. 1989. "Existentialism as a Humanism." In *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*. Translated by Philip Mairet. Meridian Publishing Company.
- Kinnvall, Catarina, and Ted Svensson. 2022. "Exploring the Populist 'Mind': Anxiety, Fantasy, and Everyday Populism." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24 (3): 526–42. doi.org/10.1177/13691481221075925.
- Lee, Wilson Y., J. Nicholas Hobbs, Steven Hobaica, Jonah P. DeChants, Myeshia N. Price, and Ronita Nath. 2024. "State-level Anti-transgender Laws Increase Past-year Suicide Attempts Among Transgender and Non-binary Young People in the USA." *Nature Human Behaviour* 8: 2096–106. doi.org/10.1038/s41562-024-01979-5.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2001. "The Gay Science: Basic Writings." In *Existentialism*. Edited by Charles Guignon and Derk Pereboom. Hackett Publishing Company.
- Plato. 1997. "Protagoras." In *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Hackett.
- Price, Maggi A., Nathan L. Hollinsaid, Sarah McKetta, Emily J. Mellen, and Marina Rakhilin. 2023. "Structural Transphobia Is Associated With Psychological Distress and Suicidality in a Large

National Sample of Transgender Adults.” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 59 (2): 285–94. doi.org/10.1007/s00127-023-02482-4.

Rummler, Orion. 2025. “‘They’re Erased’: When Trans People Are Misgendered After Death, the Consequences Extend Beyond Paper.” *the 19th*, January 11. <https://19thnews.org/2023/01/trans-people-misgendering-death-certificates/>.

Seidlitz, Holden. 2024. “Jane Schoenbrun Finds Horror Close to Home.” *The New Yorker*. June 10th. www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/jane-schoenbrun-finds-horror-close-to-home.

Schoenbrun, Jane, dir. 2024. *I Saw the TV Glow*. Fruit Tree.

Tagesschau. 2025. “Das Wahlergebnis Im Überblick.” Bundestagswahl 2025. www.tagesschau.de/wahl/archiv/2025-02-23-BT-DE/index-content.shtml.

Turban, Jack L., Stephanie S. Loo, Anthony N. Almazan, and Alex S. Keuroghlian. 2021. “Factors Leading to ‘Detransition’ Among Transgender and Gender Diverse People in the United States: A Mixed-Methods Analysis.” In *LGBT Health* 8 (4): 273–80. doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2020.0437.

Thoreson, Ryna. 2025. “Trump Administration Moves to Reject Transgender Identity, Rights.” *Human Rights Watch*, January 23. www.hrw.org/news/2025/01/23/trump-administration-moves-reject-transgender-identity-rights.

Zandt, Florian. 2024. “How Common Are Hate Crimes Against Queer People?” *Statista Daily Data*, November 20. www.statista.com/chart/32260/number-of-reported-hate-crime-incidents-in-the-us-targeting-the-lgbtqia-community.

De weg naar bevrijding

Is het afschaffen van het onderdrukkende genderbinaire model echt afhankelijk van bio-technologische ontwikkelingen?

Fleur van Schaijk

De schrijver zou graag de redacteuren van *Splijststof* willen bedanken voor hun zeer gewaardeerde feedback op eerdere versies van dit artikel.

1. Inleiding

Is een wereld zonder gender wel mogelijk? Is dit wenselijk en hoe ziet de weg hiernaartoe eruit? Het genderbinaire model is een van de fundamenteën van onze maatschappij. Het genderbinaire model kan worden uitgelegd als het verschijnsel dat gender, net zoals sekse, altijd wordt opgedeeld in twee delen: het mannelijke gender en het vrouwelijke gender. Deze tweedelingen zijn gebaseerd op de twee geslachten: het mannelijke en het vrouwelijke geslacht. Intersekse en non-binaire mensen worden hierbij altijd vergeten.

Dvorsky en Hughes (2008), die zich bezig houden met gender in relatie tot bio-technologische ontwikkelingen, stellen dat het genderbinaire model op dit moment nog niet zou kunnen worden opgeheven. We zouden namelijk afhankelijk zijn van toekomstige technologische ontwikkelingen om de biologische verschillen, met name het feit dat de een het kind draagt¹ en baart, en de ander deze capaciteiten niet heeft, tussen man en vrouw op te heffen (Dvorsky en Hughes 2008, 3).

Twee van de meest bekende filosofen die zich bezighouden met sekse- en genderverschillen, Judith Butler (aangehaald door

1 Dvorsky en Hughes gebruiken het woord ‘vrouw’ in hun artikel vaak zonder er nadrukkelijk bij te vermelden dat er ook personen zijn die zich niet als vrouw identificeren, maar wel het vermogen hebben om zwanger te raken en een kind te baren. Ook bij De Beauvoir zien we deze aanname. Deze aanname is wat mij betreft onwenselijk, aangezien je van een hele groep mensen hun bestaan ontkent. Ik zal in dit artikel deze denkfout zo veel

Dvorsky en Hughes) en Simone de Beauvoir (niet behandeld door Dvorsky en Hughes), geven in hun werken echter aanknopingspunten om te kunnen stellen dat de biologische verschillen tussen ‘man’ en ‘vrouw’ helemaal niet ten grondslag liggen aan het genderbinair model. Mijn stelling is dus, contra Dvorsky en Hughes, dat het opheffen van het genderbinair model wel mogelijk is onafhankelijk van bio-technologische ontwikkelingen.

Dit artikel kijkt specifiek naar de werken van Butler, omdat Butlers werk vaak leidend is in hedendaagse discussies over gender en bijna altijd wordt aangehaald ter argumentatie van postgenderistische overtuigingen (Dvorsky en Hughes 2008, 7). Daarbij beschrijft Nicholas in “Philosophical Argument for Post-Gender Ontological Ethics” hoe Butler verder borduurt op de ideeën uit *The Second Sex* maar zich hier ook tegen afzet (Nicholas 2014, 86). Daarom is het—enerzijds om Butlers theorie beter te kunnen begrijpen, maar anderzijds ook om De Beauvoir zelf te bestuderen met het oog op het postgenderisme—wenselijk om zowel naar de visie van De Beauvoir als die van Butler op gender te kijken.

Dit artikel is als volgt opgebouwd: Eerst wordt er verder ingegaan op de stroming van het postgenderisme (Sectie 2). Daarna zal worden uiteengezet hoe De Beauvoir het verschil tussen man en vrouw lijkt te interpreteren in *The Second Sex* (Sectie 3). In de volgende sectie wordt gekeken hoe Butler het begrip gender interpreteert in diens “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (Sectie 4). Tenslotte wordt in de conclusie samengevat hoe we op basis van de werken van De Beauvoir en Butler tot de conclusie komen dat er geen bio-technologische ontwikkelingen nodig zijn om het genderbinair model op te heffen, in tegenstelling tot wat het

mogelijk proberen te vermijden. Wanneer ik de categorie ‘vrouw’ toch op deze manier neerzet op bepaalde punten in dit artikel is dat in navolging van een gerefereerde auteur en niet onderdeel van mijn eigen opvatting.

postgenderisme veronderstelt. Daarbij zal ik ook de implicaties van deze stelling en de bijdrage aan de literatuur onderschrijven in de conclusie (Sectie 5).

2. Het postgenderisme

In deze sectie wordt dieper ingegaan op het postgenderisme aan de hand van enkele auteurs die zich met deze stroming bezighouden. Er wordt daarbij vooral gekeken naar de spanning tussen het idee dat het genderbinair model niet alleen door technologische vooruitgang ondermijnd kan worden (Ferrando 2014) en auteurs die beweren dat deze ondermijning alleen maar kan worden bewerkstelligd met bio-technologische ingrepen (Dvorsky en Hughes 2008).

Een auteur die over de toekomst van gender heeft geschreven is feministisch-wetenschapsfilosoof Donna Haraway. In haar werk *A Cyborg Manifesto* beschrijft Haraway dat een *cyborg*—een smelting tussen mens en machine—in een “postgender world” zal leven (2016, 8). Ze beschrijft hoe, door middel van technologische ontwikkelingen, de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw uiteindelijk zullen verdwijnen. Dit zou bijvoorbeeld mogelijk zijn door uitvindingen zoals artificiële baarmoeders, die vrouwen kunnen ontlasten van het dragen en baren van een kind.

Door dit soort technologische ingrepen zouden we hypothetisch gezien afstand kunnen nemen van het huidige genderbinair model: het dominante idee dat er twee (binaire) geslachten, en dus ook twee genders zijn, namelijk man en vrouw. Dit gedachtegoed rondom deze hypothetische afschaffing van het genderbinair model heeft later de term ‘postgenderisme’ gekregen, vernoemd naar het werk van Haraway.

In haar artikel “Is the post-human a post-woman? Cyborgs, robots, artificial intelligence and the futures of gender: a case study” beschrijft Francesca Ferrando, posthumanistisch filosoof aan de Universiteit van New York, het postgenderisme als volgt: “Postgenderism refers to a hypothetical phase of the future during which the human sexual difference might be voluntarily overcome

through the application of advanced biotechnologies” (Ferrando 2014, 11). Het is dus belangrijk om te beseffen dat aanhangers van het postgenderisme niet verwijzen naar iets wat heden ten dage al bestaat. Het gaat over een hypothetische fase ergens in de toekomst waarin seksuele differentiatie ofwel niet meer bestaat, of een drastisch andere vorm heeft gekregen door middel van technologische ontwikkelingen.

Ferrando (2014, 11) schrijft in haar werk dat Haraway niet een utopische postgendermaatschappij voor ogen had: “...this is not ‘post-gender’ in a utopian, beyond masculine-and-feminine sense, which it is often taken to mean” (Haraway 2004, 328). Ferrando stelt dat het nog onduidelijk is wat er met gender gaat gebeuren, zeker met de steeds groter wordende invloed van technologie op onze biologie. Het lijkt haar voordehandliggend dat gender zoals het nu, vaak binair, gedefinieerd wordt, een andere invulling zal krijgen. In plaats van de assimilatie of neutralisatie van gender (de utopische variant waar Haraway naar verwijst), zouden er namelijk zomaar meer gendervarianten bij kunnen komen (Ferrando 2014, 11).

Dit zou echter niet betekenen dat gender en de invloed van dit fenomeen op de maatschappij compleet zou verdwijnen. Aangezien gender zo’n grote rol in onze geschiedenis heeft gespeeld, zal de invloed van dit begrip niet ineens verdwenen zijn en misschien zelfs nooit verdwijnen, aldus Ferrando (2014, 11). Ferrando onderstreept in haar artikel dus ook de belangrijke rol van sociale constructie als grondslag van het genderbinair model.

Er zijn echter ook aanhangers van het postgenderisme die wel overtuigd zijn dat het afschaffen van het genderbinair model mogelijk is. Zo bepleiten Dvorsky en Hughes dat technologische ontwikkelingen uiteindelijk het genderbinair model zullen doen slijten. Ze schrijven het volgende in “Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary”: “Postgenderism is an extrapolation of ways that technology is eroding the biological, psychological and social role of gender, and an argument for why the erosion of binary gender will be liberatory” (2018, 2). Volgens Dvorsky en Hughes moeten we

een postgender-maatschappij dus uitleggen als een maatschappij waarin het genderbinair model is opgeheven. Zo’n maatschappij kan volgens hen echter alleen ontstaan wanneer de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw zijn opgeheven doormiddel van technologische vooruitgang.

De visie op het postgenderisme van Dvorsky en Hughes, en Haraway veronderstelt, contra Ferrando, dat biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw ten grondslag liggen aan de tweeslag tussen het mannelijke en vrouwelijke gender. Daarom veronderstellen zij ook dat er technologische ontwikkelingen nodig zijn om deze binariteit op te heffen.

De Beauvoir en Butler geven echter argumenten om tot de stelling te komen dat de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw niet ten grondslag liggen aan de genderverschillen tussen man en vrouw.

3. Gender bij De Beauvoir

Zoals in de sectie hierboven is besproken, veronderstelt het postgenderisme dat we technologische ontwikkelingen nodig hebben, zoals de ontwikkeling van artificiële baarmoeders, om het genderbinair model af te schaffen. Nu noemt De Beauvoir in haar werk nooit het woord ‘gender’. Echter, ze geeft ons wel een kritische kijk op de verschillen tussen man en vrouw, en waar deze vandaan lijken te komen.

Hoewel De Beauvoir nooit over gender spreekt, kunnen we wel een beschrijving van het genderbinair model vinden in haar boek *The Second Sex*. Daarbij zal ik aantonen dat er in dit boek ook argumenten staan voor het afschaffen van dit model. Tenslotte zal ik met behulp van De Beauvoir betogen dat biologische verschillen niet ten grondslag liggen aan dit genderbinair model en dat we dus niet afhankelijk zijn van de technologische ontwikkelingen waar aanhangers van het postgenderisme, zoals Dvorsky en Hughes, over spreken.

3.1. De mythe van de vrouw

Aangezien De Beauvoir het woord gender zelf nooit in *The Second Sex* of haar latere werken noemt, vinden sommige auteurs dan ook dat het werk van De Beauvoir helemaal niet een divisie tussen sekse en gender veronderstelt (Nicholas 2014, 87; Heinämaa 1997, 21-22). Een beschrijving van gender valt echter wel te vinden in het werk van De Beauvoir, namelijk in haar beschrijving van het fenomeen ‘de mythe van de vrouw’. Al in het begin van haar boek refereert De Beauvoir naar deze mythe (2015, 34).

Met de ‘mythe van de vrouw’ doelt De Beauvoir op het, volgens haar fictieve, onderscheid dat altijd wordt gemaakt tussen mannen en vrouwen. In deze mythe wordt de vrouw als de ‘Ander’ afgeschilderd ten opzichte van de man. De mythe van de vrouw is een web van fabels die aan de vrouw kleven. Deze fabels zijn vooroordelen over de vrouw. Een voorbeeld van zo’n fabeltje is het feit dat er altijd wordt gezegd dat vrouwen van nature beter zijn in het opvoeden van kinderen (De Beauvoir 2015, 827). Deze aanname wordt behandeld als een biologisch feit, maar is dat niet.²

Wat deze mythe van de vrouw een beschrijving van gender maakt is het feit dat De Beauvoir het hier niet over het biologische verschijnsel sekse heeft. De mythe is iets dat kunstmatig gekoppeld wordt aan de sekse ‘vrouw’ door de man, maar ook door de vrouw zelf. De mythe is niet een biologisch vastgelegd feit.

² Amerikaans onderzoek van Yogman en Eppel onder ouders naar hun visie op het vaderschap wijst bijvoorbeeld uit dat 53 procent nog steeds denkt dat vrouwen beter geschikt zijn voor het zorgen voor kinderen dan mannen. Ook werd daarbij aangegeven dat 64 procent van de ondervraagden denkt dat vrouwen en mannen een andere aanpak hebben in het opvoeden van kinderen. Van deze 64 procent dacht twee derde van de mannelijke respondenten dat dit verschil een biologische basis had. Terwijl twee derde van de moeders dacht dat dit komt door stereotyperende genderrollen en de verwachtingen die vanuit deze rollen worden opgewekt (Yogman en Eppel 2022, 18).

In de beschrijving van de mythe van de vrouw vindt men ook een beschrijving van het genderbinaire model. De Beauvoir beschrijft namelijk hoe er twee spelers in de mythe zijn: de man en de vrouw. Het model dat De Beauvoir omschrijft is nadelig voor leden van het vrouwelijke gender en voordelig voor leden van het mannelijke gender. De man wordt in dit model namelijk gedefinieerd als de standaard en de vrouw als de negatieve afwijking van deze standaard. De vrouw is de ‘Ander’, waar de man de ‘Ene’ is. Waar de man zichzelf poneert als de ‘Ene’, poneert hij de vrouw als de ‘Ander’. Dit zorgt ervoor dat de vrouw zichzelf nooit als subject kan positioneren; zij kan in dit geval alleen maar neergezet worden als vrouw, als object, door iemand anders (De Beauvoir 2015, 27).

Wat zegt dit over de toekomst van deze mythe, en dus over de toekomst van het genderbinaire model? De Beauvoir zegt het volgende over het afschaffen van de mythe van de vrouw: “Perhaps the myth of woman will be phased out one day: the more women assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of Other dies in them. But today it still exists in the hearts of all men” (2015, 196). Uit dit citaat valt op te maken dat volgens De Beauvoir biologische verschillen niet ten grondslag aan deze mythe liggen. Het genderbinaire model zou volgens De Beauvoir verdwijnen wanneer iedereen, ook de vrouw zelf, stopt met het behandelen van de vrouw als afwijking van de standaard (de man).

Kortom, De Beauvoir poneert wel degelijk een beschrijving van (het vrouwelijke) gender, ook al noemt ze het woord gender zelf niet. Gender in haar werk *The Second Sex* kan worden opgevat als het mythologische concept ‘vrouw’ dat naar de mannelijke standaard wordt gedefinieerd.³ De Beauvoir beargumenteert ook

³ Tegen mijn stelling zou terecht kunnen worden ingebracht dat het concept ‘gender’ ten tijde van De Beauvoirs *The Second Sex* nog niet was bedacht, dan wel in gebruik was. Ik denk echter dat het terecht is om dit framework (van het concept gender) te forceren op het werk van De Beauvoir. Ik beargumenteer echter dat dit framework ons wel houvast kan geven bij het bestuderen van De Beauvoirs behandelingen van de biologische verschillen

dat deze mythe zou kunnen verdwijnen, dat gepaard zou gaan met het verdwijnen van de onderdrukte positie van de vrouw. Het verdwijnen van deze mythe zou, mijns inziens, het einde van het genderbinair model inhouden omdat deze mythe, oftewel de culturele interpretatie van de twee geslachten, ten grondslag ligt aan dit model.

3.2. *De Beauvoir over biologische verschillen*

In de inleiding van dit artikel is gesteld dat gender niet alleen gedefinieerd kan worden door biologische verschillen en dat men daarom niet afhankelijk is van technologische ontwikkelingen als het aankomt op het afschaffen van gender. In de vorige paragraaf was de conclusie dat biologische verschillen niet ten grondslag liggen aan het genderbinair model, maar dat wat De Beauvoir de 'mythe van de vrouw' noemt.

Toch is het niet zo dat De Beauvoir de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw compleet negeert. Ze gaat in haar werk uitvoerig in op deze verschillen. In de benadering van De Beauvoir van de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw ligt het argument voor de stelling dat biologische verschillen niet opgeheven hoeven worden om het genderbinair model af te schaffen. We moeten alleen anders met deze verschillen omgaan. In het citaat hieronder is te lezen dat De Beauvoir de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw niet ontkent, maar stelt dat deze 'feiten' qua betekenis afhankelijk zijn van de maatschappelijke interpretatie hiervan:

In truth these facts cannot be denied: but they do not carry their meaning in themselves. As soon as we accept a human perspective, defining the body starting from existence,

tussen man en vrouw, omdat de 'mythe van de vrouw' die De Beauvoir beschrijft ook kan verdwijnen en omdat de biologische verschillen, hoewel ze wel de culturele kijk op vrouwen beïnvloeden, niet allesbepalend zijn voor het verschil tussen man en vrouw.

biology becomes an abstract science; when the physiological given (muscular inferiority) takes on meaning, this meaning immediately becomes dependent on a whole context; "weakness" is weakness only in light of the aims man sets for himself, the instruments at his disposal, and the laws he imposes. (2015, 69)

De vrouw wordt vaak als 'zwak' omschreven, aldus De Beauvoir (2015, 68), omdat zij minder hard kan rennen en minder zware gewichten kan tillen dan de gemiddelde man. Door een sociale betekenis aan deze biologische verschillen te geven worden deze 'feiten' gebruikt, of liever misbruikt, om de man als subject en de vrouw als object, de Ander, neer te zetten. Vrouwen kunnen namelijk alleen als 'zwak' beschreven worden, wanneer mannen, de standaard waarvan wordt afgeweken, als 'sterk' beschreven worden. Deze feiten hoever echter niet bepalend te zijn voor de positie van de vrouw, beargumenteert De Beauvoir. Daar komt bij dat dit soort negatieve verklaringen van biologische verschillen, met onderdrukking van het vrouwelijke geslacht tot gevolg, niet bij andere zoogdieren voorkomen.

The relation of maternity to individual life is naturally regulated in animals by the cycle of heat and seasons; it is undefined for woman; only society can decide; woman's enslavement to the species is tighter or looser depending on how many births the society demands and the hygienic conditions in which pregnancy and birth occur. (De Beauvoir 2015, 69)

Volgens De Beauvoir kan alleen de maatschappij beslissen wat er met het lichaam van een vrouw gebeurt. Dit is een indirect gevolg van de werking van de mythe van de vrouw, aangezien de man in deze mythe de controle over de vrouw heeft. Op deze manier verklaart De Beauvoir (2015, 66) ook de negatieve ervaringen die vrouwen met menstruatie en zwangerschap hebben. Deze

verschijnselen maken haar namelijk tot slaaf van de menselijke soort (69). Niet omdat alleen de vrouw zwanger kan worden, maar omdat ze over deze zwangerschap geen zeggenschap heeft zoals we in het citaat hierboven lezen.

Biologische verschillen liggen dus niet ten grondslag aan het genderbinair model, maar de mythe van de vrouw. Een implicatie van deze stellingname is dat zelfs wanneer mannen en vrouwen biologisch 'gelijk' zouden zijn, er nog steeds sprake zou zijn van een kunstmatig verschil tussen de beide seksen, aangezien zonder het opheffen van de mythe van de vrouw, de vrouw altijd volgens de mannelijke standaard zal worden benadeeld.

De biologische verschillen zijn dus niet de oorzaak van de ondergeschikte positie van de vrouw. Daarom hoeven we deze verschillen niet op te doeken door middel van technologie. Op de weg naar, of liever strijd voor, de afschaffing van het genderbinair model zouden we ons misschien meer moeten focussen op het veranderen van de connotatie en interpretatie van deze verschillen, in plaats van de biologische verschillen op te heffen. We moeten niet meer vanuit de mannelijke, oftewel de 'neutrale' standaard blijven redeneren. Het is aan ons om ons te bevrijden van deze standaard en de biologische verschillen te laten voor wat ze zijn: verschillen die de een met de biologische eigenschap 'x' niet beter maken dan de Ander met de biologische eigenschap 'y'.

Tenslotte volgt hieruit de volgende conclusie: het eroderen van de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw zal niet de afschaffing van het genderbinair model tot gevolg hebben. Daarom is het zo belangrijk dat er verder wordt gekeken dan alleen het opheffen van de biologische verschillen tussen de verschillende sekses.

3.3. Onderscheid tussen sekse en gender in De Beauvoir

In de vorige twee paragrafen is besproken dat De Beauvoir wel degelijk het biologische geslacht en gender van elkaar onderscheidt. Er zijn echter auteurs die, zoals ik in de inleiding van dit hoofdstuk al schreef, beweren dat er geen sprake is van zo'n onderscheid in het werk van De Beauvoir. Zo gaat Sara Heinämaa, Hoogleraar

Filosofie, in "What is a Woman? Butler and De Beauvoir on the Foundation of the Sexual Difference", in op Butlers interpretatie van De Beauvoir. Butlers interpretatie is fout volgens Heinämaa, omdat Butler ervan uitgaat dat het werk van De Beauvoir verhaalt over een onderscheid tussen sekse en gender. Heinämaa stelt dat het citaat van De Beauvoir "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (2015, 330) niet gaat over het aannemen van een gender, hier het vrouwelijke, maar over het 'vrouwelijke zijn' in het algemeen. Gender zou maar een aspect van het 'vrouwelijke zijn' omvatten (Heinämaa 1997, 32).

Hoewel ik Heinämaa volg in het feit dat De Beauvoir niet slechts over het vrouwelijke gender spreekt in haar werk, denk ik wel dat er sprake is van een zeker onderscheid dat De Beauvoir maakt tussen de vrouwelijke sekse en het vrouwelijke gender. Zo verhaalt De Beauvoir namelijk over het biologische verschijnsel 'vrouw', de vrouwelijke sekse, wanneer ze ingaat op menstruatie en zwangerschap (2015, 63-64). Wanneer De Beauvoir echter spreekt over de mythe van de vrouw, spreekt ze over iets wat niet biologisch is. Het klopt dat De Beauvoir beide beschrijvingen toekent aan de vrouw. De Beauvoir spreekt echter nooit over het verdwijnen het biologische fenomeen 'vrouw', het vrouwelijk geslacht.

Een andere schrijver die beargumenteert dat een onderscheid tussen sekse en gender niet nodig is in *The Second Sex*, is Lucy Nicholas, universitair hoofddocent gender en seksualiteit aan de universiteit van Sidney. Volgens haar is, net zoals Butler beargumenteert, sekse namelijk ook een op gender gebaseerde categorie. In hoofdstuk twee "Diagnosing & Transcending Sexual Difference" van haar boek *Queer Post-Gender Ethics* haalt Nicholas (2014, 33) een citaat van Wildeberg aan dat stelt dat "sex is just as socially constructed as gender" (1998, 134). In het licht van deze nieuwe visie op het fenomeen 'geslacht' zou volgens Nicholas het werk van De Beauvoir niet meer een onderscheid tussen sekse en gender hoeven te impliceren.

Ten eerste geldt ook hier weer hetgeen wat als tegenargument voor de opvatting van Heinämaa gold: de mythe van de vrouw. Wat

als beschrijving van het begrip gender geldt, staat los van de biologische verschillen tussen mannen en vrouwen die De Beauvoir beschrijft. Hierdoor is er wel sprake van een divisie tussen sekse en gender in het werk van De Beauvoir. Ten tweede geldt, los van De Beauvoir, als argument tegen de opvatting van Nicholas, dat er wel degelijk biologische verschillen zijn tussen mannen en vrouwen. Deze verschillen worden vaak als negatief voor de vrouw afgeschilderd, zoals De Beauvoir beschrijft (2015, 69). In dit soort gevallen is het benadrukken van de biologische verschillen tussen het mannelijke en het vrouwelijke geslacht niet wenselijk.

Het uit het oog verliezen van deze biologische verschillen, met name in de medische wereld, kan namelijk ook gevaarlijk zijn, bij uitstek voor personen van het vrouwelijke geslacht.⁴ Om Nicholas toch enigszins tegemoet te komen stel ik voor dat we onze interpretatie van de sekseverschillen zeker moeten bijstellen wanneer we het genderbinair model willen opheffen. Ik denk echter niet dat we de sekseverschillen volledig moeten negeren. We moeten kritisch kijken naar waar iemands gender stopt en waar diens sekse begint. Daarbij is er voldoende bewijs dat we het fenomeen ‘sekse’ net zo goed als het fenomeen ‘gender’ niet binair moeten opvatten.

4. Gender bij Butler

In het vorige hoofdstuk over *The Second Sex* van De Beauvoir is duidelijk geworden dat, volgens De Beauvoir, biologische verschillen niet ten grondslag liggen aan het genderbinair model.

⁴ Denk bijvoorbeeld aan het onderscheid tussen de ervaren klachten van vrouwen en mannen bij hartproblemen. Hoogleraar Cardiologie Angela Maas heeft bij het Radboudumc hier veel onderzoek naar gedaan. Zij waarschuwt voor het gelijk behandelen van mannen en vrouwen in medische context. Volgens haar zijn er veel vrouwen overleden aan hartfalen, omdat hun klachten niet overeenkwamen met de klachten van mannen. Daardoor waren deze klachten bij hen niet herkend en werd er te laat geconstateerd dat zij leden aan hartproblemen, met alle gevolgen van dien (Maas 2020, 22).

In dit hoofdstuk zal duidelijk worden dat Butler er een iets andere theorie over gender op nahoudt dan De Beauvoir: Butler heeft een theorie waarin niet de nadruk op specifiek het vrouwelijke gender ligt, zoals bij De Beauvoir, maar een theorie die verhaalt over gender in het algemeen. Hoe definieert Butler gender en welke rol hebben de biologische verschillen tussen de geslachten in diens theoretische kader?

In dit hoofdstuk zal eerst ingaan worden op hoe Butler gender definieert. Daarna zal er gekeken worden naar de limitaties van het kiezen van iemands gender en naar de invloed van biologische verschillen op gender. Tenslotte zal ik op basis van Butlers theorie over gender beargumenteren hoe men kan komen tot de afschaffing van het genderbinair model zonder de noodzaak van technologische vooruitgang.

4.1. Gender performativiteit

In het essay “Performative Acts and Gender constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist theory” beschrijft Butler het begrip ‘gender’ als iets dat niet vaststaat. Butler definieert gender als volgt: “Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (1988, 519). In dit citaat vermeldt Butler dat de realiteit van het fenomeen gender performatief is: iemands gender wordt pas een realiteit als diegene diens gender uitdraagt door middel van bepaalde handelingen, die steeds worden herhaald (1988, 527-28). Gender kan niet los van die handelingen (acts) bestaan. Als ik mij niet elke dag zou gedragen als een vrouw, zou ik ook niet meer het gender vrouw dragen. Gender bestaat dus, aldus Butler, uit verschillende handelingen die, wanneer zij herhaald worden, iemands gender vormen.

Bij Butler zijn het dus onze daden, en niet ons geslacht, die ten grondslag liggen aan ons gender. Wanneer men de theorie van Butler over gender aanneemt, komt men bij een *prima facie*-lezing van diens artikel tot de conclusie dat het niet nodig is om

door middel van technologische ontwikkelingen de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw op te heffen om zo het genderbinair model te laten verdwijnen.

Toch is dit te snel geconcludeerd: Butler stelt niet dat men volledig vrij is om diens eigen gender te kiezen. Er zit namelijk een limiet aan onze gendervrijheid: sociale conventies (Heinämaa 1997, 21).

4.2. *Sociale conventies als limiet aan gendervrijheid*

“This style is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history and that history conditions and limits possibilities.”

Judith Butler (1988, 52)

Onze repetitieve handelingen vormen een ‘style of being’, oftewel een belichaming van een verzameling strategieën waarmee iemand van dag tot dag door het leven gaat. Butler (1988, 521) beroept zich hier op Foucault en Sartre. Het is niet zo dat we volgens Butler ons gender kunnen kiezen. Een lichaam heeft namelijk een geschiedenis. Ons gender is verweven met deze geschiedenis en kan zich daar niet zomaar van loskoppelen.⁵ Het is wel zo dat we voor een deel ons gender kunnen beïnvloeden maar, volgens Butler (1988, 521), zit hier een limiet aan.

In Butlers theorie zijn het sociale conventies die het genderbinair model in stand houden (Butler 1988, 528). Dit zit als volgt in elkaar: Butler stelt dat gender niet vasthangt aan iemands natuurlijke geslacht, maar eerder aan iemands doen en laten. Sociale conventies spelen een rol in iemands doen en laten, en dragen op deze manier bij aan de constructie van iemands gender. Op deze manier zijn dus, volgens Butler, de sociale conventies, en niet sekse, bepalend voor de vorming van iemands gender.

⁵ Ook Ferrando onderschrijft dit (Ferrando 2014, 11) - zie sectie over postgenderisme.

Welke rol kan de theorie van Butler—over sociale conventies als limiet aan gendervrijheid—spelen in de weg naar de bevrijding van het genderbinair model? Om deze vraag te beantwoorden moeten we ons bewust zijn van het volgende: sociale conventies kunnen veranderen. Deze veranderingen kunnen inderdaad het gevolg zijn van technologische ontwikkelingen, maar dat is geen vereiste; sociale conventies kunnen ook veranderen zonder technologische ontwikkelingen. Kijk maar naar de acceptatie van leden van de lhbtqia+-gemeenschap. Zij werden de afgelopen decennia steeds meer geaccepteerd.⁶ Daar is geen technologische ontwikkeling aan te pas gekomen, maar de sociale conventie omtrent seksualiteit is wel veranderd.

Kortom, wanneer wij, als maatschappij, ervoor zouden kiezen om de sociale conventies rondom gender te laten varen, zou het genderbinair model worden opgeheven. De sociale conventies benadrukken op dit moment namelijk dat iemand zich ofwel als man, ofwel als vrouw moet gedragen. Wanneer deze veranderen, vervalt het binaire karakter van gender en dus het genderbinair model. Op deze manier zijn technologische ontwikkelingen niet noodzakelijk om het genderbinair model op te heffen.

Hier zou tegenin kunnen worden gebracht dat er indirect toch biologische verschillen ten grondslag liggen aan het genderbinair model, zelfs als sociale conventies een grote rol spelen bij de constructie van gender. Butler beargumenteert namelijk in diens artikel dat het genderbinair model voortkomt uit een strategische overweging voor het overleven van een cultuur (1988, 522). De conventie van heteronormativiteit, die een sterke rol heeft in het genderbinair model, is hier een voorbeeld van. Heteronormativiteit komt volgens Butler voort uit de noodzaak om de soort voort te planten (1988, 524). De voortplanting kan nu nog alleen voltrokken

⁶ Hiermee wil ik absoluut niet zeggen dat we al zijn waar we moeten zijn met betrekking tot de rechten van de lhbtqia+-gemeenschap, noch met betrekking tot hun acceptatie in de maatschappij (zowel in Nederland als wereldwijd).

worden door een man en een vrouw samen te brengen. Wanneer deze limietering weg zou vallen, zou ook de conventie van heteronormativiteit kunnen vervallen.

In dit geval lijkt het alleen met een technologische ontwikkeling mogelijk om dit biologische verschil, en zo de sociale conventie, op te heffen. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan artificiële baarmoeders, die een embryo dragen voor een koppel van twee mannen. Als gevolg van deze stelling zou Butlers theorie eerder bij het postgenderisme van Dvorsky en Hughes passen, dan bij mijn eigen visie op het postgenderisme. Zij stellen namelijk dat de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw eerst opgeheven moeten worden door middel van technologische ontwikkelingen, voordat voor dat we afstand kunnen doen van het genderbinaire model (2018, 2).

Butler stelt zelf echter, in navolging van Foucault, dat de aantrekkingskracht op de andere seks een cultureel en niet-natuurlijk gegeven is: “As Foucault and others have pointed out, the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural ‘attraction’ to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests” (1988, 524). Uit dit citaat volgt dat de sociale conventie van heteronormativiteit, die ten grondslag ligt aan het genderbinaire model, niet een natuurlijke, maar een culturele oorsprong heeft. Daarom kan er niet gesteld worden dat biologische verschillen ten grondslag liggen aan het genderbinaire model.

Verder kan er worden teruggegrepen op wat De Beauvoir zegt over biologische verschillen en de sociale conventies die daarvan afhankelijk zijn; ze zijn slechts interpretaties. De sociale conventies zijn verharde interpretaties van de verschillen tussen het vrouwelijke en het mannelijke geslacht. We hoeven dus alleen onze interpretatie van deze verschillen te veranderen om de sociale conventies op te heffen. Dan zou in de theorie van Butler het genderbinaire model opgeheven kunnen worden, aangezien de sociale conventies het limiet aan gender zijn.

Kortom, volgens Butler is gender dus performatief. Het limiet dat op gender ligt, volgens Butler, zijn de sociale conventies. Het klopt dat sociale conventies onder andere door technologische ontwikkelingen kunnen veranderen. Deze technologische ontwikkelingen zijn echter, zoals in dit hoofdstuk aangetoond, geen vereiste voor verandering van sociale conventies.

5. Conclusie: de weg naar bevrijding

In dit werkstuk is vastgesteld dat sommige aanhangers het postgenderisme, zoals Dvorsky en Hughes, veronderstellen dat we alleen met behulp van technologische ontwikkelingen het genderbinaire model kunnen opheffen. Aanhangers van het postgenderisme gaan er namelijk vanuit dat biologische verschillen tussen het mannelijke en vrouwelijke geslacht ten grondslag liggen aan dit model. Dit onderzoek is vertrokken vanuit de stelling dat dit niet het geval is. Hieruit volgt dat het onszelf bevrijden van het genderbinaire model niet afhankelijk is van technologische ontwikkelingen.

In het derde deel is geconcludeerd dat de opvatting van De Beauvoir over biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw in *The Second Sex* als argument geldt voor deze stelling. Zij stelt dat de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw er wel zijn, maar dat het belangrijker is hoe we deze biologische verschillen interpreteren dan dat ze er zijn (2015, 69). Aangezien het probleem dus niet in onze biologie ligt maar in de maatschappij, zullen de technologische ontwikkelingen niet de (enige) oplossing zijn waarmee we het genderbinaire model kunnen opheffen.

In Judith Butlers “*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*”, beschrijft die gender als performatief. In diens theoretische kader liggen sociale conventies, gebaseerd op strategische overleving, ten grondslag aan het genderbinaire model. Op deze manier geldt ook Butlers theorie van gender als argument voor de stelling dat we niet afhankelijk zijn van technologische vooruitgang om het genderbinaire model op te heffen.

Zo kunnen we dus stellen door de argumenten uit De Beauvoir en Butler samen te nemen dat we niet afhankelijk zijn van technologische ontwikkelingen om het genderbinair model op te heffen. Het zijn namelijk niet de biologische verschillen die dit genderbinair model in stand houden, maar onze sociaal-culturele interpretatie van deze verschillen. Daarbij zijn het ook de sociale conventies van een maatschappij die de binaire genderrollen in stand houden. Het probleem ligt niet in onze biologie, maar in onze maatschappij. De weg naar bevrijding van het genderbinair model moet niet vrijgemaakt worden door de technologie, maar door de mens als schepper van diens eigen identiteit.

5.1. *Implicaties en verder onderzoek*

Dit betoog heeft laten zien dat er meer schuilt achter het genderbinair model dan alleen de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw. Als gevolg hiervan kan men stellen dat technologische ontwikkelingen, die de biologische verschillen tussen man en vrouw doen eroderen, niet het genderbinair model zullen opheffen. De conclusie van dit artikel geldt als kritiek op het huidige dogma van het postgenderisme dat stelt dat dit wel het geval is. Tegelijkertijd geldt de behandeling van gender en het genderbinair model in dit werkstuk als een verbreding van het postgender-discours.

Dit betoog wil niet stellen dat technologische ontwikkelingen geen verschil in de omgang met gender kunnen maken. Het is echter gevaarlijk om ervan uit te gaan dat alleen de biologische verschillen ten grondslag liggen aan dit genderbinair model, zoals Dvorsky en Hughes bijvoorbeeld doen (2008, 2). Wanneer men hier namelijk vanuit gaat doet men tekort aan de ontwikkelingen die daadwerkelijk het verschil gaan maken: de socio-culturele ontwikkelingen op het gebied van gender.

Na het theoretiseren over hoe het genderbinair model het best opgeheven kan worden, rest ons tenslotte nog de vraag hoe een postgendermaatschappij—een maatschappij zonder genderbinair model—eruit zal gaan zien. Dvorsky en Hughes zien zo'n maatschappij voor zich als een maatschappij waarin gender

volledig vrij is (2008, 2). Er zullen in zo'n maatschappij meer dan twee genders bestaan en iedereen zal vrij zijn om diens gender te kiezen. Bij Haraway en Ferrando lijkt postgender eerder te impliceren dat gender een andere, nog onbepaalde betekenis zal gaan krijgen in de toekomst (Ferrando 2014, 11).

Mijns inziens zou het verdwijnen van het genderbinair model ervoor kunnen zorgen dat er op de lange termijn helemaal geen behoefte meer aan gender zal zijn. Wat we in De Beauvoir in ieder geval lezen is dat de opheffing van het genderbinair model, dat zij beschrijft aan de hand van haar mythe van de vrouw, tot gevolg heeft dat de vrouw zich kan losrukken uit haar onderdrukte positie in de samenleving. Bij Butler zouden we kunnen stellen dat, zoals bij Dvorsky en Hughes, iemands gender volledig vrij wordt, aangezien er geen sociale conventies meer zouden zijn die iemand in een bepaald hokje forceren.

Hoe een maatschappij zonder genderbinair model er precies uit gaat zien, kunnen we nog met geen zekerheid zeggen. Hoewel er sterke bewijzen zijn dat dit in de samenlevingen van jagers en verzamelaars het geval was (Dyble et al. 2015, 796-98), hebben we uit dit prehistorische tijdperk natuurlijk geen historische bronnen waar we op kunnen terugvallen. We kunnen daarom slechts speculeren. Er zijn daarbij ook verhalen van samenlevingen uit prekoloniale tijdperken waar gender als meer fluïde werd gezien en bijvoorbeeld een derde gender in gebruik was, helaas zijn die gebruiken door Westerse koloniale onderdrukking veelal verdwenen (Robinson 2019, 1677).⁷ Wie weet vinden we deze

⁷ Margaret Robinson (2019, 1677) noemt bijvoorbeeld het gebruik van de term 'two-spirit' in Noord-Amerika door leden van de Inheemse bevolking die sinds een aantal decennia weer in gebruik raakt als verzet tegen de koloniale onderdrukking. Hierbij wordt terugegrepen naar een 'derde gendercategorie' tussen 'man' en 'vrouw', gebruikt door inheemse volkeren die enkele eeuwen geleden werd afgeschaft of verboden door koloniale bezetters.

gebruiken wel weer opnieuw uit. Ik wil dit artikel dan ook afsluiten door de vraag te stellen: hoe zou een maatschappij zonder gender-binair model eruit zien?

Referenties

De Beauvoir, Simone. 2015. *The Second Sex*. Vertaald door Constance Borde en Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Random House.

Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40 (4): 519-531. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.

Dvorsky, George, en James J. Hughes. 2008. "Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary." *Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies* 3. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.18028.08324>.

Dyble, Mark, Gül Deniz Salali, en Nikhil Chaudhary et al. 2015. "Sex equality can explain the unique social structure of hunter-gatherer bands." *Science* 348 (6236): 796-798. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa5139>.

Ferrando, Francesca. 2014. "Is the post-human a post-woman? Cyborgs, robots, artificial intelligence and the futures of gender: a case study." *European Journal of Futures Research* 2 (43): 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40309-014-0043-8>.

Haraway, Donna. 2004. "Cyborgs, Coyotes, and Dogs: A Kinship of Feminist Figurations and There Are Always More Things Going on Than You Thought! Methodologies as Thinking Technologies." Interview door Nina Lykke, Randi Markussen, en Finn Olesen. In *The Haraway Reader*. Routledge, geciteerd in Ferrando, Francesca. 2014. "Is the post-human a post-woman? Cyborgs, robots, artificial intelligence and the futures of gender: a case study." *European Journal of Futures Research* 2 (1): 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40309-014-0043-8>.

Haraway, Donna. 2016. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, And Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century ." In *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press.

Heinämaa, Sara. 1997. "What Is a Woman? Butler and Beauvoir on the Foundations of the Sexual Difference." *Hypatia* 12 (1): 20-39. <https://doi.org/10.2979/hyp.1997.12.1.20>.

Maas, Angela. 2020. "Empower Women in Healthcare to Move Women's Health Forward." *Maturitas* 136: 22-24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.maturitas.2020.04.001>.

Nicholas, Lucy. 2014. *Queer Post-Gender Ethics: The Shape of Selves to Come*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Robinson, Margaret. 2019. "Two-Spirit Identity in a Time of Gender Fluidity." *Journal of Homosexuality* 67 (12): 1675-90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1613853>.

Widerberg, Karin. 1998. "Translating gender." *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 6 (2): 133-38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038749850167833>, geciteerd in Nicholas, Lucy. 2014. *Queer Post-Gender Ethics: The Shape of Selves to Come*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Yogman, Michael W., en Amelia M. Eppel. 2022. "The Role of Fathers in Child and Family Health." In *Engaged Fatherhood for Men, Families and Gender Equality*, geredigeerd door Marc Grau-Grau, Mireia Ias Heras Maestro, en Hannah Riley Bowles. Springer.



Why Do We Travel?

Mirte Debats

Why do we travel?

To go somewhere? To leave somewhere? To give or to take?

Why do we travel?

To see new places? Escape our usual day to day life? To discover the world?

Why do we travel?

To test our worldviews? To discover the different ways people live, the different ways they think?

Why do we travel?

For the experience? For meeting people? Friends? Loved ones? Strangers waiting to become friends, maybe even family? Do we let the experiences and the people in, or do we hold them at a distance?

Or do we travel simply because we can? Because we have the means to do so?

On the first of November this year I left for Argentina and Brazil for 2 months. To answer my own question, I travel this journey for two main reasons:

1. After finishing my bachelor's degree in PPS (Philosophy, Politics and Society), I wanted to go discover the world and, hopefully, find the missing piece of the puzzle that is my life. To do so, I wanted to travel by myself to a country that is at least a 10 hour flight away for more than a month.
2. I didn't merely want to travel far away and for a longer period of time. I also wanted to go on a journey that is meaningful to me. My grandparents grew up in Brazil. They moved there as children with their families after World War II. They met there and went back to the Netherlands after they got married

when they were approximately the age I am now. Even though I don't want to acknowledge it, they are getting older every day. They are in their 80s now. Until this journey, I have never seen where they grew up. I would love to share the experience of seeing these places with them. These places that meant and mean home to two wonderful people whom I love deeply, who helped shape the person I am today.

Before I went, people told me: "Have fun on your holiday in Brazil!" Even though that was very sweet, it felt so wrong. It still feels wrong. It doesn't feel like I'm on holiday. It feels like I am visiting my family, going back to my roots, going back home. I see the same Guaraná we used to share as kids as if it were precious scarce gold. I see the same bonbons my aunt always brings from Brazil. I see the same Havaianas everyone in my family wears because they are the best flipflops in the world, and yes, I will defend that statement with my life. Recognising those simple, at first glance, meaningless day-to-day objects makes me feel nostalgic for a country I have set foot in only once before in my life. It makes me feel nostalgic for those festive moments when relatives come to visit and bring entire suitcases full of gifts, those moments when we make pastels for Christmas at my grandparents' house, those moments when my mom and I try our hand at making pão de queijo again, and laugh away our failure to make them 'just like in Brazil', 'just like grandma makes them'. I feel nostalgic for the times I played with the wooden toys that my grandparents gave me, which are not available in the Netherlands. Every time I recognise a food, a word, an object from those warm moments of my childhood, it hits me. It fills my heart with emotions I have never felt before. It makes me feel everything more deeply, because I feel strongly connected to my family, to the people around me. I'm in my grandparents' country! Their home! I'm home!

Even though I have no drop of Brazilian blood in my veins, I am home. Even though my grandparents have not lived here since they were my age, I am home. Even though I have never visited

these places before, I am home. This is where part of my family is. This is where people speak the language that makes my grandmother talk in a way that Dutch never can, a way that is animated, full of love, excitement. Here is the hospitality, the warmth, the openness that I often miss in the Netherlands, that sometimes even makes me feel alienated from the country I was born in.

The more I travel around, the more I explore Brazil, the more I realise: my grandparents combined the best of both worlds.¹ When they returned to the Netherlands, it was the coldness and bluntness of the people that they struggled with. It was the "Just act normal", and the "You are Dutch, so act Dutch" that made my grandmother forget how to speak Portuguese for a long time. "Just be like everyone else". But they weren't like everyone else. They brought their Brazilian culture with them. They struggled with this cold distance Dutch people keep around themselves.

The Brazilians on the other hand are warm and open. You are always welcome to come over and stay as long as you want. Without having to ask, you are invited, let in. You can make yourself at home in any house in Brazil.

However, this hospitality has another side to it: it can be a cold warmth, a fake hospitality, a duty instead of an act of love. Brazilian hospitality can lack the Dutch, blunt honesty. While Brazilian warmth can be cold, the Dutch coldness can turn into a heatwave. My grandparents found a kind of sincere closeness, a love, a hospitality, Dutch people reserve for their loved ones. Maybe they keep people at a distance at first, but once they know and love you, they will not easily let you go.

My grandparents combined these two to create the best mix. For them, everyone is family, everyone is always welcome, and it's

¹ I want to explicitly point out that this text is based on what my grandparents told me about their experiences and on my own experience with Brazilian and Dutch culture. Brazil is an enormous country with many cultural differences within the country. Therefore, I do not wish to generalise either Brazilian, or Dutch culture.

real, it's sincere. This warmth, this openness full of love, empathy and sincerity is what raised me. If more people show up for dinner, I just add a little water to the soup. I welcome people into my home, I welcome people into my life.

What I learned through my own experience is that being open, having this hospitality, being available, is not enough. You can show people they are welcome, yes, but you also have to say it. You have to tell the people around you just how much they mean to you, just how important they are. Not only through your actions, but also through your words. You need both: actions to make people feel welcome, feel the warmth in their hearts; words to make people know for certain that you care, that they are welcome, in their minds. Emotionally and rationally.

As I'm walking the streets of Brazil, as I'm visiting my family here, I realise: my family is a migrant family. I'm a mix, not at home here, not really, not at home in the Netherlands, not really. But why act normal? Why forget part of my family's past here? Why be either/or when I can be both? When I can make my own beautiful mix?

To explore that mix, and share my experiences with my grandparents, my family. That is why I went on this journey. I'm excited to find out where it will take me.

Lots of love and a very sincere warm abraço from Brazil!

Queering Victimhood

Charlie Chowdhry

This essay is about (not) being a Victim. Some of what I write here could be triggering for those who share the experience of being hurt and violated and are not in a safe place to recall the associated thoughts, emotions and sensations, so please read with caution and take care. With that said, I hope, perhaps rather self-importantly, that what I write here could also be worth the challenge. This essay is about victimhood, and how it relates to (my) queerness and sense of self.

It was maybe a bit naïve of me to think that I would be capable of elaborating on my relationship to victimhood in a brief 1000-word column, but hindsight is always 20/20. The lengthy essay you are about to read is (hopefully) the final step in processing and understanding two separate experiences I had in 2025, as well as something that happened when I was a teenager. It is very personal, but I have no problem sharing it with you.

I would also like to preface what I write by saying that I do not intend this as a public critique or call-out of the other human beings involved. The vagueness with which I have described my experiences with other people is a deliberate measure to shield others from being identified or punished. In publishing this essay under my own name, rather than a pseudonym (which some of my friends recommended), I open myself up to be seen and spoken to by those who recognise themselves in what follows. I open myself up to public scrutiny. This is something I feel ready to do, but I would like others to take their time and only accept my invitation to become open, complicated, *queer*, when they are ready.

Being a victim

At the beginning of 2025, I had a troubling encounter with a controversial book I had to read for an ethics and political philosophy seminar. I read *Conflict Is Not Abuse* (2016) by Sarah Schulman, and I hated it. At some moments, it made my skin crawl. As a victim

of abuse, I was triggered by many of the things Schulman argues. For instance, Schulman argues on pages 65–66 that if textbook abusive behaviour (like yelling) is provoked by your originating action, claiming that the other person is abusive is a “smokescreen” to avoid taking responsibility for your part in the conflict.

Elsewhere in the book, Schulman wrote a passage that made my blood boil:

"There are some women, often in the bourgeois class, who now perform that public event commonly recognized as “abused,” with ease [...] They may select some details and omit others; they may rearrange the order of events so that consequences are reconstructed as causes [...] I recite those few words: “I was abused” or “she was abusive” or “it was an abusive relationship” and it is immediately understood that I am right, and I am violated, and I am in danger and therefore deserving of group acclaim.” (2016, 48)

...Was this book ghostwritten by Johnny Depp’s legal team? I was waiting for Schulman to criticise so-called Cancel Culture and the #MeToo movement explicitly, but at the time she wrote the book, these terms were far from the notoriety and ubiquity they would go on to secure. There is no way Schulman could have been inspired by either of those movements. The foreshadowing is nevertheless so extreme that the book might as well have ended mid-sentence with an ominous jagged line of ink being dragged off the page. It really is like she saw it coming.

I was overwhelmed with indignation and sickened by the flashbacks that the book had triggered, so much so that I very nearly stopped reading after those first chapters. My lecturer for the ethics seminar, whose wisdom and foresight I am now incredibly grateful for, encouraged me to read the whole book, sit with my discomfort, and think about what the root of these feelings could be.

I sat with the discomfort, and I struggled. I wasn't sure to what end I was struggling, and I couldn't see another way to feel about what I had read. Convinced of the validity of my own stance, I graciously tried to find a way to read Schulman differently, but she was unyielding. I saw the first few chapters of *Conflict Is Not Abuse* as Schulman's attempt to recontextualise several very uncomfortable and downright concerning past situations of her own creation, to publicly shift some blame for those situations onto the other parties as if it was also their fault. What I was reading felt abusive, both to those in Schulman's stories and towards myself as a reader.

Some of the editors of this essay have suggested that, at this point, I should try to define abuse in order to illustrate why I initially felt like the book was abusive. The reason I didn't do this in previous drafts of this essay is because I had no idea how to define or describe the contents of abuse. Somewhat predictably, as a philosopher, I don't think I can define the inner contents of abuse. I not only feel incapable of expressing this eloquently, but feel I must shy away from such a project because it runs the risk of schematising harms according to their perceived objective severity rather than their subjective impact. I hope the problems with this project are as apparent to you as they are to me. I can, however, describe an abusive situation in general. I understand an abusive situation as follows: an agent establishes, exploits and/or exacerbates a power asymmetry in order to (re)enforce or take advantage of the non-agency of another party.

Schulman is determined to see herself as on an equal footing with people she has hurt, and determined to see herself on an equal footing with people who have hurt her. Drawing from knowledge she gained from a workshop run by an expert social worker, in which she learned to tell the difference between conflict and abuse (57), Schulman ultimately problematises identification with victimhood except in situations where an individual truly has no power (58). The difference between conflict and abuse boils down to the difference between “*Power Struggle* and *Power Over*”

(58). Schulman highlights the complexity of the power dynamics in her past encounters. She argues that in the personal situations she describes, there was a *Power Struggle*, but she did not have any kind of *Power Over* the people she hurt, nor did the people who hurt Schulman have *Power Over* her. They were conflicted, but not abused. In short: Schulman uses *Conflict Is Not Abuse* to encourage people to try to take responsibility even when they don't want to feel responsible, and acknowledge others' pain even when they are hurting.

Rather than attempting to exploit an existing power asymmetry for her own benefit, Schulman seems to be trying to complicate or nuance the existence of the power asymmetries that lead others to identify as victims. She tries to cure others of their victimhood at her hands, not by undoing or downplaying the severity of the pain she caused them, but by showing them that her actions never diminished their agency. She attempted to *ameliorate* the perceived power imbalance between herself and others, inviting them to discuss what happened as equal interlocutors. This appears to be the exact opposite of my formulation of an abusive situation. Paradoxically, as I realised to my horror, the root of my discomfort was in fact Schulman's attempts to 'undo' my abuse and my consequent identification with victimhood. She wanted me to acknowledge something more nuanced, complicated, *powerful* about myself, and this made me feel abused. What was happening to me?

Reading *Conflict Is Not Abuse* dredged up painful memories of the relationship I had with an ex-boyfriend when we were both older teenagers. This boy claimed that the damaging things he did or said to me, of his own free will, were caused by my own originating actions, meaning they were never truly his fault and he should not be punished for them ("punishment" simply being the end of the relationship, something I asked for several times and was denied). Over the course of two years, I was mistreated,

all while being expected to apologise and take responsibility for it or else face several more hours of negging, gaslighting and myriad other forms of manipulation.

These two behaviours from my ex (mistreatment and being held responsible for 'causing' it) were wielded against me simultaneously, eventually blurring into one abusive action—having to apologise while feeling seriously hurt, anxious and confused. This, I think, is why I found Schulman's argument about originating actions so triggering. It rehashed, almost verbatim, the way in which my ex argued that I was responsible, not only for his campaign to exert total coercive control over me, but also for the way it made him feel when I objected to his attempts to decide everything about me, from my appearance and my biological sex to my hobbies, my music taste and my political opinions.

As far as I can recall, the closest he ever came to acknowledging his fault in the relationship were the moments I managed to bring forward such a convincing claim of maltreatment on his part that he now said he felt so guilty about his actions that he was suicidal (my fault, sorry), and could only be talked down from self-harming or ending his own life (clearly what I had implicitly demanded of him when I said I wanted an end to the relationship) (my fault, sorry) if I could reassure him that I was delusional and exaggerating due to my poor mental health (what kind of insane person would try to defend themselves against a paragon of logical thinking such as my ex) (my fault, sorry).

My inability to keep my own story straight while confused and under duress (lying and peddling falsehoods, maliciously and on purpose, because I relished the possibility that he would finally fall for it so much that I just had to keep trying, like a dog quadruple-checking if the fence is still electrified by running headlong into it) and my eventual accession to his viewpoint was a sign I was clearly an insane person who could not be trusted with their own opinions or feelings. I *was* insane, reader, but I would like to also give some credit to my ex for the expertise with which

he systematically attacked my psyche. He could probably have sent Freud himself to the psychoanalyst's couch with a nervous twitch.

My eventual admissions of fault (giving up and saying I agreed and that it was my fault, sorry) led him to double down on controlling me. The biggest blow-up we ever had was when I downright told him he was acting abusively towards me. How dare I? If anything (he tried to convince me in the several-hour rant that ensued), it was so difficult and painful for him to try to maintain the relationship that *he* was the victim. I have come to realise that my experiences in that relationship classically conditioned me to feel triggered and unsafe in moments when I was asked to take responsibility for hurting a person who had also hurt me. I suffered as I lived through the contradiction of both being an agential supervillain and a helpless non-agential victim of my severe mental health issues.

In the context of that relationship and the aftermath, I regretably lacked the power to un-violate or un-gaslight myself, but I *did* have the power to refuse to feel responsible for it. I felt as though I was un-doing that particular component of my abuse. I refused to be abused (held accountable while I was hurting). The way I spoke, my triggers, the way I would lash out at perceived rejections or criticism, were all totally out of my control. I refused to be an agent. Others may have been hurt by how I behaved, but it was in fact *their* fault for provoking me with their originating actions. *I* was the victim.

Conflict

The second experience I would like to talk about happened more recently. I was at a philosophy conference, and one of the attendees spoke to me and about me (and some other students in attendance) in a way I didn't like—it was unprofessional, sexist and sexually inappropriate. During a lunch break, I was looked up and down twice by a man who then made a weird comment about

me being “scary”¹. Later, as I was distractedly gazing around the room during a conference presentation (as one does), I spotted him texting some cruel and sexually demeaning things about the female students at the conference, and I realised he was probably also talking about me. After the presentation was over, I went up to him, called him indecorous, sexist and unprofessional, then stomped away to calm down in the Splijtstof office, hoping to be able to deal with the situation myself once I had a better handle on my emotions.

When I returned to the scene, I found that the issue had already been brought to the attention of the organisers of the conference by another person who saw the man's messages. The organisers assured me that I didn't need to do anything else, and that it was in their hands now. They said something along the lines of ‘We keep talking about wanting to take this shit seriously, and now we have the chance to, so let's do it’. Once the appropriate plan of action had been decided, I was asked if I thought they'd done enough. I was relieved that they were going to escalate the issue, so I told them that yes, I was happy, and they'd handled it by the book. Then, I found myself telling one of the organisers: “I already confronted him about this. Is that okay?”. The person I spoke to responded “Yes, of course,” without a moment's hesitation. I felt sick and paranoid for the days afterwards, like I had done something wrong. Why did I feel so uneasy in this situation, where I was as safe as I've ever been, where everything was handled for me and I didn't need to lift a finger in my own defence? Why did I allow others to handle the situation for me, when moments beforehand I had been prepared to talk to the man for myself? It took me a long time to unpack, but now I think I understand why.

1 Given I chose to respond to his behaviour by publishing a 10,000-word “column” about (among other things) what he did and how it affected me, I have to conclude that while his observation was likely intended as a sexually-loaded euphemism, he made an accurate appraisal of me in ways he may never be able to fathom.

It's not what it looks like

I look like a woman. I am not actually a woman, and haven't been for some time (I realised I wasn't a woman sometime around 2014, came out publicly in 2015, and have been queer about my gender ever since), but since people tend not to ask, they only know if I volunteer this information. I hadn't volunteered the information at this conference at this point, and I was wearing a dress that day. As far as everyone else was concerned, I was a woman. Furthermore, I was a young woman who was attending a conference at my home university as a student. The man who made me angry was not from this university, but he was known to the organisers. They knew that there was a possibility that he would act this way towards women attending the conference based on testimony from another conference he attended, and the only reason he was welcome on this occasion was to see if he would do the same thing again here. He did.

The cultural trend of offering second chances at vulnerable people's expense was what made me so uncomfortable about what was argued in *Conflict Is Not Abuse*. Schulman argues against what she calls "shunning" and "escalation", the precise measures taken against the man which, had they been taken earlier, would have spared me and my colleagues from this situation. Given that the organisers of the conference were aware that this was a risk, I felt like bait, like a piece of meat, exposed, dangled around to see if it would be taken. I felt like, in the interests of being fair to the man, they were unfair to everyone else. When I discovered that they knew this was a risk, it had the same emotional impact on me as the very action they were belatedly punishing—I had also felt like a piece of meat when the man looked me up and down, and referred to myself and my colleagues in his text conversation as 'young Dutch masters students' who were attracted to him (an inaccurate observation on several grounds, and one that he made alongside other comments that I am unwilling to put into print). The situation made me very angry. I remember crying afterwards

from frustration about the fact that other people at the conference were able to simply network professionally, but because I look like a woman, my attempt to make a friendly professional connection was misconstrued as flirting. But once I felt ready to process what actually happened, I increasingly felt as though some of my anger and discomfort at the situation was not only due to the man's actions, but the choices I made in the aftermath.

To be clear, I'm grateful for the fact that this situation was taken seriously when my colleagues brought it to the attention of the conference organisers. This should never have happened in the first place. I do not think the man behaved in a way that was okay, which I made very clear to him before I walked out of the room. It's the question I was asked ('have we done enough?'), and the fact that I questioned whether it was okay for me to confront the man and defend myself, that continue to trip me up. The sticking point for me is not the fact that my colleagues were helped by institutional intervention against unprofessional conduct (something that we are rightfully owed, especially after decades of negligence and complicity by my university, and the philosophy faculty in particular). Rather, I am curious about why I felt so uneasy about it.

Identity crisis

I mentioned earlier that I was a victim of abuse. It took me a while to acknowledge that what was happening to me in that relationship was not proportional or fair. Shortly before I ended that relationship, my therapist had helped me to start calling the situation abusive. When I tried to tell my friends what happened to me and that it was abuse, some of them didn't believe me, in spite of the screenshots and graphic evidence I laid out for them. They didn't believe me because it didn't seem like abuse, not because they thought what he did to me was okay, but because *I don't seem like a victim*. In all fairness to them, I also don't think I resemble the archetypical victim. I am quite a tough nut to crack and often unintentionally come across as quite abrasive, sometimes even cruel. I carry myself like a powerful person, and I always speak my

mind when I feel I have to, even if I get in trouble for it. I think this all makes it quite hard for people to imagine me rendered helpless, defenceless, hurt, or scared by another person. I also rarely admit these feelings to other people. I have learned not to let men, even friends, learn what my weaknesses are, so you could be forgiven for thinking that I have none. Even though the ex-boyfriend in question apparently acknowledged a few months after the relationship ended that he *had* behaved abusively towards me (much to everyone's surprise), the theme of me 'not seeming like a victim' has followed me around, echoed by others and also in my own head.

This confusion of identity was not only to do with how others saw me. There was no doubt in my mind that I had suffered due to my ex's actions, but secretly, I also felt impotent and emasculated by the suggestion that I was 'his victim'. I prickled at the suggestion that I was anything of 'his', in any manner of speaking, but this was not where this feeling of impotence came from. The feeling was also not due to what I had 'allowed' to happen to me, that I had been unable to protect myself from the emotional and sexual mistreatment I had been subjected to. It was also not due to the fact that so often, the active abuser is seen as masculine and the passive victim is seen as feminine. Rather, I was made to feel impotent by the assertion that none of my actions 'counted' against me or warranted consequences. Victims lack agency—it is taken away from them by their abuser, so the things they do and say that would otherwise be cause for scrutiny or consequences should be taken with a generous pinch of salt. The irony of my identification with victimhood is not lost on me. The fact of my non-autonomy was once a linchpin that held together the narrative that caused me suffering at the hands of my ex, and was now being uttered as comforting words by my remaining allies (and eventually by myself).

If I was the victim, this meant that everything I did was, ultimately, as a result of his originating actions, rather than resulting from my own strength or selfhood. There are a few cases,

even now as I look back and reclaim my past for myself, where I can see the truth of this. On some of the occasions when I made a desperate bid for freedom, the frothing, effervescent rage and indignation that boiled up inside me when he mistreated me and blamed me for it would bubble over and reveal itself to him. He left me blindingly furious like the sun, constantly fighting the urge to cry out in shock and anger like a desperate, cornered animal, and sometimes I failed to restrain that urge, much to my regret. In those moments, I ended up resembling the crazy, angry person in the images he painted of me. The person I became in those moments was of his own design, a beast with no remorse or sense of proportionality, concerned only with surviving the encounter at all costs. I do not recognise that person, and have not seen him again since.

But more often, I drew on another power that he didn't appear to believe in, and thus could not be said to exert any deliberate control over. *I would try to reason with him.* I tried to keep my cool, demonstrate that I was an agent and could decide for myself what my hobbies were, who I was, how to express my gender, that I was still sexy and worthy of love if I got a nose piercing, what my political beliefs could be, and that what I was experiencing at his hands was wrong. The philosophical voice you are now hearing emerged like a phoenix from the ashes in the moments I tried to reason with pure unreason, to make sense of what appeared to be senseless cruelty, when I was face to face with an interlocutor who was determined to undermine every dissident thought, opinion, belief, sensation I dared to articulate. I felt strong, like a person, in those precious few moments of clarity when I managed to break through, to stump him, to catch him out, to notice the fallacies that peppered his argumentation, to make a case for myself and my right to selfhood (although it would always come back to bite me later). I *chose* to argue with him. The field of possible actions left open to me was limited by what he was doing to me, but I still made choices within it.

But the narrative that grants that what I experienced was abuse does so only by denying that anything I did as his victim was agential. If victims are agents, they are blameworthy when it comes to how they treat their abuser, and are thus responsible for the moments where calm, reasonable conduct is no longer possible and proceed to act in accordance with their anger and irrationality. This would open the door to more scrutiny and punishment for victims of abuse who truly acted out of desperation and a lack of options. This is something I am against. But as a result, if I was a victim of abuse, it would mean that in retrospect, the strength I seemed to exhibit during my attempts to hold my own against him were at best an extension of his power over me, no more a reflection of my own desires, beliefs, power, or personhood than my knee jerking involuntarily at the tap of a doctor's hammer. It would mean that my strongest action—the only autonomous action I took against him in those two years, the only action he didn't secretly control or initiate—was the moment I crawled away from him with my tail between my legs. Calling him the abuser and myself the victim (the *only* victim) would mean that I was not deemed powerful enough to throw a (verbal) punch that landed hard enough to warrant recognition, that I was unable push back in a way that was noteworthy enough to factor into an assessment of who had power in that situation. It meant that I never managed to drum up enough force, enough rage, in my retaliation against him to merit recognition of my agency. It meant that up until the moment I left him, I might as well have just laid there and taken it (in more than one sense) given how futile it all was, how little power I truly had.

My ex also told me I was not an agent, that I couldn't make important choices for myself due to my mental health. I knew that it wasn't true, back then as well as now. Even though I wasn't always able to escape, I fought him as hard as I could. There were moments I directly accused him of gaslighting me, of coercing me, when I told him I was leaving him (for real, this time), moments I *was* able to find the words, maintain the razor-sharp focus and

determination that was needed to argue with him. I also fought, in a different way, during the painful moments I struggle to talk about except when I invite others to joke with me about it as though it's funny, as though sufficient time and space has reduced it to nothing more than a distasteful dark punchline played for a couple of uncomfortable chuckles. Some subconscious mental force, the insidious actor many of us come to know when we are violated and scared—the one that kicks in to bend us in the wind rather than letting us break in the storm—held me quietly in place at those moments, at the expense of my dignity and my innocence, but keeping me safe from provoking further anger or violence on top of what I already had to endure.

During those moments of scorching shame and piercing self-loathing, where my body froze and words failed, when I was unable to continue choking out a 'stop' or 'wait' or articulate the pain he was causing to me except in stifled whimpers and panicked tears, hastily wiped away and replaced with the desired facial expression, I fought a war in my head against his violent insistence that I should like it, his attempts to make me feel as though this was okay or normal or even a kindness on his part, and *I won*. But the only people in my life who seemed to be willing to recognise my power or agency in any of those moments were those who suspected that the role of abuser and victim had, in fact, been 'the other way round'.

Compulsory victimhood

We all had to grapple with the fact that harms of the magnitude that occurred during that relationship must be discussed using an abuser/victim framework. The abuser is the person who causes the harm, and the victim is on the receiving end of it. I was harmed by my ex, almost beyond repair, ultimately setting in motion the series of events that would drive me to flee my country, Scotland, the only home I had ever known, and try to start my life over again in the Netherlands. To call that relationship anything other than abusive would have been a dismissal of the severity of the suffe-

ring I experienced at his hands. If it didn't "count" as abuse—the worst kind of harm a person can inflict on another person—it sounds like it couldn't have been *that* bad. On those grounds, I conceded that the relationship was abusive, and that I was a victim. Nevertheless, it was obvious that 'victim' was not quite right. I knew, deep down, that I had behaved agentially, in a way that is not possible for actual victims. I was nevertheless encouraged to identify with victimhood, minimising and downplaying the moments that appeared to prove otherwise, because everyone involved seemed to lack a framework to understand serious harm that did not require inaction on the part of those harmed. I was saddled with compulsory victimhood, so to speak.

Coincidentally, this unwilling induction into victimhood also mirrors how I felt about my gender growing up. I came into being in a world in which people must be known as a man or a woman. I didn't feel like a girl or a woman as such, but if we *have* to call things man or woman, it makes the most sense for me to be a woman, given certain features of my biological composition and social experiences. As a teenager, I came to identify more with the label man. Nowadays, I just say I use he/him pronouns, and it's up to other people to figure out what's going on (or not). I am able to do this because the framework of queerness allows for it. Queerness acknowledges the failure of our sex-gender system to account for the complexities of how people actually feel, and acknowledges the fact that our current sex-gender system simply assigns roles to people on a best-fit basis (sometimes). I was assigned woman, and then I reassigned myself man from the list of available options. Now that the novelty has worn off, I reject the question of my gender on the grounds that I feel that, barring biologically essentialist arguments, the question of my gender is an inquiry into how I relate to manhood and womanhood. Ultimately, I feel no more represented by the mores of manhood than I do those of womanhood.

If I accept, as many people do, that gender roles are contingent and have a non-essential connection to gender itself, I don't

know what 'manhood' and 'womanhood' even mean beyond just Being A Man or Being A Woman. This is a top-down explanation of why we tend to think we know 'what' something is by looking at it, and I do not find it especially enlightening when it comes to the question of 'who' somebody is. Beyond simply making sense of my positionality in a world that doesn't know to ask 'who' somebody is before deciding 'what' something is, gender has nothing to do with me or how I feel about myself. On the grounds of 'what', I am *de facto* a woman, because that is what I resemble to outsiders. By queering my gender, I refute the claim that 'what' I am to others is 'who' I am. I shook off compulsory womanhood, so to speak.

Thus, as it turns out, in the exact same way and for the exact same purposes that I was assigned 'woman'—it being the least confusing way to understand what's going on with me—I was assigned 'victim'. Given I have no idea what victimhood means beyond just Being A Victim, I also feel like it has very little to do with me or how I feel about myself, and everything to do with what another person has made of me. It may be 'what' I am at a certain moment, but just as with gender, it is within my power to decide 'who' I am.

Power to act, failure to act

At the conference, I felt completely within my right to confront the man who made me angry, and only later did I second-guess myself. I was never explicitly called a victim, but I was certainly treated like one. The assumption was that I needed somebody to act on my behalf, that I was powerless. Of course, this is not all about me. I am not arguing that my own complicated and evolving feelings about my relationship to victimhood are sufficient reason not to punish the man for what he did. As I said before, if action had been taken to exclude the man from conferences after the first time he acted in this way, my fellow students and I would not have been in this situation. I hope the other students feel as though the situation was handled appropriately, and that this is a success story for them. That said, I think that it should be a *little* about me, since I was

involved and I was asked if the organisers had done enough. The question ‘have we done enough?’ seemed to presume something about my own feelings and experiences that I had not been given the time to articulate. Namely, that I had wanted something to be done on my behalf, and that they acted on my behalf along the lines of what I would have wanted, and furthermore that it was possible that I would want them to do *more*, not less. But I knew I was the furthest thing from powerless when that man treated me and my colleagues the way he did. I was angry; I was frustrated; I was upset. But I was not powerless.

The question of who actually had power in the situation at the conference is, in my opinion, complex. The fact that my testimony and that of the other students instantly held weight over his protestations indicates that we had power in that situation. The fact that he had the ability to act in an inappropriate way towards me indicates that he also had power. And this doesn’t even take into account the way that he and I both *felt* about the situation, aside from the power given to us by our institutional belonging. I still consider that man to be my equal. To say otherwise would imply that being female, young, and not as far in one’s formal education are inherently inferiorising characteristics in both fact and feeling. There was a *Power Struggle*, but no *Power Over*.

Thinking back to the statement made by the organisers—‘we keep talking about wanting to take this shit seriously, and now we have the chance to, so let’s do it’—it feels as though this event was *not* acute. It *did* implicate global politics. It happened in the context of several upsetting incidents at my university, in the past and present, in which sufficient action was not taken to stop abuses of power. I knew all of this at the time, and yet I didn’t push the point because it would have made things more difficult. As a result, I failed to demonstrate my power. This failure to act is, perhaps counterintuitively, proof of my agency.

I did not act. I *chose* not to act. I would hasten to clarify that by calling myself powerful and agential and emphasising the role of my own choices, I am not saying that I am responsible for what

the man did or that I could have reasonably been expected to stop him. I do not believe that the way I chose to dress that day was an originating action from which the man’s actions at the conference naturally and understandably followed. Rather, I believe that the fact I appeared to be powerless to prevent being sexualised by the man was misread as a sign that I was powerless to act in other ways—powerless to talk to him and too vulnerable to be exposed to him. I did not act in a way that would have dispelled this misunderstanding. To make things easier for other people, and because I suspected this would be the most effective route towards restorative justice for myself and my colleagues (not to mention those who might encounter this man in the future) I chose to allow others to escalate the issue without any further input from myself. It is this failure to act in accordance with my own principles, something I know that I am capable of doing, that I am in fact *responsible* for. I am *responsible* for what I *did not do*. I did not try to talk with the man afterwards. But this lack of action also does not indicate a real lack of agency on my part. Rather, it indicates that I am an imperfect agent, a human who found it all too easy to slip back into an old habit because it feels easier, feels safer. I *chose* the easier route.

If I had managed to calm down and emerge from my office a few minutes sooner, I would have told the organisers that I saw a conflicted situation that needed to be discussed before the proper consequence could be established. Consequences for him *and* for me. I felt guilty for looking at the man’s private conversation, which was not an acceptable thing to do, even if this action ultimately led to the appropriate outcome. The dismissal of my admission of guilt regarding reading his messages over his shoulder, and the near-instant reassurance I received when I asked one of the organisers if it was okay for me to have confronted him at the end of the conference, reminded me of how it felt to try to talk to people about the harsh words I had for my ex-boyfriend during our relationship. My admissions of guilt were downplayed as if nothing I did

had mattered, were hastily dismissed as if acknowledgement of my wrongdoing would somehow diminish the blameworthiness of the other actor.

I knew from experience that getting involved in standing up for yourself complicates matters and makes it harder to receive an acknowledgement of the harm caused to you, so I made the choice to step back and allow others to handle it for me. I am responsible for this choice, but I would like to call on you (whoever you may be) to consider the following: Do you listen with an open mind when loud, rude, opinionated and forceful people like me tell you that we've been hurt? Or do you need a clean line between active abuser and passive victim to be drawn before you are willing to consider restorative effort or care? How can anyone be expected to give a truthful account of their experiences of harm, an account of what happened in which they do not downplay their agency or miss out the messy details, if they cannot be sure that their complicated human selfhood will not weigh against them? It is not only abuse that creates victims; if our system for understanding harm and providing care only works in cases where we cannot find anything faulty or blameworthy in those who have been wronged, people must transform themselves into victims before they can seek justice for what has happened.

I re-read *Conflict is Not Abuse* after what happened at the conference. Schulman's words leapt out at me from the page, not to chide me or try to suffocate me in a feeling of helplessness and wrongdoing, but to remind me that

[b]eing in a negative moment with another person can be destabilizing, hurtful, and stressful, especially if a person's self-concept requires them to think of themselves as perfect. But it is not, by definition, Abuse. It could be Abuse, if one has power over another, but if not, it's a Conflict. And being in a Conflict is a position that is filled with responsibility and opportunity. (Schulman 2016, 59)

Womanhood, victimhood, selfhood

I could never have embodied the perfect victim, because the perfect victim does not exist. The perfect victim is not a person. People are always *imperfect actors*. The perfect victim can be neither of those things and thus arguably not really a person. The demands of perfect victimhood are thus dehumanising on two levels, both in the realm of lived experience and in what is asserted about those who populate that category. 'Victim' is a label that lacks content. It isn't a 'who', it is a 'what'. It cannot describe the entirety of your being. It hints at what a person has endured, but does not tell you who that person is or how they feel. The fact that I have been mistreated indicates that I have been mistreated. This sounds tautological because it is. The fact that I was mistreated should not have sufficed to indicate, in my absence, what the right action to take on my behalf would be, what I desire, or what I am capable of handling for myself.

In much the same way, 'woman' as a category also lacks content. It is laden with things that have nothing to do with the labelled person. It isn't a 'who', it is a 'what'. In fact, when there is an attempt to populate this label with something material and unique to it and it alone (shared cells, organs, unique capacity for victimisation), everything breaks down. Its emptiness is laid bare. In my opinion, one of the least flawed attempts to specify something about *womanhood*, *pure womanhood*, is the tautological statement: 'If you feel like a woman, you're a woman'². Who is a woman? That's hard to answer. What is a woman? If you ask anyone who's ever misgendered me, a woman is something that looks like a woman. If I didn't speak up, nobody would question my womanhood, even though I don't feel like a woman. The position I occupy in this sex-gender system is that of a woman; this is my 'what', my positionality. My positionality simply concerns the plurality in which I find myself, and does not indicate anything about how I, as

² This is also how I'd define manhood.

an individual, feel or want to be treated, my preferences or capacities, 'who' I am. This is as true for an induction into victimhood as it is for womanhood.

Through the performative utterance 'I have power', I acknowledge, demonstrate and create my power—I show that I have the power to decide who I am, that I *choose* to understand myself and my life as something that can determine things for itself. I choose not to wait to be imbued with designations by others, passively receiving whatever comes my way or allowing myself to uncritically absorb the things that have happened to me as if they tell me something about myself, as though I can learn everything there is to know about myself by looking at how other people have decided to treat me. Being unable to prevent mistreatment at another person's hands does not, in fact, indicate an overall lack of agency and power in the person being mistreated; it indicates that in that particular situation, this person was mistreated. Proof of a person's agency or non-agency cannot simply be derived from the actions of another person. There are cases in which a person truly lacks the agency or power to come to their own defence after the fact, but this was not the case for me. This is where I feel that my situation was misunderstood.

Conflicted, not a victim

Following some reflection on the two experiences I had in 2025, I feel as though I was a conflicted agent. I have also come to think of the relationship I previously described as abusive as conflicted. This is not an act of forgiveness towards my ex nor an attempt to diminish or understate the catastrophic impact that gaslighting, negging, or coercion had on me. It simply does not help *me* to think of myself as a victim. I empower and save myself by stepping away from victimhood and all it entails. I rescue myself from cognitive dissonance, embrace my contradictions, allow myself to acknowledge my pain and my capacity to hurt others.

Queering victimhood also helps me to navigate future conflicts with more integrity. If I think of myself as a victim, a perpetual

victim by virtue of the influence my ex continues to have on my conduct, it shifts responsibility away from me in other moments in which I have (unintentionally, but nevertheless through my own free decision-making), misjudged what was happening and hurt other people. If I chalk my behaviour up to the extended influence of my ex boyfriend, manifesting in the thoughtless knee-jerk reactions I sometimes have to my triggers, nothing I do in those situations is 'me', I am not accountable, nor culpable. My ex is to blame again, because like before, he is acting through me. I have truthfully told the people I've hurt that I never meant to hurt them, but the enduring appeal of victimhood was that it was understood to be functionally possible for me to have 'meant it', because in the state I was in at the time (triggered, an influenced victim of my ex), I was incapable of 'meaning' anything.

This genuinely used to be preferable. I had felt more at home in the harmless state of powerlessness, where I can do nothing except be hurt, than in the world of empowerment and agency, where I have the power to act and, accordingly, the power to act in a way that hurts others. I had been groomed by my ex into accepting that my mental health meant that I lacked any kind of meaningful control over my actions, but what he taught me wasn't true. While I had gone to great lengths to unlearn this narrative, it sounds eerily similar to the narrative I myself adopted and leaned on to explain why, following the relationship, I was more prone to lash out when I felt judged or somebody disagreed with my memory of an event. To truly move past that relationship, I had to recognise that blaming others for my actions, even though I could recognise them in the root of my decision-making, was making me *more* like my ex, not helping me to recover from his treatment of me. To recover, I would have to try my absolute hardest to be more conscientious, a better listener, more willing to apologise, and accept that sometimes, even if I explained myself, I wouldn't be forgiven. I had to recognise that sometimes, the most radical act of repair isn't to explain again and again why your actions weren't

meant to be hurtful, but to allow other people to locate the source of their pain within your actions, and allow them to enter into a dialogue with you on those terms.

Schulman is, in my view, a bit over-exuberant with her insistence on problem-solving together without introducing distance through electronic communication or blocking (46). I believe that conflicts can, and sometimes should, be processed separately (at first, or forever). Time heals a shattered nervous system that may not yet be ready for an in-person confrontation. There was a moment in time where I could not share a landmass with my ex, but now if I walked past him on the street, I would be able to make eye contact. This is significant, and I did not have (let alone encourage) help from other people in this matter. I needed to be left to form my opinions by myself, to re-familiarise myself with the sensation that comes with making one's own mistakes.

I did not block my ex because I needed control (as Schulman seems to suggest on page 43), but because his continued presence in my life through mutual group chats, which gave him enough access to me to ask inane questions about my wellbeing, kept me in such a heightened state of physical and mental paranoia that I could not begin to process what had happened. Distance allowed me to make my own mind up. This is what I needed. It would be wonderful if all conflicts could be sorted out interpersonally, but in the case of my former relationship, I think the conflict could only have been resolved at a distance. Far from the explosive coming-together of our versions of events in the cinematic vindication I sometimes fantasised about, in which my ex fell to his knees, admitted his wrongdoing and begged for my forgiveness, peace has come to me slowly. I lack any kind of curiosity about how he thinks and feels about me. I do not require him to recognise that he has harmed me; I know that he did, because I felt it.

The anger and cognitive dissonance I experienced when Schulman's book tried to pick holes in my victimhood wasn't because it was wrong for her to suggest that I should take some responsibility for my actions, but because everything about my upbringing as a

white woman had groomed me to accept victimhood, had conditioned me into feeling powerless against men, had conditioned me into seeing myself as a fragile, emotional creature. Having my power to cause real harm acknowledged was disorienting and confusing. I accepted the fact of my powerlessness with relative ease when I was prompted to because, while I had managed to figure out *who* I was on the most basic level, I was unprepared to unlearn *what* I was. I refused womanhood, and I also rejected the rhetoric that womanhood is inherently inferiorising and disempowering. I hadn't realised that my positionality could have lead others to instill an affinity for feeling disempowered in me while raising me as a woman, one that I was not prepared to recognise as inherently connected to my positionality nor to my gender identity, and that this affinity would also need to be unlearned as part of queering myself.

Acknowledging my power even in moments where I am mistreated, and acknowledging that I deserve to be safe from harm even in moments where I have power, avoids the same surface reduction that others perform when they think of me as a woman and refer to me as such. Queering victimhood means developing and preserving my selfhood. While I was still languishing within an abuser/victim framework, the long-repressed memory of my feelings of agency began to resurface, and it terrified me. I worried that my responses to my ex's actions had in fact been a form of abuse. The abuser, after all, is the one with agency, so if I had exercised my agency and hurt my ex in the process, that would make *me* abusive, and perhaps even justify what he did to me.

My ex harmed me systematically, of his own volition, and almost beyond repair. Sometimes, I reacted to instances of his harmful behaviour in ways that were unhealthy and upsetting. Neither of those things are good. Even though I am to blame for the harm I caused to him while retaliating, I nevertheless deserve to have the severity of the harm he caused me acknowledged. There needs to be a way to acknowledge the magnitude of the harm I experienced without needing to call me a victim, and a way for

me to take accountability for the harm I caused him that does not make it more difficult, or impossible, for me to ask him to take accountability too. He hurt me more severely, but we were both agents, and both conflicted. This is the point, so hated by critics, that Schulman bravely brought forward in those controversial first chapters of *Conflict Is Not Abuse*.

In retrospect, I wish that the man at the conference and I could have spoken to each other beyond my last outburst. I could have used that conversation to clarify that I knew I acted inappropriately when I looked over his shoulder at a private conversation, and take responsibility for this (but I would recommend making his phone's font size smaller in any case). I don't know what he would have said to me in response, because we never spoke. He doesn't know who I am. He only knows what I am because he looked at me and saw it, and this surface reduction was reinforced by his punishment. Victim. Woman.

A lot of the time, the line between consequences and punishment is not apparent for the agent behind the originating action. If they knew their action would incur negative consequences, would they have acted? Regarding my own experience, I don't know, because I didn't feel able to ask the man. To my mind (and, I have reason to believe, to the mind of the man), a natural consequence would have been a discussion where I explained why I didn't like what happened, and he explained his perspective. We could have discussed the conflict as agents. If I had felt brave enough to speak up, I could have changed the situation. Now, as I reflect on what happened, acknowledging my own failure to act according to my principles and publicly taking accountability for my inaction in the form of this essay serves to restore my sense of self. I could have done more. I could have been brave and tried to talk to him anyway. Observing that I bore some responsibility for the situation (in spite of assurances that I did nothing wrong, and continue to do nothing wrong) brings me a feeling of selfhood that languishing in victimhood has never granted me.

Assuming (correctly) that trying to talk to me would likely bring him further punishment, the man came back to campus in spite of being banned, and tried to initiate conversations with male attendees of the conference to explain his perspective, one of whom passed the man's version of events on to me. From what I've seen of him, it seems unlikely that that man will ever think of those who populate the category 'woman' as anything other than potential victims.

An important aspect of surviving and recovering from abuse involves redefining yourself apart from victimhood. My intuition tells me that the root of the internal incoherence of 'victim' as a totalising signifier lies with its apparent simultaneous and contradictory power and powerlessness. Powerlessness to act in defence of itself, powerful in invoking consequences and punishments for others. A minefield. Many people, particularly men, are confused and scared by this incoherence, and develop a vitriolic hatred towards women, seeing them all as potential victims who pretend to be powerless but in fact have boundless power to invoke consequences and punishments against men. These people misunderstand something fundamental about victimhood, womanhood, and selfhood. The power to demand consequences for one's mistreatment is not located in victimhood, nor in womanhood, but in selfhood.

Furthermore, the desire for consequences for one's own actions is an acknowledgement of what one has done and how one feels about it—a symptom of a sense of self. It is also an important aspect of agency. Even when we act badly, in a way that we regret in retrospect, we do so as agents, as capable human beings, as ourselves. Agency and selfhood are both things that victimhood, with the lack of agency it demands, vehemently denies a person. An abuser/victim dichotomy problematises taking accountability as an agent, as if agency *itself* is morally problematic, as if agential behaviour complicates the process of establishing when harm has been caused and what the consequences should be.

As I wrote this essay, I found myself redrafting major sections as I unearthed ‘missing’ memories that gave me a fuller picture of what actually happened at the conference. Most of these ‘missing’ memories were moments where I had acted for myself, or chosen not to act. In the aftermath of what happened at the conference, I had forgotten the fact that I had several opportunities to address how I felt about the situation, and chose not to. I don’t doubt that the reason I struggled to recall these memories is because, when I want to tell people that I was harmed and be believed, I find that I am more successful when I downplay or efface complicating factors like my own agential behaviour. I repressed those memories. This instinct to agential self-effacement is something I will need to spend the rest of my life unlearning, but the effort is worth it in exchange for a richer understanding of who I am and what is happening to me.

If, when I was younger, I had had a way to acknowledge my agency without feeling as though I was calling myself abusive and my ex a victim, it would have been far easier for me to understand what actually happened to me. The categories ‘abuser’ and ‘victim’ attempt to determine who played which role in a given situation, mostly in order to apportion blame. Apportioning blame to others is not the way to cultivate a sense of self, especially if you need to downplay or conceal evidence of your own agency to make a convincing argument. In many cases, some people are indeed abusers and some people are victims, but this dichotomous framework does not adequately represent every possible situation where harm has been caused.

If harm can only be declared and remediation can only be considered once a victim has been identified, agency taints accounts of harm. Failure to be the ‘perfect victim’, in my view, ultimately amounts to exhibiting too much agency to neatly populate this category. It’s because of this that I’m highly suspicious of the proliferation of the abuse/victim framework in places where it is inappropriate—in situations where everybody has agency. There is ample historical precedent that shows the dangers that arise

when white women (and those perceived as white women) deny our agency in order to escape punishment, when we can only have the harms committed to us acknowledged by the law or our communities by playing into established narratives about women’s powerlessness. We need more comprehensive vocabulary if we want to discuss harm and remediation while being able to acknowledge the agency of those who have been harmed, and I believe I have found it in *Conflict Is Not Abuse*.

I queered my womanhood for the same reason I now queer my victimhood. I refuse to deny my own agency in order to see those who have hurt me be held accountable, even if acknowledging my agency means that I open myself up to judgement or consequences for how I have chosen to act. If my actions can’t be judged like any other agent’s, then I am not a full agent. I’m finally ready to move on from the moment in my life when another person’s (mis)interpretation of my actions, and the consequences of their interpretation, had the power to unmake me. I am grateful for the opportunity to listen to what they have to say about me. Even if it turns out that I was in the wrong, I will always leave difficult conversations feeling more like myself, not less. I am a person, a whole person, who makes mistakes. I am a person, a whole person, *because* I make mistakes.

Queering victimhood

Queering victimhood makes way for greater understanding of what is actually happening, and who someone actually is. To me, queering victimhood means rejecting the abuser/victim dichotomy except when it is truly needed, refusing the safety of the compulsory victimhood that is offered up to me when I am harmed. Only after rejecting compulsory victimhood is it possible to give a recognisable account of myself and my agential behaviour, while simultaneously demanding consequences in line with what has happened to me. Queering victimhood via a recognition of my agency also means accepting consequences for how I acted (or chose not to act) in a conflicted situation. In a conflicted situa-

tion, where everybody involved is an agent, it is proper to consider oneself responsible for one's agential mistakes and transgressions, even against people who hurt you. This is what sets a truly abusive situation apart from a conflicted one; we do not (and should not) hold victims accountable for their non-agential actions. This is where I think the anxiety and dread associated with agency lies for other people like me. Being difficult or impossible to forgive due to the nature of our transgressions against others can be a new and mortifying sensation, and not one that is easy to accept as a part of social living. But the only way to create a distinction between your environment and yourself is to go beyond what is handed to you by others and by the past.

We had no control over whether we grew up with 'zero-tolerance' policies to bullying, whether we were raised to lean into victimhood in order to have transgressions against us acknowledged, or whether others chose to mistreat us. We may have the instinct to downplay our agency, blaming forces outside our control, when we have an opportunity to take accountability. We must of course acknowledge the role that our past has played in our current relationship to agential behaviour, but then we must decide to become more than our upbringing, to commit to becoming ourselves instead, to speak to people who keep us accountable and help us get our stories straight, to listen, to apologise and understand that being forgiven is not always possible.

Discovering yourself purposefully, outside of what is simply handed to you, feels uncomfortable. It feels uncomfortable because this is not what was intended, especially not for anyone who was raised to merely be a victim of their circumstances. Just like stepping away from the benefits and privileges of whiteness, heteronormativity, and cishnormativity, you are exchanging broader social acceptance for an enriched selfhood, and there will be no indication from other people that you are doing this correctly. In fact, as Sarah Schulman has experienced, it could cause quite a deal more friction than you are used to, but it will ultimately lead to more meaningful connections and a deeper understanding of

yourself and others. It is not a reachable end-goal; it is a commitment. Queerness is a resolution to live by your own intentions, embracing a fluidity of self and leaning into uncertainty, making mistakes and behaving agentially, recognising your complex wholeness. And so I have committed to queering victimhood.

References

Schulman, Sarah. 2016. *Conflict Is Not Abuse*. Arsenal Pulp Press.