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# Defeating Bigenderism: Changing Gender Assumptions in the Twenty-first Century

MIQQI ALICIA GILBERT

*Bigenderism maintains there are only two genders, which correspond with the two sexes, male and female. Basic bigenderism requires that legal documents and public institutions designate a single invariant gender (that is, sex). Strict bigenderism applies these categories in a social context that stigmatizes “imperfect” men and women who do not reach ideals set by the bigenderist schema. I discuss these concepts and their implications, present three models that successively weaken bigenderist assumptions, and argue for the most radical of the three.*

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Every interaction we have with other human beings is predicated on the categories in which we spontaneously place them, including at least skin color, ethnicity, age, and class. While these important categories may be individually indeterminate, every interaction is framed by the gender relationship between us; therefore, placing them in the sex category of female or male is essential. Not having sex category information can mean we are practically incapable of interacting and at a loss as to how to communicate. As a result, the need to classify by sex is overwhelming, and confusion or hesitation is a great cause of discomfort and, sometimes, anger. This reaction is a function of what I call the bigender system. In the following, I present the bigender system, its nature, and shortcomings. Then I describe three systems of sex/gender that progressively move away from the prevalent, strictly dichotomous view. In the end, I shall support the most radical of the three, non-genderism, in which gender disappears. I argue that this is the ideal system, insofar as it eliminates sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia.

Judith Butler claims that it is not possible to simply or merely be a person; one must be a male person or a female person, a man or a woman. She writes:

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“persons only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (Butler 1990, 122). In order to become intelligible as a person, one must perform within the well-known and well-established rules of gender. These rules instruct us how to behave, including how to walk, talk, and relate to others of the same and of the opposite gender. They delineate what careers and pastimes are correct, what romantic interests are appropriate, what fears, ambitions, and expectations one ought to have. The rules determine who can giggle, who can cry, who will fight, who should play with cars, and who with dolls. Rules detail who opens doors and pulls out chairs, which side of the sidewalk one walks on, and how, and if, eye contact can be made. There are specifications about earning expectations, financial responsibility, familial responsibility, and the consequences of sexual dalliance. The gender rules cover everything we do and say, and they do so without seeming as if we are being coerced or that we are even making choices.

These rules, which have evolved over many generations, are exactly those rules that protect the patriarchal framework through which women and sexual and gender minorities have been oppressed and controlled. Nonetheless, for the majority of persons, these rules and requirements appear unremarkable and do not present difficulties or challenges. For one thing, they are naturalized through infinite repetitions that are both current and historical (Goffman 1977; Kessler and McKenna 1985). West and Zimmerman explain it as follows:

Doing gender also renders the social arrangements . . . accountable as normal and natural, that is, legitimate ways of organizing social life. Differences between women and men that are created by this process can then be portrayed as fundamental and enduring dispositions. In this light, the institutional arrangements of a society can be seen as a response to the differences, the social order being merely an accommodation of the natural order. (West and Zimmerman 1987, 146)

The “naturalness” of the gender rules is the foundation of their being unquestioned and the reason why a central historical objective of feminism has been exposing them and their sexist nature as arbitrary and contingent. Underpinning them is also a naturalized ideology of the dichotomous gender system. The assumed naturalness of the gender system means that anyone who violates it is being “unnatural” and so is worthy of censure. Obviously, if the gender rules are natural and not arbitrary, then societal structures defined to defend them are justified and worthy of protection. Also obviously, the transgendered, in particular, are in direct violation of these rules and ought not be permitted to thrive, if, indeed, they are allowed to exist.

While the rules of gender are infinitely subtle and various, the rules accepted by most people are basic and easily identifiable. Bornstein (1994), adapting

from Garfinkel (1967), cites these rules as generally accepted by the general population:

The Rules of Gender

1. There are two and only two genders.
2. One's gender is invariant.
3. Genitals are the essential signs of gender.
4. Any exceptions are not serious.
5. There are no transfers from one gender to another except ceremonial ones.
6. Everyone is one gender or the other.
7. The M/F dichotomy is a "natural" one.
8. Membership in one gender or the other is "natural" (Bornstein 1994, 46).

Clearly, according to the rules there is no such thing as someone whose sex or gender diverges from their birth-designated sex, which means that trans folk cannot exist. However, a corollary says that if anyone does change sex it must be from one of the two sexes to the other. The one thing that is absolutely not allowed is a gender that does not fall neatly into one of the two categories.

In light of these rules, I want to define "bigenderism" as the view that accepts the rules of gender and does not permit or allow for variations, exceptions, and/or deviations from the norm (Gilbert 2003). The main thrust of the rules is to establish that there are two and only two genders, and that everyone must be one or the other. This level of bigenderism is its basic form, and is not only a fact of popular perception, but is largely official as well. What we might call "basic bigenderism" is found throughout the bureaucratic devices and institutions that govern our daily lives. Governments, schools, hospitals, the professions, the arts, and virtually all social institutions rely on basic bigenderism as a way of classifying and categorizing those who avail themselves of or come into contact with their services or necessities. Basic bigenderism is witnessed in the plethora of bureaucratic forms that have two boxes or spaces offering the choice of male or female for sex and/or gender, with exceptions being few and far between. Of course, the most pervasive and insistent occurrence of gender bifurcation occurs in the interactions between individuals and public toilets. When going to the washroom in an institutional setting, one must make a *public* choice between one of two options, and making an improper choice can be the cause of anything from hilarity to deep anger and violence. Washroom separation, or what Goffman calls "toilet segregation" (1977), Bornstein names "urinary segregation" (1994, citing Lacan), and Halberstam refers to as the "bathroom problem" (1998, 20–29), is a pervasive way of labeling and marking individuals according to sex.<sup>1</sup> In fact, as I will explain below, washroom separation plays an even deeper and more insidious role in the maintenance of bigenderism.

Basic bigenderism obviously has a major impact on those members of the society who identify as gender diverse. Transsexuals, the intersexed, cross-dressers, gender queers, and androgynes all must follow the rules and procedures laid out for what Garfinkel calls “normals.” Since all gender diverse people must constantly choose one bathroom, check off one M/F box, and enter one of two possible locker rooms, there is no opportunity to be anything but one or the other. One must pass or suffer the consequences of social censure. This has implications for such considerations as having genital and other forms of surgery, finding and holding employment and housing, as well as the ability to be involved in romantic relationships.

In order to properly understand bigenderism, it will be helpful to conceptualize the interactive structure of sex/gender itself. To aid in this I will use West and Zimmerman’s terminology. They use three basic terms from which one can develop others:

Sex is a determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological data for classifying persons as female or male.

[*Sex category*] . . . is established and sustained by the socially required identification displays that proclaim one’s membership in one or the other category. . . . Sex category presumes one’s sex and stands as a proxy for it in many situations, but sex and sex category can vary independently . . .

*Gender* . . . is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category. (West and Zimmerman 1987, 127)

Thus sex is a biological and typically legal classification that, interestingly enough, does not play a major social function in a daily way. Do not misunderstand: sex is perhaps the single most significant identifying fact about someone, and the establishment of one’s birth-designated sex creates expectations, limits, and roles that accompany one throughout life. However, using various means of alteration, and by violating the expectations of presentation that one’s birth-designated sex delimits, one can aim to be placed in a sex category that is not, in fact, one’s birth-designated sex. One simple fact of social life that Kessler and McKenna famously point out is that even though we want to make genitals the basis for sex, it is only rarely that we are in a position to view each other’s genitals (Kessler and McKenna 1985). It is even rarer that such a viewing involves an inspection close enough to detect manufacture or artifice. The result is that most of the time we are actually dealing with sex category rather than sex; that is, since we don’t actually know the genital situation of any given individual, we make assumptions and draw conclusions about sex based on *gender display*.

Being able to adopt a particular gender display and the concomitant public invisibility of genitals is where room is created for transsexuals and cross-dressers. To the extent one is able, by displaying gender markers of one's chosen gender, one tries to be classified in the sex category of one's choice independently of the actual sex initially assigned. Insofar, as sex category is adjudicated by one of those encounters, placement in a sex category becomes an individual accomplishment. Indeed, the accomplishment of sex category is applicable to all members of society: cisgendered (that is, those who live comfortably with their birth-designated gender) or gender diverse. I have often pointed out in a university class of one hundred and fifty students that not one of them fails to display definite and unambiguous gender markers, whether it is hairstyle, facial hair, clothing, jewelry, makeup, or other unambiguous gender indicators. Certainly, there are people who choose to defy or skirt the gender rules, but they form a minority and often receive considerable disapprobation, up to and including death.<sup>2</sup> Bigenderism dictates that there are only two categories—female and male—and this means that everyone must not only be in one of those categories, but everyone must also *be put* into one of those categories. Ridgeway and Correll put it like this:

If cultural beliefs about gender are the rules for enacting the gender system, social relational contexts are the arenas in which these rules are brought to bear on the behavior and evaluations of individuals. The process that links gender beliefs and social relational contexts is automatic sex categorization. Sex categorization is the sociocognitive process by which we label another as male or female. As we sex categorize another, by implication, we sex categorize ourselves as either similar or different from that other. (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, 514)

I have so far been discussing what I have been calling basic bigenderism. That, however, is just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, bigenderism is a systematic division of the population not only by sex, but also by an extraordinarily complex, subtle, and refined system of behavior, manner, communication, presentation, and interaction. This level of bigenderism, what we might call “systemic bigenderism,” permeates every aspect of our lives and controls and dictates every movement, word, and thought. It is systemic bigenderism that affects every individual and causes stress and anxiety for a multitude who would not consider themselves gender diverse.

Bigenderism, in addition, is also a cornerstone of heteronormativity, insofar as it carries with it the implication that the two genders are intended to partner heterosexually. Indeed, bigenderism and heteronormativity are symbiotic: heterosexuality relies on the assumption that an individual's genitals are in accordance with their gender appearance, and bigenderism ensures that the

categories are demonstrative. Along with bigenderism and heteronormativity, and what ultimately drives this as a feminist issue, is the infusion of rampant sexism into both of these concepts. Bigenderism and heteronormativity ensure that the world is divided into woman and man, and sexism sees to it that woman is undervalued and man overvalued. Eliminating the categories themselves is one way of eliminating the sexism that depends on them. There may be other ways to achieve feminist ideals, but the banishment of bigenderism and heteronormativity also eliminates homophobia and transphobia. This is because the external adjudication of an individual's location in the micro world of bigenderist sex/gender means that one's procreative status and partner choice are determined simultaneously with that location.

The importance of the adjudication process can be clarified by using West and Zimmerman's three terms introduced above. Table 1 clarifies the dynamic.

Note that the adjudicators in all three categorical divisions are external observers, and, except for the comparatively uncommon circumstances of intersex births, all categorizations are assumed to be definite and permanent. Even in the case of the intersex, it is only sex and not sex category or gender that is, after the initial period of confusion, in question.

The tyranny of systemic bigenderism shows itself in the terminology applied to those who do not meet classical gender expectations. There are sissies, tomboys, and more recently girlie boys and men. In addition, any sign of the feminine in a man or masculine in a woman leads to charges and/or assumptions of homosexuality. Moreover, the rules and regulations of systemic bigenderism are extraordinarily far ranging and strict. Many (of a certain age) will remember the trick instruction, "Hey, look at your fingernails." If you held your hand out, palm down and fingers forward, you were labeled a girl. If you held your hand out, palm up with fingers in a half fist, you were labeled a boy. Systemic bigenderism delineates the kinds of behaviors that are acceptable and not for each of the two genders. By implication it leads to a hierarchy of masculinity and femininity where individuals are rated depending on how well they do or do not compare to the ideals of the bigenderist ideology. In this sense, bigenderism is a trap: first it declares that one must belong to one of the two genders, and then judges the great majority not to be up to the standards of the gender to which they are assigned.

Table 1  
Classifications made by others

Term	Division	Adjudicator
Sex	Female–Male	Medical/legal
Sex category	Woman–Man	Others
Gender	Feminine–Masculine	Others



The genders are governed by many criteria that, while they can and do vary according to age and subgroup, still have overarching characteristics that are rigidly applied within the society at large. Each gender has its hierarchy and standards. The female beauty myth, of course, has been examined and is well-known as a stress-inducing, almost Sisyphean, conglomeration of patriarchally determined standards of attractiveness, personality, ability, and sexuality. The A-list girls who seem to have everything are nonetheless often plagued by self-doubt and insecurity because they are dependent upon male approval for their status. But they are still far and away better off than those whom the genetic roll of the dice made, by heterosexist and sexist standards, “unattractive.” The male beauty myth requires strength, good looks, and an accomplished degree of athleticism. The winners of the genetic lottery who score high in all these categories become the A-list boys who seem to be the best at everything, become the coolest guys in high school, and revel in popularity and prestige.<sup>3</sup>

It would be difficult to complain if the main issue was that some high school people were lucky and excelled, thereby, receiving more goodies than the rest of us; such complaints might be considered nothing more than sour grapes. No, the difficulty does not concern those who do well, but rather those who do not. The girl who is not “attractive,” develops late, has a poor sense of balance or poise will fall outside the inner circle, and her self-esteem and self-image will likely be formed by those who judge her poorly. The boy who is frail, or whose hand-eye coordination is dreadful, or who is small, awkward, or “funny looking,” or who simply does not fit in becomes the target of bullies, derision, ostracism, or, at the minimum, expulsion into a group of similarly designated youth, for example, the nerds.

Bigenderism says that there are specific ways to be a woman and specific ways to be a man. If you fall outside those parameters, then you are just that, an outsider. Yes, as you grow older you may find your way, and values may change, but that early path, no matter what successes are achieved in later life, will always be the one you were forced to walk. And, like a fresh bruise, it is easy for a touch in the wrong place to bring up pain and discomfort. The rigidity of the categories and the standards within them mean that it is extremely difficult for anyone who is not hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine to receive a high rating.

While much of the population at large suffers under bigenderism, trans people and the gender diverse surely suffer greatly. The problem is that there is no room in the world of bigenderism for self-identification or classification. Table 1 above demonstrates that sex and gender are geared to being identified, classified, and categorized by others regardless of the category one wants. Thus, there is a need for categories of self-classification that are respected and accepted; the *assumption* of sex category needs to be abandoned. Two terms that describe self-adjudication will be useful here. The first is *Gender Display*, which involves the voluntary representation of one’s self in the traditional presenta-



tion mode of one of the two genders. Similarly, *Chosen Sex Category* is a decision made by oneself for oneself as indicated in Table 2 below.

The freedom to self-categorize flies directly in the face of bigenderism. In the first instance, the assumption that gender appearance entails sex must be abandoned. In the second, it must be possible to permit individuals to choose a sex to which they were not natally assigned. This is nothing less than the de-genitalization of sex and gender, an undertaking that requires far more individual respect and acceptance than is currently available.<sup>4</sup> Self-categorization requires a non-hierarchical cultural organization that accepts difference and variability without judgment. Prom queens can still be feted and can continue to fight off suitors, but plain Janes, brains, and hockey players would be neither ostracized nor shunted aside. Golden boys can still be as handsome and athletic as they are able, but nerds and geeks would be allowed to thrive, and sissies would not be picked on.

Anyone who has attended high school is bound to react to all this with complete incredulity. “That could never happen! Prom Queens not look down on plain Jane brains or butch hockey players? Jocks not pick on nerds and sissies! Never happen.” This very incredulity demonstrates how pervasive bigenderism is, and how outrageous is the idea of altering it, let alone eliminating it. Yet we allow ourselves to be saddled with a system that discriminates among the majority of the population, because the majority of us fail to match up to the extremely stiff standards that bigenderism demands. Nonetheless, we continue to “do” gender in our daily activities, detailed as they are down to the finest minutiae. West and Zimmerman write: “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 126). Nor is it only pursuits; it is everything we do and how we do it. Doing gender reinforces the process and gives it its “natural” veneer, that is, the constant repetition of activities in a gendered way makes them seem as if that is the only or the only real way to do it. As Judith Butler famously said, “gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation

Table 2  
Self-classifications included

Term	Division	Adjudicator
Sex	Female–Male	Medical/legal
Sex category	Woman–Man	Others
Gender	Feminine–Masculine	Others
Gender display	Feminine–Masculine	Self
Chosen sex category	Woman–Man	Self

that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself" (Butler 1991, 312). This instantiation of naturalness is one reason why gender miscreants, those who violate gender rules in subtle or deceptive ways, as opposed, say, to gender outlaws or gender queers, those who defy gender rules in blatant and outrageous ways, are more likely to suffer from attack and separation. If every activity both mirrors *and* establishes gender, then anyone who does not follow the rules of that activity stands in violation and is failing to support the normalcy of gender. *Ipsa facto* one is abnormal.

One reason for this might be explained by Erving Goffman: "If gender is defined," he wrote, "as the culturally established correlate of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates" (Goffman 1979, 1). In other words, the Rules of Gender dictate that there are two and only two genders, and presenting in a given gender means that you have the corresponding sex. Consequently, if you are presenting a mixed image, you are misleading a potential sexual partner with regard to your suitability. In certain jurisdictions, discovering that an individual one thought was, say, female is in reality male may be a legal excuse for sexual rage leading to violence. As appalling as this is, it might go some way toward explaining the issue, but not nearly far enough. It does nothing, for instance, to explain why so many individuals who are obviously members of a given sex category but have some *traits* of the other gender are harassed, often to the point of violence. In other words, why does a butch woman who is clearly not a man, or an effeminate man who in no way appears to be a woman evoke such vociferous antagonism? The very fact of these reactions belies the suggestion that the root cause of bigenderism is procreative misinformation.

The answer to this central question lies in the fact that gender display covers a very wide sense of self-presentation, and the cross-gendered limp wrist or butch haircut does present a challenge to bigenderism. Clothing, in other words, is but one aspect of gender presentation, and the physical mannerisms frequently presented by a sissy, that is, an effeminate male, must, I hypothesize, elicit some sexual response programmed by the bigender rules. The signals we emit for the purposes of mate attraction are very diverse, complexly subtle, and frequently unintentional. Under the reign of heterosexism as instantiated and regulated by the rules of bigenderism, virtually all movements are assigned to one of the two genders. When an individual has been sex categorized, any indicators belonging to the "opposite" sex will send a "wrong-sex" signal. It is not merely the presentation, blatant or not, of secondary or even primary, sex characteristics; it includes the way our eyes work, the way our hands fall, the way our bodies move and stand, and a countless number of other signals both subtle and direct.<sup>5</sup> Bigenderism states that the signals are sex-specific and belong exclusively to one gender or the other, and crossing over is forbidden. A man who moves his hips in a feminine way or whose eyes behave in a feminine manner is sending sexual

signals—intentional or not. This has nothing to do with being provocative; rather it concerns sex categorization and ambiguities therein.<sup>6</sup>

Ambiguities in sex categorization might be acceptable, except that the male receiving the signals is conditioned within a bigendered, sexist, heterosexist culture to have a reaction: to react to such signals as if they were being sent by a female. The problem is that *he will have such a reaction* to one degree or another, even if it is involuntary and unconscious. So, *if* there is, as some insist, a strong primal instinct to copulate, then having an arousal reaction may explain the strength of bigenderism. But, as it is unlikely that the arousal reaction is very strong, then the social construction of sexism, homophobia, and heteronormativity on which bigenderism relies is a more likely explanation. Michael Kimmel posits a complex of factors that together give a meaning to masculinity that provides a basis for bigenderism (Kimmel 1994). Kimmel grounds his theory in Freudian separation issues, the idea of competition, and the fear of being feminine. Separation from the mother and identification with the father leads, in the final analysis, to the grounding of manhood in competition and aggression. Kimmel writes:

This, then, is the great secret of American manhood: *We are afraid of other men*. Homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood. Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay . . . Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, and reveal to us and to the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see our fear. Fear makes us ashamed, because the recognition of fear in ourselves is proof that we are not as manly as we pretend . . . We are ashamed to be afraid. (131)

If we add subliminal arousal into Kimmel's mix it is easier to understand the kind of anger that violators of bigenderism arouse. Homophobia, on my model, becomes a fear of an involuntary reaction to a sex-category signal. While the fear of emasculation may come, *in our culture*, from the sources Kimmel cites the arousal comes from the historical process of mating and procreating. Whether Kimmel's causal analysis, that is, Freudian separation anxiety, is correct or not is essentially irrelevant. What matters is not why masculinity is so fragile, but rather simply that it is.

Though others use different causal paths, Kimmel is not alone in suggesting that the tentative confidence and ephemeral grip males are conditioned to have on masculinity lies at the base of homophobia, heterosexism, as well as much violence against women and the gender diverse. Patrick Hopkins writes: "I find that one way to read homophobia and heterosexism in men is in terms of homosexuality's threat to masculinity, which in light of the connection

between gender and personal identity translates into a threat to what constitutes a man's sense of self' (Hopkins 1998, 170). For Hopkins the explanation involves separation from the mother, which requires rejection of the feminine; in addition, the longing for the father becomes confused with homoeroticism. As a result, the male vehemently rejects everything feminine including and especially attraction to a male, that is, to the father. Stephen Ducat also implicates absent fathers in the creation of what he terms "femiphobia," insofar as the frequently emotionally and often physically absent father intensifies the infant boy's identification with the mother (Ducat 2004). Consequently, when separation begins, it is harsh and results in chronic womb envy.<sup>7</sup>

This brings us one step closer to understanding the mysterious conflict that forms the psychological foundation of femiphobia. Male femininity is clearly a taboo in a male-dominant culture, in part because women and all things feminine are of lower status. But to really understand the taboo against displaying or even feeling any similarity to women, we have to reflect on the fact that taboos exist only against those things people want to do. For example, unlike incest, cross-dressing, or exhibitionism, there is no taboo against having sex with cheese . . . . When it comes to femiphobia, as we will see, what energizes the taboo against male femininity is that deep down, out of awareness, so many men want to violate it. (Ducat 2004, 28–29)

Julia Serano also discusses this phenomenon, though she labels it *effemina*: "an obsession with 'male femininity'" (Serano 2007, 129). This obsession includes the issues Ducat raises, but is also used to explain why male-to-female cross-dressing is considered a psychiatric issue, while female-to-male is not. The pervasive idea that the masculine is *better* than the feminine means that fleeing the feminine is not pathological, but embracing it, for males, certainly is. Cressida Heyes concurs in this when she writes: "To express masculinity . . . is often to despise femininity, just as to express femininity is often to implicate oneself in one's own oppression" (Heyes 2003, 1112).

Bigenderism, by codifying the distinction between male and female, man and woman, masculine and feminine, creates a virulently sexist, heterosexist, and transphobic culture just because of the valuation of the sexes. That valuation creates a situation in which misidentification of sex category based on gender display leaves no room for tolerance. Hopkins offers three possible explanations for homophobia, and then concludes: "They reside on a field of unequal, binary, sexual, and gender differentiation. Behind all homophobia, regardless of its development, expression, or motivation, is the background of heterosexism. Behind all heterosexism is the background of gendered identities" (Hopkins 1998, 179).

In the next part of this essay I first define bigenderism, and then present three models that diverge from it in varying degrees. The final model, non-genderism, is one in which there simply is no conceptual apparatus that allows us to define and identify gender or sex. It is an extremely radical model and does away, I maintain, with a host of harmful social apparatuses that damage a multitude of people and, most especially, women. Non-genderism may, nonetheless, be unattractive to those who embrace, enjoy, or for various reasons see the necessity of a gender bifurcation. Bigenderism has adherents among some theorists who maintain that there are core, essential, and immutable characteristics held by some subset of humans that demarcate them as belonging to a particular sex. In addition, some transsexuals would not be inclined to accept any analysis of the sex/gender phenomenon that did not allow them to become members of the sex with which they identify, while still others may hold a weaker version of bigenderism, but still adhere to the core notion of two foundational genders. Thus several feminist theorists argue that the delineation of an identifiable class of persons known as “women” is, at least, *politically* important (Stefano 1991 and Friedman 1996 are two examples). In addition, some trans men and trans women insist on maintaining membership in their chosen community, *as it now exists*.

Well-known problems exist in systems that seek to maintain a genderist framework. First are the notorious difficulties in defining just who is and who is not in the class of women. Hale, for one, has pointed out that every stipulative definition runs into counterexamples that may not be easily dismissed, and we must finally settle for a Wittgensteinian family resemblance (Hale 1996). The history of the Olympics’ attempts to determine who does and does not belong to the class attests to the difficulty in forming such a straightforward definition. Moreover, applying such definitions often leads to complex political issues where philosophical interventions have little effect. Examples include such divisive activities as the exclusion of trans people from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival or employment in women’s shelters.

Certainly, in today’s genderist world the definition can be very important, and, as Elliot points out, the discussion raises crucial questions (Elliot 2004). Nonetheless, although the question of who is and who is not a woman is important and can impact trans people in different ways (see Gilbert 2001), the model I am presenting sidesteps that issue. The sidestep is for two reasons. The first is that on a non-genderist model the question becomes moot insofar as the sets referred to no longer exist. But the second is the inability to be sure what a non-bigender world would be like. We are so far from bringing about such a social revolution that concerns about the elimination of the woman/man dichotomy are at this point, to put it mildly, in the abstract. It would likely be generations before any strong non-genderist model could come about. Indeed, we cannot really anticipate the political and social consequences until it is much closer, nor can we even imagine how it might feel to lose a system that

is so completely integrated into our psyches. So I prefer to sidestep the question and instead turn to presenting the models.

Strict Bigenderism may be defined as follows:

- I. Strict Bigenderism maintains [a] a binary gender distinction, [b] a higher valuation for male and masculine, and [c] a strict correlation between sex and gender.

A baby step away from a strict bigender model, and one that does not eliminate sexism, would be a culture in which feminine men are accepted as sexual objects by other men. That is, in terms of sexual objects, males who were feminine would be included with women. In this case, the feminine males may avoid certain sorts of opprobrium, *but only to the same extent that the patriarchy protects women as well*. The distinction is not between male and female, but between sexual object and non-sexual object with their concomitant vulnerability to violence and rape. So this is obviously not a major advantage because it still involves the dominance relation on which sexism rests, as well as remaining intolerant of gender ambiguity. Still, it is a change, and from the point of view of trans persons who pass, a not inconsequential one.<sup>8</sup> It can be described as follows:

- II. Soft Bigenderism maintains [a] a binary gender distinction, and [b] a higher valuation for male and masculine.

With II there are still only men and women and one is in one category or the other, but there is partial degenitalization of the sex—gender linkage. The advantage, such as it is, is that it softens such issues as those raised by Talia Bettcher with respect to deception and treating trans people as evil deceivers (Bettcher 2007). Soft Bigenderism entails the degenitalization of gender so that sex and gender are not strictly isomorphic. But it is just this isomorphism that creates difficulties for both trans and non-trans people whose gender appearance does not completely match their sex. “Gender presentation is generally taken as a sign of sexed body, taken to mean sexed body, taken to communicate sexed body. And it is precisely for this reason that transpeople who ‘misalign’ gender presentation and sexed body are construed as either deceivers or pretenders” (Bettcher 2007, 52). The implications of this for trans people are stark if anything short of Soft Bigenderism exists, as is now the case. Bettcher continues:

For if what I have claimed is correct then deceiver/pretender is not merely one of the many unfortunate stereotypes that plague transpeople. Rather, it flows primarily from a fundamental communicative relation that obtains between presentation and body—a relation within which even non-transpeople are impli-

cated. For insofar as gender presentation means sexed body, we do engage in “false representation.” . . . And given that the only “option” is between invisible deception and visible pretense, it would appear that this representational system actually prevents transpeople from existing at all (except, of course, as fakes and frauds). (55)

Soft Bigenderism is hardly the Holy Grail, and Bettcher does not advocate stopping there. It does little to eliminate sexism, violence toward women, or the systemic discrimination against women and sexual/gender minorities. While it offers some comfort to those who do pass as one gender or the other, it does little to aid those who *do not* pass as one gender or the other, or who demonstrate a mixed gender. As Namaste points out, “Women and men who transgress acceptable limits of self-presentation, then, are among those most at risk for assault. Assaults against men judged to be ‘effeminate’ or women deemed ‘masculine’ reveal the ways in which gender and sexuality are intertwined” (Namaste 2000, 141).

To go further than soft bigenderism is to actually abandon a binary model; but what exactly does it mean to abandon bigenderism? The answer is not at all clear. Does it entail doing away with the categories of woman and man, so that an individual is a person without a category? Or is it simply making the categories independent of sex? What about feminine and masculine? Surely one way of defeating bigenderism is to make masculine and feminine independent of woman and man, or, perhaps even better, independent of female and male. This requires a different system.

The third kind of gender organization does involve a degentialization of gender and a fuller separation of gender presentation as entailing sex. On this model, call it Non-binary Genderism, one views *characteristics* as gendered rather than individuals. So, for example, “throwing like a girl” does not mean one is a girl or has a certain sort of genitals, or, importantly, doing one thing in, say, a masculine manner does not entail that one does other things in a masculine way. Of course, one may well have a nexus of gender characteristics considered feminine or masculine, and happily identify that way. However, this model does allow for selecting or owning characteristics from either the feminine or masculine column. The definition is:

III. Non-binary Genderism entails no binary distinction but maintains that masculine characteristics are valued over feminine.

Model III is, at its core, a multifactorial approach such as described by Janet Spence. She argues for a separation of an individual’s sense of *femininity* and *masculinity* and what is construed as feminine and masculine. She writes,



even among those with a strong, unambiguous gender identity, men and women do not exhibit all of the attributes, interests, attitudes, roles, and behaviors expected of their sex according to their society's descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes but only some of them. They may also display some of the characteristics and behaviors associated with the other sex. (Spence 1993, 633; see also Spence 1985)

So in Model III, non-binary genderism, feminine and masculine are independent of female and male, and instead refer to collectivities of properties. It follows from this that tomboys and sissies would not be harassed simply for violating the gender rules, because behavioral characteristics are not genitally tied. Rather, it is the *characteristics* that have a valuation, and not the *person* carrying the characteristic. There is no such thing as a tomboy because having the masculine characteristics currently attributed to that category would not have a genital, that is, sex, implication. *Mutatis mutandis* for sissies, who, like tomboys would simply cease to exist. However, the model is still patriarchal since there remains a social preference for masculinity, and masculine people will do better. But a male who is not masculine or a female who is not feminine will not suffer *on those grounds*. So, non-binary genderism is an improvement over bigenderism, but still has a far way to go in reaching my stated goal of creating a society that does not use sex or gender as a means for distributing societal largesse.

The final step in moving away from bigenderism is the elimination of gender valuation altogether. In other words, on this model, the very terms *feminine* and *masculine* do not refer to collectivities of properties, and, consequently, no property is valued more or less than any other. Right now we have some sense, albeit a fluid sense, of what is meant by feminine and masculine. On all three previous models, there is still a set of predicates that apply collectively to the terms feminine and masculine, but on IV, a completely non-bigenderist system, there are no such conceptual collectivities. (I reproduce III for convenience.)

III. Non-binary Genderism entails no binary distinction but maintains that masculine characteristics are valued over feminine.

IV. Non-genderism entails no binary distinction and no societal valuation making masculine more highly valued than feminine.

With non-genderism there simply is nothing that is, say, feminine: not a way of talking, walking, dressing, thinking, or communicating. These ways of behaving, of course, do still exist, that is, a *person* might be nurturing or aggressive, but *there is no further association of them with a gender category*. This goes beyond the idea raised by Chodorow: "Each person personally inflects and cre-

ates her 'own' gender, and there are many individual masculinities and femininities" (Chodorow 1995, 521). Non-genderism reaches this ideal and goes further because talking about masculinity and femininity simply makes no sense.

It is non-genderism that approaches the ideal of eliminating sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, and sexual discrimination. All of these social categorizing phenomena depend for their existence on the performance of gender according to the rules of bigenderism. Ridgeway and Correll put it like this: "Widely held gender beliefs are in effect cultural rules or instructions for enacting the social structure of difference and inequality that we understand to be gender" (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, 511). While they are emphasizing discrimination against women, the same applies to discrimination against gays, lesbians, the intersexed, and the transgendered. Without gender, one is attracted to or likes a person, not a bearer of a certain sort of genitals. One might be attracted to soft vulnerable people, but there would be no necessary connection between those properties and any assumptions about sex. Rather than first identifying sex, then determining attraction, the opposite might be true.<sup>9</sup>

What, then, would such a world be like? Is it possible? Can we conceive of a genderless world? Barbara Risman writes,

There is no reason, except the transitional vertigo that will accompany the process to dismantle it, that a utopian vision of a just world involves any gender structure at all. Why should we need to elaborate on the biological distinction between the sexes? We must accommodate reproductive differences for the process of biological replacement, but there is no *a priori* reason we should accept any other role differentiation simply based on biological sex category. (Risman 2004, 446)

Sandra Bem desires a similar world: "I want to move beyond androcentrism and gender polarization to advocate a vision of utopia in which gender polarization, like androcentrism, has been so completely dismantled that—except in narrowly biological contexts like reproduction—the distinction between male and female no longer organizes either the culture or the psyche" (Bem 1993, 192; see also Bem 1995). If we arrive at such a world, we would be eliminating the multitudinous hierarchies on which so much of society, ours and others, is built. If there were no categories of woman and man, there would be no transsexuals and cross-dressers, no homosexuality. Preferring sexual partners who have vaginas rather than penises would not mean anything more than preferring someone taller than you or someone with a small nose. In a degenerated world, sex category no longer exists. The implications, when one begins to enter the fantastical world of non-gender, are intriguing and mind-boggling, but they will not be pursued here. In truth, I can imagine many scenarios and many worlds in which gender is not central or does not exist, and most are splendid.

Even Risman's concern that "No one wants to be part of a revolution where she or he cannot dirty dance" (Risman 2004, 446) is not frightening. As a committed cross-dresser (Gilbert 2000) I have dirty danced with both sexes, both genders, and sometimes with partners whose genital status is a complete mystery to me, and, frankly, none of my business. But the dancing has been grand.

I have, in the above, used gender as a massively powerful, far-reaching, and defining concept. Some may think this too much, but I respectfully disagree. Gender may not account for everything bad in the world as, for example, Ducat may be implying, but it certainly has a lot to account for. The segregation of the world into two sexes is, on a daily and systemic basis, a function of gender and its correlate sex category; and it is that fact that brings sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia into existence. Rescue lies in the combination of the degenitalization of gender and the decategorization of personal predicates. This will not happen soon or easily; a non-genderist world is not around the corner. In the meantime, anything that can be done to reduce the tyranny of bigenderism is a forward move. Anything that aids in defeating bigenderism is progressive and liberating. Those activities and creeds that work toward this end include feminism, transgenderism, homosexuality, and heterosexuality devoid of heterosexism, all of which violate gender rules.

I began by talking about the connection among bigenderism, sexism, and heterosexism, but I hope it has become clear that in many ways the first is a component and consequence of the latter two. The freedom that is required is the liberty to be a person, a simple, ungendered, and individuated person.

## NOTES

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1. Christine Overall has an interesting discussion of washroom segregation relating to public spaces and the ensuing sexism that is thereby entailed (Overall 2007).

2. In a recent and terrifically horrible case, a fifteen-year-old high school student, Larry King, was murdered by another student. According to *The Advocate*: "If they didn't see the execution coming, most of King's peers at school knew he was being bullied for being proudly gay and flouting male conventions by accessorizing his school uniform with eye shadow and high-heeled boots" (Broverman 2008). Also, see Halberstam again on washrooms (1998).

3. In later life the tables may turn. Many golden boys, especially those coming from wealth, will go on to be successful. However, in the technological age those girls and

boys shunted off to the math club not infrequently get their own back. In many cases, though, the ego and emotional damage done is not reversed.

4. While some governments require sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to legally change one's sex, it is not required for one to live in a preferred *gender*. It is (barely) conceivable that a government might go so far as to *require* SRS to match gender life choice, but this would be legally fascistic whereas bigenderism itself is only culturally fascistic.

5. There is a considerable quantity of work done on this subject in social psychology, especially with respect to reading and misreading signals for sexual arousal and attraction. An early, important piece is Birdwhistell (1970); more recently Morrison et al. (2007) provide an interesting example of ongoing work.

6. See, for example Charlotte Furth:

Gendered bodies are understood through culturally specific repertoires of gestures and emotions which assign significance to acts and define objects of desire at the level of the erotic; as well as by codes of the masculine and feminine at the level of psychic experience and personal identity. This way of thinking has intersected with feminist analysis of gender as socially constructed through kinship, religion, and other roles, and feminist rejection of "biology" as a natural basis of gender distinctions. Accordingly sex, referring to physical characteristics and biological capabilities, is distinguished from gender, which represents the cultural and social meaning attached to sexed bodies. The "sexual" becomes that aspect of gender which deals with culturally constructed biological and erotic meanings. (Furth 1993, 479–80)

7. This brings up the intriguing idea that Steinem's tongue-in-cheek reflections on womb envy might not be so tongue-in-cheek (Steinem 1994).

8. It is worth noting that when such a classification is not voluntary, then the social politics of the situation changes dramatically. We actually see this phenomenon when females are not sexually available to males, but other, weaker males are; prisons are such an example. This model is not intended to be a recommendation for forced activity.

9. There are suggestions that *some* bisexual interactions are like this, insofar as attraction may proceed independent of sex category, but there is no question that gender identity still exists.

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