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# Phenomenological Twilight: Genders, Orientations, and Experiences

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Phenomenological Twilight: Genders, Orientations, and Experiences

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Philosophy

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of

Master of Arts

By Angel Holmes

May 2020

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## Abstract

This master's thesis applies concepts in phenomenology and psychology to social justice, fictional works, and lived experiences. I argue that the marginalization of different gender identities is systemic, affecting people at both the individual level and society. I employ Shulamith Firestone's contention that this oppression is rooted in the division of men and women into biological sex classes as a feature of Western society. For Firestone, the capacity of a person to give birth is tied to societal expectations ranging from but not limited to parenting, professional careers, and the culture of romance. To support the notion that these expectations are not merely a pressure, but an oppression, I provide phenomenological accounts of non-cisgender identities, i.e., identities that do not align with gender as it is assigned at birth. To affirm the legitimacy of these identities, I look to Smokii Sumac, providing evidence of these identities as predating the United States to further validate them in the face of the Western gender binary. Drawing upon Julia Serano, I provide different formulations of sexism as they exist under Western patriarchy, and relate them to real-life cases of injustice against non-cisgender people. Looking to the present-day, I give phenomenological analyses of members of these communities like actor Asia Kate Dillon, and looking to the future, I discuss what Western culture without a binary patriarchal paradigm could look like using the works of Marge Piercy. My goals in writing this are to contribute to the literature that argues that a binary gender system is ultimately damaging to individuals and to society more generally, and to validate varied gender expression as appropriate and necessary for the LGBT+ populace of the United States.

Keywords: Firestone, Serano, queer theory, trans feminism

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A youth spent having insults such as “overly-feminine” and “probably gay” thrown at me raises a number of flags. First, that the people around me found issue with a person assigned male at birth (AMAB) acting feminine, and second, that there is a problem inherent in being gay in the first place. Being told I “throw like a girl” on the elementary school playground and in high school experience being told my voice is too soft and too high-pitched and therefore I was “probably gay” are examples of experiences that indoctrinated me into a world where people took issue with certain identities, such as non-straight identities, and even with certain forms of expression of those identities were considered less legitimate and less valuable than others. The onslaught of mostly verbal attacks on me because of my gender presentation trained me to overact and present hypermasculine behaviors throughout most of my high school experience. This resulted in a severe dissonance between my actions and my authentic feelings, and in that dissonance, I was never able to develop self-confidence as a child. Today, I am an out non-binary trans woman, as in, I am an AMAB person who gravitates toward modes of expression that are not traditionally masculine, and my identity exists largely in contrast to the experiences of masculinity with which I was raised. After only one month of hormone replacement therapy (HRT), I found a greater comfort in the experience of being me, and following that, a sense of confidence that I have never had prior.

“You throw like a girl” and its variations is a slight so common between children on playgrounds that not only have I been on its receiving end, I think the odds are that the reader of this has as well. Yet, how many schoolchildren have taken the time to consider specifically why this is an insult and an indicator of inadequate performance? Attempting to answer the question, 20<sup>th</sup> Century neurologist Erwin Strauss suggests that not only is there a truth to this adage, that young boys and girls demonstrate notable differences in technique while playing ball, but these

differences are accounted for by what he calls the “natural comportment” of females contrasting that of their male counterparts (Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 138). In his view, then, there are not only biological differences between males and females<sup>1</sup>, but there are also essential characteristics implied by gender that affect individual behavior, whether it is on the playground, or elsewhere. Unsatisfied with his response aimed at quantifying the athletic performance of young children vis-à-vis their assigned gender, Iris Marion Young replies:

[T]he particular existence of the female person is no less defined by the historical, cultural, social, and economic limits of her situation. We reduce women's condition simply to unintelligibility if we "explain" it by appeal to some natural and ahistorical feminine essence. In denying such a feminine essence, however, we should not fall into that "nominalism" which denies the real differences in the behavior and experiences of men and women. (138-139).

Yet, Young and Strauss still share a central concern: how do we account for the differences we notice in the bodies of others? In her essay, *Throwing Like a Girl* (1980), Young offers the premise that every human’s existence is defined in some part by its situation (139-140) but this clashes with Strauss’ view of gendered characteristics and gendered differences. For Young, one does not “throw like a girl” by virtue of being a girl because there is no universal essence from where a girl’s throw originates that all women are imbued with at birth. However, for Young, divorcing an essential gendered essence from the given state of the human condition leaves ample room to define the human condition through its situation and descriptions of that experience. Where Strauss attributes the differences in the throwing skill of young children to

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<sup>1</sup> I use “male” and female” in reference to human physiology—thus, sex; “man” and “woman,” among others, in reference to gender identity.

characteristics endowed by and inseparable from their respective physiologies, Young begins her project with the clear goal of exploring the phenomenology of the lived body as it is experienced, building on the foundation that one's particular existence is shaped by the constraints of their given situation.

Instead of appealing to a reason rooted in fundamental sex characteristics or physiology to account for the observed differences, Young draws on Simone de Beauvoir, contending that these differences are acquired. If we begin by accepting Young's premise that each case of human existence is defined by its situation and then add the premise that there is no essential gender implicit in each human existence, then Young is compatible with Beauvoir's claim that one is not born a woman, but made one (Beauvoir, 70-71). For Beauvoir, this claim is historically prior to today's conversation of people identifying with a given gender, and is instead intended as a commentary on the differences in the freedoms of males and females as she observed them in her society: 1940s France. In her system, freedom is an inherent component of the human condition, where choices and actions are made possible through freedom. This comes with the caveat that the distinct features of society varying from gender roles to economic inequality will further separate a human from this freedom, limiting their abilities to choose and to act in the face of freedom (70-71). Effectively, freedom is stratified for Beauvoir. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* largely serves as an analysis of how traditional gender roles in Western society oppress women, creating a deeper level of social inequality that people gendered as women face in contrast to people gendered as men, as per this stratification of freedom. Women, as women, must endure that and their male counterparts men, as men, do not.

Young and Beauvoir both assess a social difference between man and woman as a difference in privilege, finding the state of being a man to be the default state of being normal,



that this privilege is a systemic feature of society, and that as men they can act more freely than the women society has rendered as their counterparts. This is a recurrent strain of conversation within queer theory, a multidisciplinary approach to analyzing the situations and experiences of people of different orientations. Evidence of privilege, such as the lack of freedom women generally have when compared to men, suggests Western society installs inequality in the lives of its citizens through the imposition of prescriptive gendered norms. As Young points out, the boy on the playground throws the ball with full strength and confidence, but the girl exhibits hesitation, feeling forced to consider how others view her posture, a moment of reflection prior to action.

Observing differences like the one highlighted by this example, I am joining this conversation in part by examining the different privileges implied by gender, and I want to contribute primarily via a phenomenological approach to the conversation. My starting question is this: when there is a dissonance between the actions that constitute one's gender and another's subsequent recognition of that gender, how can that dissonance be understood or even possibly overcome in a social context? In this work, I will examine how the gulf between gender as action and gender as identity affects daily life and the perception of others.

In this chapter, I will discuss Young's essay on what it means to "throw like a girl," and relate the throw as an experience to the works of Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, and Judith Butler. I aim to examine how Western society uses gender to create and reproduce inequalities in an unjust way. My analysis will extend to domains outside of academic philosophy; I aim to highlight these inequalities as they appear in philosophy, history, fiction, and pop culture to demonstrate how deep-seated this marginalization is in the Western world.

To return to Beauvoir, one example she uses to illustrate the difference in the gender roles that are dictated by society is that men do not have to deal with the physical and emotional strains of the physiology connected with the potential for pregnancy and childbirth further compounded by these societal dictates. Yet, this is where Young critiques Beauvoir, finding Beauvoir's rendering of the narrative of a woman's body as one of burden, from puberty to pregnancy, strictly reductive to one's anatomy (Young, 140-141). While this is a somewhat uncharitable reading of Beauvoir, for Beauvoir, the default situation of the woman as "feminine" in society is one of otherness; the object, as corollary to man as subject. In her essay, Young intentionally uses the term "feminine" to refer to this state of otherness as one that contains possibilities. For Beauvoir, while one who is identified as female is met with adversity and systemic inequality there is still a possibility for a woman to transcend her situation as object in society and ascertain a new social status (Young, 140).

Regarding this default status, Beauvoir rightly sees women as displaced from their own subjectivity by being rendered as an object for and by a male-dominated society. Young takes this a step further, suggesting that feminine bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality is the performance of a tension between the individual's own subjectivity and the state of immanence ascribed to their bodies through their situation as object in society. Beauvoir describes immanence as a state of stagnation, the result akin to a sense of alienation from one's own body, an idea that finds itself later fleshed out in the writings of Marxist feminists such as Shulamith Firestone (*The Dialectic of Sex*, 3; 7-9). From the perspective of a woman in the face of this socially-fabricated narrative of womanhood, Young argues that women are taught that the acting out of specific mannerisms and bodily expressions that lend themselves to socially agreed-upon definitions of womanhood, such as crossing one's legs or covering one's torso with one's arms,

are a higher priority than realizing the full utility of the potential uses of the body. This is similar to what Judith Butler will describe as gender performativity, where one effectively “performs” their gender through acting out gendered signifiers. Returning to Young, both “womanhood” and “manhood” take form following a society’s designation of give traits to each as if they were finite and separate categories, needed to organize human beings in order to readily recognize and identify them as such.

Young makes a key observation about the socialized differences in the openness of bodily expression between men and women. Young notices a more general looseness and comfort in stride as opposed to that of their counterparts, but this generalization has its applications to everything from women covering their bodies with their arms while they sit to the bane that is today known as “manspreading” on public transit. This colloquialism refers to a man who feels comfortable spreading his legs in a wide v-shape in a public space. Here, he is using his body in a way that women are taught is “unladylike.” Here, she is rendered immanent to her male counterparts, with Young herself saying that she often does not feel capable of attempting the same actions, relegated to a specified “feminine” posture and set of gestures within that posture (143).

The focus here is on the trepidation toward using one’s body despite it having the capacity and space to move. It is this unease that is deeply ingrained in the members of Western society who are not cisgender men, i.e., men whose sense of personal identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth, that in part leads to disadvantages in daily life. In this example, a woman forgoes comfort because she is taught that the extension of her body that will lead to her comfort is not acceptable for a woman. The normalization and acceptance of men

carrying out this same action forbidden for women is one example of the inequality that results from the roles and expectations placed upon them by society.

The point I want to make here is that men and women use their bodies in different ways in everyday life: where the man freely extends, the woman contracts, feeling that she cannot move using all physically possible and available actions. While women may not feel that they are allowed to sit like a man, this social coding can be traced back to childhood, as seen with the example of a child “throwing like a girl.” Just as this term is used to indicate a less than optimal performance, with the female action seen as less than optimal compared to the corresponding male action, Young argues that this follows from the female being the object to the male as subject in Western society. The result is an internalization of differences between male and female, such as the throw of a child, sorted into respective male and female categories. Young finds women’s bodily comportment to use less space than that of a man (144). I agree with Young, finding this posture to often be subconscious, resulting from one’s internalization of signifiers used to indicate a given gender. Before I unpack that idea further, I must revisit an earlier point.

So far, the current handful of examples points to an unequal dichotomy for gendered roles accompanied by differences in socially-acceptable actions and capabilities that follow from those roles. Before proceeding, there are a set of potential counterexamples that I would like to quickly offer:

(1) How do we understand women who do not fit this prescribed narrative of immanence, that some women transcend their situation in society to enjoy the same or even greater level of social mobility than men?<sup>2</sup>

(2) How do we respond to women who exhibit more “traditionally masculine” posture and mannerisms?

(3) How do we respond to men who exhibit “traditionally feminine” posture and mannerisms?

Question (1) can be addressed through Beauvoir’s notion of transcendence. In projecting one’s self toward various projects and goals in the anticipated future, Beauvoir remarks that some women may actualize these goals in a manner that transcends their social situation (Changfoot, “Revisiting masculinist ontology,” 392). Someone like Mary T. Barra, the CEO of General Motors at the time of this writing, appears to have transcended this narrative, earning a fortune per annum more than her husband Anthony in sharp contrast to the commonplace housewife life that Beauvoir observed of women living in 1940s France. Yet, bearing in mind the intersections of identity, we must also acknowledge Barra’s privilege as a white woman, something that gives her greater access to social mobility than women of color. Regardless, a 2017 CNBC report found that women held eight percent of CEO positions in the United States, a number higher than France and Germany at the time of the report (Ferris). While the Western world has its Barra, Beauvoir’s point would be that Barra’s situation is uncommon, and this holds true today,

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<sup>2</sup> I will be using this notation system throughout this master’s thesis. In a given chapter, I will start the components of a multi-line argument using a short string of either numbers or letters and refer to them using those respective characters exclusively for the rest of that chapter. If an additional argument is added using the same technique, the list will continue instead of starting over again. Only in a new chapter will I start listing argument points anew.

with Barra clearly a statistical outlier. One of Beauvoir's observations is that men are granted the privilege that makes the ascension up the social ladder far easier than it is for a woman.

However, Beauvoir's argument largely hinges on physiology, Young takes this a step further to argue that women are conditioned against using their physical bodies to a fuller capacity. The apprehension exhibited toward performing a certain action because it does not neatly fit into the narrative of womanhood is a feature of society and of the lived experience of womanhood for Young (143). Today, she would most likely contend that even Barra still acts in a "feminine" mode at times outside of her career, despite her status not just as her family's breadwinner, but as a major success in American business. To draw an analogy, gender acts like a cookie cutter mold for which a person is to pass through in order to be recognized as socially acceptable. The human condition is complicated, and no existing person can squeeze through this mold without some form of self-sacrifice in the public sphere because the mold itself is not as dynamic as a human being. It functions to broadcast that same human being to those with whom they interact. To transcend the mold is a rarity because in order to do so, a person must find a way to the other side without passing through the vaguely human shape the mold forecasts.

Now, I can form a response to questions (2) and (3). In her work, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (2007), Julia Serano introduces the concept of oppositional sexism as the ingratiation of men and women as mutually exclusive classes within society (104). Under this model, exceptional<sup>3</sup> gender and sexual traits, such as those raised by (2) and (3) above, are socially delegitimized, seen as less valid and less-than-fully-formed mode of self-expression. Serano adds to this that oppositional sexism can also foster traditional sexism, that is, the idea that maleness and masculinity are inherently superior to

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<sup>3</sup> As in, the exception to what is perceived as the norm.

femaleness and femininity (Serano, 105). Both models of sexism can be used to analyze the marginalization of masculine women and feminine men.

To build an example from this, it follows that a gay man's attraction to another man is socially read as less valid than a heterosexual man's attraction to a woman by the model of traditional sexism. Under traditional sexism, the gay man is read as less legitimate than his heterosexual counterpart because his sexual attractions and expressions are not the dominant heterosexual mode of expression, and the object of his affection is not considered to be the "default" object of masculine affection. Yet, under oppositional sexism, he is a man expressing a sexual orientation that is borrowed from the category of "woman," of which he is not a member, and therefore his expression is viewed as illegitimate. Oppositional sexism categorizes his attraction as one that does not follow from masculinity as a category, and traditional sexism describes his attraction as an aberration because it does not fit into mainstream masculinity as a paradigm. Under each model, he still faces societal oppression because his mode of expression is viewed as inferior to the dominant, i.e., heterosexual, mode of expression. If this conditioning is systemic within society, then from this the possibility arises that the gay man himself may feel inferior or illegitimate, given that these paradigms of sexism accompany daily life within Western society. To respond directly to (2) and (3), "man" and "woman" as gender categories serve as social categories to classify human beings. Yet not only are they mutually exclusive categories under the model of oppositional sexism, they are not implicit characteristics of these categories as they are codified into mainstream society and culture. This speaks to both Beauvoir and Young, that one is not born a woman, that there is no gendered essence implicit in the state of being human. Both forms of sexism respond to the concept of Western patriarchy, that power

is distributed unevenly among all groups, with white, straight, cisgender men as the wielders of the greatest power within society.

Next, I would like to introduce the concept of categorical legitimacy as it relates to the sorting of genders as a categorical move. Under both of Serano's models of sexism, the legitimacy of non-dominant modes of expression becomes stratified by its proximity to the cishet<sup>4</sup> white male default, building upon Beauvoir's default of man as subject alone. Here, non-dominant modes of expression are seen as being of less value because of their distance from cishet expression being considered the norm. Even though the sexual orientation of straight women is perceived as a part of the binaristic paradigm, its deviation from the default is why society assigns a lesser value to it. This is where the marginalization of human gender expression begins, as traditional sexism champions one specific mode of expression and regards all others as in a state of "less than," i.e., as less legitimate than the dominant mode. Marginalization then becomes stratified by whether or not a person is a man, straight, white, cisgender, and so on. To work with the previous example, a gay man's attraction to another man loses legitimacy under oppositional sexism as his attraction deviates from what is the categorical default of straightness. His marginalization only worsens if he is non-white, non-cisgender, and so on.

The further stratification of marginalization from this default follows Kimberlé Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality, the concept that power manifests chiefly in the default under Western patriarchy and the spaces where identities other than the default collide are increasingly more subject to marginalization, violence, and even legislation against their freedoms (Crenshaw, 3-4). When discussing Mary T. Barra, I only talked about her gender—as a

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<sup>4</sup> Shorthand for "cisgender" and "heterosexual," i.e., a person who agrees with the gender they are assigned at birth and experienced romantic and sexual attraction to those who identify with a different gender.



woman. The number of women of color that see her level of success is significantly lower than that of white women because white privilege is also activated here. Or consider the statistics for hate crimes against black transgender women—this identity deviates from the default in several ways: race, gender, and gender identity, and as a result, members of the community with this identity are substantially more likely to be victims of hate crimes, victims of bigoted laws that will deny them work and housing, and without positive representation in mainstream media.<sup>5</sup>

As Emi Koyama writes in *Whose Feminism Is It Anyway?* (2006), differences in race and class have often served as the root cause for infighting in feminist and trans movements. She cites the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival of 1991, containing a controversial policy of only admitting women and postoperative male-to-female (MTF) transsexual women as an example of this infighting (2-3). Preoperative MTF women were denied access to the festival on the grounds that they were men infiltrating women's spaces and that the presence of a physical phallus would translate to a symbol of men's oppression against women that would make attendees uncomfortable (2-4). Preoperative MTF women were seen by this festival as being bearers of male privilege, something that this event is to be a safe space from. Koyama's response is rooted in intersectionality. She argues that if women see the phallus as a symbol of oppression against women, the organizers must also consider the impact of whiteness against women.

Incorporating this into my view, I see men as viewed as superior through the lens of white patriarchy, the whiteness of legislators who restrict access to abortion and contraceptives, and charge money for feminine hygiene products, among many other facets of life, is also damaging to women's lives and their respective movements, and should be acknowledged as

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<sup>5</sup> Statistics taken from Human Rights Campaign via HRC website (2019) at <https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2019>

such. The intersections of identity where people are harmed by not being white, not being a man, and not being cisgender are all relevant when considering how to advance equality for women and other marginalized groups.

Koyama argues that events like the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival homogenize the experiences of women, and to treat the experiences of white women and women of color as being equal and being of equal struggle is an inherently racist move (6). Koyama argues against the Michigan festival organizers, saying that if the presence of a phallus is liable to trigger women, then so is whiteness, as both are symbolic of harm done to women. Failure to acknowledge the ramifications of whiteness is a failure to advance an intersectional feminism, because at this juncture, a feminism ignorant of the experiences of women of color is reductive of the experiences of all women, failing to encompass many others' individual perspectives.

To return to Young's case of "throwing like a girl," an argument can be made that the action of the female throw is the result of an internalization of a model of sexism acting as a feature of society. If society renders woman as the immanent counterpart object to the male subject, raised and socialized to be "ladylike," then it follows that this inefficient style of throwing is a performance of femininity, rendered immanent to the man's throw, following the traditionally sexist narrative of masculine superiority. For Young, forcing different mannerisms and behaviors onto people of different groups creates a hierarchy of identities. Alternatively, the other case is where the girl uses her body to its fullest extent; it may result in a barrage of "tomboy" outcries from her peers, which functions as an indicator that she is not acting "ladylike" as oppositional sexism demands. Regardless, when the young girl fully utilizes her body in an optimal throw, the entire situation is read as abnormal by her peers because she is not fulfilling a traditionally feminine narrative as formulated by traditional sexism. She is situated

within the space where the anticipation is that her throw will not move as fast or as far as a young boy's, and when this expectation is not met, a sort of cognitive dissonance is likely to arise. Serano's diagnosis of traditional sexism is one where the event is rendered as strange, in many cases leading to reactions from her peers who accept this form of sexism as a feature of society (Serano, 103-105).

Before I proceed with Young, I need to address the notions of internalization and performance out of the need to be precise with my terms. First, the idea that one internalizes a series of social customs as an aggregated order of performative instructions and may then act to comply with the roles doled out by this order is also explored in the works of Jaques Lacan. Lacan posits that a symbolic order arranges individual subjects in a human-constructed matrix of meaning, as the Symbolic human world is mediated to us through concepts such as language, culture, and laws (Lacan and Mehlman). Similar to Beauvoir, there is a socio-cultural paradigm that dictates the sphere of human interactions through positing concepts like masculinity and femininity as normative components of society. For Lacan, the Symbolic stands in stark contrast to the Real, which is the objective physical world as it really exists outside of anyone's personal subjectivity (54-56). As seen in Young, the Symbolic is intuited by and subsequently ingrained in the denizens of society at a young age. Even prior to her sexual awakening and her awareness opening toward a fuller range of actions of the adult woman's body, the young girl is taught that if she does not act "ladylike," there is something inherently off, or even wrong, about her behavior (139).

To refer to an earlier example, women are taught that the act of "manspreading" is not "ladylike," and even if they are not explicitly taught to avoid that particular action, it is heavily implied that it is a wrong thing for a woman to do. As Young argues, this is because women—

particularly white women—are taught to fight against their bodily motility, that actively hampering their movement and accepting their default state as one of fragility is ladylike, that this is entailed by the process of learning to become a woman as womanhood is prescribed by the dominant culture (153). This is oppositional sexism working within the Symbolic, as a Lacanian order of expressions coded male and female is internalized by children based upon their socially-assigned genders and reflected in actions such as their performance playing ball. This is another example of non-dominant identities experiencing oppression. In mathematics, “deviance” may speak to numerical averages, but in a social context, it carries the nefarious connotation that there is something inherently wrong or immoral about being different from the default.

When a woman does not follow these gendered prescriptions of action, not only does she risk being viewed as abnormal by those around her, but there is additional room for her to read her own actions as abnormal, similar to the earlier example of the gay man reflecting on his sexuality. Consider this: a woman is catching the bus home from a long day at work and there are other passengers seated on the bus. She is exhausted, tempted to relax by letting her body slouch, but feels unable to. Not only would a more relaxing posture potentially be “unladylike,” but forbidden from doing so. The quip made earlier about “manspreading” has a real application here: that under oppositional sexism, man and woman exist as separate categories. The woman on the bus does not feel like she can “manspread,” an action so overtly reserved for men that it has “man” in the name. Both cases observe human lives in instances where they do not follow the narratives demanded by sexism, but because this sexism has been ingrained in society, internalized by citizens, and promoted as “normal,” each person may feel a sense of something being off when they are not acting in the socially-prescribed “right” way.

To revisit the young girl's pitch on the playground, this is what Butler would label as an example of gender performativity, that in following the narrative of womanhood, the young girl is effectively performing femininity in front of her peers (Butler, 34). Butler renders gender as this nonessential fluid sphere of expression routed in performance, choosing to depict gender as a component of the Lacanian Symbolic, not of the Real. In her example of the drag show, a man is capable of performing femininity on stage and being read as a woman until leaving the stage and taking off his makeup (187). His actions determine the gender he expresses in the matrix of human-constructed meanings, that is to say, that his actions navigate the Symbolic and broadcast multiple genders through actions that follow from different narratives. Grabbing a beer and watching the game, he is read as a man, but donning a dress and makeup allows him to be read as a woman because these two cases contain signifiers for masculinity and femininity that are rendered as mutually exclusive under the model of oppositional sexism. Oppositional sexism does not allow makeup to signify masculinity. It creates a link between makeup and woman as a category only. It is then in turn applied in a reading of another person where the makeup leads to a perception of their gender.

The girl pitching in Young's example is read as a girl because the pitch she throws is conditioned through her socialization as a girl. The noticeable apprehension is not fear of the baseball, it is a fear of her own body (148). To follow Beauvoir's thought, the girl or woman would have to transcend her own femininity to throw the ball at a full capacity, something we can observe with the record-breaking performance of American athlete Serena Williams or Mo'ne Davis (the 2014 Little League superstar). If we are to accept the premise that the Symbolic enforces a hierarchy of gendered expressions, and I think it makes sense that we should (following Lacan and Mehlman), then it must be the case that the immanence of a

traditional notion of femininity leads to the apprehension that comes before the throw. This conditioning leads to what could be read as a feminine performance on the playground, as the girl is effectively acting out a perceived femininity through this hampered throw. We see this play out in what Virginia Valian calls “gender schemas” in *Beyond Gender Schemas* (2005): this conditioning of a feminine performance as an inferior one comes from a patriarchal culture that consistently overrates men and underrates women instead of analyzing their performance for what it is outside of any gender qualifier (198-199). To bring this back to Williams, a 2019 survey done by *YouGov* found that 12 percent of anonymously polled men thought they would be capable of scoring a point against Williams in a tennis match, despite her status as one of the all-time greatest human beings to ever pick up the sport (Fakuade, n.p.). Valian argues that these societal gender schemas transmit values of “greater than” and “less than” in terms of performance based on cognitive perceptions of gender—contending that women’s performance is generally perceived as “less than”—women do not advance in professional settings as quickly as men. Valian cites a range of findings conducted by the City University of New York (212). Here it is again, the social perception that deviation from the societal default is in some way worse than the default by virtue of not being that default. I see this as revealing something important about the mindsets of men (and many women) about women’s abilities when veiled by anonymity: that implicit bias as a psychosocial phenomenon practically wires citizens to judge some people to be greater than others, and that this judgment is rooted not in performance or career statistics, but in a person’s gender, color, economic background, and so on.

While Lacan posits the Symbolic as this network of interrelated meanings, an element of recognition becomes crucial in its maintenance. In Butler’s example of the drag show, a person who identifies with the gender of a man is recognized and gendered as a woman in the context of

the performance (Ferrarese, 762). The drag queen expresses himself using generally-accepted feminine signifiers with the intent of forecasting an exaggerated version of a specific gender to the audience. This gives credence to the thought that sex and gender are separate, as the man's physiology does not change, but his gender presentation does. How he is perceived and then recognized by others, however, does change: before standing on stage, he is recognized as the gender of a man, and during the performance this changes to his recognition as a woman, and then after the show and the removal of the drag attire, his gender is perceived by others as male once more. Here, recognition provides confirmation of the Symbolic: that his gender follows from his actions and not from the facticity of his body. The distinction between the Real and the Symbolic becomes clear in context. The drag queen's perceived femininity allows for the performer to don a gender like a costume and act it out on a stage—and to be clear, the audience knows this—but this communicated meaning of gendered femaleness is mediated through the makeup and attire and changes in comportment, the signifiers that lead to the performer being recognized and gendered as a woman. It is the act of recognition as it transpires in the human world that distinguishes sex from gender for the performance. While this is all happening, the person's physiological sex remains unchanged, his anatomy as is belongs to the domain of the Real and his expression broadcasts signifiers understood in the domain of the Symbolic. Despite this person's recognized gender changing several times throughout the night of the performance, his physical body remains unaltered despite what his actions signify or intend to signify and how they are recognized by those around him.

However, this is not to say that Lacan's Real and Symbolic are mutually exclusive in all cases. To approach the example from another angle, let's consider it not in terms of what is Real, i.e. objectively factual, and what is Symbolic, i.e. a meaning constructed and attributed to the

performance, but instead let's examine this example through the lens of perception, of perceiver and perceived. To the audience member, the makeup and attire signify femininity, as do the mannerisms and bodily motions. Seeing those signifiers attached to a given body leads to a cursory reading of that body as gendered female in the case of the drag show. The audience members assume the gender of the person as a woman because they perceive the signifiers attached to and acted out by that body as being that of a woman. Yet, this assumption can change for those who encounter the performer before or after the performance, were stripped of his drag attire, he is read as a man. Imagine the case of a person who meets the man before his performance, and then attends the show knowing that he is on stage. The audience member registers maleness in his initial encounter, but this changes once the drag queen performs the actions of a different gender. These altering perceptions of the audience member, one of the performer as a man and one of the performer as a woman, concomitantly demonstrate a fluidity to the performer's gender, but also a historicity to one's own perception, as a given perception can change.

The audience member is still perceiving another human being at  $t_1$ , before the show, and again at  $t_2$ , as the show is happening. In their perception at  $t_1$ , they first recognize a shape against a background that they conclude to be the body that belongs to that of a human other, then they perceive a gender because of how they have registered the specifics of the performer's appearance and actions prior to the show to signify masculinity within the Symbolic. The same happens again during the show itself, yet with differing results, demonstrating one's ability to revise their own perception. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), it is the aim of perception to uncover truth (8) and applied to this variant of Butler's example, the audience member is trying to uncover what it is that they are perceiving.



For Merleau-Ponty, perception is the dynamic faculty of organizing phenomena, not the passing of a singular judgment nor the process of transmission from the Real to one's individual subjectivity (Macann, *Four Phenomenological Philosophers*, 174-176). He argues instead that the act of sensing is the active, living communication with the world itself that brings it to our present and relates it to our lives (Merleau-Ponty, 59). This is where a concept like Lacan's Symbolic can be useful: by imbuing perceptions with meaning, they are organized beyond the manifold of sense-data that perception intakes, and therefore achieve a more direct level of relevance to the person perceiving. To rearticulate Butler's example from *Gender Trouble* (1990), what the audience member perceives is no longer a moving shape against a background, it is the show that he or she has willingly attended with other concertgoers, and the figure before him or her is recognized as a woman on a stage giving a performance.

Using the works of Young, Butler, Serano, and Merleau-Ponty, I have argued that men, specifically cisgender white men in Western society, have implicit social privileges that other members of society do not. For those not a part of this dominant category of man, their entire social experiences are marked around the state of being a non-man, i.e., being treated as an object for the subject, while at the same time being nudged and conditioned toward responses that fit the non-man, i.e. non-subject category I do not want to discuss women only, or, specifically, for Beauvoir, white middle-class French women living in the 1940s. The locus of this thesis will be on transgender rights as they relate to intersectional feminism. I draw on the works of writers like Crenshaw and Koyama, but I do not want to appropriate the struggles and pain of others as if they were my own. I am privileged to be white but am marginalized because of my gender identity. Intersectionality becomes necessary to recognize and integrate the experiences of those whose rights are marginalized by society and advocated for by feminism.

Part of my focus is on the phenomenological works of writers like Merleau-Ponty as they relate to the lived experience of the body and the recognition of one's lived experience as it relates to the context of a greater social network. It is my aim to present a nonessential framework for understanding gender as a category that is enforced through a paradigm of sexism, and from there, discuss Butler's theories of performativity and recognition as effective but flawed models that conflict with one another. Butler argues that gender is what one does, but its recognition requires an other, preventing performativity from being an exclusively unilateral series of actions (Ferrarese, 760). In the following chapters, I will argue that these theories of performativity and recognition are compatible, but not in the way that Butler depicts them to be. Recognition is an event that takes place in the present, and as such, I want to discuss what the world looks like in the present-day United States for the transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming community. Before I arrive there, I will use the preceding discussion to examine our experiences, borrowing from the dialectical methodology of Firestone, and deconstructing it, contrasting logical necessity with open possibility. My primary goal is to be a diagnostician, to explain the inequality trans people face, and then to bring it to the present in discussing how recognition is a double-edged sword, a tool of affirmation or injustice depending on how it is used.

In Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology*, perception itself becomes the background of experience that guides conscious action. For him, the world itself is a field for perception inseparable from human experience (43). He argues that humans use their perceptions to assign meanings to the world and cannot fully separate themselves from having them. This resonates with Lacan, who finds that human existence transpires in the Symbolic as a network of meanings that humans create. The Lacanian Symbolic serves as an umbrella term for the social world where language, communication, intersubjectivity (Bertram and Cellikates, 839)<sup>6</sup> and one's acceptance of the governing law maintain and regulate a social order (Beauvoir, 331-332).<sup>7</sup> But as seen with Merleau-Ponty, our perceptual field is not a commentary on socialized order but more of the arena from where we can describe the faculties of an individual's phenomenological experience as an arena where perceptions exist in time and space for a perceiver. For Merleau-Ponty, the faculty of perception works in such a way that it is always receiving phenomena and sense-data, and thus he argues that a complete disengagement of a person from their perception is impossible (33-34). Using this notion of perception to return to Butler's example, the person perceived as a woman in the drag show is sensed and perceived by the audience members, filtered through the meanings attached to the audience members' perceptions to render an image of a woman onstage. The members cannot willingly choose to disengage from their senses and their consciousness before entering the auditorium, and as such, cannot holistically detach from their perception for the duration of the show. It is important to keep this idea in mind when

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<sup>6</sup> "Intersubjectivity" can be defined as the position that selfhood is a constituted phenomenon that requires others and cannot exist prior to and wholly without one's intersubjective relations.

<sup>7</sup> "Acceptance of the law" is often referred to as the "Big Other" in Lacanian scholarship.

thinking about this event as abstraction before considering it within the context of the real, physical world.

Lacan argues that this social event is mediated through the Symbolic so the audience members can ascertain some meaning beyond the basic recognition of shapes, sounds, and colors apparent to perceivers in the physical world (Lacan and Mehlman, 47). This claim is compounded by Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception: that the individual's faculty of perception, intuiting and organizing that sense-data, cannot be switched off entirely (Merleau-Ponty, 34, 187). Combining Lacan and Merleau-Ponty, the result is a Symbolic world of social meanings, and as people cannot fully disengage from the faculty of their perception, it follows that they will perceive stimuli that fall within an internalized Symbolic order. To add Butler to this, it is through the perception of another human that an Other is encountered (Burke, 57), and it is through the layered meanings of the Symbolic that the audience members perceive and then recognize the person on stage as a woman. Butler's analysis is consistent with what Merleau-Ponty would call a "perceptual field," where we can see how signifiers are grasped, recognized, and assembled into an understanding of another person. For Butler, the example of the drag show is one where the perceptual field is filled with queer signifiers, as gender is free to move fluidly and its recognition is subject to change throughout the event.

While Merleau-Ponty, in his theory of perception, explicitly describes perception as not being equivalent to the faculty of judgment, he devotes some time to describing judgment as a possible human action in his *Phenomenology*. Identifying a relationship between objects of perception is what constitutes a judgment for him (Macann, 160-161). He often describes perception as the observation of a figure against a background, using an example of a drawing on a page (Merleau-Ponty, e.g., 4-6, 15-17, 116). Where our focus is on deciphering and

understanding the drawing, part of that process is recognizing the necessity of the page as the background. By recognizing the page for what it is, the perceiver makes the lines on the page intelligible as a drawing (Merleau-Ponty, 41-42).

For another example, Serano's description of traditional sexism carries the implicit judgment that maleness, when compared to femaleness, is superior. When perceiving gender as something intrinsically linked to biological sex, then, gender will influence the ways in which biological sex is perceived, intertwining the two in one's perception of these features. The ramifications of this judgment can become disastrous when people who use this judgment to inform their beliefs have the power and privilege to do something like making public health policy. Hypothetically, that perception of an uneven division between maleness and femaleness leads to a belief that one is superior under the model of traditional sexism, and then that belief can eventually translate into prioritizing healthcare issues for those sexed male or specifically benefit the male to the outright neglect of healthcare issues for those sexed female. US legislators (at both state and national levels) consisting almost entirely of wealthy, white, cisgender men make laws that are not relevant to their personal experiences, thus acting as a tool of oppression for people in need of these healthcare services. This has been the status quo in the country for decades now. Later in this thesis, I will spend more time examining how perceptions can feed into actions as they relate to people and their perceived genders, through the lens of Merleau-Ponty.

Before continuing, let us recap what I have already discussed. From the generalized example of a young girl playing baseball on a playground to the specific situation of Mary Barra at General Motors discussed in the last chapter, phenomenology can be an indispensable tool in analyzing experiences. By relating it to one's own perception and experience of the lived-in

body, and also in examining how one is recognized in the greater context of their given social network, we can see that sex and gender are often perceived as linked, that the perception of one can influence the perception of the other. Here, one's understanding of another person communicates details about them that are guided by the faculty of our perception. The example of the drag queen demonstrates the gendering of signifiers ranging from body language and attire to how the attendees of a show use those signifiers to attach a gender to a perceived body. The example of the young girl pitching a ball reveals an inequality between the two dominant genders in Western society, fitting the opposition between them into the narrative of traditional sexism. Applying Merleau-Ponty's definition of judgment as a mental action that synthesizes experience from sensory data, the observations a perceiver makes allow for that individual to judge the gender of another. Under traditional sexism, as formulated by Serano, those same characteristics of a human as observed by a perceiver give way to a judgment of this relationship as one marked by inequality. Here, Serano's term 'traditional sexism' further supports Beauvoir's classification of that sexism as a male-subject / female-object dichotomy. It is the act of a person noticing a person outside of themselves that becomes the basis of social recognition theory.

In philosophy, the use of the word "recognition" can be used to designate the act of acknowledging or respecting another human being. Butler's *Gender Trouble* posits a theory of recognition that is contingent on intersubjectivity, seen earlier as a component of Lacan's Symbolic. As such, Butler's theory of social recognition, as developed in *Gender Trouble*, posits that a person constitutes their selfhood through a series of relations that involve acknowledging or respecting another. In other words, one must recognize the Other in order to recognize one's self. As intersubjectivity is a prerequisite for this form of recognition, recognition can be

understood as constituting the self through a series of relations. Person A sees person B, realizes that they differ, and comes to define features of the self through those differences.

Another way to look at this is with a definition formulated by Heikki Ikäheimo in *On the Genus and Species of Recognition* (2002). In it, he posits recognition as “always a case of A taking B as C in the dimension of D, and B taking A as a relevant judge” (450). Here, A is the one recognizing, B is the one recognized, C describes A’s recognition, and D describes the context in which the instance of recognition takes place. Butler’s example of the drag show (D) is an example of social recognition, where the drag queen as performer (B) is recognized by the audience (A) as a woman (C). In other words, the performer’s attempt at conveying meaning begins with the action of performance, and underneath that performance is the implicit expectation that their intention will be respected and understood by the audience, leading to an instance of social recognition where the drag queen is recognized as a woman by the audience.

In this chapter, I primarily want to provide an understanding and clear usage of Butler’s theory of recognition. To do this, I will be tracing her thought through G.W.F. Hegel’s work in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Similar to the example of the master-slave dialectic Hegel provides in *Phenomenology*, Butler’s theory of recognition is built upon the notion that recognition is defined by struggle: social change is carried out by virtue of difference when faced with the opposition between two parties involved in a struggle. For both thinkers, any changes that happen occur in dialectical moves, that is, there is an initial thesis, an opposing antithesis, and an overcoming of the tension between the two resulting in a synthesis of their respective qualities. It is my intent to show that Butler’s theory has salient applications for queer theory, but is not a doctrine without its flaws when viewed in the larger context of her work, *Gender*

*Trouble*. From there, I will use the tools provided by Merleau-Ponty and Sara Ahmed to further sketch out what instances of recognition look like in these so-called struggles.

Before discussing Butler's model of recognition, I want to start a discussion of Hegel's model as it is presented in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to trace her line of thought. Butler builds portions of her own thought from a section of Hegel's text known as the master-slave dialectic, in which Hegel frames an instance of recognition through its situational context as a struggle necessary to overcome the difference between two entities (Hegel, 167). For my current purposes, the common understanding of Hegel's model of the dialectic can be simplified to a three-step process that brings about change. Step one, the thesis, is a notion whose weaknesses are exposed by its differences in step two, the antithesis. These weaknesses are overcome and subsequently preserved in step three, the synthesis, which represents parts of the former two steps in a new entity (and becomes the thesis for any new evolution). The master-slave dialectic is presented as two abstract ideas serving as these first two steps, corresponding, respectively, to the idea of a lord and a bondsman. The lord serves as the master, and the bondsman as a slave; both struggle with one another in carrying out their roles, and it is through this struggle that the lord and bondsman recognize each other and give legitimacy to their roles vis-à-vis their differences.

Hegel posits the role of the lord as the thesis and the bondsman as its antithesis in this dialectic. The lord recognizes the bondsman as an Other, and in their role as the slave, the bondsman is responsible for the manual labor of the lord's land. The lord fulfills the role as the land's overseer, but requires the labor of the slave to maintain the land. The lord can organize and issue commands, but will realize it is their dominion without the direct need to perform intensive labor on the land that constitutes their lordship. Similarly, the bondsman comes to



realize that their repeated acts of maintenance on the land under another's command is what characterizes their work as slavery. Using Ikäheimo's model, this instance of recognition can be formulated as follows:

- A) The lord is the one recognizing, serving as the intended audience for the bondsman's work.
- B) The bondsman performs actions to be recognized through their work.
- C) The bondsman is recognized as a worker under the service of the lord.
- D) The work done as service for the lord is what the bondsman performs.

The service of the bondsman is the way in which the worker comes to be recognized as the bondsman of the lord by the lord, and Hegel posits that as time passes, the lines between these roles of lord and bondsman begin to blur as each realizes the inadequacies of the other. Without directly practicing manual labor, the lord becomes aware of their own inability to maintain the land without further assistance, the lord comes to recognize the significance of the role of their slave. Their relationship is oppositional, lending to the interpretation of this dialectic as a struggle: it is the labor of the slave that allows the lord to define their work as overseer and it is the command of the lord that requires the slave to define their work through their subjugation. Through the observation of their differences via their actions, the lord and bondsman come to recognize each other and themselves as such.

After the two roles expose the respective weaknesses of the other, they are able to overcome their own shortcomings. In the *Phenomenology*, the result is a synthesis of these two into a more efficient worker with a broader skillset, with the roles unused qualities preserved in the new worker's memory and work habits in a move that Hegel calls the sublation (Hegel, 192). This worker is a new entity which comes about as a unity of its antecedent steps, overcoming the tension between the master and slave. One consideration Hegel brings to this example of

dialectical change is that the lord and bondsman gain self-consciousness as autonomous agents in realizing that they work, that their work differs from the other's, and that they interact with one another through their work. The interpretation of the yielded synthesis is based on the result of a struggle, determined by the differing qualities of the two previous roles that yield a synthesis and preserve their weaknesses. For Hegel, when a synthesis occurs, nothing is entirely lost, but the unused traits, such as the lord's inability to perform all of the bondsman's manual labor, are preserved in the memory of the synthesis (203). This allows for the new worker to implement new techniques based on memory, a concept that I will be discussing later in applications of Hegel's model.

A phenomenology of recognition is at play here: let us consider the role of the slave not as an abstraction, but as it would relate to an actual bondsman working under capitalism. Each day, the bondsman experiences the strain of field work under the ownership of their master. They understand that their master does different work than they do, and they understand that in their role, they are to take orders on the farm. Here, they recognize that they differ in some capacity from their master. Karl Marx posits that this dialectic begins resolving its tension when the worker realizes the inequality of their condition as it relates to the master, and then actively tries to change their situation (545-546). This implies that dialectical change happens through action of some kind being taken. For Marx, it is the revolt of the worker against their overseer that is the action that leads to this change, but for the purposes of understanding this model to understand change when it takes place, the key takeaway is that despite its abstract presentation, the dialectic can be used to understand change happening in the real world. According to Marxist theory, improvement of social conditions will prevail in the presence of inequality once that inequality is recognized by—and sufficiently burdensome to—the Other. The Other suffers from

that inequality and takes action to change the conditions that foster that inequality. Marx posited that workers and overseers exhibit a tension between their roles, and the resolution of this tension is inevitable. A workforce predicated on greater levels of social equality sublates the previous inequality: the new workers understand the brutality of their prior conditions and demand a more even distribution of labor and profit based on these conditions as they existed historically (Marx, 412).

For Butler, recognition entails a sense of non-ownership of the self as seen in Marx's alienation as an analysis of working conditions under capitalism. In both cases, a generalized Other encountered by the self then forms the grounds for intersubjectivity and subsequently leads to one's recognition through that Other (Bertram and Celikates, 840). Building from Marx's example, the worker whose shifts begin and end under the overseer does not own the product of their labor, nor do they own any of their time while on the clock. Marx argues that the workers must come to a collective realization of this non-ownership, leading toward a self-consciousness that can lead to the improvement of their condition (Marx, 456). This is consonant with Butler's theory of recognition, where recognition is predicated on the non-ownership of the self and the interpretation of the self by an Other through action. Here, the workers experience the non-ownership of their selves as alienation via the conditions they experience through their labor: what they produce is not their property, instead, it is corralled by their business overseers. Butler's argument is similar, reaching a conclusion in which the recognition of "man" as Western society's primary gender leads to the marginalization of those who are not. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that this marginalization stems from society's naturalizing and unifying (1) human biology, (2) heterosexuality as the presumed default sexuality, and (3) a false conflation of gender and biology (31-33). In arguing that the confusion of (3) takes place in the

world, Butler describes a situation of childbirth: when a midwife says this newborn “is a girl,” the midwife is taking part in a practice that reinforces societal gender norms (Speer and Potter, 153). Here, the person being born did not select their gender. As this practice is repeated when people are born, its repetition solidifies the conflation of sex and gender as the natural state of affairs.

The concept of societal naturalization is a key one for Sandy Stone, who writes on the concept of passing in the trans community in “The Empire Strikes Back” (1987). In this essay, Stone responds to Janice Raymond’s *Transsexual Empire* (1979), in which Raymond presents an argument against the medical technologies that help trans people feel comfortable in their bodies. Raymond claims use of surgery and hormone therapy for trans people is a part of a medical industry conspiracy to undermine the legitimacy of womanhood and women’s space. For Stone, the trans experience is not about checking off the boxes that align with the trans narrative, such as “being born in the wrong body.” This is vital in breaking away from stereotypes and prescribed metanarratives in moving toward a humanization of the trans experience. While, at the time of her writing, much of society seemed to assume that the goal of trans medicalism was to help trans people “pass” as a “real” man or woman, Stone writes that passing should not be the goal. Maintaining a rigid gender binary does not serve to further human expression and instead furthers the societal perception that only two genders and sexes exist and that trans people really just want to fit into a binary (229). The societal naturalization of a passing trans person may guarantee safety in many situations, but for Stone, it does not fully encompass and embrace the trans experience (231). Instead, she argues that trans people can be like a genre of people, one who’s experiences are legitimate, though different from those of cisgender people. Revisiting Butler’s take on human biology, marginalization stems from not being born AMAB; it is

complicated in social spheres when bigots choose to use biology as an argument against the existence and autonomy of non-cisgender people. I will save the discussion on this ideology, largely pedaled by the Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist group, for the next chapter. What I want to emphasize here is that an attempt to intellectualize the physical body one has at birth as a person's essential gender is to be ignorant of that which can change. This does not even begin to describe the actual nature of how sexual characteristics are biologically determined, as strawperson arguments attempt to render sex in biology as a binary, ignorant of the nature of human biology. This tactic forgoes acknowledging the intersex community, and I will pay it no more attention in this piece. Returning to the topic at hand, if a trans person is postoperative, then the previously-discussed Michigan festival organizers recognize their biology as different. Refusal to do so for preoperative trans women is to recognize them as a different biological class, leading to further marginalization and separation in the overall LGBT+ community. Here, the Festival's categorization via biology equates one's genitals with their gender, and this reinforces Butler's charge that society often conflates sex and gender.

To look at this through the lenses of Butler and Marx, a person being recognized does not hold dominion over the dimension in which they are being recognized. As the worker does not have complete control over what they produce while they are at work, the newborn has no say in the label they are assigned by the midwife or doctor. This lack of province is what Marx uses as a call to action, rallying workers toward a more complete state of ownership over their work, their product, and the proceeds of their product (Firestone, 175). Similarly, Marxist feminists cite the immanence of femininity in conjunction with the disadvantages seen by women in the workforce as a reason that social and working conditions both need to change (Firestone, 4-5). This marginalization for women under capitalism is two-fold, as they are marginalized both

through their gender and through the work available to them because of their gender. Before returning to Butler, I note the master-slave dialectic in Marx: the workers are clearly slaves, subservient to business owners who act as the masters of their time, their labor, and their product.

To take the master-slave dialectic elsewhere, consider it in terms of how gender functions in a greater social sphere. If we go by Beauvoir's analysis that man and woman constitute a subject-object dichotomy in Western patriarchy, then understanding these two, not as any given human beings but as abstractions people assign to one another, leads to parallels between Hegel's master and slave. The freedom for self-determination of the patriarchal subject and the lesser degree of freedom implicit in the Object together demonstrate inequality as it existed in Beauvoir's time. Dialectical methodology via Hegel features tension between opposing classes, and it is this tension between men and women as gendered classes of human beings that Beauvoir notices playing out in Western society. It is then the noticing of a human being as a member of a gendered class that forms the basis of social recognition.

For me, a recognition of gender as a more fluid notion than a traditionally imposed one is vital to breaking away from an appeal to gender as an essentialized facet of the human condition, both at the micro level of interpersonal interactions and the macro level of how gender functions in society more broadly. I agree with Firestone in that there is a tension between the categories of man and woman that result in social inequality for people in Western society.

Butler's larger concern is about how gender functions as a social tool that helps constitute recognition for individuals among their peers in the social sphere. She provides the example of the drag queen to demonstrate the intentionality behind action as leading to the recognition of femininity. Her intent is to show us the pitfall of essentializing gender in society, as the

performer exhibits a series of relations between the self and others that create and maintain gender. This flows from action, such as the actions of dressing or speaking in a given manner (*Gender Trouble*, 115-116). For this reason, Butler is so commonly associated with the phrase “gender is performativity.” To summarize *Gender Trouble* with three words poses the risk of reductionism, so let us further unpack her work.

Painting a fuller picture of Butler begins by describing gender as a series of actions carried out and recognized by the majority of a social sphere’s members, and subsequently maintained through the repetition of those agreed-upon actions, such as the example with the midwife enforcing the inscription of gender at birth as a normative practice. In continuing repetition as a means toward establishing social gender norms, Butler argues that we are acting out social scripts, shooting for ideals that are holistically unascertainable (*Gender Trouble*, 113-115). This is like my example of the mold in the previous chapter: Butler and Young both contend that these ideals guide many daily activities, such as a young girl throwing a baseball without using her full force. In aiming for an idealization of femininity, her athletic performance suffers.

In my view, what Young is examining in her essay is predisposition, that the young girl is oriented toward certain actions over others, similar to how Merleau-Ponty writes that one’s perception orients them toward given behaviors (Merleau-Ponty, 106). For Merleau-Ponty, a person is a “being-toward-the-world,” as their temporally-present body is involved in a dialectic with the habits and experiences of their same body of the past (90). As this “being-toward-the-world,” the body can project itself to possible futures and potential goals through its own spatiality. In other words, implicit within the living body is a potential for action, and those actions are the figure for which the body itself serves as the background, rendered in the space

the body inhabits. Beauvoir has demonstrated that this potential is accompanied by human freedom, but this freedom has limits rooted in disparate treatment of sex classes. To synthesize Beauvoir's terminology with Firestone's work, it appears that freedom is implicit in the human condition, but that the class divisions of human beings creates uneven opportunities for using that freedom. Firestone writes that the biological features of being a member of the female sex class, such as pain during childbirth and menstruation, leads to the structuring of society around sexual difference (Firestone, 10-11). The female sex class is rendered object to the male sex class as subject, which Firestone argues is the root of both the division of labor and gender in Western society (1-3). For those who are non-members of the default class in society, their freedom to act is not genuinely unlimited, rather it is constrained by what is and is not socially acceptable.

To address a common critique, under the notion of the social contract, actions do come with consequences—regardless of with which gender one identifies. An action like murder is still punishable by law. However, Firestone makes the point about the expectations placed upon members of the female sex class: she argues that if one is physically-capable of carrying a child to term, they are expected to care for the child after its birth (58-59). This leads to the building of what she calls the family-based society, typically—in Firestone's era—described as the “nuclear family” unit, where two heterosexual parents have approximately two children, the father serves as the breadwinner, and the mother rears the children. For Firestone, these units become the building blocks for society—the breadwinner participates in capitalism to provide for his family, and the mother bears the responsibility of continuing that family. This unit displays a huge imbalance of power, one of the most obvious symptoms is that the husband has mobility where the wife does not. This is not just restricted to the changes of the wife's body during pregnancy. Each work day, the man is leaving the household, his life demonstrating an initial



difference to the wife, who Firestone argues—in true second wave feminist fashion, thinking only of the middle-class white woman who has the luxury TO stay home—is expected to be home for the children (174-176). She divides expression between man and woman into two distinct cultural modes, citing examples such as while the man “makes love to the woman,” the woman makes love to herself vicariously through man (173-174). Firestone sets up a series of examples to display the tension between these two categories, allowing her to posit a dialectic and predict ways in which it will be resolved in the future. In the next chapter, I want to delve further into Firestone’s work and relate it to the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty. From there, I plan on building on this approach by incorporating Sara Ahmed’s phenomenology into my discussion, providing a first-person perspective on the tension shown between Firestone’s two categories: the biological classes of male and female.

At this juncture, I have provided evidence that the dialectical model has its usefulness in analyzing tension, struggle, and resolution over time. Using the works of Hegel and Merleau-Ponty, I have argued that there is a phenomenology of recognition at play between two given opposing parties, as in the thesis and antithesis or the subject and the object. The ability to identify the self and the other arises when the self becomes aware of the difference of that other. Borrowing from Hegel and applying his master-slave dialectic to the consciousness of these two parties leads to a recognition of a self and another vis-à-vis their differences. Whether it is the slave coming to realize that the lord has ownership of the land, or Marx's workers realizing their employers have ownership of the products of their labor, that recognition of difference entails a tension. I want to use this chapter to further delve into those acts of recognition to move from the works of Hegel and Merleau-Ponty toward an analysis of Firestone's work on sex as a biological class and how it can relate to the recognition of one's gender. I have previously discussed Butler's work on the conflation of sex and gender as well as the patterns of society and its members that appear to essentialize gender as a rigid concept. I have used the works of Young, Serano, and Butler to argue that the roles of thesis and antithesis as they correlate to gendered citizens in society as members of distinct classes are characterized by an uneven distribution of power. For Firestone, this imbalance of power is rooted in biological reproduction. While I agree with Firestone that the uneven distribution of power and freedom for members of a society leads to instances of oppression, I disagree with Firestone that the root cause of this problem is solely biological class. Analyzing a dichotomy between men and women tells us that men, generally speaking, have more social mobility than women, but in rendering these as binaristic classes falls short of the fuller understanding of human beings that we are capable of ascertaining. For my purposes, a part of this understanding comes via gender identity and expression. Firestone is

helpful in illuminating the tension that exists between different members of society, but I want to further discuss her approach to the topic.

Whether it is Hegel discussing the bondsman and lord, Marx examining the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, or Firestone analyzing woman and man, each of these three thinkers have provided examples of tensions that exist in dialectical opposition, and as described in dialectical methodology. All three use a dialectical model for understanding how change will come about: by analyzing how tension will be necessarily resolved in the future. For Firestone, as the tension between woman and man is rooted in biology, the resolution of the tension between the two will be accomplished through technological advancement that changes how the children of the future are born. Once the biological class of female are no longer tied to their reproduction function, Firestone argues, the placement of people sexed female into an inferior biological sex class will become superfluous, and it is through this arbitration that the tension between the two sex classes that Firestone identifies will be resolved. This will be the erosion of—the disintegration of—the biological class system (6, 172-174). In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Firestone discusses reproductive technologies, such as ways to incubate a fetus outside of the womb that will inevitably create a greater sense of agency in society for females through a biological revolution leading to social change (192-195). In *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Marge Piercy takes this a step further, providing a fictionalized model for what the synthesis between the two sex classes will yield. In her novel, gender understood as rooted in biology becomes *de trop*; and thus, the society of her novel is radically different from our own. Consider one example of the differences between Western society today and Piercy's fictional society of Mattapoissett: there are no gender-coded pronouns in Piercy's utopia; people are simply referred to as "per," signifying the word "person" (26). For Firestone, part of the problem is that female bodies are

inscribed with an imperative: female bodies ought to give birth. The culture surrounding this is one of docility, one where gender-reveal events and bachelorette parties come with the implicit expectation that the bodies around which these events revolve are bodies that will fulfill the function of prolonging the human species by giving birth.

In *Docile Bodies* (1975), Michel Foucault serves as both a historian and diagnostician of a stratified imbalance of power. He gives us the example of the soldier in the classical age: a person who was trained through discipline, whose body was “improved” to function with specific intent and at a specific standard (179-181). The first act of recognition comes from the intent of the monarch, finding the body of the average citizen unfit to serve and protect the land. Here, the monarch recognizes a difference in the capabilities of a citizen and soldier. The monarch sets up this dialectic and resolves it through physical training, the tension between the real citizens and ideal defenders resolves in the creation of real defenders. Foucault writes that the body is both the “object and target of power” (Foucault, 180), the object is the physical human body, and the targeted goal is tempering it into one that can wield a weapon, specifically with the intent of using it more efficiently than that of another country’s soldiers.

Foucault furthers his analysis by stating that while the physical human body is an analyzable object, it is also a malleable one: he uses the term “docility” to describe how the body can be “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (Foucault, 180). As Hegel writes in the *Philosophy of History* (1837), the tension between two monarchs is resolved on the battlefield (248), and for Foucault, the object used to resolve this tension is the human body, a docile body manipulated and transformed into a warrior and coerced into fighting on the battlefield. Foucault contends that there is the useful body, which is useful to others as seen in the soldier marching to their death, and there is the intelligible body, an object capable of actions (180). Foucault thusly

connects this notion of docility to the point where the dichotomy of the body is joined: the body of the soldier is useful to the monarch, and the soldier uses their freewill to mobilize their body and effectively serve them.

Docility plays a role in the dialectical materialism of Marx and Firestone. For Marx, as Firestone's describes it, it is when workers are trained for employment and choose to carry out the actions desired by their employers. They are manipulated into working for a person who maintains a greater degree of power in the organization than the worker. He argues, as Firestone presents it, that developing a self-consciousness of labor conditions and the imbalance of power between workers and employers is a necessary condition for the social revolution that will lead to a more even balance of power (2-3). This feeds into the argument proposed by Firestone for her own goals. She sees the same kind of imbalance in the conditions between those sexed male and sexed female. In both cases, the tension exhibited between group A (males) and group B (females) exists not at just the individual level, but also as the class level. Examining romantic relationships that affect the sex classes, she finds that "power and love don't make it together" (146), a symptom of the imbalance of power between the two partners in heterosexual relationships.

Firestone offers a distinction between love and the culture of romance in Western society. For her, romance is a cultural tool used to enforce the imbalanced sex classes of male and female. She argues that (1) eroticism, (2) the privatization of the sexuality of females, and (3) the enforcement of an ideal of beauty become the tools of female marginalization (147-151), apropos to what she categorizes as the female sex class. Combined, these lead to a sense of "false individuality" for females within the context of social recognition, where the existence of the individual is not acknowledged in detail, but only as a generality (151).

Connecting this with Young's example of the young girl playing ball yet again: "girl" becomes an insult hurled toward her, not from the intent of commenting on the details of her character or her athletic performance, but from a characterization of her behavior as un-feminine. For the insulter, it is a recognition of a body conditioned to be feminine that is not behaving in a way believed by the insulter appropriate for sports. It is the perception of an object with presupposed behaviors that is acting in a deficient manner, leading to the scorn of the insult.

From here, I would like to continue the discussion of Firestone's analysis of the culture of Western romance started in the previous paragraph in order to shed light on another way in which marginalization permeates Western life. For Firestone, eroticism ([1] above) is the concentration of sexuality and the subsequent projection of related social and affective needs onto sex itself (147). Items like a pair of panties purchased at Victoria's Secret become a displacement of social/emotional needs through a kind of erotic projection. This projection is not localized to the physical or social needs of the human body, as Firestone finds that "[v]irility and sexual performance become confused with social worth" (147). Adopting Beauvoir's subject-object dichotomy between man and woman for Firestone's male and female sex classes, we will find further inequalities in the erotic lives of the male and female sex classes. The example of Victoria's Secret panties is useful in that those panties are created with the intent of being purchased by or for a person that is sexed female. This fact is hardly different today than when Firestone published the *Dialectic* in 1970.<sup>8</sup> Where this erotic dichotomy exists for Firestone is in how females are the only permissible "love objects" in society (148). In the first chapter, I discussed Serano's findings of how a gay man's attraction toward another gay man is read as less valid than the attraction expressed by a heterosexual man toward a heterosexual woman—here it

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<sup>8</sup> Even as we see the cancellation of Victoria Secret's annual fashion show (Show, n.p.).

is again, where the consideration of a non-female as the object of affection is not seen as valid under the patriarchy. For Firestone, eroticism functions to preserve the direct pleasure of sex for the male sex class, specifically the heterosexual male.

Of the second tool of marginalization ((2) above), Firestone finds that “sex privatization of women is the process whereby women are blinded to their generality as a class which renders them invisible as individuals to the male eye” (149). I.e., women are tricked into believing that what makes them attractive is unique to them; men want individual women because of what they have in common. The body of a person sexed female becomes vague, shrouded in mystery to others and often alien to the person in question. Society pressures females to continually perform and repeat behaviors that are categorized as female, and the result is a homogeneity of women who have physical appearance as the only outlet for expressing their individuality. For Firestone, the social metrics for gauging one’s womanhood are contingent mostly upon appearance, and patriarchy forecasts an ideal appearance that women are supposed to set as a goal. The expectation that one ought to look and act a certain way based on one’s category conflicts with the unique nature of individual humans, and this contributes to neuroses about physical appearance: when one is supposed to be self-expressive, but at the same time one is supposed to stifle that self-expression in a bid to conform to what is considered beautiful.

Firestone’s discussion of “sex privatization” must be seen in tandem with “generality as marginalization.” The aspects of oppression that these notions highlight are manifold. Foucault would find a multiplicity of moments of docility in the symptoms that Firestone describes. Firestone observes situations where women are informally addressed by strangers with names such as honey, sweetheart, or darling, instead of being greeted with Ms. or Mrs. Firestone notes that many of those words do not register as offensive for the woman on the receiving end of them

(150). For me, while there may be alternatives for the man's Mr., calling him "sir" or "bro" generally does not come across with the same condescension as calling a woman "honey." The docility of the woman's body manifests as an analyzable physical object pushed into an existence of generality, removed of details. Human bodies are imbued with meaning, but Firestone is arguing that bodies sexed female are seen as bodies of lesser value, not too dissimilar from Serano's formulation of traditional sexism as previously discussed. Firestone provides another example of how women can be greeted by strangers: "Hey Legs!" (150-151). This 1960's/'70's greeting shows an empirical analysis of the body (yes, this person has legs), but fails to offer anything specific, not even accounting for the person's name. While, no, I do not find that particular catcall to be a prominent one in 2019, I have found the act of being catcalled to still be dehumanizing, and a prevalent part of my own personal experience.

What stands out when Foucault's notion of docility is combined with Firestone's privatizing of women's sexuality is that the pressures coming from our culture can manipulate bodies sexed female into viewing themselves with the same generalities the culture generates, causing them to fail to develop a full sense of public individuality when faced with an existence that requires generality.

I am aware of some social progress, but I'm sure we can all point to a multitude of examples that indicate much remains the same. If Firestone is to be believed, many (not all) women do not enjoy an existence where specific details flesh out their humanity in the public eye because the public eye has a greater fixation on their generalized capacity to give birth and rear children or exude sexuality. The beauty ideal Firestone describes in her *Dialectic* (151-152) shifts attention away from what a woman can do and places it instead on what she looks like and what she can do for others. While this does not suggest that one's desire to be beautiful is



unacceptable. It does, however, create social pressure to act in a manner that conforms to socially recognizable norms of masculine or feminine, dependent on one's perceived biological sex. In the final chapter, I offer my own personal experiences as support for this aspect of Firestone's views.

Firestone offers this final tool of marginalization, the beauty ideal, as a fluid notion that, despite this culture evolving over time, is a third way in which society manages to marginalize and oppress. Firestone states that romance as a culturally-promoted and feasibly achievable goal is irrelevant, but as an ideal it is modeled on rare qualities, such as the perceived attractiveness of French women (of a certain age and body type) in the United States in the 1960s (151-152). Showing that she was ahead of her time, she posits that as soon as people can achieve this ideal through artificial means, they will. Look at the prevalence of cosmetic surgery in celebrity culture (and beyond) today, from the Kardashian empire to pop stars like Iggy Azalea; a selection of procedures more commonly chosen by women than by men in the US by a wide margin (White, n.p.). Firestone argues that when this ideal-seeking becomes commonplace, the ideal will shift because its rare and special qualities no longer exist; and it was the unattainability that made the ideal attractive in the first place. Meanwhile, through this pursuit of the beauty ideal, Firestone argues that women become more and more alike in that they express themselves similarly through their physical appearance. This, combined with (2), the privatization of sexuality, creates a severe dissonance for women: sex privatization renders women invisible as individuals, and their individuality often comes out in generality as an attempt at achieving (3), a societal beauty ideal. For Firestone, this is a futile endeavor when so many people are trying to model themselves after the same physical ideal in an attempt to establish their own overall uniqueness.

To summarize, Firestone offers a note of clarity. She states that sex objects are beautiful, but that is not the point. For her, we must consider whether or not beauty is a quality we can ascribe to a body as one that requires external support, as in, do we need a culture to tell us a body is beautiful? Do we need to modify our bodies in such a way that fits whatever paradigm of beauty is dominant at the given time, or can we self-define beauty? (155) I believe this relates to desire and existential authenticity: does one want to be beautiful in their own way for their own reasons, or for reasons external to the self? To bring this to the present, consider a common critique of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*: the show “looks plastic;” its stars are more like works of art than tangibly human. In honing an ideal of beauty, some would argue that the beauty the women of this family have achieved is close to the point of being uncanny. It is this uncanny quality—these are human beings who resemble plastic dolls more than ordinary people—that Firestone argues is the pitfall of the beauty ideal.

Firestone’s diagnosis of man and woman and biological sex classes brings with it a problematic import: the adoption of biological sex classes as a talking point by trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs). The argument Firestone offers, that biology is oppressive, is a salient critique, but it becomes limited when it morphs into an argument that biology is destiny, effectively unchangeable and determined at birth. Firestone’s analysis relies primarily on only two biological sex classes. This fails to account for the full range of how sex is determined. The TERF view accepts the proposition that there are two biological sex classes, and goes no further. This leads to the claim that there is no legitimacy to the gender identity of any transgender person because the TERF view equates sex and gender, and this appears to be reliant on a false equivalence. There is a disconnect between the body at birth and what the body can become, as, for many, transitioning is literally the move from the gender assigned at birth to a

different one, and the medical changes made to the body assist this change. If we believe Beauvoir's theory that one is not born a woman, then for Firestone, people are "made" into women once others recognize their capacity for childbirth, as a feature of woman as a biological sex class.

The first problem I see here is in the case of cisgender women who, for whatever reason, cannot give birth. The TERF view would state that a woman in this case was assigned woman at birth, but she lacks a quality that Firestone deems essential to the labeling of people using biological sex classes. This argument is beginning to feel analogous to saying that a triangle is defined by having three sides, but the use of these statements to define a term as broad as womanhood is failing to account for the human experience. Let us consider the case of a sterile, yet otherwise healthy cisgender woman. Unlike a triangle drawn on a page, a human being changes, and in this example, the change is in the capacity to give birth. If it is the most essential equality for sorting people into biological sex classes for both Firestone and the TERF view, then it would follow that we need to place this woman in a different category. However, her body is in fine working order and we are still addressing her as a woman. In most places this woman goes, she does not disclose her inability for live childbirth, and therefore other people do not know she is sterile. She is effectively a woman in social spheres, with one particular indicator being the pronouns others use to refer to her by. However, she does not fit into woman as a biological sex class if the capacity for live childbirth is an essential quality of all members of that class. Here, we are seeing the limitations of equating sex and gender, the limitations of using biology as the primary metric for gauging a phenomenon that is not fully encompassed by biology. This is not the only case of a woman who cannot give birth, but it is helpful in understanding why equating biological features to womanhood is fallacious in nature.

To further this view, I look to Merleau-Ponty. In *The Phenomenology of Perspective*, he argues that the body is less like a static physical object and more like a work of art with multiple signifying components (152). This distinction compliments Foucault's description in *Docile Bodies*, where the body can be analyzed as a physical object and where the body can be manipulated and trained to do certain tasks. For Merleau-Ponty, one's own body is not an object for the *cogito*, but is the totality of lived signification (154-155). Just as multiple components of a piece of art are required for the art itself to be made intelligible to its receiver, the experience of the body is a matrix of meanings, like an individualized version of Lacan's Symbolic Order. In one example Merleau-Ponty gives, he likens the body to music. Sound, including pitch, volume, and intonation, are all necessary for music; similarly, the body requires its physical self and one's perception and ability to synthesize sense-data into thought. Despite having a physical component, one's own body is not perceived as an object for one's consciousness. It is in the world and has the capacity for the intake of sense-data through its external and mechanistic relationships (75). The organization of this stimuli leads to a synthesis of this sense data that allows for the formulation of ideas (77). Foucault places heavy emphasis on the significance of details in the lives of human beings. For Merleau-Ponty, there are so many stimuli constantly taken in by one's perception, and yet, these details are often absent in how we as people read and understand one another. For my goals, the works of both writers are helpful in understanding both the significance details give to understanding another person, but also just how one's perception has the capacity to grasp so many details simultaneously. Foucault stresses that the absence of details lends itself to the treatment of a body as a physical, docile object. Merleau-Ponty's project emphasizes how complicated our faculty of perception is, absorbing a multiplicity of details in every moment it is active.

In this chapter, I have been drawing upon Marx, Beauvoir, and Firestone and their interpretations of Hegel's dialectical methodology all to assess the balance of power between two different classes. Hegel's model shows a tension between two classes and posits that the resolution between these two will yield a synthesis in the form of a new class. For Firestone, the observed tension is exhibited between the biological sex classes, which demands a resolution brought about through technology. In her *Dialectic*, she examines the imbalance of power between men and women not just from a technological perspective, but also from a socio-cultural one. She argues that it is this stratification of inequality that leads to further marginalization for women, but as theorists like Serano and Susan Stryker argue, this inequality worsens the further away one gets from a cisgender men's subjectivity, who Beauvoir put us on notice is the default in Western society.

Consider wage-earning: women are generally paid less than men for the same or similar work in this society, but black and brown men get paid less than white men, and this pay lessens even more if the person of color is a woman. Another form of marginalization exists outside the common gender binary. Firestone assesses human beings in terms of sex classes, but as seen in Serano, Stryker, and others, a mode of being other than cisgender is often not even considered by most people—including Firestone. Stryker has brought to our attention medical cases of transgender Americans that predate the American Civil War (35). However, much of the media's coverage of the transgender population sees this group as a recent phenomenon, marginalized to the point of reinstating a recently lifted ban on serving in the American military (at the time of this writing). Additional gender non-conforming identities include non-binary people such as pop singer Sam Smith, and actor Asia Kate Dillon, offer further potentialities for human expression outside of a gender binary. Much prejudice and bias and potential for violence is aimed at those

who are not cisgender and in large part this problem exists because cisgender is the perceived dominant norm. Non-cisgender people must navigate a society that was not built to accommodate them; their varied identities are not accepted by a patriarchal binary. Proof of this exists in examples like the prosecution of Virginia Prince<sup>9</sup> in the 1950s after the U.S. government seized private letters (Stryker, 68-70), or in the present day where trans people are banned from serving in the military. I spend time on those accounts of individual experience below (Ch. V), but now I will summarize what I believe I have accomplished in this chapter.

Merleau-Ponty describes perception as a human faculty from which we can never fully disengage. Even when we sleep, the body still reacts to sensory input; if the body is sleeping in an area that is too cold, it will shiver, indicative that the body perceives the space as being cold. Merleau-Ponty spends much of his *Phenomenology* focused on individual experience, how the self as subject can look at a drawing and perceive a figure on a background as an object. Close to the end of the book, he devotes a chapter to other persons as “Other Selves and the Human World.” He notes that “I am thrown into a nature, and that nature appears not only as outside me, in objects devoid of history, but it is also discernible at the centre of subjectivity” (403). He describes the orientation of a body thrown into nature by saying that the significance of the lived body is as a “being-toward-the-world.” Here, he is saying that bodily subjectivity allows a person to recognize the presence of physical objects that are separate from the self, and furthermore, such subjectivity allows a person to take in perceptions and make inferences about the world around them. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is the totality of lived signification; the mind-body problem has been the wrong problem to study all this time.

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<sup>9</sup> Prince was an American transgender activist notable for the publication of the *Transvetia* magazine in the early 1960s.

His next move is almost Lacanian, stating that beyond this natural world, there is a cultural world, molded by and constituted of human actions. Where the dialectics Hegel sets up are abstract, i.e., the master and slave are representative of opposing forces, they do not designate historic individuals. Merleau-Ponty moves from this macro level of opposing forces in the world to matters concerning individual persons. He says that a person observing a spoon on a table sees a utensil that “someone else” uses for eating, leading to a recognition of self and other within the context of what he calls the cultural world (405-406). This is similar to Sara Ahmed, who writes that one’s own phenomenology propels them toward a thing, and it is through our perception that we become capable of saying something (25-26). For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is the illustrative force that allows one to say this spoon is being used by another person. It is one’s own phenomenological experience that recognizes the spoon, the ownership of the spoon, and the existence of a person different from the self who is using the spoon.

After discussing how a person recognizes signs of the cultural world that exist beyond the natural world, including everything from human-made farms to spoons, Merleau-Ponty then discusses the problem of other consciousnesses. He states:

The analysis of the perception of others runs up against a difficulty in principle raised by the cultural world, since it is called upon to solve the paradox of a consciousness seen from the outside, of a thought which has its abode in the external world, and which, therefore, is already subjectless and anonymous compared with mine. (406)

What he is saying here, in my view, is that there is a singularity in a person’s perception, that the internal monologues of others are private, divorced from the access of that individual person. He argues that one’s body and consciousness are co-extensive of one another, but neither can gain access to the consciousness of the other. Yet, he ponders why, if there is a

consciousness to his body, other bodies should not have consciousness (409). That is, what evidence do we have to refute that the body of the perceiving individual is one with consciousness? If we are to understand the body as a knowledge-acquiring apparatus (410), then what restricts the body of another from functioning similarly? He proposes a distinction between the body as a physical object described in physiology—what Foucault calls the analyzable body—and the body as a being-in-the-world, an existence endowed with a perceptual consciousness (409-410). This does not provide an airtight solution to the problem of other consciousnesses and I am not attempting to solve that problem in this work, but given the observability of human behaviors and similarities between them, we can infer the likelihood that other bodies too possess a consciousness of some kind.

Applying Merleau-Ponty's work on perception and a Hegelian approach to recognition to Firestone, we can establish a model of recognition at play in her dialectical materialism. For Firestone, there are different physical traits applied to the two physiological classes. The recognition that these traits are different leads to a struggle for the individual, and, at the macro level, that struggle leads to inequality. Firestone's diagnosis is that this inequality manifests in society in a multiplicity of ways, from women being culturally expected to give birth and raise their children, to the toxic culture of romance where men and women have uneven power in their interpersonal relations with one another. Young states that this inequality begins in youth, but Firestone's conception of this moves in a different direction. Firestone declares that "childhood did not apply to women" (51) in the sense that they do not experience a childhood of sameness, further separating the two default biological sex classes in Firestone's diagnosis. As the default experience, men see their childhoods as "normal," but as Firestone contends, this is not a norm that women have the privilege of experiencing because of how society inscribes meaning upon



the body that follows from the sex class that body belongs to. This is enforced in and by a system where white cisgender men, Beauvoir's subject, are, e.g., generally paid more in the workforce. The resolution to this inequality begins in a Hegelian way: the differing classes must form a self-consciousness of their own situation and recognize how that situation differs from the other class. In Firestone's work, the next step is a feminist revolution through social and technological change aimed at gradually resolving the tension between the two biological sex classes. This will lead not only to a greater level of equality between the two classes, but will have other socio-cultural effects, such as the way gender is understood and how labor is distributed. While there are problems with her specific assumptions about how change will come, the dialectic need for a resolution of the tension is, in my view, a necessity for that greater level of equality.

The metanarrative prescribed for human history by the dialectical materialism as seen by Marx and Firestone will not necessarily unfold the way these two have envisioned. But there is a usefulness in spending time with Hegelian ideas to provide us a base understanding of the dialectical model of change. Ultimately, Hegelian theory will likely not prove to be fact. It presumes moves that necessarily arrive at a specific future, but the argument that humanity is moving toward any historical goal is at odds with both existential freedom and the postmodern condition, as both emphasize human freedom and the ability to choose. In applying Hegelian methodology to dialectical materialism, Marx and Firestone attempt to predict the future, ultimately repurposing Hegel with specific socio-political ends of their own. For Marx, the resolution of the tension between opposing economic classes will lead to a society without economic classes. This is similar to Firestone, where the erosion of biological sex classes enables a radical revisioning of society without gender roles as they are traditionally understood today. The initial utility of Firestone's materialist narratives is in its capacity to inspire the hope of a

more trans-inclusive future, one where the absence of a binary gender system grants more freedom of individual expression, for social justice, and in equal access to healthcare. Where our work with phenomenology becomes most useful is in helping the individual recognize a difference in socially-prescribed roles—the act of recognition serves as an acknowledgement of a lack of sameness between two parties. This is seen both for Marx, when a worker’s recognition of their boss as a person who lives under capitalism on different terms is understood as an inequality, and for Firestone, when a woman, realizing that people around her are expecting her to have a child simply because she is physically-capable of doing so, is an inequality.

Firestone’s theory contends that reproductive technologies that render live childbirth arbitrary is the apparatus by which her revolution can be realized. If we are to accept the premise that human beings are prescribed social roles via one of two prescribed biological sex classes, then technologies that change how we understand biological sex will inevitable change how we understand each other. This is my next move: in the next chapter, I want to envision this Firestonian future—without the technological requirements; And, in the final chapter, I want to more fully bring these concepts of dialectical change and the phenomenology of perception into the present day.

As Ahmed states, phenomenology asks us to be aware of a starting point, the place from which the world unfolds to us (545). Building on the work of Husserl in his *Ideas* (1913), she states that if we are to accept the nature of consciousness as intentional, then it follows not only that we are directed toward certain objects, but that this relationship is twofold, as these objects take us in certain directions that exist in relation to those objects (545-546). For Husserl, this means that the nature of thought is directed toward or about something, that our thoughts intend to grasp an object or idea. Ahmed calls this state of being directed one's 'orientation.' Merleau-Ponty argues that a human consciousness is perceptive, able to synthesize information from different stimuli, and Ahmed builds on his work, saying that from this localized perspective, we find ourselves oriented toward given objects and given actions. Applying Ahmed to Young's example of the young girl playing baseball, the girl moves away from the full motility of her own body during the game. Ahmed would say the girl is oriented against using her body to its fullest capacity, and Young accounts for the observed differences in how children act on the playground by being rooted in the differences in how children are socialized as either gendered boy or girl. This has applications for my example of "manspreading" from the first chapter: it is another instance in which a female is oriented away from an action that her male counterpart carries out without reflection. The intention is to appear "ladylike" by outwardly presenting an absence of what is considered "masculine" in the given scenario. What we see here is a definition of femininity predicated on an absence of femininity as part of what constitutes the subject-object dichotomy between humans socialized as men and women: the male category has self-determination, and the female category is determined by what the male category is without.

I want to take this argument and expand on it by moving it in a new direction. Given the space dedicated to exploring orientation and disorientation in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938)

and Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), I will explore the narrators of each as phenomenological accounts that further illustrate Ahmed's terms. I will additionally discuss why I find each to get successively closer to the self-consciousness Firestone describes as being necessary for a revolution that would lead to greater social equality in her *Dialectic*. I will finish by envisioning what a more developed level of self-consciousness could look like in this chapter, specifically a kind of self-consciousness with the capacity for recognizing differences between the self and what is Other. I will then devote a final chapter to real-world experiences, to take these philosophical theories and move them out of fiction into the lived world.

Sartre's *Nausea* follows the fictional French historian Antoine around as he chronicles the minutia of his own existence and balks in terror when he doubts his own perception of the world around him. As previously discussed, Foucault emphasizes the significance of details in everyday life, but Sartre's novel highlights the potential darkness in this; to use an old adage: the devil is in the details. Antoine describes experiencing "nausea" whenever he becomes aware that he exists, aware of the details of his existence and how his reflections on his existence are effectively irrelevant to the world around him. Advancing Sartre's existential phenomenology, the idea here is that the world as a collection of physical objects is indifferent to Antoine's perceptions of it and ensuing cogitations on it. In the novel, there are episodes where Antoine finds himself surrendering to this feeling of nausea: in one instance, he leaves his place of residence because he has "no reason not to" (100). Here, what manifests is a lack of implicit meaning contained by the experience of being home, and it is the act of being home that the narrator declares to be meaningless. Antoine cannot find a reason satisfactory enough for him to stay home, and the nausea this lack of meaning elicits is what horrifies him. Rather than stay home in this state of horror, he leaves his residence. Sartre finds that these ill feelings are rooted

in freedom as a facet of the human condition, something he will further explicate in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). In this text, he describes modes of using freedom that are both genuine and at odds with one's genuine desires, but in the example from *Nausea*, his character Antoine uses his freedom to placate his nausea. The action of staying home yields no meaning for him, so he chooses to search for that meaning elsewhere.

What follows in *Nausea* is Sartre advancing the idea that human freedom exists at some odds with the nature of the physical world. Antoine's fits of nausea are then symptomatic of how overwhelming human existence is. For Sartre, human existence is so boundless that he created a protagonist who enters bouts of extreme anxiety, pattering over the smallest details of existence, to show us the actual terrifying depths of our freedom amid the variations of our possibilities. Much of the novel is spent with Antoine choosing inaction over action because he anticipates that the result of an event will not yield any meaning for him. For activist Merle Boppert, a fundraising officer of Germany's Marine Stewardship fundraising officer, Antoine is a "human failure" (Boppert, n.p.), someone who enters situations without intent. It is this intention that brings us back to our prior discussion on Husserl and Ahmed: the horror of *Nausea* comes not from how Antoine perceives the world, but from how we are to perceive this daily existence of no genuine desire to act. The phenomenological experience of Antoine is one where he recognizes that he has the freedom to act, but the fear of what follows action is what prevents him from doing so. For Sartre, this is our struggle in the face of freedom. The novel features other characters that talk and act, but they are never shown to have the same crisis over freedom that Antoine has, the narrator serving as the mouthpiece for Sartre's then-developing philosophy.

For our purposes, the moments in *Nausea* when Antoine has these existential episodes are where his phenomenological account of the world of human meanings as fluid becomes most

transparent. He recalls a trip to a park where he notices a black piece of bark—this leads to him playing with “the absurdity of the world” in a fit of nausea (130). He first contemplates whether or not the bark is identifiable as the color black, and then proceeds to agonize over what meaning is contained by the world and to what degrees the word can be effectively employed to communicate anything at all. He remarks, “I did not see this black... [b]ut this richness was lost in confusion and finally was no more because it was too much” (131). To use Sartre’s terminology, there is a recoil from the static nature of the world as a collection of physical objects. For Sartre, alone, the world is a nothingness in that it contains no inherent meaning, but human meaning springs forth from it, generated by one who uses their freedom to create and decide upon meaning. Antoine’s remark is a linguistic confusion here: does this particular piece of bark reflect the color black, or as he asks, is it “more than” black or “almost black” (130)? Another way of considering it would be to ask: how does one’s perception of a given color hold up against the perceptions of others?<sup>10</sup> Following that, I ask: how can we find a word that best describes a thing, and to which most people can assent? In this particular instance, he finds the pursuit of accurately capturing the quality of color with a word to be a formidable task, so he resigns, giving up on describing the bark. He is overwhelmed by the details of this physical object and the array of ways he is free to consider and describe it, his shock comes from his recognition of how many possibilities he has considered to describe it, and just how many more possibilities he may be leaving out.

A further consideration for *Nausea* put forth by Boppert is one of temporality: by this, we are considering Antoine’s immediate experience versus his memory and capacity for reflection

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<sup>10</sup> Sartre’s writings predate Frank Jackson’s example of Mary’s Room; there is insufficient space to address that argument as a counterexample in this paper (see Jackson, 127-136).

before, during, and after his actions (n.p.). His immediate experience of the bark is that of a piece of wood once belonging to a tree that he finds while out in a park. His later reflection is drastically different, unable to sort through the vast range of descriptions he could potentially assign to his experience of the bark. As a narrator, he struggles to relay its color to the audience, and so a full account of it also proves to be a futile task for him. There are even stranger examples in the text: during this same episode of nausea, he confuses the hand of a friend he shakes with that of a live worm based on its consistency (130). He sees another person's fingers at first, but upon feeling their movement in his grip, he fears that he now has a handful of worms. This is similar to the previous example in that the narrator second-guesses his experience and his interpretation of it upon reflection. On this matter, I find Merleau-Ponty's discussion on the mediating faculties of perception in his *Phenomenology* to help us make sense of this. For Merleau-Ponty, an analysis of perception is liable to have errors; what he calls the "constancy" of one's perception is contingent upon the efficacy of the faculties that lead to one's perceptions (5, 7-8). However, the problem posed by *Nausea* is not that Antonine has poor eyesight or a deficient sense of touch. The central thesis of Sartre's fiction is that experience is so overwhelmingly dense, detailed, and full that we cannot ever make sense of it and find order within it, a notion that aligns itself with Merleau-Ponty's description of perception as a faculty we can never fully disengage from. This is why I saw Sartre as useful in demonstrating another side of the prior discussion on Foucault: the multiplicity of details informs our experience of the world, but the range of possible details are so many that considering them all is not possible in a given moment. If we accept that our consciousness has an orientation as Ahmed puts forth, then it follows that there are possibilities we are not considering in that given moment.

In her *Phenomenology*, Ahmed describes *Nausea* as “a novel about ‘things’ becoming oblique ... a phenomenological description of disorientation” (162). Antoine states that his sense of nausea is not localized within him, rather, it is so ubiquitous he is fully encapsulated by it (Sartre, 35). When he is stricken by these fits of nausea, the contents of his experience and the world around him become, as Ahmed describes, oblique to him. The perception of the tree bark or the hand of the man he is shaking becomes void of meaning and he becomes disorientated, driven away from extrapolating meaning by those perceptions. His description is one applicable to the real world; he encounters a phenomenological twilight zone where there are physical objects, yet he is unable to effectively navigate the matrix of human-constructed meanings for each of them and how they relate to one another. Ahmed says that when an object is perceived as something other than what it is intended to be or how it is intended to function, it becomes a “cold object” that gives off a character of indifference (163). Yet, the bark is not a human-made construct, it is the result of nature. For Antoine, to find an intention and find none behind the bark reveals the inherent meaninglessness of the physical world. It is a “cold object” to him in that it is indifferent to any meaning he could find in it or assign to it. Here, Sartre tells us that meaning as we understand it is subjective, that we can observe objective phenomena like gravity, but a motion such as the shaking of hands is not a constant signifier of anything unless people achieve a consensus that the gesture has meaning (Sartre, 61). Yet, that consistency is contingent upon people living at a given time and place, and is therefore subject to change. To relate this to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of constancy, there is no constancy of human-made meanings like handshakes across the history of our species. Those meanings become localized and encapsulated by people, geography, and time.



I would like to revisit my central topic of a phenomenological account of gender by bringing this notion of disorientation back to the notion of gender as a lived experience and socio-cultural phenomenon. As previously discussed, Butler's theory on gender describes it as a performance, a cultural meaning understood in a social context vis-à-vis consensually agreed-upon actions. For her, gender is not the extant result of biology; it is what a person does, how those actions signify meaning, and how those around us recognize those actions as constitutive of a mode of human behavior. As Young writes, it is the imposition onto others and the following internalization of this system of meaning that leads to differences in how children play on the playground. Furthermore, as Lacan states, these meanings become aggregated into a Symbolic Order that we call upon in our interactions to make sense out of each other, ourselves, and our actions (Lacan and Mehlman, 47, 58-61). As previously discussed, Firestone's methodology uses a model of dialectical materialism to argue that these meanings can change, that changes in the physical world and our access to changing technology will necessarily lead to a paradigm shift where the social meanings implied by gender become arbitrary.

Again, I would like to invoke fiction, this time visualizing a base model for a post-gender society in an effort to contrast a society where acts of misrecognition happen based on gender against a society where those acts almost never take place. Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* appears as a work of utopian science fiction where time travel serves as the protagonist Connie's vehicle for escaping the circumstances of her current life in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Here, Piercy adopts Firestone's biological solutions of reproduction technologies and uses her theories to describe what society would look like after Firestone's revolution. In this society, there is no gender, and as a result, societal differences range from the micro-level of interpersonal interactions and the macro-level of, e.g., healthcare being radically different from the West as we know it today. As

Miriam Rosenthal writes on Mattapoissett in her *Observations* on Piercy's work, "[r]eproduction and parenting as we know it is obsolete" (3). What Piercy does in her novel is a step past Firestone: gender is unlinked from biology wholesale, giving no room for oppressive sex classes or uneven gender roles to exist in her utopia.

As mentioned above, one example of this comes through the pronouns that people in Mattapoissett use to refer to one another. The gender-neutral "per" stands in for the word "person." When Connie first experiences this after traveling from her present, the Western 20<sup>th</sup> Century, to Piercy's fictionalized future, she experiences a sense of disorientation. Ahmed would argue that the previous experiences and internalized social order of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century lack compatibility with the world of Mattapoissett, and so Connie experiences a sense of nausea in a world where the paradigm is unrecognizable. As a result, her initial reactions to how characters address one another sparks questions and confusion from Connie, such as the first time she hears another person referred to as "per." Luciente, a citizen from Mattapoissett, explains to Connie during their first encounter: "we've reformed pronouns ... We must work to commune, because we have such different frames of redding" (40-41).<sup>11</sup> Using Ahmed's terminology, we can say that Connie is disoriented, her proclivities toward the cultures and customs of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western society feel disjointed in Mattapoissett. This is akin to what we call culture shock, as she feels her actions and sentiments are effectively counterintuitive to the socio-cultural modes of expression in which this future world and its denizens act. Consider her rejoinder to Luciente following this first contact: "You're crazy, you know that? If I'm not" (57). That is the outward projection of her feeling so disjointed in the world of Mattapoissett; that is her stating for the

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<sup>11</sup> The term "redding" is used here in Piercy's fiction to explain the perspectives by which the two characters understand one another.

reader the degree to which she is disoriented away from this new world, given the time she spent in her first one.

There are many more significant differences in how the language of Mattapoissett works, tied to the reproductive differences that contrast this society to Connie's. Rosenthal remarks that "[t]he parenting arrangement is not of our convention. Three mothers are chosen from men and women who have volunteered to mother. There is no mention of fathers" (2). During Connie's first encounter with Luciente, per explains not only that the pronouns per society uses are different than Connie's, but also that parenting is volunteer-based. Traditional monogamy as Connie knows it no longer exists, and the language is considerably more advanced at addressing mental states and mental health. Addressing the first of these—Mattapoissett's social makeup where parents volunteer combined with the absence of the word "father" from the society's lexicon—aligns with a central claim Nancy Chodorow makes in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978). As Chodorow states from a theoretical basis, anyone can become a mother (87-88). More specifically, this is to say that any given person who has participated in a healthy relationship with a mother-figure during their infancy has the capacity for nurturing and rearing a child, a mode of behavior any human is capable of learning and replicating in their own actions. This qualifier is significant for Chodorow; she argues that an infant child who has been sufficiently taken care of by their mother will internalize confidence in the mother's ability for caretaking and thus associate that ability with their own thriving and wellbeing (88). Effectively, the thought process is one of recognizing the positive impact one's mother left on their development and, as a side effect, that recognition generates a sense of gratitude for the mother's actions. Despite the word's associations with femininity in Chodorow's day—1978—there is no gendered connotation to "mother" for Chodorow. However,

Chodorow brings her work closer to Firestone when she follows this up by saying that “the parenting capacities laid down in people of both genders will be called up in women only [by society]” (88). This translates to the inequality of social expectations, where even though Chodorow finds there to be no gender requirement to work as a parent, it is, regrettably, only expected of women.

Revisiting Piercy, her depiction of a utopia is a heavily Firestonian future. Firestone predicts that technologies that allow for the incubation of a fetus outside of the human womb will lead to a great socio-cultural restructuring of society where the notion of gender is reconsidered and ultimately revised. Firestone argues that this is because of the division of sex classes in Western society, and how much of this society is subsequently structured around that division. Mattapoisett has achieved a way out of the division of sex classes: babies are born with technological assistance, and instead of biological mothers being expected to rear these children, mothering is a volunteer-based position in this society.

Firestone’s revolution may not be the world we currently live in and may not fully eradicate women’s oppression, but Piercy has fictionalized it as if it were the case in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, in order to bring it to a dimension beyond theory. As the audience, we see firsthand the application of Firestone’s ideas to a broader society and what a way of living beyond the division of sex classes and the gender binary could look like. This is more than useless escapism in that reading Piercy’s novel can be the first step toward conceiving of a different way of organizing society. For Connie, she resists and protests against how Mattapoisett is structured at first, from its social conventions to how it handles the disposal of waste. Perhaps the error in envisioning the future as the current status quo is that it will inevitably serve to maintain that status quo. In other words, if we envision tomorrow based upon

the conditions of today, aren't we likely to simply project the conditions of today onto the future?

To reroute discussion to the world we live in, Chodorow further argues about the developmental differences between boys and girls in *Mothering* from a psychoanalytic perspective. She believes that Freud was correct in stating that children are born matrisesexual, and that their experiences and resolutions of the Oedipal complex lead to significant differences in how children are socialized into adulthood (168-169). Where she departs from Freud is in his characterization of how this complex is resolved. Where he argues that there are good and bad reactions to this early socialization, Chodorow is more interested in discussing the asymmetries of this socialization, the conditions and structures that lead to such widespread differences in growing children. These differences account for "masculine and feminine" personalities, with the relational capacities sustained in women being largely absent in men (93). This is reflected in a societal expectation of women to which their male counterparts are not equally pressed: women are believed to have the capacity for rearing children and are expected to do so, where men are not—something that is changing at a snail's pace in our society. I believe Chodorow got this right, and it lines up well with Firestone's own diagnosis, about the asymmetry resulting from the social expectations of child-rearing. Firestone's exploration of this asymmetry is primarily rooted in the differences of sex classes, and Chodorow's argument is that it is instead primarily rooted in the differences of gendered socialization. Firestone extensively discusses differences in socialization as well (such as in her work on the Western culture of romance that I discussed in the previous chapter), but her core belief is that biology is the root cause of this social inequality, and phenomena like the culture of romance are symptoms of this inequality. We can see a model of Firestone's dialectic play out in *Piercy*, where this inequality resolves itself after the passage

of time. In both cases, there is an observable asymmetry between men and women via the roles they are expected to perform because of their respective genders. Another way to examine their commonalities is by using Virginia Valian's psychological diagnosis of interactions between men and women in the present: "The cognition that women are nurturing, for example, can be recruited to rationalize a belief system that dictates that women's principal role should be childrearing and that if necessary, the role should be legally, economically, or physically enforced" (200).

Sartre's Antoine and Piercy's Connie are protagonists set in radically different contexts. However, both are portrayed as living in the Western world during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and their respective novels follow them repeatedly second-guessing themselves, their perceptions, and their reflections on their experiences. Both characters experience nausea activated by the seemingly endless variables entailed by different possibilities of being, causing a great deal of consternation and intrapersonal conflict. Both protagonists experience disorientation: Antoine's brings about his nausea, but Connie's is more of a culture shock, where the world she is socialized in conflicts heavily with the one she is transported to. Yet, they share in their experiences that maintaining a sense of social order in a world of conflicting human-made constructs is difficult. Antoine may struggle to grasp the meaning of a handshake, and Connie may struggle to adjust to using new pronouns, but both characters exhibit a struggle in the face of alien territory and new experiences. Antoine is disoriented away from the world of human meaning he has experienced, and Connie is disoriented back to the modes of expression antecedent to the world that she is from, despite its high incompatibility with the denizens of Mattapoisett. Both protagonists are passive in that they do not choose action so much as they have actions happen to them. The Self-Taught Man tries to open Antoine's mind to other

possible modes of expression in their interactions, and Luciente opens the possibility of bringing Connie to a future unlike the world she currently lives in. In each case, it is the external that opens up the possibility for change within each protagonist.

This is not to say that the two are without their differences. Antoine spends most of *Nausea* in a state of resistance, acting with no discernable reason and reacting to whatever given circumstances he finds himself. As a historian, Antoine does have a goal from the outset of the text: to compose a history on the 18<sup>th</sup> Century French aristocrat Marquis de Rollebon.

Throughout the text, he repeatedly procrastinates on this task, leaving the audience to wonder whether he actually wants to write this piece, or if his fits of nausea are generating an executive dysfunction that prevents him from completing the work. The ending of the novel answers this for us, as he eventually sets out to write an original novel, unrelated to his work as a historian. Finding an action that he is authentically committed to takes Antoine most of his respective novel; it is something achieved by Connie in a much shorter timeframe.

A poor woman later committed to residence at the Rockover State Psychiatric Hospital in New York, Connie does not have the same freedom from the outset of her novel that Antoine does in his. Sartre may argue that human freedom is boundless, but Connie is not granted the same freedom Antoine has to come and go where she pleases, partially the result of her economic standing and her institutionalization. Antoine is a white cis man with more money than the average person in his world, and as a result his world is considerably more open to new possibilities than Connie's. To acknowledge the difference between these two protagonists both in terms of gender and class is to further nuance the analysis via intersectionality. Earlier, I discussed that Connie is initially resistant to Luciente's first invitation to leave her time to visit the future of Mattapoissett, but it is noteworthy she does agree to go of her own volition (Piercy,

68-69). Within the context of their fictional narratives, Antoine's character arc effectively ends once he finally chooses actions that are important to him, but for Connie, the decision to jump headfirst into the unknown is where hers begins. For much of this project, I have talked about the resolution of tension between conflicting forces and ideas, whether they are historical, social, or fictional. In the two fictions presented here, both characters find a way to resolve the fear of the unknown as an internal tension, with Antoine reconciling his perceived strangeness of the world with a genuine desire to compose an original novel, and with Connie finally accepting that the circumstances of the world she was thrown into may be subject to change in the future. However, *Woman on the Edge of Time* shows Connie bringing this newer self, a protagonist of synthesized tension and resolve, into a new world. While Connie may not understand Luciente's future in the same way that Antoine may not understand the people he encounters, Connie spends more time in the novel trying to interact and form relationships with those around her. Both resist the possibility of change as it is brought on by their narratives, but a key difference between the two is that Connie makes attempts to further integrate herself, and that should not go unnoticed when comparing the two texts. It is the willingness to open herself up to new possibilities brought on by new modes of expression and socializing that becomes the model for reminding us of our own capacity to change.

Subsequent returns to the present lead Connie to synthesizing knowledge of different people and different ways of living together. She has moments where she remarks about a technology from the future, and what ramifications its absence has for the present. Her observations include meditations on how the social spheres are radically different without the present-day constructions of gender. As an example beyond that, she notices other facets of life in the future, like the society's generally healthier food that comes from different farming



processes that prioritize quality over quantity (320). A key takeaway from Piercy for Firestone is in how the world of this fictional future does not have a division of sex classes. This is vital to our project here too: the societal expectation and ensuing oppression Firestone and Chodorow discuss of women pressured to be mothers is entirely absent in Mattapoissett's broader social context. The social equality of Mattapoissett is perhaps best expressed by Connie in a fit of jealousy: "She hated them, the bland bottleborn monsters of the future, born without pain, multicolored like a litter of puppies without the stigmata of race and sex" (111). Even in the romantic conventions of this utopia, there is no stigma against consenting partners, and the majority of people have multiple partners. They have "cores," similar to the "primaries" of today's polyamory culture. Without the social expectations of women to raise children, there are no gendered men and women in Mattapoissett by today's conventions. People are freer to pursue the lives they want to live and are freer to couple with others without the social stigma of gender roles or sexuality. This is useful to us as a model to envision what the result of a Firestonian revolution may look like, but it is fictional, giving it limited applications for the real world.

When discussing models for the future, we again need to be considerate of the limitations of dialectical materialism. Whether it is Marx or Firestone, making a prediction for what the future may hold does not equate to logical necessity. Just as meteorologists will give several models for the path a storm may take, we do not see which anticipated future will come to pass until it actually becomes the present. As Anton Pannekoek describes this in *The Theory of the Collapse of Capitalism* (1934), "necessity is not valid beyond possibility" (n.p.). For Marx, a global economic revolution is spawned by the generation of class consciousness, and the occurrence of this event is one of logical necessity. The work done following Marx shows that some degree of class consciousness has been developed, with analyses by people like Pannekoek

and Firestone building upon his work and further honing the idea of this class consciousness. Yet, brokers are still trading on Wall Street, free to move sums of currency that the proletariat will never possess. Instead of a gradual shift toward a widespread socialism in the West, we are seeing wealth gaps grow greater in many Western countries, most significantly in the United States. My point here is that what I said of Hegel previously may also be true of Marx: their theories may not be correct nor an inevitability. It is my goal to illuminate what I find useful about these thinkers for us, but it is not my goal to accept their writings as dogma.

To bring this to Firestone, we still have the binary gender system, actively squeezing human lives into molds shaped like the symbols outside of a public restroom. It is in the openness of postmodernity that we eliminate the tension between the future a theory predicts, and the future that comes after the theory is posited. In removing a cultural metanarrative, our self-determination becomes what we do in the moment, and the notion that the following moment is one of necessity disappears. For the present, we need Piercy, we need these spaces where a world without the gender binary feels possible to give hope to the humans who may one day see it.

*Woman at the Edge of Time* is a book that looks to the future with bright eyes, but it is also not without its limitations. What I would most like to see in this kind of work is a protagonist with a non-binary identity set in a world similar to Piercy's Mattapoissett, but with a greater sense of agency than that of Connie or Sartre's Antoine. I am imagining a character whose identity is similar to the gender identities of Mattapoissett, where physiological sex does not determine individual expression and identity, a character capable of interacting with the world instead of simply letting it happen to them—effectively, a protagonist with the qualities of a citizen of Mattapoissett. This is a limitation of Connie as a protagonist: while her passivity

serves as insight for the reader about what Mattapoissett is like and how it is like a realization of Firestone's post-gender society, it is still presented by a character who does not fully engage with that society and is thus not fully integrated into that society. Connie is biased, clearly expressing a preference for Mattapoissett over the United States of her original time period, but her perspective is that of an outsider, awed by the society of the future, but not fully working in it because she spends too little time living in it to fully adapt; to unlearn of the social conditioning of Western patriarchy. My goal in this text is to be a diagnostician, not a fiction writer, nor a prescriptivist for how to achieve a society like this. I am interested in a world like that which Piercy puts forth, but I will end this consideration here, and save a deep dive into it for a later work.

Now that we have analyzed a multi-faceted social inequality that runs deep in the divisions of gender, sexual orientation, and sex as a biological class, the final step is to bring this to the present-day and discuss what the world looks like for the trans / non-binary community. I have previously mentioned the works of non-cisgender authors Serano and Stryker, and how their perspectives disclose themselves to existence outside of the patriarchal binary. Drawing on them and others who will be discussed in the next chapter, the final move is to explore these non-cisgender identities as marginalized and underrepresented modes of expression and then search for ethical and legal moves that may lend themselves to greater social change. The significance of hearing firsthand accounts from people of these identities is that it humanizes people who are not the majority, whose lives are often overlooked and misunderstood by the greater populace. The semi-autobiographical works of Serano go substantially farther than the caricatures offered

by products of our culture like the film *Silence of the Lambs*<sup>12</sup> in rendering a realistic portrayal of an actual transgender person (*Silence*, MGM). When one reads Serano, they read a human being with a history of human experience, even if that experience is not packaged neatly into an award-winning film.

In effect, what a cultural artifact like *Silence* does is create what Miranda Fricker calls a “hermeneutical injustice” in her *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007). *Silence* uses a cis man to portray a transgender woman as a cartoonish monster. This damages the mainstream public’s knowledge and understanding of the transgender community when it is the only wide-reaching portrayal of a transgender person to which the public is exposed. Or, to use Fricker’s words, this is a hermeneutical injustice because “a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (1; see also, 147-151). That person is disadvantaged by a society without the tools to understand them, and to consider this in relation to a previously-discussed example, consider again legislation like the transgender military ban. That action on the part of the government sends a message to the general population that there is something deficient about transgender people in relation to their capacity to serve, and the injustice happens in the gap of knowledge the general population has about the majority who can serve and the minority in this instance who cannot.

Another way to consider the impact of hermeneutical injustice is in the ingratiating of stereotypes in the cultural zeitgeist. As Buffalo Bill, the character in question in *Silence*, may be

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth mentioning that Buffalo Bill was performed by Ted Levine, a straight man—this trend has yet to disappear with actors Scarlett Johansson and Jared Leto portraying trans individuals in films from the 2010s. As Levine would have no firsthand basis of living the transgender experience, that calls into question how closely he can relate to the character he was tasked to portray.

the only trans representation American citizens see before meeting a trans person (if they ever do), this fictional character will disproportionately negatively influence society's perception of transgender people and further propagate toxic trans narratives to a general populace. Yes, there are more figures in the public eye to provide an alternative narrative, but the prevalence of the film on critics' lists and circles discussing films warrants another discussion on it today. In *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Patricia Hill Collins argues that stereotypes serve as "controlling images" (72-74). Her examples illustrate how stereotypes of the black community dehumanize the community to non-members and police mainstream discourse about the community. The result is that the community is not understood by actions and history, but by word-of-mouth, by appalling stereotypes that fuel the flames of racism and bigotry. This has parallels to what a movie like *Silence* does. The stereotypes that people like me are "born in the wrong body," that we want to perform traditional and often regressive gender roles as a part of transitioning, and even that we actively seek to deceive others for sexual gain, all serve to demonize members of my community. This homogenization of identity in the public eye without adequate positive representation in media to counteract these stereotypes creates an epistemic injustice: how will people understand my experience as both human and deserving of respect if they are never given tools to effectively do so? If a person has their mind made up about the trans community before ever talking to a real-life trans person, then these controlling images have won against us and injustice has prevailed.

Yet, in spite of this, there is reasonable cause to be hopeful for further progress. One need only compare and contrast today's definition of "queer" to what it was a century ago to observe the process of reclaiming that word for the community and a broader mainstream understanding of why that world was damaging to queer people (Hall, n.p.). As we recognize just how varied

human expression can be in these moments of progress, it likely follows that we recognize those expressions in our interactions with others. Yet, now is not the time to celebrate, now is the time to deepen the discussion and plan for action—to move towards a society closer to one like Percy imagined.

In *Whipping Girl*, Serano describes the 2002 murder of Gwen Araujo as a hate crime that resulted from the myth of deception. Despite substantial evidence that three of her four killers planned the act out a week in advance, the trial ended with a hung jury, with defense lawyers citing Araujo's "sexual deceit" as grounds for acquittal (47). As two of the murderers had been sexually intimate with her, they were driven to committing a "crime of passion" upon discovering Araujo's genitals, seeing that they did not match the anatomy the killers had been expecting (247-249). The "crime of passion" has repeatedly been a historic defense that leads to the murderers of trans people walking away from prison time. This defense is not predicated on the surprise of the assailants; rather, it is rooted in what Serano calls the myth of deception: the belief that trans people are actively trying to trick others about their genders and bodies (248-251). She describes the cultural invocation of this myth as follows: "Behind every accusation of deception lies an unchallenged assumption—in this case [the trial of Araujo's murder], that no male in his right mind could ever be attracted to someone who was feminine, yet physically male" (248). She goes so far as to say that "deception" is effectively the scarlet letter worn by the trans community that allows everyone else to maintain innocence, even in situations with a real-life harm like Araujo's murder (248, 250-251). In this criminal case, there is a victim who lost her life, but there are no consequences for her murderers because their plan to murder a teenager was legally labeled a "crime of passion" in a criminal trial (*A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story*).

Serano follows this up by relating it to herself. She confronts the reader, asking, if she were to meet them, would she be guilty of deception if she did not immediately disclose the gender assigned to her at birth and how that contrasts with the person she is today? (250). This implies that people, especially the trans community, "owe an explanation" to strangers they

meet. Serano's fear is more than understandable: if people like Araujo's killers can evade a prison sentence, would anyone face legal trouble if they were to cause harm to her personally? The results of Araujo's trial set a precedent for what the legal protections of trans people are like, but it also sends a message to trans people about how much of society feels about them.

Serano ends this chapter of *Whipping Girl* with a call-to-action. She says that we, as a society, should stop buying into the myth of deception because, every day, we are guilty of innumerable acts of assumption (251). This is to say that we interpret our given observations as signifiers that we think allow us to quickly understand a person. Noticing another person's attire, posture, voice, and so on leads to assumptions about another person, ranging from the adjectives we inscribe upon their personality to the gender with which we presume that they identify. In other words, consider the following: if you see a stranger on the street and think they are a man, you might be wrong. I believe this should be a simple mistake, but given a case like Araujo's, the ways in which people react to being wrong about their assumptions of each other are far too grave to ignore. Araujo's identity was misrecognized by her assailants based on her body, and it is this misrecognition that formed a legal defense to acquit those assailants. In this final chapter, I want to discuss the ramifications of misrecognition, and move from there to discuss non-cisgender identities as a way to illustrate the nuance of this socio-cultural phenomenon of gender as one that requires a legitimate effort and not a paltry assumption to assemble.

In *Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler*, Nancy Fraser defines the act of misrecognition as a "status injury," as the denial of one's full social status based upon the institutionalization of cultural norms that bar devalued persons from fully participating in that culture (290). As Serano argues in Araujo's case, her status as a trans woman is not only what prevented her from having a fuller social standing that would have led to a fairer



trial, but also the fact of her existence that got her killed. Non-cisgender identities are not the current cultural norm in the West, and so Araujo, a person with a non-cisgender identity, was not treated as what Fraser would call a citizen with a full social standing. Without the full standing, her killers were not treated like they killed a full person, and thus were acquitted. This is how the court ruled, despite insurmountable evidence that Araujo's killers were guilty of a hateful, premeditated murder (*A Girl Like Me*). A key takeaway in Fraser's work is that the paradigm of heterosexism has consequences beyond the current socio-cultural understanding of sexuality where heterosexuality is the assumed default of the people of Western culture. One result is the delegitimization of marginalized communities via their gender and sexuality which prevents many other people from seeing those communities as individuals to begin with—as was the case with Araujo. Furthermore, this is, as Serano argues, based on the countless assumptions we make about others. Fraser takes this a step further, saying that these assumptions become codified as cultural norms, received as a part of everyday life, despite the harm that individuals experience as a result (291).

Here I would like to draw a connection between Fraser and the work of Valian discussed in the first chapter. Fraser's claim that the assumptions we make about others based on the culture and society we live in share commonalities with what Valian calls "implicit bias" (Cohn-Vargas, n.p.). For Valian, people's actions and reactions toward others can be influenced by beliefs that are not rooted in logic, but by their degree of unfamiliarity (Cohn-Vargas, n.p.). This is why representation becomes key in humanizing a demographic, but its absence also points to the epistemic injustice talked about in the prior chapter. Could the argument be made that Araujo's killers acted on implicit bias? Certainly, but that does not erase the real-world harm done, mainly the life literally lost in this tragedy. We cannot even make this case that this is a

passé phenomenon—in 2019, at least 26 transgender people were violently murdered in hate crimes across the U.S (Human Rights Campaign, “n.p.”). But, this leads me to another question: could the situation have played out differently in a community where transgender people had full standing as citizens, unlike the hermeneutical injustice described by Fraser? My argument is not that that full standing would necessarily entail the eradication of hate crimes like these, but it would increase the likelihood of real and just punishment under the law when such crimes occur, and that, in turn, would most likely create over time a social environment with a more welcoming attitude and greater consideration for this community overall.

Fraser’s understanding of the erasure of non-binary communities from a broader socio-cultural awareness is something absent from the work of Beauvoir. As Beauvoir’s writing focuses on man and woman as a subject-object dichotomy, using the “man/woman” language of the binary does not explicitly address non-binary identities. Invisibility reveals itself as a symptom of existence to those outside of the binary, but the marginalization they face is still rooted in their status as what Beauvoir would label the Other. However, to bring Fraser into this discussion, the act of misgendering serves as an act of misrecognition, where one’s identity is assumed by another. That assumption implies a status injury because of who this misidentified person is, regardless of intention. Araujo was not a hypothetical person, and as evidenced by Serano, her murderers most likely knew her identity as a transgender woman before planning to kill her (248-249). If taken up by the general populace, a widespread adoption of a practice by which we make fewer assumptions about those around us would certainly reduce acts of misrecognition. Personally, I would like to imagine the relief of walking through a crowded intersection without constantly catching myself thinking: do I pass, am I safe here, or will someone take issue with me by virtue of my presence? I am not the only person with these

concerns, and my next move will be to address other experiences outside of the provisional gender binary. These different gendered expressions inform individual experience, and that relationship will be my next inquiry.

In *Two Spirit and Queer Indigenous Resurgence through Sci-Fi Futurisms, Doubleweaving, and Historical Re-Imaginations: A Review Essay* (2017), Smokii Sumac writes:

I am two-spirit, which means I carry certain responsibilities within the many communities I am a part of. This term, in my understanding, does not define my sexuality, but is perhaps more closely connected to my gender. While some define this term based on a simplified narrative of both male/female spirits existing in the same body, I believe that we could ask a thousand folks who claim two-spiritedness to define it and we would end up with a thousand different responses. (168-169)

Sumac's essay provides insight into one person's experience as two-spirit, giving a phenomenological account of experiential gender, saying "even as I write this, my experience of gender is shifting, changing, and growing" (169). Gender norms have displayed a sense of fluidity across human history, as everything from the gender with which we associate certain clothing to whom wearing makeup is seen as both common and socially acceptable has changed repeatedly in the human species' timeline. This fluidity is present both at the micro and macro levels for considerations of gender, considering both how a person experiences gender and how a society experiences gender. Sumac's work is beneficial in understanding the micro level, that the individual experience of gender is one that changes as a person goes through their life. As Sumac writes in *All My Relations: Aunties, Cousins, and Indigenous Methods of Recognition* (2017), "there is no universal standard to recognizing an other, to implement some type of badge of identification would be akin to another Holocaust" (22). I agree with this idea, as it is consistent

with the capacity for social standards to change as history evolves. This may not follow Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* beat-for-beat, but this piece is not intended to prescribe action; I read this essay as, in part, arguing that the pervasive nature of the gender binary is oppressive and offering hope that that predicament can change.

A key point must be made here: as two-spirit, this absolutely does not make Sumac analogous to being transgender, non-binary, or gender-non-conforming as understood in Western patriarchal society. The purpose of bringing Sumac up is that they allow me to discuss historical instances of societies that do not have binary gender systems and it is my intent to avoid any fetishization of their identity. Additionally, it is affirming for the trans community to have historical evidence of societies that do not use a binary gender system as evidence for the legitimacy of transgender expression due to its existence outside of the patriarchal binary. Under a more-encompassing intersectionality, it is vital to recognize two-spirit as another gender identity, one that may bear some similarities with our understanding of other non-binary gender identities, but not as a synonymous term. Furthermore, Sumac's identity as a Native American intersects with their identity as two-spirit: in the United States they are outside of the patriarchal gender binary in a manner that is similar to the trans community, but they are further displaced from social privilege in the United States by virtue of not being white. It is here we begin to see a broader picture of identity as a composite of different elements and the concept of identity as manifold, as existing in multiplicity that is essential in my challenge to Western patriarchy and its prescriptive gender binary.

In *All My Relations*, Sumac discusses people they personally know, saying that their relation to another does not establish authority over their identity (21-22). This appears to be in line with Serano's work: assumptions about another can cause harm. As seen in Fraser, those

assumptions can lead to acts of misrecognition, which is effectively a denial of one's full personhood. Whether you are assuming or asserting the identity of another person, it is like claiming you know this other better than they know themselves. At the time of writing this, my country has banned those with transgender identities from serving in the military. How would the military know those people are unfit to serve if they don't even make it to an initial medical screening? Sumac writes, "I'm tired of identity politics. I'm tired of policing folks" (22). I do not see a policy of universally banning a demographic from serving my country as anything other than institutionalized discrimination. For the United States government to bar the entire demographic from serving is for that government to presume a greater knowledge of those individuals than they have of themselves or to simply institutionalize blatant prejudice.

A 2017 memorandum from President Donald Trump cites the burden of treating trans-related healthcare for serving members and lack of research conducted on transgender people serving, but I think there is an act of misrecognition at play here. Yes, there is a financial burden that comes with receiving healthcare of any kind in the United States, but that expense is entailed by all healthcare needs of all-American citizens, not just trans citizens, so I do not find "expense" to be a sufficient reason for the ban alone. The other component of the memo is more nebulous: the research conducted on trans individuals. Here is where we veer into territory that denies trans people full status as citizens when our existence becomes that not as individuals, but as test subjects. Around this time, the general public started seeing a greater frequency of news headlines openly accusing trans athletes of having "unfair advantages" in competition in terms of physical performance. Clearly, the state of being trans does not mean that the body of a trans person is physically incapable of high-performance action in a given sport if we are considered to have "unfair advantages" in that sport. In my view, the government has committed an act of

misrecognition by denying equality through access without substantial reason for that denial. The result trickles into public life where the existence and participation of trans people is called into question. This is then covered up by talk of research or a lack thereof, but what happens in the present before this supposed research takes place is the barring of a group of people from public life in a way that gives the general public permission to do the same.

Hegel writes that we come to understand ourselves through engagement with the other, (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, 31-32) and our own self-identification is one of comparing and contrasting ourselves against the world presented to us. In the Hegelian view, part of our own individual development entails cultivating a sense of self-awareness, of others around us, and of the broader context of where and when we live. Yet, it is not the sole relation to another person that constitutes interior self-identity; it is that the self is free to self-define. Social recognition theory argues that we are recognized by others by our actions, but that does not mean we cannot self-describe ourselves as we relate to the world around us. If we could not, there would be no misrecognition as it is defined by Fraser. In *The Two Sides of Recognition: Gender Justice and the Pluralization of Social Esteem* (2012), Gabrielle Wagner describes the act of social recognition as something inherently paradoxical. For her, there is an ambiguity between recognition as a demand for equal respect and as an open acknowledgement of difference (347). She contends that a system of pluralistic recognition is required to prevent one's identity from total dissipation. She says that one can be a mediocre musician, a decent doctor, and a brilliant literary scholar without the proficiency of one activity overriding or devaluing another (360). Even in terms of proficiency, here it does not matter what skills one excels at in relation to what component of their identity bears the most significance. I believe this is why Hegel decides to frame the master and slave in his *Phenomenology* as abstract qualities, and not extant, historical

people. This move is compatible with the notion that everything that can be said about another person as merely a landowner or enslaved farmhand negates the possibility that they have many other qualities; it is too reductive of the fullness of the human condition. If one limits their focus of a landowner to just that of a landowner, we deny the possibilities that they could be anything else. Instead of rendering two human beings who have no existence beyond these roles, Hegel wants us to focus on the role itself as an identity and how it functions in relation to other people in a system with multiple socially-coded identities.

As Wagner argues, a real-life person can be different things in different degrees. Hegel sought to show the resolution of tension between opposing qualities, but matters become far more complex when considering just how many qualities a given person can have. For example, I have discussed Serano as a philosopher and as a trans woman, but I have yet to make mention of her superb musicianship. It is this multiplicity of potential qualities that require a pluralistic social recognition to even begin understanding another person. Even after we ascribe all of these terms to flesh out the identity of another person as we understand them, we may still miss other details relevant to how they feel or misinterpret what is signified by their actions. This is a nudge toward humility as a helpful tool to have when judging others. Sumac expresses a sense of fatigue over the difficulty of identity politics—perhaps this is a symptom of how truly difficult it can be to understand the identity of another human being. No cultural myths or stereotypes can capture the fullness expressed by one's existence. We saw this fullness in my previous chapter with the fiction of *Nausea*, where the varied possibilities implicit in human existence elicits anxiety, nausea, and indecision. Just as Antoine is free to idle, we are free to self-define; both fit within the capacity for freedom as a feature of the human condition. One of the difficulties

emerging here occurs when we try to forecast ourselves to others in the hope that they recognize our intention and the meanings we try to convey.

Revisiting their *Review Essay*, Sumac details their experience of academia as one largely filtered through a binaristic lens. Sumac argues that while it appears that Indigenous Studies are thriving, for each individual writing about their own subjective experiences, there are a hundred that remain invisible, overwhelmed by homophobia, transphobia, racism, and violence (172). Sumac acknowledges this again at the end of their essay, saying it was composed on November 20, the Trans Day of Remembrance. This day, as its name implies, is intended to bring attention to the lives of people like Araujo, members of the transgender community lost to violence. It also serves as a reminder of the persistent severity of transphobia today. They find mourning to be a necessity for the LGBT+ community, and the grief for those lost should be felt and honored abroad (174). If we are to accept Sumac's premise that there is no universal standard for judging another person, then Wagner's notion of pluralistic social recognition follows suit. I can claim to be a decent musician, a budding philosopher, and a good older sibling, but these facets of my character appear at different times in varying contexts. Thus, a plurality of recognition is required to understand me as having more than one defining characteristic, as I use more than one word to describe myself to others and to self-identify.

To add another lived experience for additional context on non-binary identities and experiences, another person I would like to discuss is that of American actor Asia Kate Dillon. Dillon achieved popularity for their role on HBO's *Billions*, a legal drama that premiered to Western audiences in 2016. This ascribes the word "actor" to Dillon's career, a term they prefer for its gender neutrality. Dillon has openly identified as gender non-binary, adding a second term to a description of their identity. At this point, we are building toward some understanding of



another person, but despite what our culture may think of actors, we must remind ourselves that this is not a person we know personally. I think a response that does not inflict status injury on Dillon comes from an interview that they did with Ellen DeGeneres on her daytime television show. In this episode, DeGeneres asks questions for clarity, and does not make assumptions about Dillon, their body, or the gender they were assigned at birth. DeGeneres says, "I think people assume just because I'm gay I understand all of this and I don't" in a genuine admission of not-knowing (Marusic, n.p.). Here, DeGeneres' interview style is similar to the recommended approach from Serano, where an open-mindedness without prior assumption leads to a mutual understanding and a moment of equal respect between two different people. Responding to her, Dillon says, "After doing some research, I understood that sex and identity are different. 'Female' is a sex, and sex is between our legs. Gender identity is between our ears" (Marusic, n.p.). Obviously, people have observable physical bodies, but as Dillon points out, identity is at least partially an interior matter. How another feels is not immediately disclosed to others, and the act of assumption risks becoming an act of misrecognition.

I would like to finish this discussion of individual experiences by referencing my own. I would use what Peter Hess calls "toxic masculinity" as a primary descriptor for the social atmosphere of the Philadelphia, PA neighborhood I grew up in (Hess, n.p.). My early understanding of masculinity is that it entailed emotional unavailability, a sense of power through action, and the arrogance of posturing to maintain the facade of toughness. I was assigned the gender of male at birth, and the people, not just the men, of my neighborhood expected that I would act "manly." The consequences I experienced when my actions did not meet others' expectations included a slew of insults, slurs, and other acts of homophobia. Without telling others, I came to understand and identify myself as antithetical to what I believed

masculinity to be. My environment led me to form the belief that masculinity was the root of actions of violence and the intentional stifling of one's own emotions. Effectively, in my mind, to be a man was to be powerful, to let others know you were powerful, and to be so powerful you could consciously switch off the ability to feel emotions.

I internalized these beliefs and approximated them as some kind of truth in relation to how men and women acted in society. As a high schooler, yes, I tried to be masculine, not because I liked it, but because I wanted people to leave me alone. In other words, there comes a point where being called slurs becomes emotionally unbearable. Thus, I spent roughly eleven years of my life in this performative mode of expression utterly hating every detail of my being, a sentiment that extends past the idea that I was performing masculinity. From my voice to my body, I inevitably came to the conclusion that not only was masculinity unsuitable for me, but I also experienced what is called gender dysphoria, where the dissonance between one's assigned gender and gender identity manifests in extreme psychological discomfort and immense emotional distress. This led to a gamut of health problems for me, ranging from depression to an eating disorder to attempted suicide. My victory over these emotional and psychological hurdles came from embracing my identity as a non-binary transgender woman instead of running away from it. The action of doing so marks what I call the "second wind" of my life.

Phenomenologically, present again is this engagement with the Other: the social forces maintaining the gender binary tried to force me into a box, and that box was not a good fit for me. I rejected the definition of masculinity I was given in favor of using my autonomy to seek my own happiness. At the same time, I recognized signifiers of masculinity and femininity in terms of performance. When I was a child, masculine performance was practically a Clint Eastwood movie character: violent in nature, volatile when told they were wrong, but perpetually

sure of one's self. Of course, my own experience with masculinity is subjective—I do not believe there is an unchanging masculine essence that constitutes manhood for all. In my youth, I attempted to perform what I personally perceived of as masculine, decided it did not work, and then accepted a different identity contrary to what was considered masculine at the time and place in which I was living and contrary to what the adults who raised me expected of me.

Intersectionality has largely served as a theoretical backdrop for much of this project, even when not explicitly named. In tandem with that is the need for coalition-building within marginalized communities. To seize social recognition, marginalized communities should band together in favor of progressive change and social reform to minimize the suffering that comes from marginalization. An obstacle to that coalition-building is a phenomenon known as “truscum,”<sup>13</sup> a specter hanging over the trans community that only divides it. Activists in the community like Buck Angel and Natalie Winn advocate for truscum, the idea that in order to be transgender, one must experience gender dysphoria. In my view, despite my own experience with gender dysphoria, this seems like nothing more than a gatekeeping tactic that allows truscum supporters to feel superior to other trans people. It fails to recognize non-binary identities and other gender-expansive identities that exist without the component of dysphoria. Yes, I experience miserable dysphoria over my physical body. However, I find it an utter waste of time to tell other trans people that they are not welcome in specific spaces because their experience does not precisely mirror mine. If we are to legitimize the trans experience, then we must not make the mistake that the Michigan Womyn's Festival made (referenced in Chapter 1): homogenizing the trans experience across the board. In their decision to accept only

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<sup>13</sup> Pronounced “true scum,” a term used to describe people with the view that one must have gender dysphoria in order to be legitimately transgender.

postoperative transgender women, they enforce the narrative that all trans people are heading toward a major surgery of some kind. Just as trans people need the broader LGBT+ community to band with us in order to press for transformative social change, trans people need to accept themselves as a community despite their differences, and we need to accept the different intersections that find themselves mingled with trans identity, this includes pre- and post-operative transgender people, non-binary transgender people, people with and without dysphoria, and so on.

Here is where Wagner's model of pluralistic recognition becomes vital in accounting for the boundless possible identities that one may relate to. It almost makes Piercy's *Woman at the Edge of Time* feel reductive in the sense that "per" may be an oversimplification of reference and identification. However, the crux of that work is in how the characters in the novel perceive and relate to one another: as people, friends, lovers, fellow citizens; namely, as more than one possible descriptor. Wagner's model of pluralistic recognition is a tool we can use to celebrate ourselves in a similar manner today. As Sumac writes, our own experience is often one of flux, as they acknowledge the capacity for human beings to change and grow. Part of that growth may entail revising how we understand and relate to ourselves.

There was a time in my life when people referred to me as a boy, but now that I have an expanded vernacular of gender identities and a stronger relationship with myself, I simply prefer to use "non-binary" as the best term to describe that facet of my identity. For Hegelians, this process of self-growth is dialectical, and I can see that in myself. The scene laid before me was one of masculinity, but my own rejection of that through my mannerisms and actions created a tension. I found the resolution to this tension to begin in my coming out as a non-binary woman, and the actions that follow for me are part of my medical transitioning. I use "non-binary" to

comment on the nature of the gender binary as arbitrary to me and I add “woman” to describe my preferred presentation to others. For me, this process is still unfolding. My memories of boyhood and the men of my childhood preserve the experience of masculinity, and the identity I embrace today serves as the impetus for developing a greater sense of self-awareness as I continue my journey into developing a healthier relationship with myself.

Revisiting Firestone, I notice a divergence in my own view from her description of the narrative of dialectical materialism. I chose to offer Piercy’s fictional account alongside Firestone’s proposed feminist revolution to posit ideas of what the future may look like, not what it necessarily will look like as the end result of historical progress. If Dillon is right in that gender is between the ears, then the function of gender in society is to be determined by the people presently living in it, with no obligation to conform to gender roles from an earlier era. In a country with military bans and transcurm, that is easier said than done. For Dillon, an individual is free to define the self, and I believe they are right, recognizing how the understanding of gender has changed in societies over time. If a society like the Cherokee can have more than two genders before the founding of the United States, then we likely are capable of moving past the binary as well. The lesson to be gleaned from history here is that the gender binary is simply not an essential feature of the human condition.

I find one way of escaping binaristic ways of thought to come from pluralistic recognition; i.e., acknowledging statuses and identities beyond gender in the social dimension. I see no reason why this system could not permit more than two genders as well. To do otherwise is to ignore Anne Fausto-Sterling’s diagnosis in *Sexing the Body* (2000), where she describes our society as one that artificially demands an assignment of one of two possible sexes (46). Fausto-Sterling’s response to this is to posit a society that has more than two genders, a tongue-in-cheek

move intended to get us thinking about how limiting and constricting the binary gender program is. Her description is like my example from earlier of fitting shapes into molds: our society forces people through those molds at birth. It is here that my example of the shape and the mold is also similar to Butler's example of the midwife previously discussed. For both Fausto-Sterling and Butler, there is an inscription made upon a body without any input on the decision by that body. Returning to my proposed alternative via Wagner, if pluralistic recognition can make better sense of a human being in terms of gender, profession, family, hobby, and more in creating a multi-faceted basis for identity, then it surely can accommodate more than two categories for gender.

Using a horrific real-life murder case, Serano has demonstrated the severity that can follow from assumptions; instead of assuming that we fully recognize the meanings others try to convey, we need to take recognition with a dose of humility and fallibility. We can be wrong in interpreting the actions and intentions of others, but that is not morally wrong or damaging *ipso facto*. This is what we see in Piercy. The fervent jealousy Connie demonstrates toward Mattapoissett serves as an analog for what Piercy believes are deficiencies within our society. This does not mean that we need more or fewer descriptive terms in our language. It does mean, however, that we need a level of respect for our fellow humans that requires us to tone down our assumptions about others. What we need to do is adopt Serano's non-assumptive social attitudes and Wagner's notion of pluralistic recognition. The benefit is a reduction of harm overall, a utilitarian consideration for the impact the adoption of this policy would likely have on society overall.

Here, I present another consideration for a future work: what would a new ethics of mutual respect look like? So much of this project has contained the language of "ought," that I

find a system of ethics to be the next step of this work. Three features that I would want this system to contain are present here in this chapter: (1) non-assumptive attitudes toward others, (2) pluralistic social recognition, and (3) categorical legitimacy. When these items work in tandem, the possibility arises for a person to self-define, and they are thus free to reveal as much as they would like about their self-identity. From (1), there would be less pressure on the individual to conform to a label to communicate socio-cultural meanings. A culture without rapid-fire assumptions about others would lead to a slower pace in learning about others. Instead of assuming a person is x gender or y orientation, the perceived need to know another person with immediacy would dissolve. From (2), an emphasis is placed on identity as multi-faceted. As demonstrated by Wagner, people can be known for multiple things with a complex identity, I still find it too common to think of a person, say Serano, and instinctively choose one word, such as “philosopher,” to identify them. Pluralistic recognition is predicated on recognizing the individual as an assemblage of identities. Here, Serano is not just a philosopher, but she can also be a musician, an activist, a friend, a family member, and so on. I talked about (3) briefly in chapter one: my idea here is that there is legitimacy to human experience, that what people live through can and does matter, and that human experience does not need to necessarily fit into a stereotype or image. It is the example of the mold: we can have terms like “trans” to help us better understand a group of people, but we must also recognize that our individual mental image of what it means to be trans will not be identical to the experiences of all who identify with the term. A major drawback I see this hypothetical system of pluralistic recognition facing is in its pacing. Learning about ourselves and others is time-consuming. Removing these shortcuts to identifying another and instead forcing ourselves to acknowledge other people as more than just one word avoids the fallacy of *reductio ad absurdum*, but it comes with the caveat that we live in

a society where people are openly recognized as known unknowns. In simpler words, there are strangers around us, we know they're there, and that brings about uncertainty. However, the exposition of this system is a matter I will pursue in a later work.

In this text, I have used the accounts provided by Foucault and Stryker among others to examine the historic marginalization and injustices experienced by those existing on the outside of the gender binary in the Western world. Incorporating Beauvoir and Lacan provided me with a lens for the social context in which these injustices have occurred. Young illustrates how selfhood is internalized from the external during childhood, and the works of Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed have provided the details for sketching one's individual phenomenological experience as it is framed by one's perceptions and orientations. By discussing popular culture, I have attempted to move this conversation out of academia and into the broader world, creating applications of these philosophical ideas as touchstones easily identifiable by readers outside of an academic context. From there, I chose to discuss the phenomenological makeup of fictional characters, to show the salience of philosophical works in disciplines that are not academic philosophy. My next step was to bring this discussion of personal experience to real people, who are still the victims of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, violence, and the like in the present-day West. I acknowledge the lives of women like Barra and Williams as signs that socio-economic conditions for women in the Western world are improving, but my counterexamples, ranging from private citizen Araujo to CEO Barra, show that true social equality has yet to be achieved. The mission to secure equal rights for people outside of the gender binary is not over, and people in these groups still must fight for access to healthcare, the ability to serve in the armed forces, and fair representation, among other goals. If members of the transgender community are still being murdered by people acquitted under "crime of passion" defenses in



2019, then the current convention of gender as we know it still needs work before it can be considered a benefit rather than a tool of oppression for the population overall.

My final move was to tease out ethical considerations in an attempt to show how different branches of philosophy may lend themselves to our concerns about gender seeing that the topic of marginalization of the queer community often features a variety of issues. I begin to talk about the social construct of gender and the current system of gender in utilitarian terms. For me, this is another consideration pushing me to advocate for revising gender. If people experience a multitude of real-world harms rooted in what their assailants believe gender will allow them to get away with, be it misogyny, workplace discrimination, and violence among a host of other issues, then this paradigm needs heavy emendations. Yet, this is indicative of the vital nature of queer theory, providing a space where we may openly investigate ourselves and share our findings with one another. Whether it is with the utopian visions of Piercy and Firestone or the considerations for perception of Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed, I believe that an immense social paradigm shift is both a good and attainable solution to these issues. Sumac has shown us that such a society does not need to be restricted to the realm of fiction, but the eradication of that society should serve as an impetus to be more considerate of others, assume less about them, and enact change today. To be trans is beautiful. To be human is beautiful. The moment we forget that is the moment we lose ourselves.

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