

Ain't I a Woman? . . . No, boo, you're a lesbian!

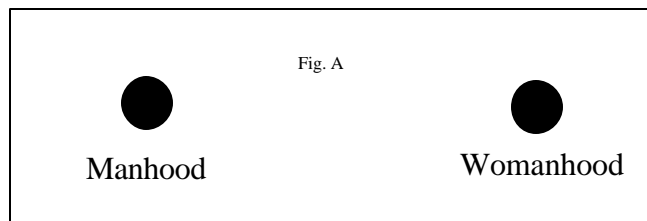
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Today we celebrate international women's day. But what is it, exactly, that we are celebrating? All women? Even those that are self-loathing and abusive? Only those that exemplify admirable qualities of womanhood? Who has the authority to define these qualities? Women? Which women? Moreover, what is womanhood?

Womanhood is like newsprint. When newsprint is examined closely it becomes individual letters that signify very little. When examined even more closely, the letters are reduced to meaningless dots. These facts, however, do not prevent the words from holding meaning. Just so, there is a lived reality to womanhood that is undeniable. But as womanhood is examined more closely, the elements begin to dissolve into almost meaningless atoms of experience. This tells us that, like written language, womanhood requires a particular social context, frame of reference, and set of relationships in order to express its meaning.

Womanhood appears to dis-integrate when magnified and examined. Gender is commonly thought of as a binary proposition:



In this framework, one's biology determines whether one is a man or a woman. Although the defining visible biological element is genitalia,¹ there are a multitude of "natural" and "essential" qualities that accompany manhood and womanhood. These qualities tend to be polar; their opposition to each other defines them. For example, men penetrate, women receive; men are interested in power, women are interested in nurture; men artificially construct, women naturally birth. Deviations from these poles are often seen as freakish or perverse.

Due to its perceived polarity, gender becomes a metaphor for balance, as symbolized by *yin* and *yang*. To many, this harmonious binary polarity has great appeal. The idea that gender is organic fits with what we have been taught to see in the "wild kingdom," and resonates with the fact that gender has been so hardwired into our system that it feels absolutely "natural." Furthermore, there is something very satisfying about the notion that men and women are polar opposites; it creates a zone of cultural exclusivity and comfort coupled with a feeling of cosmic balance.

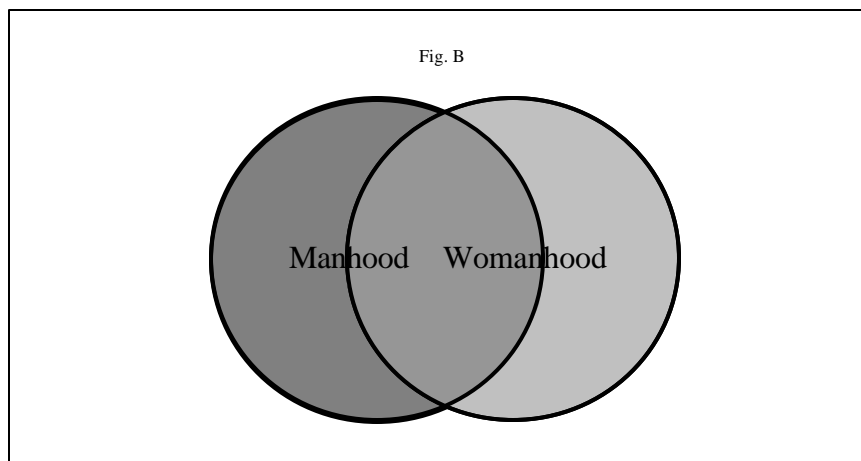
The balanced, binary polarity of gender is so satisfying that it persists despite the fact that it conflicts with the lived reality of most people. Although there is a great deal of debate as to

¹ Genetics are, of course, the truly determining biological element.

whether there is any biological determinism regarding gender characteristics, there is no question that an enormous amount of effort is spent on social conditioning. Before birth, a person's gender begins to influence how people prepare for and respond to him or to her. Color, clothes, toys, tone of voice, and body language are aligned and monitored.² Very few actions are neutral; almost all can be seen as masculine or feminine. At the very least we can say that society makes a mountain out of a biological molehill.

Feminism has done a great deal to expand the territory deemed "acceptable" for womanhood. For women to work while married, wear pants, play professional sports, and hold managerial positions is considered well within current standards of normal behavior.³ Male gender authorities (*e.g.* religious and political leaders) have reacted by constricting manhood to maintain exclusivity in the face of encroaching womanhood.⁴ Moreover, they characterized feminists as fanatical, man-hating, ugly, social outcasts. Recently, even within conservative circles, there has been a recognition that the tight restrictions placed on manhood have somehow resulted in a loss of freedom for men. As a result, there has been an attempt to recapture elements such as "compassion" while conceding that qualities such as "strength" can be shared by both genders. This campaign has been successful to the extent that many young women who enjoy the benefits of past feminist efforts nonetheless distance themselves from the term "feminist." They accept the fiction that the patriarchy has adopted a sane and rational approach to gender, while feminists are socially repellent extremists.

The vast majority of gender traits have been assigned their significance through social contest, such as the one between patriarchy and feminism. Therefore, manhood and womanhood become two shifting and potentially overlapping domains. (See Fig. B.)⁵



The elements contained within these domains are potentially infinite. Almost any aspect of our experience can be seen through a lens of gender. This encourages us to increase our

² Research has shown that people change their interaction even with the unborn once they know the gender of the fetus.

³ Although some argue that this is due more to economic pressures than political activism.

⁴ The image of shrinking manhood was just too delicious to pass up.

⁵ To understand the progression from Fig. A, imagine the two dots in Fig. A expanded to the point of overlapping one another.

“magnification” of these two domains. To illustrate this, Fig. C contains a small subset of potential qualities for comparison.⁶

Fig. C

Manhood		Womanhood
	Behavior	
	Character Traits	
	Romantic/Sexual Attraction	
	Biological Traits	
	Personal Identification	

Gender freedom is gained not only through increasing the domain of a gender, but by increasing the independence of each element. Even if there are several “types” of woman one can be, it is still restrictive if one must conform to a stereotype (*e.g.* butch dyke, frigid businesswoman, dumb blonde). Freedom is increased when one is allowed to just be. For example, a strong, blonde woman who loves women and who has feminine features and behaviors. Territory and flexibility are important. People are most free when they are able to be fully male or female with a complex and potentially conflicting set of characteristics. To maximize this freedom, manhood and womanhood should be fluid, ebbing and flowing with time and context to best match personal identification. The social domain should be wide and flexible enough to accommodate this individual inconsistency.

Fig. C is somewhat misleading in that the domains seem to align to the poles. This alignment belies one of the valuable aspects of the model – the loss of “essential” qualities of gender. Behaviors are labeled male and female as part of a social contest, not due to nature. Therefore, the womanhood of a woman who loves a woman is as natural or as pure as that of a woman who loves a man. In fact, it could be placed at the center of the domain since it places womanhood at the center of focus. Within this model, womanhood and manhood can become so malleable that each no longer has to maintain rigidity or polarity. Theoretically, they could share the same domain or even swap characteristics.⁷

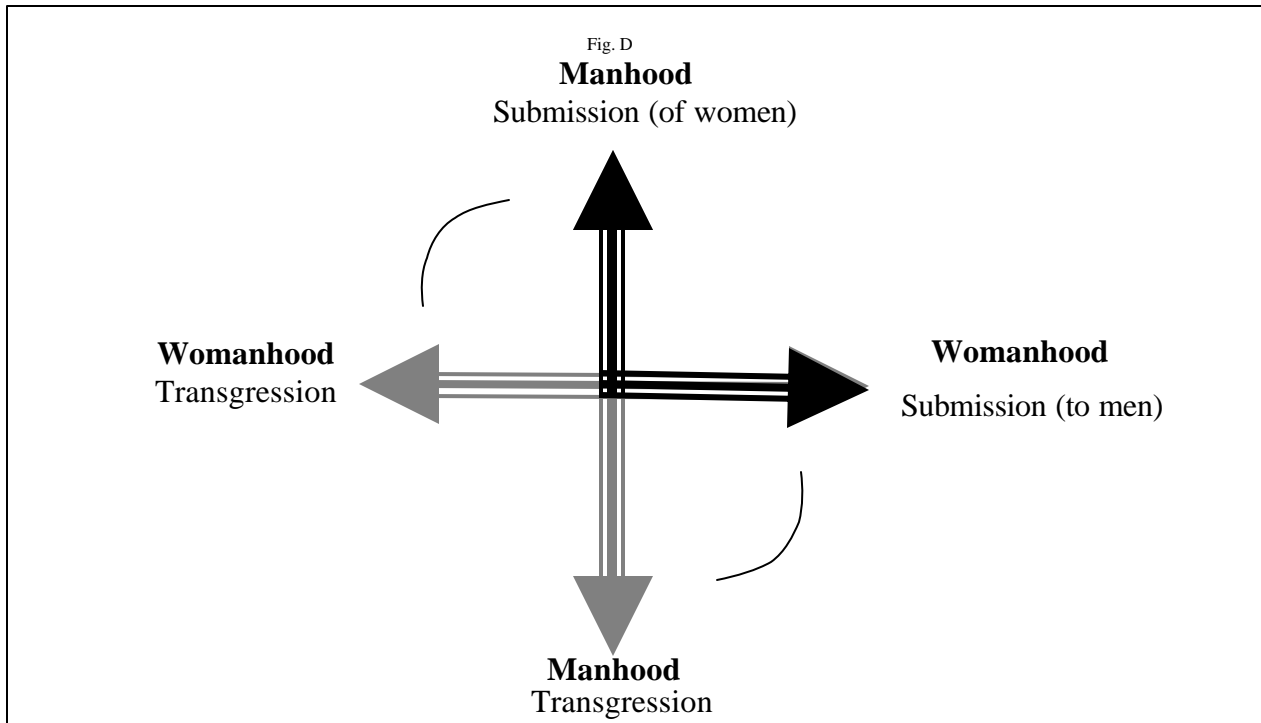
If this line of thought is taken to its logical extreme, the domains could overlap completely. This would mean that all elements of gender are congruent and contested. An example of a “congruent and contested” element is “passion.” Historically, sexual passion has been claimed alternately as a male and a female quality. Currently, both genders lay claim to the trait, although there continues to be struggle. The preceding example is valuable since it begins to incorporate the reality of gender as a social and political construct. We see this most powerfully

⁶ Fig. C is a “close-up” of the middle section of Fig. B.

⁷ Although a historical review is beyond the scope of this article, there is strong historical evidence that both of these occur.

within transgender experience. There are people with penises that identify as women, and people with vaginas that identify as men. The model illustrated in Fig. B allows for the fact that these people may be independently masculine or feminine, or can be attracted to women or to men. It also accounts for the fact that one does not necessarily have to alter one's body in order to maintain a gender identity. The transgender community includes people who think of themselves as born into the wrong body. But there are people who are simply redefining biology. Some people with penises are identifying their genitalia as female because they self-identify as female.⁸ Taken one step further, this leads us to the radical possibility of a person who reads in every way as a straight man, but who identifies as a woman. Is s/he?

I think not. I was forced to examine my rejection of this idea. I admit that to some degree I just didn't like it. It conjured notions of white people trying to be more "ethnic" to the point they felt they were fully immersed in the "Black experience." The idea that a white person could become Black – just because they felt Black – was unreasonable to me. Similarly, the idea that a man could appropriate womanhood merely through a self-identification, no matter how sincere, was unacceptable.



More compelling is the realization that the model illustrated by Fig. C fails to incorporate sexism and misogyny. When we incorporate them we get a very different diagram. (See Fig. D.) Sexism and misogyny become the territory upon which the lines of gender are drawn. This has two powerful consequences: First, the model regains polarity, and allows us to incorporate the oppositional experience of gender. Patriarchy works to subjugate and acquire women, bestowing privilege and power on men. Gender is tied directly to those power relationships. In fact, they

⁸ Please note that "women with penises" is not synonymous with "chicks with dicks," which is often associated with sexual titillation derived with disjunctive, not redefined biological traits.

define it. Femininity, maternity, vaginas, breasts – all these characteristics become tags that allow gender oppression to find its targets and customize its attack. Women, as a class, are pushed toward identifications that allow patriarchy and men to subject and acquire them. This is why patriarchy pushes the model of binary polarization. The binary model occludes the transgressive side of womanhood. It denies the fact that female individuals can react against the class boundaries imposed by patriarchy, and enter into new realms of womanhood.⁹

This leads to the second consequence of sexism on the model illustrated in Fig. C. The spectra for women and men are broken into two dimensions and no longer form a continuum. As individual women resist or evade their submission (or that of other women), they enter the realm not of manhood but of transgression.¹⁰

The same is true for men who fail to assist in the appropriation of women. To see this more clearly, let's go back to our example of the apparently straight man who identifies as a woman. We can see that even if the person openly and fully proclaims his womanhood and works to operationalize it, he will push the boundaries of transgressive manhood, but his experience will never be that of a woman. Sexism and misogyny punishes gender-transgressors, often violently. However, that punishment is different from the suffering experienced by women as patriarchy works to acquire them.

This is not to say that a person's identification should not be honored,¹¹ or that elements of his experience (feelings, interpretations, and thoughts) can't be identical to elements experienced by women. However, just as identical words will change within the context of different sentences, the purely female experiences of the transgender male will change within the context of sexism, which frames the experience of all women. Thus, the female experience of the transgender male is transformed into the experience of a transgressive male. Transgender male-to-female people are not *essentially* different from women; they are *politically* different from them.¹²

Homophobia and heterosexism, in this light, are derivatives of misogyny and sexism. They are specifically designed attacks on potential gender transgression. For example, women having sex with women is accepted and even valued if it serves the sexual gratification of straight men. As long as women are subordinate, nothing is really "wrong." Similarly, effeminate men (straight or gay) are much more threatening to the patriarchy than masculine gay men since masculinity compels men to subjugate women (or non-compliant men) through force.

Homophobia is critical to gender-based oppression as it makes men afraid to identify with women, encourages men to despise feminine traits in themselves, and offers the acquisition of

⁹ To better understand Fig. D, imagine that Fig. C was placed on the "fabric" of misogyny and sexism. This fabric is made from the fiber of power that automatically aligns Fig. C along lines of submission and transgression. As sexism increases, the fabric is pulled tight, snapping the gender lines into two dimensions (note the curved arrows).

¹⁰ Another advantage of this model is that female-to-male transgender people can be seen as radically transgressive women. They are, therefore, not subverting feminism as many claim, but pushing into new territories of womanhood.

¹¹ I would normally use the pronoun most preferred by an individual (in this case "she"), but to do so within this context could lead to hopeless confusion.

¹² An exciting corollary to this model is that if sexism and misogyny are eliminated, Fig. D collapses back into Fig. C and gender becomes a completely contested domain with manhood and womanhood at both poles. The experience of the transgender man-to-woman would then be potentially indistinguishable from other women.

women as the only way to access feminine qualities. This deserves emphasis: Patriarchy must push men to own women and thereby have access to their resources and qualities. Misogyny is required so that men both reject the assimilation of femininity, and gather the hateful violence required to subjugate women. Men are to love and care for women just as the master is to love and care for the slave. Women are the joyful and loving captives.

Using this paradigm, let's redefine lesbianism. Lesbianism is more than women loving women, or even transgressive women loving transgressive women. It transcends sexual and romantic connection. *Lesbianism is a call to authentic relationship between women in order to overcome the incorporation and subjugation of women by patriarchy.* What is essential is the call to transgression and transcendence, not just sentiment or physical lovemaking. Because it renders male response irrelevant, it is subversive in a way that even men loving men can never be. Therefore, lesbianism is potentially the most radical position.

In this light we proclaim Sojourner Truth a lesbian as she asks, "Ain't I a Woman?" We must remember that she was speaking in reaction to male clergy telling white women that they were too fragile to engage in political action. Her question was powerful precisely because the political system had no reason to see her as a woman at all. It had already acquired her as a "nigger." She was already the political property of the white patriarchy. By juxtaposing her identity as a Black woman with that of white women, and by highlighting the intersection of her race and gender, she was able to illustrate the hypocrisy in both racism and sexism. This act of banishing patriarchy and sexism by illuminating the inter- and intra-section of race and gender within her is an act of self-love and a rejection of oppression. It calls white women into account as well, asking them to examine their own sense of womanhood and relationship to Black women. It re-centers womanhood on the experience of Black women, who (because they have born the full brunt of white male patriarchy) are transgressive in ways that white women simply cannot be. In this sense, Sojourner Truth is calling from the center of transgressive womanhood.

This re-centering can be seen in one of the most powerful moments within her speech, her reference to Christ. She asks, "Where did your Christ come from?" Not waiting for a response, she answers her own question by exclaiming, "From God and a Woman! Man had nothing to do with him!" This individual transcendence of patriarchy, in fact the marginalization of maleness, is a lesbian act. It calls women first to examine their relationship to the divine, exclusive of a male principal¹³. Women must realize that they are both the focus of and the gate for divinity. This step is critical if women are to do the seemingly impossible act of shedding patriarchy and racism, transcending category into authentic relationship. Where this is impossible in human terms, "in Christ all things are possible."

Once an individual woman has encountered the Divine, authentic and revolutionary relationships are possible. This is shown in Sojourner Truth's closing: "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right-side up again. And now that they are asking to do it the men better let them." Although her phrase "let them" might indicate an acknowledgement of male power, the implied threat is strong. She evokes a rich tradition of scripture which forecasts doom for those who fail to liberate those whom God has chosen. Since the Moses epic is never far

¹³ Although "principle" could also be used here, I wish to emphasize the exclusion of a defining male actor.

from Black Christianity, Sojourner Truth calls upon vivid images of men beset by plagues and eventual death by raging seas if they should seek to stop women in their quest for freedom. The actions of the men are therefore rendered irrelevant as women first attain individual transcendence through faith, and then achieve revolutionary relationship in an effort to attain class and categorical transcendence.¹⁴

Yes, this we can celebrate. We join in celebrating Sojourner Truth and all other lesbians Of Color who love the sheer and uncategorized power of women called to action by faith, family, and love.

¹⁴ Faith and authentic relationships allow lesbians to break out of the two-dimensional world of Fig. D and seek a three-dimensional, uncategorized experience of womanhood.