Recognizing Social Subjects: Gender, Disability and Social Standing

by

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Abstract

Gender seems to be everywhere in the norms governing our social world: from how to be a good friend and how to walk, to children's clothes. It is not surprising then that a difficulty in identifying someone's gender is often a source of discomfort and even anxiety. Numerous theorists, including Judith Butler and Charlotte Witt, have noted that gender is unlike other important social differences, such as professional occupation or religious affiliation. It has a special centrality, ubiquity and importance in social practices. This observation moves us away from the classic philosophical question 'what is gender?' towards a more underappreciated one: 'what is the *role* of gender'?

To answer this question, I introduce the notion of *social standing*, which refers to our ability to enter into social relations. Social standing distinctions are an important feature of human societies. However, our existing philosophical tools do not adequately capture this notion: it is neither a moral distinction, nor is it reducible to hierarchy. I offer a conception of our entry into social relations as always conditioned by various shared representational assumptions about social subjects. When individuals are anomalous with respect to those assumptions, their social standing is in doubt. This explains important forms of uncommon and peculiar treatment across societies. I argue that forms of social devaluation on the basis of severe and visible disability in our society are central examples of diminished social standing.

In our social context, being hard to recognize through the matrix of gender makes one representationally anomalous and imperils one's social standing. Gender plays a *fundamental* role because *gender legibility is a precondition for full social standing*. Gender norms parallel

'ability norms' in this respect, linking notions of normalcy in scholarship on gender and in scholarship on disability. Social standing also explains two key phenomena about gender. Firstly, it tells us why our social practices and norms are pervasively gendered. Given the performative and relational nature of gendered positions, this is necessary for constant gender legibility. Secondly, social standing recognition accounts for social anxiety phenomena around gender ambiguity. These phenomena are reactions to anomaly as a threat to our social systems of meaning.

In the final part of my dissertation, I consider some political consequences of my view. Understanding this special role of gender allows us to identify a distinct type of backlash to feminist social change that is particularly insidious. It is not driven by the hierarchical investments of the most gender-privileged, but rather by our collective investment in gender as a system of social coordination. I explore 2000s 'raunch feminism' to argue for this hypothesis. Gender's role as a conditioning parameter of social standing puts systematic pressure on all would-be social subjects to be gender legible. This requires that individuals position themselves in recognizably gendered ways within social practices. But when gender differentiation is eroded, this positioning becomes tricky. This gives rise to a disorientation I call 'meaning vertigo'. Meaning vertigo prompts attempts at reinstating a clear gendered system. In the process, gender equality suffers a serious set-back.

To make substantial feminist progress, we must unseat gender from its central position in social domains like sexuality. I suggest that the best way to do this may be by foregrounding other aspects of social identity as systems of social coordination, instead of working on gender directly.

Chapter I Introduction

1 The Conclusion of Feminism?

The tradition of 20th century feminism has left us with two important legacies.[1] The first is a broadly *social constructionist approach* to gender. One is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman, as Simone de Beauvoir put it. Gender differences are not 'natural', 'essential' or 'immutable' consequences of biological reality. The way men and women are is contextual, variable and can be changed. Secondly, we have inherited a *hierarchical analysis of femininity and masculinity*, a view of gender as an axis of oppression and domination. We have come to understand gender differences as non-neutral: they form a social regime that structurally disadvantages women. Gender distinctions are partly *constituted* by power differences.[2]

A natural way to put these two elements together is to conclude that, because gender is oppressive and not immutable, we ought to radically change it. This is in fact the source of our contemporary impulse to do away with – or at least completely alter – our gender regime. We are eager to eliminate patriarchy, toxic masculinity, rape culture, beauty myths and compulsory heteronormativity. We are eager to dismantle gender, as we know it, and usher in a society with non-hierarchical genders, a society with no gender, or a society where genders are optional. All of these are versions of the same seemingly natural conclusion of 20th century feminism.

[1] As I will clarify below, I do not take these two points to be universally accepted by all feminists, but I take them to be very widely shared within the intellectual feminist tradition, particularly in North-America.

[2] For an influential example of this view see Catharine MacKinnon: "on the first day that matters, dominance was achieved, probably by force. By the second day, division along the same lines had to be relatively firmly in place. On the third day, if not sooner, [gender] differences were demarcated (….). [Therefore] gender might not even code as difference, might not mean distinction epistemologically, were it not for its consequences for social power" (MacKinnon 87).

Let me be clear that I do not take this to be a characterization of mainstream public opinion, nor am I claiming that all self-proclaimed feminists think this. But this is a substantial conclusion that is widely shared by feminist thinkers and activists, both historically and in central contemporary debates. To see that this is not at all a fringe phenomenon, consider Sally Haslanger's recent and influential philosophical work. Summarizing her account of gender (and race)[3], Haslanger highlights the following points:

> *Both gender and race are real, and both are social categories. Neither gender nor race is chosen, but the forms they take can be resisted or mutated. Both race and gender (as we know it) are hierarchical, but the systems that sustain the hierarchy are contingent. (Haslanger 2012 246)*

This is an articulation of precisely the two 'legacies' of radical feminism: *social constructionism* and *hierarchical analysis*. And the conclusion Haslanger draws is exemplary. She concedes that, as sexually reproducing beings, we will have to have "social categories that take sexual difference into account" in a just society (254). After all, there are different needs and burdens that are generated by reproduction, and a just society must track and address them. So, we should not abolish gender *simpliciter*. But "we should try to envision new non-oppressive ways of being gendered *without* being a man or a woman" (254). We need to do away with gender *as we know it*, to create new social categories that are gender categories, but are not the ones we have. In a just society, gender will exist "in some yet unknown form" (254).

I take myself to be committed to both *social constructionism* and *hierarchical analysis*. I want, however, to pause before reaching a conclusion like Haslanger's. I want to consider first an extra wrinkle articulated by Marilyn Strathern, in *Before and After Gender*.[4]

[3] In this project, I am not committed to a position on race – I am interested solely in the claims about gender in the following quote.

[4] *Before and After Gender* is Strathern's recently published "missing book" (Strathern xiii). Written in Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea), in the early 1970's - and only finally published in 2016 - it is both a work in the anthropology of gender and the anthropology of feminism.

Writing in the 1970's, Strathern warns against what she perceived as a misguided feminist urgency in declaring gender a harmful "myth" – a socially-constructed, cultural category of hierarchical organization.[5]

> *The assumption is that if a practice has been identified as nothing more than a cultural artifact (a "myth") then it can be dispensed with, since cultures are of our own making.* ***But this can be valid only to the extent that we are aware of all the uses to which the artifact is put****. You cannot classify an axe as a weapon and hope to ban its use if it is also a work tool. (Strathern 266, my emphasis)*

I take this to be a powerful cautionary metaphor. To think about doing away with a socially constructed part of our world, we must understand *all* its social uses. And Strathern warns that there is more to the social function of gender than hierarchy. Feminists must pay attention to these other things gender (as we know it) does for us or else their efforts are bound to just fall flat or, worst, to create reactionary resistance. And what other uses does our gender regime have?

> *Proving that there is no genetic basis for gender discrimination does not even begin to approach the problem that such discriminations may be embedded deeply in society—not just in those institutions which allocate this or that range of roles to men and women, but* ***in our whole perception of mankind's place in the world****. (…) In fact, the more we work the concept of gender, whether by denial or affirmation, the more nourishment we give it. Gender, for us, is like a mandrake. Pull it up for its poisonous or for its medicinal properties, and you find the root has human form. (Strathern 276, my emphasis)*

Gender is not *just* a weapon, a social way to sort people into hierarchies. It is also a tool we use to understand and navigate our social world. Strathern suggests that it is a "social language" through which we understand our "human form" (266, 276). On this picture, gender categories appear foundational, baked into our very perception of "mankind's place in the world".

[5] Strathern mentions these debunking articulations of gender as a harmful myth in the work of Germaine Greer and Kate Millet (Strathern 5). For another 70's articulation, see Dworkin's *Woman Hating*: "'man' and 'woman' are fictions, caricatures, cultural constructs. As models they are reductive, totalitarian, inappropriate to human becoming. As roles they are static, demeaning to the female, dead-ended for male and female both" (Dworkin 1974 174)

Strathern suggests then that gender is a fundamental axis of meaning for us, just as much as it as an axis of domination. Any attempt to dismantle our patriarchal regime must wrestle with this duality.[6]

In this project, I want to heed Strathern's warning against a naïve politics of social change. My aim will be to pursue the kind of social theoretical investigation of gender necessary to inform and direct our political projects in a nuanced way.

2 Understanding the Role of Gender

I start my investigation from a motivating and intuitive observation: we seem to care a lot about gender, as a society. Gender seems to be everywhere in the norms governing our social world: from how to be a good friend and how to walk, to children's toys and clothes. And gender distinctions seem to matter to us, even when we cannot find a good reason for them. Numerous theorists, including Judith Butler, Linda Martín Alcoff and Charlotte Witt, have noted that these features set gender apart from other important social differences. In our contemporary North-American society, gender is unlike professional occupation or religious affiliation. It has a special centrality, ubiquity and recalcitrance in social practices that is worth noting. Gender plays a *special role* in our social life. In this project, I, firstly, provide an explanatory account of this intuitively special role of gender in our social life. Secondly, I argue that this role has important implications for the normative direction of feminist politics.

In the first part of this dissertation, I focus on trying to articulate and explain this special role of gender in our social life, which I take to be distinct from its function as an axis of hierarchy. In order to do so, I will start by introducing the notion of *social standing*. Social

[6] Haslanger makes room for a recognition of this difficulty when she considers that radical feminist reimagining of our sociality must be bound by what is necessary for a just but also a *functioning* society. So, "not everything goes" (Haslanger 2012 254).

standing refers to our very ability to enter into social relations. It is neither a moral distinction, nor is it reducible to hierarchy. Instead, it captures a distinct dimension of human sociality to do with the integration of human beings into social communities. The conceptual apparatus of social standing allows us to explain various forms of uncommon and peculiar social treatment of which I offer various examples: from 19th American circus shows, to the sadistic killings of emperors in medieval Byzantium. I then argue that social standing allows us to understand the special role that certain modes of identification play in social life. They do not just determine our location within the social fabric, but they condition our very ability to show up in it as subjects of social relations. I explore this paradigmatically in the case of certain forms of ability/disability. I go on to argue that the same happens in the case of gender. By placing gender within a broader social theoretical landscape, I draw parallels between being gendered and being 'able-bodied', as both matrices of representation that mediate our ability to integrate the social community.[7]

In the second part of this dissertation, I go on to argue that the fundamentality of gender is a major driving force in the perpetuation of patriarchal hierarchy, one that feminist politics has failed to take into account. I explore the case of early 21st century 'raunch feminism' to make this case. I argue that the role that gender plays in relation to social standing makes gendered meanings, norms and schemas seem indispensable in our eyes. Their erosion by feminist critique prompts an insidious form of backlash driven by what I call *meaning vertigo* – a perception of vertiginous and unsettling emptiness at the level of social meaning. This is a way of explaining reactionary push back that is different from other explanatory models such

[7] In so doing, I take myself to be engaging in the kind of project Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls "feminist disability theory". A fundamental goal of feminist disability theory "is to augment the terms and confront the limits of the ways we understand human diversity, the materiality of the body, multiculturalism, and the social formations that interpret bodily differences. (….) integrating disability as a category of analysis and a system of representation deepens, expands, and challenges feminist theory." (Garland-Thomson 2002 3)

as misogyny, as recently theorized by Kate Manne. I then suggest that we should complement our feminist critique with a broad strategy of downplaying gender distinctions in our social life. We should aim not at eliminating gender distinctions, but rather that at making them less pervasive in our social practices. This should make us less dependent on gendered meanings and therefore help minimize meaning vertigo, in the face of feminist critique.

3 Chapters Overview

Chapter 2: On Social Standing

In this chapter, I introduce my notion of social standing. To motivate the need for this concept in our philosophical toolbox, I examine three disparate case studies: the practice of photographic tourism targeting the Mursi, in southern Ethiopia; the 19th century circus exhibition of Julia Pastrana, named "the Bear Woman"; and the historical puzzle raised by the frequent sadistic killings of semi-divine Byzantine emperors. There is a pattern that emerges: these are all instances of people targeted for uncommon treatment that is also peculiarly ambivalent, that trades on oscillations between fascination and horror. I argue, that in all three cases, explanations couched in moral terms or in terms of hierarchy fail to capture what is puzzling about these stories for historians, anthropologists, and other observers.

Instead, I propose that these are cases of *social standing* in doubt. Social standing is constituted by one's ability to enter into social relations and is mediated by community-specific representations of what social interlocutors may look, sound and move like. When this mediation goes off script, one's social standing is imperiled. I introduce the notion of representational *anomaly* to characterize why certain ambiguities in appearance have this effect of threatening one's social standing. With this conceptual apparatus in place, I provide an account of the initial examples as instances of loss of social standing triggered by the anomalous

appearance of these figures. This explains why the victims in these stories are treated in ways that are not just morally problematic but also uncommon and peculiar.

Finally, I introduce the notion of *fundamental* modes of social identification. These are aspects of social identity that function as preconditions for full social standing. By using this framework, we can explain how certain forms of social identification function in a given society as conditioning factors of the very possibility of social existence.

Chapter 3: Disability and Social Standing

In this third chapter, I apply the notion of social standing to disability/ability social distinctions. I focus on certain forms of disability that are perceptible and highly obtrusive in social interaction, which I call radical bodily difference disability (RBD disability, for short). I consider Robert F. Murphy's claim that the marginalization of people with RBD disabilities is unlike most other forms of social devaluation. I argue that Murphy is right. While other forms of devaluation involve a loss of social status, a downfall in social hierarchies, RBD disability diminishes one's *social standing*. This is what sets it apart from other social dynamics of devaluation.

Murphy points to at least three special characteristics of the social marginalization of people with RBD disabilities: social anxiety, ambivalence and social isolation. I argue that all three of these elements can be explained by adopting an interpretation of RBD disability as a form of representational anomaly that, in turn, triggers a loss of full social standing. This renders the marginalization associated with RBD disability continuous with cases like the Mursi, Julia Pastrana or the Byzantine emperors. A key upshot of this analysis is that *being RBD 'able-bodied' is fundamental* in our society: it is a precondition for full social standing. Social standing can therefore tell us something informative about the role of certain modes of social identity in our contemporary context.

Chapter 4: Gender and Social Standing

Just like being RBD 'able-bodied' is fundamental, so is being gendered. In this fourth chapter, I defend an application of the social standing framework to gender. I start with the intuitive claim that gender is special, that we care a lot about it, and that it seems to function unlike other modes of social identification. I argue that what explains this seemingly special role is gender's *fundamentality*: *gender legibility is a precondition for full social standing*.

I go on to explain and make plausible this hypothesis by distinguishing gender legibility from gender conformity. I then argue that my articulation of the intuitively special role of gender has advantages over prominent alternatives by Judith Butler, Linda Martín Alcoff and Charlotte Witt. Finally, I use this framework of fundamentality to explain two aspects that are intuitively symptomatic of the special role of gender: the *pervasiveness* of gendered distinctions in our social practices and the inchoate *social anxiety* often generated by gender ambiguity. I argue that social anxiety can be understood as a reaction to representational anomaly. I then explain the pervasiveness of gendering in our social practices as a consequence of the need for constant perceptibility of our gender legibility. Gender is therefore not just a hierarchical structure of social organization, but an axis of meaning that delimits our very understanding of what social interlocutors can be like in our society.

Chapter 5: Perpetuating the Patriarchy: Misogyny and (Post-)Feminist Backlash

In this chapter I turn to the political implications of gender's fundamentality. I argue that it makes salient important reactionary phenomena that hierarchy-centered approaches do not adequately capture. Kate Manne's recent work on misogyny is an example of such an approach. According to her, misogyny is a property of social environments where women perceived as violating patriarchal norms are 'kept down' through hostile reactions. This policing is meant to

explain the perpetuation of patriarchal modes of social organization, in the face of constant challenges. I argue that Manne's approach is problematically incomplete.

I do so by examining a recent puzzling form of backlash: the rise of women-led movements reinstating patriarchal practices in the name of feminism, illustrated by the case of 'raunch feminist' CAKE parties. Misogyny cannot account for what is puzzling about raunch feminism, which I take to be only one among many examples of this kind of backlash. I propose a different story that emphasizes the continued centrality of gendered distinctions in our pervasively gendered social life, even as gendered social meanings become increasingly contested. This tension triggers *meaning vertigo*, a perceived emptiness at the level of social meanings that is socially disorienting.

Meaning vertigo is the reactionary impulse at the heart of phenomena like CAKE. It is also an especially deep obstacle to feminist social change. It triggers a form of backlash that is not driven by the hierarchical investments of the most gender-privileged, but rather by our collective investment in gender as a system of social coordination. I argue that, to overcome this difficulty, feminist critique needs to be complemented by more work on an alternative positive proposal.

Chapter 6: Degendering as a Feminist Strategy

In this concluding chapter, I sketch a tentative proposal for a mode of feminist politics that is responsive to the need to minimize meaning vertigo. I suggest that we should complement feminist critique with a *degendering* strategy that systematically downplays the centrality of gender to our social practices. This involves recognizing that there are other forms of social identification that can provide us with social norms and meanings in any given domain of social life. We can therefore highlight some of those as a way to combat our dependence on gender as a system of social coordination.

A full explanation and defense of degendering is beyond the scope of this project. My aim is to give only an initial but promising characterization of this view. I start by motivating degendering by pointing to important epistemic difficulties that we face in trying to rethink our gendered representations. We have reason, therefore, to turn to ways of moving forward that do not demand this fraught imaginative exercise. I give some examples of social changes and policy proposals that can be understood as attempts to degender social spaces in academic departments, children's clothes, military training and parenting. I go on to argue that what emerges is a reasonably coherent and distinctive strategy. I contrast degendering with 'gender blind' policies, gender eliminativism and nonbinary gender politics. I argue that we can degender much of our social world without having to undo the fundamentality of gender. I end by suggesting a direction for further work in the application of degendering to (hetero)sexual social practice.

Chapter II On Social Standing

In his study of bodily adornment among the Kayapo of the Amazon, Terence S. Turner notes that the importance of adornment derives from its being the cultural and symbolic medium

> *most directly and concretely concerned with the construction of the individual **as social actor or cultural 'subject'**. This is a **fundamental concern of all societies** and social groups, and this is why the imposition of a standardized symbolic form upon the body, as a symbol or 'objective correlative' of the social self, invariably becomes a **serious business for all societies**, regardless of whether their members as individuals consciously take the matter seriously or not. (Turner 501, my emphasis)*

Turner claims we should not take appearance and its rituals lightly. It is there that, through adornment and other practices, we become "social actors". In this chapter, I will be concerned with a number of forms of appearance and presentation beyond adornment. However, I will be interested precisely in the point I take Turner to be making here. Entering into social relations is a process heavily regulated by shared representational assumptions about how one should look, sound and move. These assumptions are enacted, enforced, and protected by various practices, like bodily adornment, and forms of institutional and informal treatment. To enter into the social life of a community, it is not enough to be human, a person, autonomous or rational. One must be perceptible through a certain set of representational schemas to be a full-fledged social actor.

In this chapter, I will argue that this process of becoming a social actor endows one with a distinctive kind of standing, which I will call *social standing*. Social standing is constituted by one's ability to enter into social relations and is mediated by these community-specific and substantive understandings of what social interlocutors may look, sound and move like. When

this mediation goes off script, one can come to have *less-than-full social standing*. This is a distinct and important category of social analysis. Having less-than-full social standing involves not simply having a lower social place, but more radically having a social location *out of place* in the social order. Those with less-than-full social standing are relegated, not just to the margins of power, but to the margins of our own sociality. This robs interactions of a customary sense of normalcy and motivates a deep ambivalence by the rest of the community. Thus, the way in which those without full social standing are treated is often not just morally problematic but is also both *uncommon and peculiar*.

I will start with three illustrative vignettes of such uncommon and peculiar treatment: the contemporary encounters between tourists and the Mursi in Southern Ethiopia; the life and death of 19th century circus attraction Julia Pastrana, "The Bear Woman"; and the pattern of popular worship and revilement of the emperors of the Byzantine Empire. Even though I have selected these three as representative, there are many other cases that illustrate this kind of phenomena.[8] I will be relying on existing accounts of these phenomena and will use them much like thought experiments: as intuitive starting points for my argument and test cases for my claims.[9] These are disparate times and places, quite different from our own. I take this to be a methodological strength. As Turner suggests, social standing is "a serious business for all societies": it is a transhistorical and transcultural condition of human social existence. Moreover, the processes of recognition that endow us with social standing are in the background of our social life and are therefore hard to notice. Thinking about social standing in different settings is an opportunity to more clearly investigate this hidden machinery. What I aim to show

[8] In the following chapters, I take myself to be introducing other such cases, connected specifically with disability and with gender.

[9] I will not be presenting original descriptions or interpretations, but I will rely on multiple secondary sources to offer credible and plausible reconstructions of these cases.

in this chapter is that, for *any* given society, some forms of social identification – *some* shared ways of representing social subjects – have an important role as preconditions for the very intelligibility of social life.

After describing the three examples, I will formulate two questions in relation to them. The first has to do with *what* sets these individuals apart in the eyes of their audiences, what makes them targets for such uncommon treatment. The second asks *why* perpetrators engage in this treatment, given its peculiarly ambivalent nature. I will then consider various canonical philosophical ways of answering these questions. In section 2, I will argue that conceptions of moral worth, personhood or even social status fail to get at what is distinctive and troubling about these cases. We must instead build a different conceptual apparatus. In sections 3 and 4, I will introduce my notion of *social standing* and the process of social standing recognition, which I am using here in a technical sense. With this in place, I will return to the three initial vignettes and give an analysis of them as instances of social standing recognition breakdown, where representational strains disrupt usually seamless background processes. In section 6, I will argue that these strains positively cast the characters of these stories as what I call *anomalous* subjects, towards whom we have characteristically ambivalent reactions. Circling back to the cases once more, I will use the notion of anomaly to explain the peculiar nature of these patterns of treatment. I will argue that these forms of treatment endow people with less-than-full social standing and that they function as one of several possible social responses to anomaly.

Social standing helps explain and unify these transcultural and transhistorical phenomena of marginalization. It also allows us to understand how our contemporary social context works. In the last section, I will briefly introduce the notion of a precondition for full social standing. Every society has some modes of identification which do not just determine

our relative social position, but also condition our very existence as social actors. They are *fundamental* aspects of social identity. In the following chapters I will argue that both being 'able-bodied' and being gendered are fundamental in our society.

1 Three Examples

1.1 The Mursi

The Mursi or Mun[10] are a pastoralist ethnic group of Southern Ethiopia for whom it is still a "norm for women to wear large pottery or wooden discs or 'plates' in their lower lips" (Turton 2013; LaTosky 2004 389).[11] Most young women get their lips pierced around age 15, some choose to pierce their lips later in life and some never do. Some marry happily without a plate, though this may be frowned upon by their families (LaTosky 2004 386-388). Lip-plates are related to piercing and stretching practices done on earlobes by both Mursi girls and boys and they present no greater risk of infection.[12] After the initial 3 to 6 months of stretching, women feel no pain, but they do permanently remove their four lower incisors to fit the plate in (Turton 2004). The plate also permanently affects their speech, modifying certain sounds, and gives them a specific gait, not unlike high heels (Turton 2013; LaTosky 2004 384). The plates are worn primarily by unmarried and newly married women, less by older women and never by widows (LaTosky 2014 184; LaTosky 2004 387). Like high heels, they are mostly used in public outings and festivities, but also when serving food to men and milking cows (LaTosky 2012 229).

[10] Mun (singular Muni) is a self-designation and Mursi is the term used by outsiders (LaTosky 2012 229).
[11] The practice is also still the norm for the neighbouring Suri or Surma (Turton 2013; Abbink 2000 fn1). It is not exclusive to Eastern Africa and is well documented, for instance, among the Kayapo, in the Amazon (Turner).
[12] Mursi women have traditional and effective ways to treat and prevent infections (LaTosky 2012 235). For a discussion of lip-plates and the promotion of gender equality see LaTosky 2012.

Many explanations have been advanced for the lip-plates, including a widely discredited hypothesis that it was a form of intentional disfigurement designed to be unappealing to slave traders. The lip-plates are not thought to disfigure, but they are also not just a beauty technique. They are tied to sexual maturity, to womanly strength and poise, to being "calm, quiet, hard-working, and above all, proud" (LaTosky 2004 385, 388). The lip-plate "is best seen as an expression of social adulthood and reproductive potential. It is a kind of 'bridge' between the individual and society - between the biological 'self' and the social 'self'" (Turton 2013). And this is a distinctively 'Mursi self', in contrast with a 'Kwegu self', the nearby unpierced hunters; or with 'a Bodi self', the Mursi's hostile neighbors who use very small lip-plugs (Turton 2004 5; LaTosky 2004 fn4). Therefore, for all other things that may be involved in the lip-plate – identity, pride, esteem – there is a basic *socializing* function that it serves. Lip-plates are part of a host of adornment techniques that integrate adults into their community (Turner 486; Eczet).

This distinctive cultural practice has gathered considerable attention from European and North-American tourists since the early 1980's (Régi 51). Tourists "share the general disdain for, not to say disgust at the practice shown by outsiders, (…) nevertheless [they] come great distances mainly, it seems, in order to photograph this symbol [that they take to be indicative] of Mursi backwardness" (Turton 2004 5). These 'visits' have become famous and infamous for their particularly strained character.[13]

> *For the onlooker it is a depressing and disturbing sight, to see the women, alternating between aggressive demands for money and sullen passivity, as a phalanx of video cameras pan up and down their bodies, and to see the tourists selecting particular 'specimens' from the crowd to be filmed and photographed.*

[13] For another description of an encounter between the tourists and the Mursi see Régi 41-42. See Abbink 2009 905 for a description of the use of similar encounters with the Suri (who also wear lip-plates) on Dutch reality TV. Much of what I say here concerning the Mursi can be extended to the case of the Suri. For further analysis see Abbink 2000 and Abbink 2009.

> *This is an encounter which is almost **entirely stripped of any form of 'normal' social intercourse.** (Turton 2004 5, my emphasis)*

Indeed, these encounters often resemble unorganized confrontations, where the Mursi jump the approaching cars and loudly demand the tourists photograph them. The tourists unlock their doors, promptly pick and photograph a few people and "make their getaway as quickly as possible", amidst fears of theft and violence. The interaction, although eagerly awaited by both villagers and tourists, is, at best, "tense and uneasy" for both sides (Turton 2004 1, 5).

What happens to the Mursi is continuous with a broader tradition of tourist gawking in Eastern Africa, targeting peoples like the Nuba or the Maasai (Régi 50). But the encounters with the Mursi are relevantly unlike 'visits' to other ethnic groups.[14] Those do not seem to elicit the same disparaging comments by tourists, nor the same display of volatile and resentful disorder by the locals (Turton 2004 6-7). The encounters are also unlike the exploitative and hierarchical relations that the Mursi maintain with local authorities and tax collectors, who stigmatize lip piercing as a 'backwards' traditional practice (Turton 2004 5, 8; LaTosky 2012; LaTosky 2004 390). The Mursi are called the "highlight" of tourist tours, "the most aggressive" and "the most unusual" of the local ethnic groups (quoted in Régi 44, 57). The most animated tourist accounts call the Mursi "demons" from "hell" (58). The regional 2000 edition of *Lonely Planet* singled them out as intimidating "thieves" and included this quote by a driver: "of all of them, the Mursi, they are the bad ones (…). They are savages, savages!" (Régi 55; Turton 2004 6). And yet the number of tourists who 'visit' the Mursi villages of the Omo Valley seems to show no sign of decreasing.

[14] With the exception of the Suri, who also wear lip-plates – which is the crucial factor, as I will argue below.

1.2 Julia Pastrana

Julia Pastrana was an indigenous Mexican woman, born in 1834, who was exhibited as a circus act throughout the USA and Europe from 1854 to her death in 1860. Pastrana was uncommonly hirsute, had a protuberant jaw and dentition, and a somewhat distinctive shape of nose and mouth.[15] Her features were described to the public as "simian" and "semi-human". She was billed as "Ape Woman", "Bear Woman", "Hybrid Indian", or simply as "The Nondescript" and her act included singing, dancing in colorful and feminine clothing and demonstrating her fluency in several languages (Garland-Thomson 1997 72; Henderson 55). Some of the most famous descriptions of Pastrana are the reports made by those who examined her body and the casts made of her jaw, including Charles Darwin (Henderson 56). The main points of interest included the thick pattern of hair that covered her body and face, her 'typical female' anatomy, regular menstrual cycle and high-pitched voice, but also the way her jaw and other facial features resembled so-called "negro physiognomy" and various kinds of apes (Garland-Thomson 1997 73-74; Lovejoy). Between popular displays, arranged social occasions and these 'examinations', Julia Pastrana became one of the most famous Victorian "freaks" (Garland-Thomson 1999 87).[16]

We do not know much about Pastrana's life[17], but there are rich fictional descriptions of her background in publicity materials. She was said to be from a Mexican "Root Digger Indian" tribe, "the most filthy and abominable [race]". These "semi-humans" had a diet composed of "grass-hoppers, snails and wasps" which they ate by hand prepared with berry

[15] Her physical attributes have been found to be indicative of the condition currently known as hypertrichosis with gingival hyperplasia (Henderson 55).
[16] There were several people in the late 19th century exhibited in similar ways. The most well-known example may be Sarah Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus", who predated Pastrana (Henderson 92). There were several performers known specifically for their hirsuteness such as Annie Jones "the bearded woman", or Fedor Jeftichew "Jo-Jo the Dog-faced Man" (Garland-Thomson 1997 69; Bogdan 1990 225).
[17] For a recent reconstruction of what is known of Pastrana's life events see Bondeson.

pulp (Garland-Thomson 1999 85, 93). A souvenir booklet went as far as to claim that Pastrana was discovered in a cave, with her mother "dwelling only with baboons, bears, and monkeys" (Garland-Thomson 1999 92). Against the backdrop of these tales, she was presented as an exception, an educated lady, saved from her brutish ancestry: "the Extraordinary Lady just imported from the regions of wonder" (quoted in Garland-Thomson 1999 94).

Pastrana was displayed as kind, loving and feminine, with her appearance being the supposed last vestige of her origins. This framed her as a "sensitive monster" and an object of sentimental pity mixed with wonder and even fright (Henderson 58; Garland-Thomson 1999 101).[18] This attitude is reflected in the account of circus owner Otto W. Hermann who met her in Vienna:

> *a monster to the whole world, an abnormality put on display for money (….), like a trained animal. [But] for the few who knew her better, she was a warm, feeling, thoughtful, spiritually very gifted being with a sensitive heart and mind (…) and it affected her very deeply in her heart with sadness, having to stand beside people, instead of with them, and to be shown as a freak for money, not sharing any of the everyday joys in a home filled with love. (quoted in Lovejoy)*

Pastrana died in Moscow from post-partum complications and her child, who inherited her hirsuteness, died shortly after. Her husband and manager Theodore Lent sold their bodies to be embalmed at the University of Moscow. The process was so successful that Lent repurchased the bodies and continued to rent them for profit (Garland-Thomson 1997 77).[19]

Pastrana and her child continued to be showcased for another century. They were bought, sold and displayed throughout Europe in circuses, museums and before royal families. Many, like Hermann, who had seen her in life, went on to see her as an embalmed corpse

[18] This sentimentality was a hallmark of 'freak shows' that attempted to gain middle-class acceptability and used it to distance themselves from the popular vulgarity with which the genre had come to be associated (Garland-Thomson 1999 99-101).

[19] Lent later married a woman with a similar appearance, Zenora, whom he exhibited as Julia's sister (Henderson 58).

(Garland-Thomson 1999 96). In 1972, Pastrana's body toured the U.S. as part of a traveling amusement park (Garland-Thomson 1999 85). Her remains ended up in Norway and, in 2013, they were finally transferred from their storage at the University of Oslo's Institute for Basic Medical Sciences to her native Mexico (Henderson 56). She was given a Catholic burial in her birthplace, after an international movement came together to try to partially rectify her appalling treatment in life and death (Wilson). In their statement on the repatriation, the Norwegian Committee on Human Remains pointed out that Pastrana had been the object of a fascination "which has sometimes been not only ethically unacceptable, but *grotesque*" (quoted in Henderson 59, my emphasis).

1.3 Byzantine Emperors

Consider an even more remote case, that of the Christian emperors of the medieval Byzantine Empire. In Byzantium, the emperor was not just appointed by God, but also partook of genuine divinity as a "vice-regent of God on earth". The Byzantine monarch made claims to divinity that were much more substantial than any monarch in modern Europe (Patterson 327). By making such claims and enacting them in ceremony and ritual, he came to be represented as "Christ incarnate", "a materialization of an incorporeal substance (…) neither a god nor a man, but an actor, a figurine" (Guerdan 17-18).[20] Ritual seclusion was a major component of this enactment of divinity. Indeed, the presence of the emperor was carefully managed behind the immense formality of ritual and protocol (Hopkins 186-187). His throne was mysteriously empty at meetings with ambassadors and yet "none would approach without bowing, moved and trembling" (Guerdan 17). Often, having an audience with the sovereign was akin to a

[20] For a recent critical discussion of this "imperial idea" see Kaldellis 2015 165-198. Kalledis suggests that this semi-divine conception of the emperor was forged as a reaction to increased political instability caused by a "systemic crisis in legitimacy" (176).

"revelation" and the visitor would find both throne and emperor suspended above ground by mechanical contraptions, outside of the reach of their voice and nearly their sight (Guerdan 19-20; Haussig 190). At other occasions, only gestures were allowed (Guerdan 20). All of this gave the monarch an extraordinary and almost magical character, an awe-inspiring quality and an immense power.

Against this backdrop of religious worship and reverence, scholars have noted two conspicuously surprising aspects of the lives of Byzantine emperors. The first is the popular attitude of contempt towards them. Most had insulting nicknames of some kind or other. One had the misfortune "to soil the baptismal font; for the rest of his life he was commonly known as 'Copronymus'", "The Dung-Named" (Guerdan 28; Kaldellis 2015 146). There was also Michael 'The Drunkard' and many others: Thick Neck, Apostate, Butcher, Nose-Cut-Off, Stutterer, Pretty Boy, Caulker or The Old Man (Guerdan 28; Kaldellis 2015 146; Garland 1990 14). They were often represented in songs as obscene and lecherous and were the target of frequent satirical attacks (Patterson 328). Byzantine humor prized public humiliation, vulgarity and ridicule, particularly targeting the imperial family and the emperor himself (Garland 1992 20; Garland 1990 9, 18-19, 26). One of the most colorful examples involves a set of "talking birds trained to make fun of the empress Euphrosyne" that are reported to have said to her "'You whore, pay a fair price!' or 'mind justice'" (Garland 1990 26; Kaldellis 2015 146). As Orlando Patterson emphasizes, "the vehemence of the popular conception of the emperor in Byzantium went beyond all known limits – and this in a society where the emperor was supposed to sit by Christ" (Patterson 328).

The second surprising fact is that these emperors were often gruesomely assassinated. In addition to having "one of the most irreverent imperial cultures", Byzantines "were also frequently disloyal" (Kaldellis 2015 146). There was a high number of coups and murderous

usurpers. No doubt this had something to do with the relative ease with which someone with the right support could become emperor regardless of rank or ancestry (Kaldellis 2015 125).[21] But, even then, the details are surprising:

> *Of one hundred and nine sovereigns, sixty five were assassinated, twelve died in convent or prison, three died of hunger, eighteen were castrated or had their eyes put out, their noses or hands cut off, and the rest were poisoned, suffocated, strangled, stabbed, thrown down from the top of a column or ignominiously hunted down. (Guerdan 135)*

Justinian II ended his first reign at the hippodrome where his nose was cut off amidst popular cries for his death, though his life was spared (Kaldellis 2015 129). There is also the repeated stabbing and dismemberment of Leo V, the splitting of the skull of Nikephoros II who was then "abused, reproached and cursed" before decapitation and the poisoning and drowning in a bath of Romanos III (Skylitzes 25, 269; Psellus 53-54). This systematic record of sadistic assassinations and popular disdain stands out by its excessiveness and by its incongruity with the widespread understanding of the sovereign as a materialization of the divine. If the Byzantines thought of their emperor as a semi-god, "then how was it that they not only criticized their emperors so virulently and so commonly, sang offensive songs about them in public, and plotted against them but also rebelled against them (…) and then killed them or blinded them (…)?" (Kalledis 7).

1.4 Three Examples, Two Questions

These three examples may seem, at first, utterly unrelated. They vary in place, time but also violence, prestige and power. What do they have in common? All of these vignettes involve behavior that is intuitively degrading, disdainful or demeaning. But the most puzzling thing is how *uncommon* and *peculiar* these patterns of treatment are. In all these three cases, there is

[21] Dynastic succession was never the norm in imperial Byzantium (Guerdan 31-32).

something special about these individuals, something that sets them apart and makes them targets in the eyes of their social audience. Not every girl from Pastrana's village became a circus show attraction. The way Byzantine emperors were treated stands out to historians. And although there is a broader tradition of exoticizing various peoples in Eastern of Africa, the appeal of the Mursi in the tourist circuit is striking. Importantly, the difference that singled out these characters did not seem to lie in anything these people did, but rather in who they were. Additionally, it is hard to understand why perpetrators systematically went to such great lengths to engage in some of these forms of treatment. Why pay so much to run the (alleged) risk of theft and violence, just to get some pictures of Mursi women? Why embalm and preserve Pastrana's body for one hundred years? And, especially, why kill, laugh at and torture the incarnation of God on earth? There is a curious ambivalence here, an oscillation between attraction and fixation, on one hand, and fear and repulsion, on the other. This is the seemingly paradoxical character that makes these forms of treatment *peculiar*.

What we want to explain then are two interconnected things. Firstly, (1) *what* makes these people targets for these *uncommon* patterns of treatment? We want an explanation of what sets them apart and singles them out. Secondly, (2) *why* do others engage in these *peculiar* patterns of treatment towards them? We need to explain why people systematically behave in this ambivalent and almost paradoxical manner. A good account should answer both questions. It should tell us what makes *these* people targets for *these* kinds of treatment.

2 Some Preliminary Alternatives: Moral Status, Personhood and Social Status

One natural way to start answering these questions is to think about these vignettes in moral terms. Maybe what is special about these figures is the way in which others fail to recognize

their *moral status*. This is what these stories have in common: they are all egregious moral mistakes.

There are various ways to fill out this claim depending on what we take to constitute *moral status*. I will consider one particularly strong candidate, namely, the idea that being a moral person is constitutive of moral status. Thus, *moral personhood* is what is being denied, ignored or not appropriately recognized. On this view, what sets these three stories apart is the fact that perpetrators fail to treat these people *as people*. There is a vast and controversial literature on the nature of moral personhood that I will largely bracket here. For, even without delving deeply into the issue, we can see that this is not a promising way to characterize what is at stake here. The first thing to notice is that, regardless of what exactly we think a person is, these are not typical borderline cases. As Daniel Dennett puts it, we do recognize

> *conditions that exempt human beings from personhood, or at least some very important elements of personhood. For instance, infant human beings, mentally defective human beings, and human beings declared insane.*[22] *(Dennett 175)*

But the perpetrators in these vignettes take their victims to be cognitively typical, fully grown adults, intelligent and quite calculating. These are not fetuses or people in comas. The Mursi are depicted as cunning thieves and Pastrana's very act is premised on her ability to speak various languages and "beam with intelligence" (Bondeson 11). The Byzantine emperor is an even clearer case: there is no doubt about his robust personhood, for politically overthrowing a 'non-person' makes little sense. It would seem like the very treatment that these people receive presupposes that they are persons. So, this hypothesis seems unpromising.

A defender of this strategy may reply that personhood is only one possibility. Maybe it is the wrong way to think of moral status. We should then try to run the same argument with

[22] I do not endorse this view of personhood, nor the particular language used by Dennett. I take it, however, to be illustrative of a common way of understanding personhood.

other alternatives, like sentience, autonomy or practical agency. However, these seem similarly unpromising. The sentience of the individuals in the three vignettes is never in doubt. It is also hard to argue that the Byzantines thought of their emperor as non-autonomous, or that the Mursi's practical agency was at issue. But, even if this is right, even if there is indeed a failure to recognize moral status in all these cases, this is not sufficiently explanatory. It fails to give us an account of the *peculiar ambivalence* of these forms of treatment. There are plenty of other entities to whom we attribute no moral status – and yet we would never gawk at, photograph, excessively torture or embalm and display them. And, most importantly, we do not manifest the characteristic *ambivalence* of the three vignettes towards those entities. If one considers an embryo to have no moral status, one is in fact likely to be less ambivalent about it, to more swiftly discard it as medical waste, for instance. Even if perpetrators fail to recognize the moral worth of their victims in these three cases, there must be something else that explains why these people are singled out and treated so paradoxically.

I propose to find more informative answers to these questions by turning away from moral concepts and towards an irreducibly social understanding of what is at stake. Instead of looking to ethics to explain the puzzles raised by these three cases, I want to look instead to the fundamental mechanisms underlying human sociality. Before I go on to elaborate this proposal, I want to distinguish it from a nearby alternative explanation: *social status*. Even though this is often what is meant by uses of 'social standing', I take the two to be very different concepts. Social status, as I am understanding it here, refers to one's relative position in the overall social hierarchy. This is constituted by multiple and intersecting axes that can be measured through social prestige, resources, and power. Why not think that all of these examples are really about being pushed down along these hierarchical lines? Firstly, the case of the Byzantine emperors does not fit this explanation at all. They were at the apex of their society and their treatment

seems to be directly linked to that high social status. Secondly, not everyone who is poor, disadvantaged, or at the bottom of a hierarchy elicits this kind of ambivalent fixation and repulsion. Nor does everyone with high social status. And yet, it is clear that, in cases like the Mursi, their treatment as tourist attractions is related to the increased precarity of their lives. Social status has some important connections to these forms of treatment. But it does not provide an explanatory pattern. Thinking about social hierarchy fails to capture what sets these figures and the treatment they receive apart. The phenomenon we are trying to track involves a distinct type of social dynamics.[23]

To sum up, characterizing what the three vignettes have in common as a failure to recognize moral status is unhelpful on two counts. Firstly, if you take a canonical understanding of moral status such as personhood, it is hard to see how that is being denied in the three stories. Secondly, and more importantly, even if these are all instances of failures to recognize moral worth, this by itself does not give us all the answers. It does tell us what is different about these cases but not why perpetrators do what they do. An alternative strategy is to characterize the examples in terms of the notion of social status. But this will not work either. Firstly, there is heterogeneity in the three vignettes with regards to social status. Secondly, neither low nor high social status automatically singles one out for this kind of peculiar treatment. I propose to characterize what is at stake in these examples in terms of a type of distinctively social dynamics that is irreducible to disempowerment or hierarchical domination. It is a way of being set apart from the social world, of living in partial social isolation.

[23] I am not denying there are interesting, complicated and systematic relations between social status and social standing.

3 Social Standing

To have social standing is to be widely recognized as able to stand in a multitude of social relations with others. These include relations like being someone's child, co-worker, fellow book-club member, neighbor or spouse. What makes these *social* relations is the fact that they are mediated by meanings, schemas and scripts that we all share and understand. This may seem obvious in the case of marriage or book-club membership because of the conventional formalities and protocols involved. It may be less intuitive in the case of being someone's child or neighbor. One could think that all that is required here are biological ties or spatial contiguities. But consider how many social expectations go into fashioning these relationships. They become social roles one can adopt, and they set norms according to which actions are evaluated. I can live next to someone and not be very neighborly, and I can be raised by two adults to whom I have no biological ties, who become my parents. But sitting on the same bus or having a birthday in common with someone does not trigger similar shared expectations in our community. These relations are not social in the relevant sense.

Social standing comes in degrees. After all, I may be recognized as able to stand in more or fewer social relations. We can think of social standing as a continuum then. At one end, there is a region where we find entities with very little social standing, if any. Rocks and wild animals, for instance, are not the kinds of beings that are widely recognized as able to stand in social relations. At the other extreme, we find ordinary people in the community – what I will call *social subjects*. These are entities that occupy the region of *full social standing* in the continuum. *To have full social standing is to be widely recognized as able to stand in most social relations.*[24] Below, I will use 'entity with full social standing' and 'social subject'

[24] Tracing this continuum and identifying these three regions will always be an empirical and contextual matter. I take this to be a virtue of the notion of full social standing, in that it is sensitive to cross-societal variation. Applying

interchangeably. It is important to note that all that is required to be a social subject is that one be recognized as the kind of entity that *could* stand in most social relations. This is compatible with there being systematic barriers to actually doing so. Consider moderately patriarchal societies where women are recognized as able to stand in relations of political leadership. But they are also thought to be less likely to excel in those positions and they face systematic obstacles in accessing political power. And yet, in principle, they are widely recognized as the appropriate kinds of beings to occupy the presidency. Being a social subject is compatible then with a variety of locations in social hierarchies.

Social subjects occupy the top region of the continuum of social standing and things like rocks occupy the bottom one. There is a third region, in the middle, occupied by what I call entities with *less-than-full social standing*. Having less-than-full social standing is not like being a pebble or a killer whale. It is not a matter of being treated like an object or an animal.[25] Instead, these entities in the middle of the continuum are widely recognized as able to stand *only* in some significantly restricted set of social relations. It is also important that, like the other two categories, less-than-full social standing is a region in the continuum: it encompasses a variety of cases of significantly diminished social standing. As I will argue, individuals are constructed as having less-than-full social standing via patterns of *partially socially isolating treatment*. This is a promising category of analysis to get at what is distinctive in the three vignettes. What is remarkable about them is precisely that Pastrana, the emperors, and the Mursi are not just treated as inanimate objects or wild animals. They do have *some* social standing. But they are set apart from ordinary people. This ambiguity characteristic of occupying the

it will always require analyzing the relative importance of various kinds of social ties in a given setting. For instance, in our context, not being able to join a book club and not being able to vote do not carry the same weight.

[25] In this sense, less-than-full social standing is distinct from some notions of 'objectification'.

middle of the continuum will also be an important starting point to analyze the ambivalence that marks the forms of treatment illustrated in these examples.

The notion of social standing tracks a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human societies: the drawing of lines between entities we consider fit to be our social interlocutors and those we do not. Across time and space, human communities have displayed a preoccupation with representing, enacting and enforcing these differences between themselves and the world of nature, the divine or the monstrous. This is part and parcel of what it is to have a social order, a set of metaphysical assumptions that underpin a shared picture of the world. At a very general level, this is connected to our human orientation towards categorization and pattern-formation. We are the kinds of beings who think in terms of types, groups and variation. More specifically, social standing distinctions are something all societies need to function smoothly. We need to be 'on the same page' about what entities can be our social interlocutors. Consider the case of children and adolescents. For any social community, there must be some shared understanding of whether young people can marry, work, vote or trade. All societies draw these lines and any brief survey of contemporary and historical settings will yield a diverse set of practices in this respect. On reflection, we may consider some ways of drawing the line better than others. We may even find some morally objectionable. Nevertheless, they all fulfill a real social need. Social standing distinctions are then an instance of our basic tendency to make sense of the world in terms of organized variation, and they are also a byproduct of the coordination necessary for human sociality.

4 Social Standing Recognition

We do not simply fall into social relations. To have social standing, we must be widely recognized by others as the kinds of entities that can stand in such relations.[26] This amounts to an ongoing process of *social standing recognition* involving representations and forms of treatment that give us a place in the social world. *Social standing recognition is constituted by certain practices of social treatment and is mediated by cultural representations of social subjects.* So, although individual attitudes are involved in the process, our intersubjective practices and representations are the crucial elements. This means that social standing recognition patterns can be sociologically investigated. The relation of mediation between shared representations and forms of treatment is complex and I will return to it in more detail below. For now, we may think of cultural representations as *guiding* and *rendering intelligible* social treatment. Finally, although social standing recognition processes are a matter of what happens in individual encounters (understood broadly to be between individuals, groups or institutions), an entity's social standing will be determined by *patterns* of recognition. It is the way in which these processes systematically happen or break down that ends up determining one's overall ability to enter into social relations in a community.

Social standing recognition consists in treating the recognized entity in a certain way, not in identifying it as having some quality or capacity. These recognition practices do not pick out pre-existing entities but rather *construct* them. In other words, individuals may be viable candidates for full social standing, but it takes their actually being enmeshed in the social world, in the relevant sense, for them to have it. To make this concrete, consider a relatively simplified

[26] The following discussion on recognition has important parallels with the notion of recognition developed by Darby in *Rights, Race and Recognition*. Darby argues that, for someone to be moral rights holder, they must be "afforded institutional respect" (Darby 98). We should take certain forms of social recognition, rather than intrinsic properties, as the basis for some entity having moral rights. What I am claiming here is something structurally similar about social standing, though I do not take myself to be making any claims about moral rights.

example in Hilde Lindemann Nelson's description of her sister Carla, who was born with hydrocephaly, a severe neural tube disorder. Because of this, Carla "could not lift her head, turn over, sit up, speak or grasp objects". She passed away at eighteen months old. But until then, her appearance was very much like that of any other baby, with "a remarkably fine pair of blue eyes" (Nelson 30). There were not a lot of social relations Carla could have entered into at eighteen months of age. Infants' social life is in many ways mainly potential. But, from the moment Carla was born, she could already be a daughter, a sister, a member of the family "and other structures of intimacy" (30). This is the social microcosm where, in this case, it makes sense to talk of social standing recognition. What Nelson emphasizes is the way in which Carla being in those social relations was a function, not of her capacities or qualities, but of the way she was treated:

> *Acting out of our various conceptions of who she was, we made a place for her among us, treating her according to how we saw her, and in so treating her, making her even more that person we saw. Because I played with her she was my playmate. Because my mother cared for her at home, she was a member of the household. (Nelson 32)*

By being enmeshed in the social fabric, through practices of play and care, Carla was becoming a budding social subject. Notice that this did not depend on her capacity to reason, to smile or even to hold her head up. It was enough her family saw her looking at them and engaged with that look, that they treated her as their daughter, sister and playmate. Social treatment is sufficient then for social standing recognition.[27]

Even if the way we treat others is something we can largely determine, it is never entirely free-flowing from our representation of who they are and who they can be. These are

[27] One may worry here that this is overinclusive. If a group treats a statue or a non-human animal as a social subject, does that endow it with social standing? I think it does. If the group sustains this pattern of treatment, the statue or the animal has some social standing. This may occur when there are sustained practices of treating idols as social subjects, in some respects, for example.

the "conceptions" that Nelson refers to, mediating the behavior of family members towards Carla. It is not irrelevant that, when they looked at Carla, the family saw exactly what they would expect of a red haired, beautiful baby, except for the slightly larger than usual head on closer inspection. Carla had familiar facial responses, such as looking in an engaged way at her parents and sister. It is also significant that Carla was not a stranger. In familial relations, what once used to be an obtrusive element in someone's appearance – like an overly large head – often recedes to the background. But the way Carla *looked to them* mattered. She appeared, in most ways, like an eighteen-month-old daughter, sister and playmate. Treating her as all these things seemed normal and appropriate, given those conceptions.

Carla's case is a simplified example because the domain of social relations for which she is a viable candidate is so restricted. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson provides us with a more general model for thinking about this role of mediating representations in the following passage.

> *In a first encounter with another person, a tremendous amount of information must be organized and interpreted simultaneously: each participant probes the explicit for the implicit, determines what is significant for particular purposes, and prepares a response that is guided by many cues, both subtle and obvious. (Garland-Thomson 1997 12)*

When we interact with someone, we look for information so as to form an understanding of them that can latch onto the social meanings and scripts we are culturally acquainted with. The most basic cue we always look for – even if we are unaware that we are looking for it – is whether the entity in front of us is a social subject (Turner 501). If we did not do this, we would be confused about whether wild deer are things around which we should be polite, for example. We do not make these mistakes because we always start with the same set of questions: how does this entity look? How does it move? How does it sound?

What we do in this process is engage in a 'reading' or deciphering of the candidate entity using the social representational vocabulary we are fluent in. We take perceptible or evident

features and read them using the schemas that our social representations furnish us with (Douglas 36; Goffman 48). These representations of expected variation and expected axes of variation function then as collective or *social self-image*, as it were. They are understandings we share of what our spouses, friends, neighbors and co-workers may look like. Some of these are obvious. We expect social subjects to be taller or shorter but not more or less translucent or liquid. But some representational expectations are starkly community-specific. For instance, forms of body modification, like lip-plates or extensive ritual scarification are part of some communities' social self-images but, clearly, not of all. Legibility through these conceptual schemas supports our usual background normalcy in social relations. When everything goes as usual, we are not even aware of this 'reading' process in social encounters. It becomes salient, however, when difficulties arise.

Social standing points then to the way in which human societies, across space and time, draw distinctions between social subjects and other entities. To have full social standing, to be a social subject, is to be able to stand in most social relations in the community. This does not simply happen to us: we must be widely recognized by others as the kinds of entities that can do so. Our integration into social life depends then on others treating us as social subjects. This, in turn, is always conditioned by our shared representational assumptions about what social interlocutors may look like.

5 Returning to the Three Vignettes: Strains in Representation

With these basic building blocks in place, I want to propose an analysis of the three initial vignettes as *instances of social standing in doubt* or, more precisely, of *less-than-full social standing*. They are cases in which strains in the social standing recognition process disrupt it and lead to patterns of social treatment that are socially isolating. This results in interactions

that lack fluidity and responsiveness. In this section, I want to focus on the important representational strains introduced by the appearance of these individuals. In all three cases, I will argue that the people in question present variations of appearance that transgress the social self-images of their audiences – the shared assumptions of the community about what social interlocutors can look, move and sound like. This will be an important first step in characterizing what singles these people out for uncommon treatment. It will also allow me to describe in more detail the mediation relation between representations and treatment in the process of social standing recognition.

5.1 The Mursi

Why do the encounters between the tourists and the villagers seem "more of a 'confrontation' than a normal social interaction", by both Mursi and tourist standards alike (Turton 2004 5)? One possible answer is the obvious power difference. Tourists come with disposable income to photograph the Mursi, who are struggling in the face of environmental and economic pressure. But all this goes on with other ethnic groups in the region. It is also largely true of the interaction between the Mursi and the urban Ethiopian officials and drivers. And yet, the Mursi say of these other Northern Ethiopians that they are different from the "whites": they don't take photographs (Turton 2004 8).[28] What sets the encounters between the Mursi and the tourists apart then? Anthropologist David Turton, the leading scholar on Mursi culture,[29] argues that the lip-plates are the key element.

> *Although eagerly sought after by both sides, this 'encounter' (…) appears to be as uncomfortable and unsatisfactory for those who take part in it as it is disturbing for those who witness it. (…) I ask why this should be so, and find a*

[28] "'Give us a goat to eat,' they say. So we just give them one, When a lot of them come, it's for tax. (…) There's none of this going around taking photographs with the Kuchumba [non-Mursi Ethiopians] – they are more like us" (Turton 2004 8).

[29] Turton has conducted ethnographic research among the Mursi since 1968. He was the only person to do so until the early 2000's (LaTosky 2004 382, 394 fn2).

> *large part of the answer in the lip-plate itself and in what it means for those who wear it, and for those who photograph it. (3)*

Turton's methodology starts with a common-sense observation: the Mursi look strange to the tourists, but not to themselves. Turton's implicit claim is that the interaction between the Mursi and the tourists is different in that it is *premised* on this asymmetric strangeness. Unlike other outsiders, the tourists have no business with the Mursi other than noticing their appearance. This makes the encounter tense and unsatisfying. What I propose to do here is to provide an argument for this implicit claim.

The strangeness of the lip-plates in the eyes of the tourists can be re-described as a strain in the 'reading' of Mursi women as social subjects. In other words, the 'lip-plated face' is a completely unanticipated variation given the tourists' perceptual schemas. Unlike an eccentric necklace, it actually shapes the facial features of the women who wear them. Lip-plates are not like surprising garb but more like a *deformation,* a way in which these faces are hard to parse in the tourits' representational vocabulary. This difficulty is in part the result of the tourists' lack of familiarity with lip-plates. It is a local tradition bound to look "peculiar if not sensational to most outsiders" (Abbink 2009 899). But there is also a history of representations of African lip-plates in Europe and North-America that exaggerates differences and has arguably precluded familiarization. This includes 19th century travel accounts, contemporary coffee-table books, and the exhibition of people with lip-plates in North-American circuses as "monster-mouthed Ubangi Savages", as recently as the 1930's (Bogdan 1990 192; Régi). These shows exoticized lip piercing traditions, casting them as symbols for racialized primitivism (Bogdan 1990 176-177). Given the geographical gap and this history of depicting lip-plates as almost monstrous, it is not surprising that the tourists are shocked.

Because social standing recognition is mediated by representation, this *representational strain* conditions it. For the tourists, it is hard to see how one could be friends, neighbors or family with someone who looks as alien to them as the Mursi women. This constitutes a profound disruption in the social standing recognition process and a loss of the basic normalcy that it bestows on any interaction. Tourist treatment of the Mursi is premised on this breakdown. It consequently makes the Mursi entities with less-than-full social standing, not within Mursi society, but in the new social context created by the increasingly frequent 'visits' of tourists. Understanding what is demeaning about the photographic session depends on grasping this idea. The Mursi are not simply handled as rocks or wild game. There are some social standing recognition practices involved in these encounters such as trading, buying and selling. But they are stopped short by the photography. Consider what these Mursi men say when interviewed by Turton.

> *Bio-iton-giga: (…) why do they do it? Do they want us to become their children, or what? (…)*
> *DT [David Turton]: They come because they see you as different and strange people. They go back home and tell their friends that they've been on a long trip, to Mursiland. They say: 'Look, here are the people we saw.' They do it for entertainment. (…)*
> *Komorakora: (…) We said to each other, 'Are we here just for their amusement?' Now you've said the same, so that must be it. (…)*
> *Arinyatuin: (…) This photography thing comes from your country, [smiling] where the necklace beads grow. Give us a car and we'll go and take photographs of you. (Turton 2004 8)*

What is demeaning is not just being photographed, it is being taken to be *strange*. What the Mursi experience in having less-than-full social standing is the imposition of the tourists' representational order, as they become part of a global social environment. As Turton puts it, by being photographed more often and by having more and more of their income tied to the practice, the Mursi "have come to realize that the center which they once saw themselves inhabiting has, as it were, slipped away from them" (8). It is not just the money that is in Europe,

but the very representations of who counts as a social subject, enacted through the practice of photography.

The case of the Mursi highlights a key point about the relation between treatment and representation in social standing recognition: mediation does not mean determination. Just because someone looks strange does not mean we cannot go ahead and try our best to treat them as normally as possible. And, in time, strangeness may wear away or become unobtrusive. Representations only *guide* social treatment responses. David Turton, who has lived with the Mursi for over four decades, inhabits the European representational schema. Unlike the Mursi, he understands what the tourists see.[30] But, at the end of the day, Turton is engaged in a different interaction with the Mursi, one with a much more social character. And, after four decades, he has probably come to regard lip-plates as routine elements of his surroundings. The way we end up treating an entity is not fully determined by our representational vocabulary. We can be reflective, expand our cultural horizons or simply manage our own discomfort. We can even try to learn another representational language and succeed.

5.2 Julia Pastrana

If the Mursi presented the tourists with an unexpected variation – a stretched out lip – the case of Pastrana is maybe more complex. At first glance, the representational strain in the case of Pastrana has to do with her embodiment of *ambiguity* between animal/human and man/woman categories. Both her handlers' display of her in the show, and the reports produced about her highlight the difficulty in representing Pastrana within these perceptual schemas (Garland-

[30] This, is in fact, the source of some of his own doubts about the possibly problematic, or just ironic, nature of his own filmed interview with a group of Mursi men: "what began as an interview, with the interviewer asking all the questions for the benefit of the TV audience, turned into a more equal exchange as I was forced to answer my own question – 'Why do the tourists take photographs?' – and thereby to confront my own behavior and motivations. The answer that was eventually dragged out of me could, of course, have served equally well as an explanation of what I and the film crew were doing." (Turton 2004 8).

Thomson 1997 74). Her hirsuteness – often referred to as a "moustache" and a "beard" – evoked masculinity, clashing with her feminine figure, voice and clothing. At the same time, her facial hair also made her seem "simian", and her feminine features, her singing and her dancing, ended up signaling her as human. Additionally, there is a racialized double ambiguity to her performance (Henderson 26). Pastrana is billed as an imaginary "Root Digger Indian", and made to speak Spanish, while being clothed and portrayed like a European 'lady' (Henderson 55; Garland-Thomson 1999 83). But "Root Digger Indians", Pastrana's fictional tribe, were themselves already "semi-human" cave dwellers. This particular mode of racialization is itself a form of ambiguity in relation to the dominant social self-image.[31] We can see this thought reflected in the broader 19th century phenomenon of displaying people "whose only difference lay in the fact that they belonged to an unfamiliar race and culture" as "freaks" (Bogdan 1990 177). These figures were a particular type of racial Other which, though certainly taken to be inferior, was also taken to be unfit to fully integrate society. The "south pacific cannibal", the "African bushman" or the previously mentioned "Ubangi savage" were a staple of the genre (Bogdan 1990 178-193). What made Pastrana so successful as an oddity was the way in which she "melded both bodily [ambiguity] and cultural difference" of this kind (Garland-Thomson 1997 63).

Indeed, strains in social standing recognition can compound. Social standing recognition becomes strained and can even break down when one is hard to parse through our perceptual schemas. The *more* difficulties are introduced, the more likely this breakdown is to happen. In the case of Pastrana, racialization, racial ambiguity, ambiguity along human\animal

[31] Not all forms of racialization put social standing in question. In some racialized regimes, devalued racial features are not actual strains on social standing recognition. They just mark a subordinate social status. Other forms of racialization put the racialized beyond the pale of sociality. For a plausible example of a difference along these lines, see the debate on polygenesis and monogenesis in 19th century U.S.A. (Fredrickson 71).

and man\woman distinctions all build on each other to turn her into a definitely transgressive figure: the dressed-up "primitive" (Garland-Thomson 1999 90, 92-94). This is the result of compounded ambiguity along various parameters that are salient in the community-specific 'civilized' perceptual schemas of her audience. It is not a coincidence that tourist descriptions of the Mursi also call them "primitives" and "savages" (LaTosky 2012 233; Turton 2004 6). They too arguably compound certain racialized strains on recognition with other ambiguities.[32] Words like "savage" are not an idle insult in these contexts, but an acknowledgement of this overall representational strain the appearance of these people represents.

Pastrana was clearly embedded in some social relations and had some social standing. She was legally married, for instance.[33] Nevertheless, her social relations were restricted by her handlers. It was important that the show be an exclusive opportunity to see her (Garland-Thomson 1999 89). During the show, the staring on which her livelihood depended effectively constituted a breakdown in social standing recognition. It turned her into an entity whose social subjectivity was permanently in doubt: someone with less-than-full social standing. Like the spectacle of silently photographing the Mursi, the display of Pastrana to her audiences was a moment of interaction devoid of basic normalcy. During the show, the audience got caught up in deciphering the puzzle that was Pastrana. They got stuck in the representational component of social standing, failing to actually recognize a social subject.

It is important to note that, although we cannot understand Pastrana's uncommon treatment without delving into the representations that condition it, the relation between treatment and representation is not unidirectional. This mediation relation involves a certain

[32] It is plausible that the 19th century figure of the 'freak' 'African bushman' has lingered in our collective imagination and comes to inform some of this popular engagement with East African imagery.
[33] The affective nature of Pastrana's marriage is dubious at best. She is reported to have said of her husband "He loves me for my own sake", but Lent's behavior cast doubt on this alleged affection (Henderson 58).

amount of *looping*, as it were. As Nelson put it, in relation to Carla, "we made a place for her among us, treating her according to how we saw her, and *in so treating her*, making her even more that person we saw" (Nelson 32, my emphasis). What we do is intelligible only given certain cultural representations of the entity in question. But, at the same time, our treatment of that entity also cements and shapes those representations. Putting Pastrana on a stage and marketing her in particular ways, having her sing, dress and groom her facial hair, "amplified this coincidence of the recognizable and the unidentifiable" (Garland-Thomson 1997 74). This is in fact the logic of all 'freak shows': there is always an intentional amplification of contradictory features and of representational strain. Moreover, the mere fact of encountering Pastrana as a circus attraction made it impossible for the audience to get past the representational strangeness of her persona. If Pastrana was the post office clerk, their new work colleague or neighbor, things might have been different. Like in the Mursi case, when the interaction is entirely premised on a breakdown in social standing recognition, we should not be surprised if it turns out to lack the fluidity and normalcy of a recognizably social interaction.

5.3 Byzantine Emperors

One may think that there is no similarity between the cases of the Mursi, Pastrana, and the Byzantine emperors. In Byzantium, the emperor did not *look strange*, one may argue. Being partially divine is not even a perceptible quality. In fact, the emperor was not even available to be seen by his subjects, most of the time. He was "shut away from public sight" (Hopkins 187). This is the exact opposite of the hypervisibility lent by photography and the circus show. So, to explain what set the emperor apart, we may need a different story. But this line of reasoning is too quick for three reasons. Firstly, this objection probably exaggerates the invisibility of the emperor. Even when he was physically absent from public space, there was a repertoire of popular jokes, stories and plays about members of the imperial family that circulated widely.

The city itself was filled with imperial portraits (Guerdan 27-28). And there *were* also various occasions at which the emperor was very visible: at games in the hippodrome, presiding over liturgical ceremonies, festivities and processions in the city (Haussig 191-193; Garland 1992 18). Secondly, the semi-divine conception of the emperor was not all there was to imperial life, even if it was central to it. Emperors had to govern, decide over taxation, diplomacy, warfare and other matters. This was done within a much more secular modality of presentation and interaction, closely related to the earlier Roman Republic (Kaldellis 2015 198; Haussig 194).[34] The idea of a totally secluded and completely unrepresentable subject seems like an exaggeration, even if the emperor was shrouded in formality.

Thirdly, and more importantly, we should be wary of projecting our own contemporary understandings of divinity onto the Byzantine context. For us, it is perhaps hard to imagine what it is to *look* semi-divine and why that would be a *disturbing* way to look, analogous to Pastrana's show or to the Mursi lip-plates. This is certainly a symptom of the way in which the distinction between the sacred and secular, which "was fundamental to the [Byzantine] culture as a whole", is no longer fundamental for us (Kaldellis 2015 192). It is also in part a consequence of the widespread influence of contemporary Christian conceptions of semi-divinity as a relatively abstract and non-threatening quality. But divinity was not abstract in Byzantium. It was a perceptually represented feature. Whenever the imperial family appeared in public, they were always "shown as resplendent, semi-divine and untouchable figures in circumstances and contexts carefully orchestrated to display their unique splendor" (Garland

[34] Anthony Kaldellis calls this a "situational logic", where Byzantine people switched between treating their sovereign as a semi-god and as the leader of a Republic, two incompatible and contradictory set of positions (Kaldellis 2015 183).

1992 18). It was important that the emperor looked semi-divine, not to trick his subjects, but because that *was* semi-divinity.

We can think of the semi-god as a figure who strained classification, who presented two *perceptible* ways of being that were meant to be mutually exclusive. It was not that the boundary between sacred and secular was collapsed in the figure of the emperor. Rather, the distinction was maintained, but the limits of each were problematic (Kaldellis 2015 192). The Byzantine emperor was much less like a Christ-figure, and much more like a figure of contemporary horror. He breached "the norms of ontological propriety", not unlike the modern vampire or the possessed person (Carroll 16).[35] In other words, a semi-god was what Noël Carroll calls a "fusion figure": an entity that "unites attributes held to be categorically distinct and\or at odds in the cultural scheme of things in *unambiguously* one, spatio-temporally discrete entity" (Carroll 16, 43). Although this may be a stretch of the imagination for us, it is a more rigorous and less anachronistic interpretation of Byzantine culture.

We should therefore take seriously Orlando Patterson's claim that the emperor was not just at the apex of the Empire, but importantly set apart from it (Patterson 325; Haussig 186).[36] Because he brought together the mortal and the divine, the secular and the sacred, he was a figure straddling the borders of the Byzantine social self-image. This constituted a strain in social standing recognition and disrupted the fluidity of social interaction with the emperor. And it did so purposively. It made the imperial monarch *special*, different in kind from the rest of the people in Byzantium, consolidating his legitimacy as a ruler. But this representational contradictoriness also made the emperor *strange* and *disturbing* in the eyes of his subjects. If

[35] Carroll mentions an even more relevant example: "the blighted victim in John Metcalfe's "Mr. Meldrum's Mania" (…) since he is a combination of a man with the Egyptian god Thoth" (Carroll 44).
[36] For a critical discussion of Patterson's argument see Tougher 50.

this is right, then the semi-divine Byzantine emperor is like the 'primitive savage' in an important respect: an ambiguous subject with less-than-full social standing.

Once again, notice that the ways in which the emperor was treated reinforced, exacerbated and partially constructed his representation as semi-divine. This is the looping between treatment and representation that I have pointed to earlier. Seclusion and formality constructed the emperor as not accessible, as not of this world, but they were only intelligible social practices because of his representation as semi-divine. Note that the role played here by *ritual* parallels the other two examples. The Mursi look strange to the tourists, not in virtue of their plain bodies, but in virtue of their ritualized cultural modifications of them. And Pastrana, who is groomed, framed and displayed by her handlers for maximum effect, is also shown in a ritualized fashion. Representational strain is important, but representation is always already intimately linked to practice, treatment, and ritualized presentation (or hiding) of the body.

So far I have tried to analyze the three initial examples as cases where social standing is in doubt by focusing on the representational difficulties – the breakdowns in 'reading' – that pose problems for social standing recognition. Recall that, on my view, this recognition is constituted by forms of treatment and mediated by social representations in our social self-image. What strains in representation imperil then is the treatment that constitutes recognition. These three cases also help us clarify how our shared representational self-images mediate social standing recognition. Representation *guides* these forms of treatment by putting them on the table as fitting options, but it does not fully determine them. Representation also makes *intelligible* certain forms of treatment. Otherwise, some behavior would seem nonsensical or, at best, unmotivated.

This analysis gives us a sense of what singles these individuals out for uncommon treatment. It also tells us why these interactions seem so devoid of normalcy. But it does not

yet tell us why these people are treated in the way that they are. If these encounters and these figures are so shrouded in difficulty and tension, why do people constantly seek them out? Why do tourists keep on travelling great lengths to see the Mursi? Why did people keep paying to gawk at Pastrana's corpse for a hundred years? And why did Byzantines both venerate and torture their emperors?

6 Anomaly and Ambivalence

The Mursi, Pastrana and the Byzantine emperors do not present their audiences with any old difficulty: they are what I will call representationally *anomalous*. This means that they are not just surprising, they are profoundly troubling in ways that both attract and repel. The anomalous is metaphysically threatening. Less-than-full social standing is a way for communities to deal with anomalous subjects: by marking them off as such and making them *partial social isolates*.

Anomaly is not just failure to conform to an ideal, or a statistical rarity. The anomalous is not just confusing. It is something that has *gone wrong* relative to what we take to be our regular picture of the world. David Livingstone Smith captures this in his description of anomalous subjects as a "metaphysical threat" (Smith 2016 433).[37] Anomalies are entities that "transgress culturally sanctioned metaphysical categories", our shared classifications of what importantly different kinds of things exist in the world (430). Our social self-image is one of those categories. An anomalous being is then one that, in virtue of its transgression of boundaries, "poses a threat to any social order founded on metaphysical presumptions about the natural order of things (that, is, every social order)" (430). Anomalous subjects trouble the very stability, recognizability and predictability of our world.

[37] For a related discussion of this attitude see Julia Kristeva's notion of *the abject* as a "perpetual danger to the subject" (Kristeva 236).

One way in which anomalous subjects can transgress metaphysical categories is by embodying some form of "categorical contradictoriness" (432). A wolf in people's clothes, for instance, is not metaphysically threatening. But a werewolf is (Carroll 43). A man acting like a rat is silly, but a rat with a human form is unsettling (Smith 2016 430). This is the difference between mere juxtaposition and contradictoriness. Another way to be metaphysically threatening is by exhibiting some of the features that we expect to see in a category, together with conspicuous features that fall significantly outside of the parameters we expect. Life-like wax figures, similar to their human counterparts in every respect except their inanimate nature, are unsettling and troubling in this way (431).[38] The violation of boundaries here does not depend on bringing together two things that ought to have remained separate or crossing a line between two well-defined categories. It is rather about being both reassuringly familiar and radically different, in a way that precludes an unambiguous reading (Garland-Thomson 1997 74).

When faced with an anomaly we typically react with profound and intense ambivalence. On one hand, the anomalous entity appears horrible and repulsive. It is the cultural metaphysical order gone wrong. For us, as beings who depend on this cultural order to make sense of the world, of themselves and of each other, this is an unacceptable state of affairs. It is to be feared and avoided. And yet, at the same time, we are often fascinated by anomalous beings. They appear as haunting interpellations, challenges to our way of making sense of the world and reminders of its recalcitrant resistance to our own ordering of it. It is as if the world *demands* our attention. An entire film genre seems to explore this characteristic 'inability to look away' from the anomalous: visceral horror or 'body horror'. Take, for instance, David Cronenberg's

[38] Animacy is not just any old characteristic but a *metaphysically significant* one.

The Fly, where a scientific experiment goes awry and gives rise to a creature that is a hybrid of Jeff Goldblum and a house fly.[39] Throughout the film, the transition unfolds. In the last scenes, the gruesome hybrid is further crossed with a machine, compounding the anomaly. The result is an oozing, crawling, giant fly-like creature fused with large chunks of metal. The movie is often characterized as straightforwardly nauseating (Dorland) and yet it quickly achieved cult status. The fly hybrid *both* elicits repulsion but also an enduring fascination.

Anomaly cannot be noticed and subsequently ignored. It threatens our shared representational order in a persistent and haunting way. Therefore, it always demands a response. In Mary Douglas' famous analysis of the notion of anomaly, she sketches possible societal responses.

> *Any given system of classification must give rise to anomalies, and any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions. It cannot ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces, except at the risk of forfeiting confidence. (Douglas 39) (…) There are several ways of treating anomalies. Negatively, we can ignore, just not perceive them, or perceiving them we can condemn. Positively we can deliberately confront the anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place (38).*

No single strategy or set of strategies is always effective or even always available to deal with anomaly. So, we should expect a plurality of solutions to be used, even within one social community. Negative measures are sometimes taken towards anomalies. We can eliminate them via disambiguation: by denying their contradictoriness or their unfamiliar elements. The anomalous being then stops being anomalous. But this often requires discounting a lot of information. For instance, it is hard to think that Pastrana is *really* a bear after seeing her dance. But it is equally hard to think there is nothing resembling non-human animals about her.

[39] Thank you to Johann Hariman for this example.

Secondly, we might physically eliminate the anomaly.[40] But again, for any system of classification, anomaly is a *recalcitrant* problem. Physical elimination is a temporary fix at best, and sometimes a particularly costly one. This leads us to the positive alternatives. The first one is to revise our categories so the anomalous becomes classifiable. However, the shared and public nature of our social metaphysical categories means that "they cannot so easily be subject to revision" (Douglas 39; Garland-Thomson 1997 34). No single individual can unilaterally rethink them. This leaves us with another positive response to anomaly*: less-than-full social standing*.

Less-than-full social standing is a social strategy for dealing with representationally anomalous subjects.[41] It is a positive one, in Douglas' typology, since it is a way of lightly revising our "pattern of reality" to accommodate anomaly as such (Douglas 38). Less-than-full social standing is constituted by forms of treatment that make a marked off place for a subject gone wrong (relative to the socially metaphysical order). The result is an existence in partial social isolation. This is what all forms of less-than-full social standing have in common: they are constituted by patterns of institutional and systematic interpersonal treatment that are socially isolating, though they never quite fully cut off anomalous subjects from social relations. Because these forms of treatment are ways to manage anomaly, they are bound up with ambivalence. The patterns that constitute less-than-full social standing are therefore shaped by an oscillation between aversion and attraction.

[40] Douglas offers the example of the Nuer of the Nile Valley: "the Nuer treat monstrous births as baby hippopotamuses, accidentally born to humans and, with this labelling, the appropriate action is clear. They gently lay them in the river where they belong." (Douglas 39). The example seems to combine disambiguation and elimination strategies.

[41] Note, however, that less-than-full social standing is not *just* a strategy to deal with anomaly. Children are not anomalous but have less-than-full social standing. Here there is a developmental character to the restriction in social relations.

7 Partial Social Isolation

Let us return, one last time to the three initial vignettes. They are all instances of anomalous subjects being accommodated via some kind of socially isolating treatment. These individuals are constructed by that treatment as entities with less-than-full social standing. How are the individuals in the three vignettes anomalies? In the case of the Byzantine emperors, there is categorical contradictoriness because two elements that delimit each other – the divine and the mortal – are brought together in one individual. Pastrana's case involves several unresolved forms of ambiguity[42] that compound and exacerbate each other. And the Mursi come to be anomalous in the eyes of the tourists because of their broadly familiar features, radically re-configured and altered by an unforeseen intruding element. This perception of distortion parallels the case of wax figures (Smith 2011 89, 138). I want to turn now to the way in which the treatment described in these stories is partially socially isolating. It both incorporates these anomalous elements into the social order and isolates them from it, at the same time.

In all three cases the representationally anomalous figures are accommodated by being staged, by being spectacularized and displayed for public view. This is not the only way in which an entity could be partially socially isolated, but it is the form that this takes in the three vignettes. *Spectacularized staging* works by playing on our ambivalence towards anomaly: we are disturbed by what is anomalous, and yet we cannot help but look at it. There is a need to keep looking, to register, to acquire mementos. At the same time, horror, disgust and fear guarantee that the audience will be interested in looking, but not in approaching. Indeed, interest only thrives insofar as the horrifying, disgusting or the dangerous cannot itself get too close.

[42] Regarding ambiguity and anomaly, Mary Douglas interestingly claims that, even though they are not the same thing strictly speaking, "there is very little advantage in distinguishing between these two terms in their practical application. Treacle is neither liquid nor solid; it could be said to give an ambiguous sense-impression. We can also say that treacle is anomalous in the classification of liquids and solids (…)" (Douglas 37).

Staging caters to this. It up-plays the interesting anomaly, while reassuring the audience that it cannot approach them – through physical containment, enfeeblement or some other distance-producing techniques. In this way, staging also socially isolates anomalous individuals. It sets up their relations with the community as unidirectional. One concrete materialization of this is what Garland-Thomson calls "baroque staring": a "gaping-mouthed", wonderstruck, indecorous gaze at a staree "singled out as alien" (Garland-Thomson 2009 50-51). This is socially scripted as a one-way activity in spite of its interpersonal nature, and it is something we think of as reprehensible in everyday settings (3). Spectacularized staging elicits and authorizes the baroque stare. It neutralizes our inhibitions by signaling the 'staree' as an entity not fully fit for social relations. This kind of staring stops being inappropriate because its object is placed outside of everyday sociality.

Consider how ambivalence is important in the three examples. The tourists photographing the Mursi seem to derive "an exploitative pleasure [from the photography], one that combines fascination with repulsion" (Turton 2004 7). A similar logic characterizes the enduring appeal of 'freak shows', both in their 19th century circus form and in their contemporary format in reality TV (Marechal; Bogdan 2012 7-11). Pastrana is both someone everyone wants to look at, but also "the ugliest woman in the world" (Henderson 58). Even the Byzantines were ambivalent in their awe of the emperor, always both "religiously proud of their monarchs, taking an active part in their exaltation", but "ready to believe the worst about them" (Kaldellis 2015 183). Staging, when successful, plays on this ambivalence by introducing a distance between the anomalous individual and the audience. Cameras frame a possibly interpersonal interaction as a one-way activity between 'the photographing' and 'the photographed'. Jon Abbink, writing about the "exoticist discourse" of lip-plate photography claims that it "generates interest in other ways of life but also feelings of distance" (Abbink

2009 917).[43] In the case of Pastrana, there were literally didactic pamphlets accompanying her show that directed the staring relationship into a one-way mode (Garland-Thomson 1999 89). Pastrana was always "beside people, instead of with them", when "shown as a freak" (quoted in Lovejoy). In the case of the emperor, distance was often quite literal. When he was sighted in staged contraptions, or shrouded in rituals and dazzling props, he was literally placed *beside – or above –* his subjects. Ritual isolation made his presence safe enough for awe.

When this distance breaks down, so does the dominance of interest over aversion. Disgust, horror and fear run wild when the staging practice collapses. When the Mursi are no longer sullen and passive, when they approach the cars and ask to be paid, they are a source of panic (Régi 43). In the case of Pastrana, her femininity and her loving sadness are up-played to neutralize any dangerous threat that her "primitive" appearance may elicit (Garland-Thomson 1999 93). Consider the famous Sarah Baartman, who was displayed in a cage as the "Hottentot Venus". Were Pastrana not a lady-like "sensitive monster", she too may have been staged in a cage, physically restrained so that the audience knew she could not approach them (Garland-Thomson 1997 72). Her enfeebling femininity is a substitute for this physical restraint. Finally, in the case of the emperor, when his religious shroud of ritual was not salient, when he seemed vulnerable or incompetent as an earthly ruler, then the Byzantines seemed more than ready to think of him as repulsive and threatening (Kaldellis 2015 183). This failure of isolation often triggered the turn to another popular response: elimination, through excessive and almost sadistic means. The assassinations of Byzantine emperors, like the killing of witches in other societies, were the confrontation of something metaphysically disturbing and out of control.

[43] Abbink is here talking primarily, though not exclusively, about the Suri – the neighbors of the Mursi who also wear lip-plates (Abbink 2009 917).

These murders were not just physical acts of killing but aggressive reinstatements of the social order against a defiling power (Patterson 329).

There is one important difference in the case of the emperor though. Instead of horror and fascination, the oscillation in this instance is perhaps better described as being between divinity and danger. What makes the people not willing to approach the emperor is not primarily disgust or horror, but fear. Similarly, what fascinates his subjects is his "awesome semidivinity" (Patterson 328). But this is just another facet of the ambivalence that anomaly elicits. What is metaphysically threatening endangers and defiles our social ordering of the world but, at the same time, it holds a creative potentiality that is very much divine. Because it threatens to overthrow our categories and limits, the anomalous is "unlimited, no pattern has been realized in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite" (Douglas 94). This dangerous and divine potentiality is in fact arguably the very *source* of the power and authority of Byzantine emperors (Patterson 238). The staging of the emperor emphasizes this by signaling him as potent, dangerous and not to be trifled it.[44] Ritual isolation and physical containment become then key in managing this divine/dangerous figure within the social order.[45]

There are then at least two versions of ambivalence towards anomalous subjects: horror/fascination and danger/divinity.[46] Whether an anomalous subject is integrated into the community primarily under one or the other matters for what status positions they can access. In the case of Pastrana and the Mursi, their placement at the edge of sociality is also a

[44] For example, dropping a plate in a meal with the emperor was punished with decapitation and everyone witnessing the event had to have their eyes removed (Guerdan 22).
[45] For a discussion of the relation between social isolation and holiness more broadly see Douglas 8. For related points on holiness and fascination see Kristeva 238, 242 and Patterson 323.
[46] These are not mutually exclusive. The fact that the emperors were treated as dangerous and powerful, but also as vulgar, lecherous and dirty speaks to this. When the religious shroud of ritual was not salient, Byzantine attitudes seem to slide into a pattern of horror and fascination, believing the most repulsive things about the imperial family (Kaldellis 2015 183). Likewise, the Mursi are sometimes cast as repugnant, but also as powerful 'primitives', threatening and proud (Régi 43).

disempowering move. The more one is thought of as a tourist or a circus attraction, the more expendable one is. Their diminished social standing results in a lowering of their social status. But not in the case of the emperor. His anomalous character is, arguably, what gives him his position as the figure at the apex of the empire. Vulnerability to public ridicule and quickly shifting political allegiances were the price to pay for a semi-divine conception of the emperor that consolidated his place in the social hierarchy, particularly during times of political instability and crisis in legitimacy (Kaldellis 2015 176).

8 Fundamental Modes of Social Identification

Recall the questions that we set out to answer about these three examples. (1) *What* makes these people targets for *uncommon* patterns of treatment and (2) *why* do others engage in these *peculiar* patterns of treatment towards them? Initially, I entertained a family of hypotheses that would characterize what sets these people apart as a denial of moral status. But this lumped the three examples with many other instances of wrongful treatment that are not comparably peculiar. I also considered the idea that, instead, these were cases of lowered social status. But that also failed to track the distinctiveness of these cases, while ignoring the details of examples like the Byzantine emperor. The characterization of the three vignettes as instances of less-than-full social standing yields a more explanatory picture.

What sets these individuals apart in the eyes of their audiences is their representationally anomalous character. They introduce very significant strains in the background process of social standing recognition that supports social relations. These strains explain the abnormal character of many of these interactions and the breakdown of social standing recognition that they constitute. Moreover, we can understand why people engage in the peculiar treatment that they do by paying attention to the metaphysically threatening character of anomaly. These

vignettes describe ways to manage the threat these individuals represent by constituting them as partial social isolates, as entities with less-than-full social standing. I also argued that we can think of these strategies for social isolation as forms of spectacularized staging. Less-than-full social standing is then one important societal response to anomalous figures, a way to partially reabsorb them into the social order as marked off elements. Although the three cases seem disparate, the notion of social standing shows that they share the same structure.

Another particularly interesting application of the social standing framework is in explaining the *role* played by certain shared identities in our social life. Some aspects of social identity do not simply impact our status within the community. They are also pre-conditions for full social standing: conditioning factors affecting who can show up in the social fabric as a full-fledged social subject. I will call these modes of social identification *fundamental*. In the next chapters, I will elaborate on this conception of fundamentality and argue that both being non-disabled in a certain sense and being gendered are fundamental in our context. I will argue that thinking of gender in this way explanatorily unifies a set of important phenomena feminist scholars have been concerned with.

Chapter III Social Standing and Disability

> *This is, after all, not my autobiography, but the history of the impact of a quite remarkable illness upon my status as a member of society, for it has visited upon me a disease of social relations no less real than the paralysis of the body. (Murphy 4)*

In 1974, Robert F. Murphy, professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, was diagnosed with a benign, slow growing tumor in his spinal cord. As the tumor grew, he began to lose control of his lower extremities and eventually became quadriplegic and a full-time wheel chair user. In spite of the recurrent long hospitalizations and increasing mobility issues, Murphy continued to publish and teach. In his 1987 book, *The Body Silent*, he analyzed his experience with disability as an "extended anthropological field trip" (ix). One of the main claims in Murphy's work is that there is something *special* about the marginalization incurred by people with disabilities in our society. What people like Murphy experience is not "a subtype of deviancy" but something more unique: a "disease of social relations" (130, 4).[47]

What does this mean? There at least three elements that Murphy points to in his characterization of this condition. Firstly, there is a widespread phenomenon of tension, awkwardness and uneasiness that afflicts "social relations between the disabled and the able-bodied" (86). Not all forms of social devaluation manifest in this way. And it is in fact quite surprising just how prevalent this discomfort is, even among the most well-intentioned interlocutors. Secondly, there is a "deep and uneasy ambivalence in relations between the able-

[47] Murphy is concerned with disability as primarily an axis of social difference, not an individual condition or illness. This understanding of disability as a "pre-eminently social state" (Murphy 195) is compatible with a range of more specific theoretical views on disability.

bodied and the disabled", a simultaneous attitude of attraction and repulsion (118). Phenomena like staring are prime examples of this push-pull dynamic in encounters with disability. Thirdly, Murphy points to an important social isolation that comes along with his paralysis. He calls it "a liminal state – literally, at the threshold – a kind of social limbo in which he is left standing outside the formal social system" (131). What Murphy experiences is not just a fall down the social ladder. It is the very fabric of his social life that starts deteriorating.

In this chapter, I will defend Murphy's characterization of disability as *special*, and I will elaborate on central strands of argument in *The Body Silent*. In doing so, I will not be talking about all forms of disability. I will restrict my argument to what I will call radical bodily difference disability, RBD disability for short. I will argue that *being RBD 'able-bodied' (i.e. not having an RBD disability) is a precondition for full social standing*. It is therefore a *fundamental* mode of social identification in our society.

Before I proceed, let me recapitulate some crucial claims of the previous chapter. Human beings are not just immediately part of their social world. To be a full-fledged social subject, to have *full social standing*, one must be widely recognized as able to stand in most social relations in the community. How does this happen? I argued that this recognition – *social standing recognition* – consists in patterns of distinctively social treatment that enmesh us in the relations and practices of the community. Thus, I am a social subject because I am treated as such. My parents treat me as a child, my colleagues as a fellow graduate student, and the coffee shop barista as a customer. And all of these are ways in which I am recognized as the right kind of entity to stand in social relations – i.e. as a social subject, someone with full social standing. This recognition is what allows me to move through the world with a sense of fluidity and background normalcy. But these forms of treatment are always already *guided and rendered intelligible by* representations we share, as a society, about how social interlocutors

can look, sound and move. These representations, taken all together, form what I have called our *social self-image*: the categories and ranges of possible perceptible variation that we (collectively) think social subjects can exhibit.

Our social self-image gives us representational schemas through which we can 'read' others as social subjects and seamlessly proceed to treat them accordingly. This is why we expect social interlocutors to be taller or shorter, paler or darker, but not more or less translucent – that is not an axis of possible variation in our social self-image. As I described in the previous chapter, social self-images are culturally variable, but every society has one. The Mursi social self-image involves a lip-plate axis of variation but the Dutch social self-image does not. *Fundamental* modes of social identification are *preconditions* for full social standing. They operate then at this representational level, as mediating factors involved in the process of social standing recognition. They condition, not just our position in social hierarchies of power and prestige, but our very ability to navigate the world as ordinary social interlocutors.

In this chapter, I will show that being RBD 'able-bodied' is fundamental and that the special marginalization associated with this kind of disabilities can be helpfully understood as a condition of diminished social standing. I take myself to have two central aims. Firstly, I will be elaborating on and systematically arguing for an understanding of certain forms of disability often articulated by disability studies scholars such as Robert F. Murphy, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Tobin Siebers and Tom Shakespeare. In doing so, I will be making claims primarily about disability in contemporary North America. Secondly, I will apply the conceptual apparatus of social standing to the explanation of our contemporary social context, thereby laying the groundwork for my claim that being gendered is also fundamental, in the next chapter.

Firstly, I will start by defining more narrowly the subject of my argument: *radical bodily difference disability* or *RBD disability*, a subset of forms of disability that are perceptible and highly obtrusive in social interaction. In the second section, I will describe in more detail the three elements that Murphy points to in characterizing disability as special: social anxiety, ambivalence and social isolation. I will then propose a way of thinking of RBD disability as a way of being representationally *anomalous* in our social context. This means that being RBD 'able-bodied' is therefore a precondition for full social standing. In section 4, I will use this hypothesis to explain social anxiety phenomena, ambivalent affective attitudes and social isolation. I will then consider and reject an alternative view, articulated by Martha Nussbaum, that explains the marginalization of people with disabilities in terms of a primordial and universal sense of shame at human vulnerability. Finally, I will consider the implications of this social theoretical framework for political strategy. I will argue that they favor a form of 'normalization' of people with RBD disabilities that starts, not with their bodies or with social representations, but with their integration into social relations and practices.

1 'Radical Bodily Difference' Disability

Disability is a notoriously vexed and controversial category. What we currently call 'disability' is a vague, contested and highly heterogeneous set of ways of being.

> *The things we group together under the label 'disability' are strikingly heterogeneous. Spinal chord injuries are very different from deafness. Deafness is very different from MS. MS is very different from achondroplasia. And so on. (…) Does it make any sense to ask philosophical questions about disability per se, rather than about individual disabilities? (Barnes 22)*

Elizabeth Barnes is here restricting herself to physical disability. The problem is exacerbated when we include "mental illness and retardation, chronic and acute illnesses, fatal and progressive diseases, temporary and permanent injuries, and a wide range of bodily

characteristics considered disfiguring, such as scars, birthmarks, unusual proportion, or obesity" (Garland-Thomson 1997 13). Given this, does it make sense to ask why *disability* works a special mode of social identification? I believe it does not. My argument in this chapter will be limited to a subset of forms of disability which I will call *radical bodily difference disability* or *RBD disability*, for short. I am here borrowing the term "radical bodily difference" from Murphy who uses it, in passing, to characterize the kind of cases he is interested in (Murphy 122). I take it to quite aptly capture his object of primary interest and, therefore, the spirit of his claim about 'specialness'.

What is an RBD disability? It is helpful to start with the examples that Murphy presents in *The Body Silent*. There is, firstly, his own condition of progressive paralysis. There are other examples of impaired mobility, the use of crutches, the absence of limbs or parts of one's skull. These bodily differences are all *perceptible*. They are also highly "*obtrusive"* in social interaction. I am borrowing this last term from Goffman who claims that, for any perceptible form of disability, obtrusiveness tracks

> *the separate question [from perceptibility] as to how much it interferes with the flow of interaction. For example, at a business meeting a participant in a wheelchair is certainly seen to be in a wheelchair, but around the conference table his failing can become* ***relatively easy to disattend.*** *(Goffman 49, my emphasis)*[48]

We could think of other similar cases where, for instance, the relevant bodily difference is always concealed by clothing. Obtrusiveness is also contextually sensitive in a more social way. Close friends and family are likely to experience bodily difference as perceptible and yet unobtrusive.[49] Regular interaction, in general, seems to diminish obtrusiveness. We should

[48] Although Goffman is making a larger point about stigma, I am here only using 'obtrusive' for the purposes of talking about disability. I take his choice of example to be suggestive of this as an apt use. I also do not mean to endorse Goffman's language of "failings", which I take to refer more neutrally to stigmatized modes of bodily difference.

[49] For extensive discussion of this see Bogdan and Taylor.

expect that when forms of bodily difference like amputations are commonly seen in public, they may be less obtrusive. But when conditions like Down Syndrome become extremely rare, their obtrusiveness may increase.[50] I will return to this point about familiarity and regular contact in relation to social change, in the last section. For now, I want to stress that the designation of RBD disability captures forms of disability that interfere with the *appearance* of bodies and our *responses* to them.

Not all RBD disabilities are physical, even if most are. Cognitive disabilities that perceptibly affect locomotion, for instance, are very plausibly included in the category. Additionally, RBD disability certainly includes what Garland-Thomson calls "bodily characteristics considered disfiguring": scarring, dwarfism and restricted growth conditions, even when those are not physically impairing (Garland-Thomson 1997 13).[51] Not all physical disabilities are RBD disabilities. A slight limp may be nearly imperceptible. Many mental illnesses, cognitive disabilities, hearing impairments, chronic illnesses and progressive conditions are not RBD disabilities. This is not to deny that they have very important and distinct social effects, but they are not perceptible and obtrusive in the same way. Finally, RBD disability, as a subset of 'disability' may be hopelessly gerrymandered. For instance, it is unclear why bodily differences that are unusual but are associated to athletic prowess do not fall in the category. For the purposes of my argument, I am largely bracketing these discussions about what constitutes a disability. Below, I will take Murphy and others to be referring primarily to RBD disabilities in their comments and arguments. It is in relation to this category that their claims seem most compelling and fruitful.

[50] This may well be the case in parts of the world like Iceland, where the number of children with Down Syndrome has dramatically decreased as a consequence of new prenatal testing practices (Quinone and Lajka).

[51] You may think of these as controversial cases, on various conceptions of disability, but they are highly perceptible and obtrusive in ways that matter for the RBD label.

2 ‘A Disease of Social Relations’: RBD Disability as Special

2.1 Social Anxiety

Murphy claims that there is something special about the way in which RBD disability functions. It triggers not just social devaluation, but also a “disease of social relations”. In this section, I will focus on three concrete aspects Murphy points to that fill out this general picture.

Firstly, there is a kind of *social anxiety* that distorts the “social relations between the disabled and the able-bodied” and makes them characteristically “tense, awkward, and problematic” (Murphy 86). Disability makes people uneasy, uncomfortable or even panicked, for no apparent good reason. Murphy recounts the case of a young friend who used crutches to move as a result of childhood polio.

> *He boarded an airplane, settled in a seat, and gave his crutches to the flight attendant. A woman sat down beside him, and the two started a friendly conversation that lasted until they landed. When the planed reached the terminal, the attendant returned with his crutches. Seeing them, the woman became flustered and embarrassed, muttered a quick goodbye, and debarked hastily. (123)*

Murphy speculates that the woman would have behaved differently if she had seen the crutches right away and that she probably was left wondering if she had said something wrong (123). But what is happening in this story is not simply a social misstep from which the woman thought she could recover. The evidence of disability undermined the very possibility of conversation. Fluid and even amicable social interactions are strained by RBD disability to the point of disruption.

This tension, nervousness and awkwardness in social relations has been noted by several other authors. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky call it an “existential anxiety” and talk of disability as stirring “dis-ease in many individuals who see themselves as *normal”* (Longmore and Umansky 6). Erving Goffman claims “mixed social interactions” have the potential to

become "tense, uncertain, and ambiguous for all participants, especially the stigmatized one" (Goffman 41).[52] Garland-Thomson states that "social scientists agree that disability is a visual cue for lower expectations and discomfort for those who identify as nondisabled" (Garland-Thomson 2009 38). This social scientific consensus[53] corroborates what Murphy claims "every handicapped person knows": that they face a widespread social difficulty. Over-thinking, inapt responses, and uneasiness on the part of many non-disabled persons make social relations systematically fraught for those with RBD disabilities (Murphy 86).

Social anxiety encompasses a range of phenomena, from slight awkwardness, to the impetus to flee. Their severity depends on the person, the situation, and the RBD disability. A cane and a peculiar gait may introduce only slight awkwardness, whereas severe facial burns may generate very serious discomfort.[54] Murphy describes an acute case, when a young woman visiting the hospital entered his room "with a look of total consternation on her face. She exclaimed she had just seen an awful sight, a girl missing half her skull." When asked "why the sight bothered her so much", the young woman could not reply (86). Social anxiety is indeed hard to articulate and is often an inchoate experience (122). It is important to note that, although this scene illustrates an extreme degree of social anxiety, not every reaction needs to be so heavily marked.

There is certainly an asymmetry in the way social anxiety is experienced. One could even object to characterizing it a difficulty affecting *social interactions* as a whole. One might think it is only the non-disabled party that feels anxiety regarding RBD disability, after all. But

[52] By "mixed social relations" Goffman means those between "normals" and stigmatized people. Again, his analysis goes beyond disability, but RBD disabilities are certainly among his most central examples.
[53] For references see Longmore and Umansky 24 fn 7.
[54] For an example of how this discomfort may be harnessed for comedic purposes, see the case of stand-up comedian Bobby Henline. Henline suffered severe burns during the war in Iraq and now calls himself the 'well-done comedian' (van Agtmael).

this is not quite right. Firstly, even people with RBD disabilities sometimes experience some of these affective reactions. For instance, artist and activist Sunaura Taylor, who is herself a wheelchair user, describes attending her first protest for disability rights, where there were at least two hundred protesters: “and my God, were they disabled! Drooling, limping, wheeling, grunting – my initial desire was to flee and scream for rescue. Thankfully, I didn’t” (Taylor 2017 9-10). Secondly, even if the asymmetry exists, it is very much *the interaction* that is affected, and the person with disabilities with it. When you notice someone being uneasy about interacting with you, you yourself become uneasy as well, and so on. This is what Goffman calls “the infinite regress of mutual consideration” (Goffman 18). Concurrently, Murphy considers that an RBD disability tends to take “center stage” and that it “distorts sociality” through a dynamic akin to a hall of mirrors (Murphy 122). Even if, initially, it is only the non-disabled participant that is uncomfortable, it is the whole interaction that is eventually affected.

2.2 Ambivalence

The second element Murphy points to is the “*deep and uneasy ambivalence*” that marks social relations between people with RBD disabilities and the non-disabled (118). He claims there is “a different scale of values and emotional responses” at work in the marginalization of people with RBD disabilities, distinct from those involved, for instance, in anti-Black racism or anti-Semitism (130). There are systematic “contradictory reactions”: kindness and rejection, or “peculiar and particular fascination” and “fear and loathing”. These attitudes turn “the treatment of the disabled [into] the arena of enormous conflicts of values” (Murphy 130; Shakespeare 1994 296). The case of the girl missing half her skull echoes this. The woman who saw her was both horrified and fixated on the girl’s appearance. In this way, ambivalence feeds into social anxiety: the simultaneous impetus to keep looking and to look away clash and add to the tension of the encounter.

Indeed, one of the clearest examples of this oscillation between attraction and repulsion is the prevalence of staring. Lots of people get stared at – all of us do, at some point. But people with RBD disabilities are no doubt much more frequent 'starees' (Garland-Thomson 2009 20). Most people have the urge to stare at those with RBD disabilities and yet most avoid doing so (5). Murphy points out that children are often "quite understandably curious about disabled people and often stare at them, only to have their parents yank their arms and say, 'Don't look'" (Murphy 130). This commonplace script ends up encapsulating much of the standard adult reaction towards RBD disability. Curiosity drives the impetus to look, but there is an instilled "sense of horror" that yanks our arm time after time (130).

First-person accounts emphasize how staring both fixates on the staree and decenters them, at the same time. In her memoir *Autobiography of a Face,* Lucy Grealy recounts how, at age 9, she lost her jawbone in the treatment of a rare and nearly fatal form of cancer. She underwent numerous reconstructive surgeries aimed at 'normalizing' her appearance. Because the surgeries were unsuccessful, her memoir ends up foregrounding the incessant staring by strangers at Grealy's face (Grealy 141, 146).[55] She self-describes as simultaneously a "Dickensian ghost" and "a face you remembered" (11, 203). Similarly, disabled artist Sunaura Taylor describes "people's sidelong looks or attempts not to stare that rendered me both hypervisible and invisible simultaneously" (Taylor 2017 5). There is a deep ambivalence at the heart of staring: it both makes someone "invisible" and a "ghost", but also hyper-visible and memorable. In that way, it embodies that very contradiction in the treatment of people with RBD disabilities that Murphy points to.

[55] Thank you to Sarah Buss for this example.

2.3 Social Isolation

Thirdly, in characterizing what is peculiar about the marginalization of people with RBD disabilities, Murphy points to a great sense of social isolation. Reflecting on the increasing withdrawal from the social world that people like him experience, he attributes some of it to the "deep physical tiredness that accompanies most debility", "the formidable physical obstacles posed by the outside world" and the psychological difficulties of adapting to his new situation (Murphy 108-109, 89). But he highlights that it is society that "helps to wall him off" (109). His professional and personal circle shrinks, social gatherings that were mundane become harder to navigate and friends begin drop out of sight (91, 124-125). There are false rumours that Murphy is at death's door circulating frequently in his local community and he is talked about almost in the past tense (125). Murphy finds himself increasingly in an "island of social relations" (21). He calls this "a liminal state – literally, at the threshold – a kind of social limbo in which he is left standing outside the formal social system" (131).[56] In other words, people with RBD disabilities are 'in between' the outside and inside of society. They have some connections but are also significantly cut off from regular spheres of social relations.

Another way to characterize this life "in the penumbra of society" is by saying that, for people like Murphy, disability becomes definitive of social existence, in a way that excludes all other things (95). RBD disability seems to take over and stifle other roles and identities. In Murphy's case, it takes over his professional life, his life as a local political figure and as a neighbour.

> *One cannot, however, shelve a disability or hide it from the world. A serious disability inundates all other claims to social standing, relegating to secondary*

[56] This notion of 'liminality' is closely connected to anthropological work on initiation rituals. These typically involve three stages: "isolation and instruction of the initiate, ritual emergence, and reincorporation into society in the new role. It is during the transitional phase from isolation to emergence that the person is said to be in a liminal state – literally, at the threshold – a kind of social limbo in which he is left standing outside the formal social system" (Murphy 130).

> *status all the attainments of life, all other social roles, even sexuality. It is not a role; it is an identity, a dominant characteristic to which all social roles must be adjusted. (106)*

What I take Murphy to be suggesting here is that RBD disability is *different* from some other social modes of identification. It does not just locate one differently in the social fabric. It constructs the person in question as a particularly isolated kind of entity. It does this by 'dominating' other social identities and imposing an isolating effect related to the difficulties in interaction that social anxiety and ambivalence track. Together, these elements plunge people with RBD disabilities into a "a state of social suspension" (131).

3 RBD Disability as an Anomaly

> *[The permanently disabled] are **anomalies**, like deeply spastic people or the so-called Elephant Man, who had the dubious honor of being the most facially deformed person of his time. (132, my emphasis)*

Murphy suggests that we should think of RBD disability as an anomaly. The term is used here with explicit reference to Mary Douglas, whose work I briefly discussed in the previous chapter. Anomalous entities, in this Douglasian sense, are those that do not quite fit into our shared schemas for understanding the world. They are ambiguous in ways that transgress important categories in our social metaphysical worldview. Murphy claims, along these lines, that people with RBD disabilities are "ambiguous people" (132). And he is not the only one. Tom Shakespeare, writing on Mary Douglas, claims that "disability can be usefully regarded as anomalous, as ambiguous" (Shakespeare 1994 295). Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson talks of disability as an "illegitimate fusion", an interruption of ordinariness, and a disordering of our basic expectations (Garland-Thomson 1997 24, 114).[57] In this section, I want to expand

[57] It is plausible to read David Livingstone Smith's brief remarks on the dehumanization of people with disabilities as saying something similar. He appeals to ambiguity in particular when he says that "the appearance of the disabled or disfigured person might cognitively compete with an awareness of her humanity" (Smith 2016 440).

on these brief remarks and present a conception of RBD disability as an anomaly, relative to our social self-image. I will then use this framework to explain social anxiety, ambivalence and social isolation.

Recall that anomaly is not just a failure to conform to an ideal, something confusing or a statistical rarity. To say that something is anomalous means that it has *gone wrong* relative to our shared picture of the world – the supposedly 'natural' order of things we take for granted as a community. Because anomalies are transgressive with respect to the variation encompassed by our social self-image, they are *metaphysically threatening*. They pose a threat to the metaphysical presumptions we use to understand and navigate the world together (Smith 2016 430). Anomalous subjects are therefore troubling. They undermine confidence in the very stability, recognizability and predictability of our shared reality. What I am proposing here is that RBD disability is a way, or a cluster of ways, of being representationally anomalous, of transgressing social metaphysical categories. To be more precise, it is a way of transgressing categories in our *social self-image*, which is itself a key part of our shared metaphysical picture of the world.

This understanding of RBD disability is very much in keeping with Murphy's characterization of it as a "departure from the human standard" (Murphy 122, 132). Murphy does not mean to say that there *is* a human standard, *simpliciter*, as a natural or universal matter of fact. What he is referring to here is our representation of social subjectivity and its boundaries: our social self-image, the way we think of what regular, ordinary humans are like. And, as I have mentioned, social self-images vary from society to society. RBD disability is always more or less anomalous in proportion to its degree of departure from this community-specific 'human standard'. "Persons with facial disfigurement or marked bodily distortion" are taken to be further away from our social self-image, whereas wheelchair users represent less of

a departure (132). But they all are ambiguous, in the sense that they are both like and radically unlike what we expect.

What exactly are the representations in our social self-image that RBD disability transgresses? And how does RBD disability transgress them? I want to highlight two examples.[58] The first is our social representation of *humanity*, as distinct from *animality*. We take prospective social subjects to be humans, not just in an abstract sense, but in having a recognizable 'human-like' appearance. They must be 'readable' though the perceptual schemas our social self-image furnishes us with. These schemas encode our socio-cultural view of human appearance and its limits. Therefore, in this sense, one can be regarded as more or less human, as more or less legible through these schemas, even while being undeniably a biological human being. Recall the case of Julia Pastrana. One of the ways in which she was rendered anomalous was precisely through the theatrical highlighting of her ambiguity along these lines. The show announced her as a 'bear-woman' or 'ape-woman' precisely because she was taken to challenge the parameters of humanity and animality. Many forms of RBD disability are representational anomalies because they 'fuse' the representationally human with elements of animal motion, shape or bodily comportment. This makes people seem "ambiguous because they hover between humanity and animality" (Shakespeare 1994 295). Sunaura Taylor's visual art is eloquent in this respect. In a series of self-portraits, Taylor, who was often told she walks "like a monkey", paints her own body next to that of manatees and bison (Taylor 2017 92, see appendix fig. 1). The paintings gently highlight similarities in the shape of her human body and

[58] Garland-Thomson points to some other examples of transgressed representational parameters when she says that "the seen body is our primary mode of perceiving and understanding scale, symmetry, balance, which are the coordinates of ordinariness" (Garland-Thomson 2009 45).

of the other non-human bodies, pointing in a very concrete way to this representational ambiguity.

Secondly, our social self-image represents social subjects as *whole*. They could be separated from their clothes, even their hair, but not from their limbs or skulls. That would be a violation of the wholeness we take for granted. In this way, having a conversation with a head in a vat is a thing of disturbing science fiction, not of ordinary life. And yet, in reality, people are born without limbs, lose parts of their skulls and have amputated jaws. People with RBD disabilities like these "question our basic assumptions and parameters related to 'human wholeness'" (Garland-Thomson 1997 59, 115). In so doing, they become anomalous as well.[59] Conjoined twins that share body parts are a striking example of an "illegitimate fusion" that seems to transgress our sense of the 'natural' wholeness and even distinctiveness of bodies (Garland-Thomson 1997 45). There are of course degrees of transgression. Arguably, missing a leg is less disturbing than missing part of one's skull, or sharing a torso with someone. But, in all these cases, there is a transgression that renders the anomalous subject "incomplete, unbounded, compromised, (…) property badly managed, a fortress inadequately defended, a self helplessly violated" (Garland-Thomson 1997 45).

The notion of a social self-image allows us then to articulate the idea of RBD disability as anomalous in more detail. RBD disabilities are forms of bodily difference that transgress our social self-image, our community-specific "human standard". They are therefore ways of being ambiguous qua potential social subjects. I have given two examples of particular representational lines along which RBD disabilities can be anomalous: humanity/animality and

[59] Forms of perceptible paralysis are also plausibly linked to "dissolution" and to "an inverse definition of wholeness" (Murphy 223, 229). Relatedly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson considers that "the disabled person becomes grotesque either in the sense of a gargoyle, breaching boundaries, or in the sense of a eunuch, one who is incomplete, not whole." (Garland-Thomson 1997 114-115)

wholeness. It is worth noting that conceiving of RBD disability in this way makes it continuous with a whole host of other examples, such as the ones discussed in the previous chapter: the Mursi women who wear lip-plates, Julia Pastrana and the Byzantine emperors. RBD disability is therefore a special cluster of cases within the broader category of representational anomaly.

4 Explaining a "Disease of Social Relations"

With this view in hand, we can proceed to explain the specialness of disability, according to Murphy. RBD disability is special because it is a matter of social standing. It impacts not just one's location in the social hierarchy, but the very possibility of entering into fluid, meaningful relations with others. People with RBD disabilities experience a loss of social standing in virtue of being hard to read through our social self-image (i.e. being representationally anomalous). This is the "disease of social relations" that Murphy describes.

4.1 Social Anxiety

Let us take the three elements from section 2 – social anxiety, ambivalence and social isolation – in turn. Phenomena grouped under *social anxiety* are symptomatic of the strain that RBD disability places on social standing recognition processes, in virtue of its representationally anomalous character. Recall that social standing recognition is constituted by forms of social treatment that enmesh us in social relations. If I treat someone as an ordinary social interlocutor, following shared norms and meanings, I am thereby recognizing them as one. But these forms of treatment are also mediated by the representations of our social self-image. In other words, the legibility of someone's appearance as a social subject, both guides and makes intelligible our treatment of them as such. In most situations, this mediation goes smoothly. We are unaware of this 'reading' of others when it remains in the background of our interaction. But when there are significant problems of legibility, when we encounter an anomaly, the process is thrown off

script and brought to the fore. Social standing recognition is then strained and even a mundane interaction becomes uncomfortable, difficult and awkward.

This disruption can be so extreme that interlocutors would rather end the interaction abruptly. When the interaction does go on, this background tension tends to distort it. When social standing recognition is strained, it is an entire host of smaller processes of information collection that is strained as well. Consider the following. When we interact with someone, we always look for perceptible information to form an understanding of who they are. We try to piece together their age, status, disposition and so on from the way people look, sound and move. Only with that information can we resort to the appropriate social norms and scripts to navigate our interaction effectively and responsively.[60] The most basic cue we always look for – even if we are unaware that we are looking for it – is whether the entity in front of us is a social subject. When that basic cue is given to us ambiguously, all other cues become difficult to read as well.

Why is this the case? Firstly, because it is hard to get past this very basic difficulty and continue onwards to gather more detailed information. Interlocutors find themselves 'stuck' and distracted. Secondly, even if they do move on, these crucial secondary cues depend for their legibility on being embedded in an unsurprising overall appearance. Trying to figure out someone's emotional state, for instance, is much harder if their face already challenges our basic schemas of wholeness or of humanity/animality.

> *Discomfort comes in part from the social illegibility of the disabled body. The social rituals in which we accord one another recognition depend on accurate reading of bodily and gestural cues. Unpredictable and undecipherable cues create anxiety. It is not that disability itself creates unease, but rather people's*

[60] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson goes further and claims that "to behave towards unknown others effectively and *ethically*, we need to gather information about them. We use their appearance as clues to who they are and how to relate to them." (Garland-Thomson 2009 34, my emphasis)

> *inability to read such cues disrupts the expected, routine nature of social relations. (Garland-Thomson 2009 38)*

Usually seamless indications about emotional states or positions in social hierarchies, for example, become confused. Then "even the best-intentioned able-bodied people have difficulty anticipating the reactions of the disabled, for interpretations are warped by the impairment" (Murphy 101, 87). So, as Murphy puts it, the "disabled body" becomes a 'silent' body, one that is no longer readily legible through our usual schemas. There are, of course, many ways of managing this difficulty, and of minimizing it over time. We can become accustomed to the difficulty, we can learn to read anew, and we can contextualize cues so that they become easier to understand (Bogdan and Taylor 139-140, 142). Close friends and family may be in the best position to do this, but anyone can develop the necessary familiarity. Nevertheless, RBD disability always presents at least an initial difficulty of legibility that needs to be overcome.

4.2 Ambivalence

The second element of Murphy's characterization is the pervasive "*deep and uneasy ambivalence"* people have towards RBD disability. This manifests in a set of contradictory attitudes and forms of treatment and is paradigmatically encapsulated by a certain persistent staring impulse. I propose that we look again to the notion of anomaly to explain this ambivalence. Recall that anomalies are always transgressive of the metaphysical categories that make up our shared understanding of the world. They are metaphysically threatening (Smith 2016 433). As such, they always elicit profound ambivalence. They are repulsive and uncomfortable, because they are the (social) metaphysical order gone wrong. For beings like us, who depend on these shared categories to make sense of our experience together, this is unacceptable. But, simultaneously, anomalies are also haunting interpellations, challenges to

our way of making sense of the world and reminders that the world is not reducible to our ordering of it.

Because of its metaphysically threatening character, anomaly *demands* a social reaction. It is not something we can simply note and pass on by. We ignore it at the risk of losing confidence in some of the basic assumptions we use to navigate the world. Societies must therefore develop ways to eliminate, minimize, dissolve or control anomalies. Many societal reactions to RBD disability respond to it qua anomaly in this way: "by reducing ambiguity; by physically controlling it; by avoiding it; by labeling it dangerous; by adopting it in ritual" (Shakespeare 1994 295).

The impetus to avoid the anomalous – and the strain in interaction that it introduces – is well illustrated in Murphy's examples of the woman fleeing the girl missing part of her skull at the hospital and of the other woman hastily departing the plane at the sight of crutches. The hiding away of people via institutionalization, segregated schools, hospitals and other facilities is also an instance of both this avoidance strategy and of physical control (Garland-Thomson 2009 19).[61] And the reaction of undoing anomaly by reducing ambiguity is a good description of Lucy Grealy's numerous and frustrating facial surgeries, solely aimed at 'normalizing' her face. There is also a long tradition of marking people with RBD disabilities as supernatural and powerfully evil that both exemplifies the strategy of condemnation and the ritualization of disability (Murphy 120; Garland-Thomson 1997 40; Bogdan 2012 121-123).[62] Other "historical experiences – such as the freakshow, the court jester, the asylum, the Nazi extermination and

[61] Think, for instance, of the recent revelation that the celebrated writer, Arthur Miller, institutionalized his eldest son Daniel, who was born with Down Syndrome. For over four decades, Miller never visited his son, never acknowledged him or spoke of him. It was not until he left Daniel a quarter of his wealth in his will that the existence of his fourth child became publicly known (Andrews).

[62] For a discussion of the ritualization of scars as shorthand for evil in popular cinema see Woodhead.

so forth – can [also] be conceptualized straightforwardly using" the framework of metaphysical threat (Shakespeare 1994 295)

Staring is another strategy of response to disability as anomaly. As such, it is bound up with ambivalence. On one hand, we stare at what interests us, at what is novel, at what thwarts expectations. We are "drawn by the inexplicable", the unpredictable and the extraordinary (Garland-Thomson 2009 19). On the other hand, we stare because we want to tame novelty, 'figure it out', reduce it to our existing categories. We want to dissolve the discomfort that it causes. We "want predictability in what we grudgingly know to be an unpredictable world" (19). Therefore, staring is both an acknowledgement of the anomalous and a refusal to engage with it. This why Taylor and Grealy describe being both hyper-visible and yet ghostly. To be stared at as an anomaly is to be fixated on, but it also to be kept at a cautious, if not horrified, distance.

4.3 Social Isolation, Social Standing and Fundamentality

The third element in Murphy's characterization is *social isolation*. This is a more general aspect. It does not describe how disability affects interactions, but rather it points to a general condition of social existence shaped by systematic attitudes and patterns of treatment. In explaining this "liminal" state of social isolation, Murphy claims that "just as the bodies of the disabled are permanently impaired, so also is their *standing* as members of society" (Murphy 135, my emphasis). What I want to suggest is that we should read this as a claim about impaired *social standing*.

Return to the forms of treatment that we can understand as societal responses to RBD disability qua anomaly. Some of them work by eliminating the anomaly, like Nazi extermination. Some undo the anomaly altogether, like corrective surgery. Others, however, work by partial social isolation, like staring. These are ways to keep the anomalous subject in

the social world but impose a distance between them and the rest of the community. They are strategies through which we make an anomalous place for an anomalous subject. Systematic patterns of this kind of treatment endow people with RBD disabilities with *less-than-full social standing*.

Social standing is a degreed notion. To have *full social standing*, to be a social subject and a regular social interlocutor, one must be widely recognized as able to stand in most social relations in the community. This is, as it were, the top region of the social standing continuum. In the middle region of the continuum, we find entities with *less-than-full social* standing. These are entities that are widely recognized as able to stand in only a significantly restricted set of social relations. They are ambiguous subjects: like an ordinary person but not quite. I have argued that one comes to have full social standing via systematic forms of treatment that constitute social standing recognition. Less-than-full social standing is therefore the product of the deterioration and breakdown of these patterns of treatment and of the proliferation of forms of engagement that are *socially isolating*.

Staring of the kind described by Grealy and Taylor is a paradigmatic form of socially isolating treatment. It takes what could be a genuine interaction and makes it a unidirectional activity, where one person stares at another.[63] The kind of "freakshows" that I explored in the previous chapter in relation to Julia Pastrana are very much an outgrowth of this kind of staring. It is no surprise that, at the side of Pastrana, we find other 19th century performers without limbs or with restricted growth (Bogdan 7-21 2012). For another example of socially isolating treatment, consider how many people systematically handle their relations with people with RBD disabilities by a "partial withdrawal of deference" (Murphy 119). This involves treating

[63] Regarding the importance of reciprocity for truly "accepting" or inclusive social relations between people with and without disabilities see Bogdan and Taylor 143-144.

adults in infantilizing ways, or as broadly incompetent (Shakespeare 1994 295). For example, Murphy recounts how, repeatedly, a waiter handed three menus to his party of four and how other wheelchair users are not addressed directly but talked about in the third person with their attendants (Murphy 199-120). Like staring, these are forms of treatment that acknowledge the anomalous subject but place distance between them and regular interlocutors.

Charity, according to Murphy, is also socially isolating. He says that "by dropping coins in a beggar's cup", by helping in the mode of charity, "the able-bodied lull their consciences without getting too close; they stress their own separation and intactness by an act of charity" (Murphy 130). This mode of engagement makes RBD disability 'safe' to approach by making it distant. And it makes it distant by centering *pity*. Pitying someone allows us to take an interest and satisfy our curiosity, while avoiding approaching and even interacting with the one who is pitied. Recall that this was also a main component of Pastrana's show, which cast her as a "sensitive monster" and thereby worked to place distance between her and the audience (Garland-Thomson 1999 99-101).

Less-than-full social standing can be understood as a 'macro' way in which societies respond to anomalous subjects. It is an alternative to elimination or disambiguation. It is a way to make a place for someone 'out of place', through a host of socially isolating modes of engagement, like staring, infantilization or charitable pity. This is why having an RBD disability can place one in a state that is "neither out of society nor wholly in it" (Murphy 131). This is the ambiguous middle-ground of less-than-full social standing. If this is true, then the flip-side is that *being RBD 'able-bodied' is a precondition for having full social standing*. It is *fundamental* to our ability to integrate our social world. Note that to say that being RBD 'able-bodied' is a *precondition* does not mean that it is an on/off consideration. What it means is that RBD disability is a graded factor that hinders one's legibility as a social subject and,

consequently, social standing recognition. It can be more or less of a hindrance, depending on the disability in question and the context. Being RBD 'able-bodied' is also not the only precondition for having full social standing. In the next chapter I will argue that being gendered is also a precondition for full social standing.

I have argued that Murphy's idea that there is something special about the way RBD disabilities function socially is right. Having an RBD disability makes one, not just devalued or subordinated, but also *representationally anomalous*. Anomaly strains processes of social standing recognition that support our sense of background normalcy and fluidity in social relations, generating phenomena of social anxiety. Representational anomaly is also the source of ambivalent affective reactions because of its metaphysically threatening character. Metaphysical threat always elicits both horror and repulsion and, at the same time, fixation and fascination. Finally, I have argued that the "liminal" socially isolating character of Murphy's experience is well captured by the notion of less-than-full social standing. One important upshot of this is that being RBD 'able-bodied' is a precondition for full social standing or, put more briefly, a *fundamental* mode of social identification. It is a key conditioning factor shaping not just who we are in the social fabric, but whether we even register as regular actors within it.

5 Shaming Weakness: an Alternative Explanation?

One may object that this is not the only way to make sense of what is happening. Perhaps we do not need resort to talk of social standing at all to understand things like the infantilization of people with disabilities. There is a simpler line of explanation available and it goes like this. People with RBD disabilities remind us that we too are vulnerable, mortal and weak. And that is uncomfortable, so we make ourselves feel better by putting them down. Marginalizing people with disabilities allows "normals" to feel better about their own perceived failings, to cast

outwards their shame about their vulnerability by shaming others "who wear their weakness on their face" (Nussbaum 187). Martha Nussbaum articulates this argument in the following passage.

> *I believe the use of the category "normal" to stigmatize deviant behavior should be understood as the outgrowth of the* ***primitive shame that to some degree affects us all****. Because we are all aware that there are many ways in which we fail to measure up to the exorbitant demand of infancy for complete control over the sources of good (…) The idea of normalcy is like a surrogate womb, blotting out intrusive stimuli from the world of difference. But of course, this stratagem requires stigmatizing some other group of persons.* ***Normals know that their bodies are frail and vulnerable, but when they can stigmatize the physically disabled they feel a lot better about their own human weaknesses.*** *(186-187, my emphasis)*

On this view, the problem is not that RBD disability is unusual or unexpected, but that it is all too familiar. Social anxiety is better re-described not as a moment of confrontation with disruptive ambiguity, but rather as a difficult confrontation with our own shameful weakness. "Normals" both see themselves in the person with an RBD disability and reject what they see. This explains their ambivalence and their contradictory social attitudes towards RBD disabilities. Similarly, the infantilization or the pitying of people with RBD disabilities are not primarily ways of isolating them, but of denying *our own* universal human weakness and mortality by proxy.

Nussbaum is not the only one to make this suggestion. This theme of shaming weakness appears in the work of various disability scholars, including Murphy, Shakespeare and Garland-Thomson.

> *The disabled serve as constant, visible reminders to the able-bodied that the society they live in is shot with inequity and suffering (…), that they too are vulnerable. We represent a fearsome possibility. (…) the disabled arouse in the able-bodied fear that impairment could happen to them (…). (Murphy 117)*

> *Able-bodied people are perpetually anxious to deny their own mortality and physicality, and disabled people are the group onto whom these difficult feelings are projected. (Shakespeare 1994 297)*

> *Seeing disability reminds us of what Bryan S. Turner calls "ontological contingency", the truth of our body's vulnerability to the randomness of fate. (Garland-Thomson 2009 19)*

As will become clear, I do not think that this is necessarily in tension with the idea of RBD disability as anomalous.[64] Ultimately, I believe that Nussbaum's line of argument is not just compatible with, but subsumable under the view of RBD disability as an anomaly. However, if we accept this 'shaming weakness' explanation on its own, we run into at least two problems.

Firstly, it is unclear that there is a universal experience of shame at our own incompleteness and frailty like the one Nussbaum relies on. Such experiences are certainly shaped by our biological condition, but also by our cultural worldview and social situation. At the very least, this feature of Nussbaum's explanation renders it incapable of accounting for historical and cross-cultural variations in the treatment of people with RBD disabilities. I take it to be a desideratum of any theoretical understanding of RBD disability that it should be able to account for these differences. This is important both to understand a range of societies, but also to get clear on what the possibilities are for social plasticity and change. The idea that RBD disabilities transgress our *community-specific* social self-image seems more promising, in this respect.

Secondly, Nussbaum identifies RBD disability with vulnerability, frailty and weakness in an unqualified manner. This seems to lack empirical adequacy. Consider the case of Professor Theresia Degener, a congenitally armless German academic and attorney who delivers lectures while holding the microphone with one foot and gesturing with the other (Garland-Thomson 2009 134). Degener's body catches everyone's attention. It is surprising in the ways it looks and the way it moves. It may even scare and horrify at first glance. But Degener, in her elegant

[64] But nor am I committed to these scholars having perfectly coherent bodies of work. It is possible to see *The Body Silent*, for instance, as marked by various strands of argument that stand in some tension with each other.

suits, delivering lectures, and greeting politicians seems to many the opposite of frail. And to find her sight disturbing, or even just arresting, one need only note she lectures *with her feet*. More broadly, by focusing exclusively on shame and weakness, an account like Nussbaum's loses explanatory power. There is a complex nexus of systematic affective reactions and attitudes linked to RBD disability, from engaged curiosity to horror. The notion of anomalous representation as metaphysically threatening better captures this complexity than the notion of weakness and shame.

Nevertheless, there is something right about Nussbaum's insistence on disability as a *threat*. "Safety" and "completeness" are threatened, but not the safety and completeness of the womb. Instead, it is the safety of our shared social order, the predictability that it gives to the world, and the seamless social coordination it supports that are under threat. This is what it means to think of RBD disability as a *metaphysically threatening* anomaly. What is at stake is not some universal, individual illusion of perfection and invulnerability, but our "collective illusion" that the world is in fact ordered by our shared (social) metaphysical assumptions (Murphy 30).[65] Some of those assumptions are importantly tied to notions of wholeness and even mortality.[66] This makes sense of how people with disabilities can be *perceived* as signs of vulnerability in a way that constitutes them as representationally anomalous. But, again, this is not a property of people with disabilities in the absence of a certain social self-image (Garland-Thomson 2009 19-20).

[65] This is not to deny that the experience of vulnerability, even though it is primarily about our social categorization of the world, is not often felt individually, as a disturbance of one's own way of making sense of the world.
[66] Murphy says "the long-term physically impaired are neither sick nor well, neither dead nor fully alive" (Murphy 131).

6 Social Change

So far, I have explained what is special about the marginalization of people with RBD disabilities using the conceptual apparatus of social standing. I have argued that Murphy's "disease of social relations" is well captured by the notion of less-than-full social standing. The social standing of people like Murphy is systematically imperiled because RBD disability renders them representationally anomalous. I want to turn now to how this theoretical articulation can inform our political projects of social change. If being RBD 'able-bodied' is fundamental, then how can we aspire to include people like Murphy in the social community?

The framework of social standing suggests two possible points of intervention for social change. Recall that social standing recognition has two elements. It is *constituted* by forms of treatment and it is *mediated* – guided and rendered intelligible – by the representations in our social self-image. But mediation does not mean determination. Nor is mediation a unidirectional relation. Just because someone seems strange, does not mean they have to be treated strangely. And the way they are treated will certainly influence the way they seem to others. I have called this, in the previous chapter, a *looping* relation between the two parts of social standing recognition. People like Murphy encounter a systematic difficulty at the level of representation – they are anomalous – which then gives rise to a problem at the level of social practice and interaction – less-than-full social standing – which, in turn, reinforces the difficulty in representation. This suggests two possible strategies for change. We can either focus on changing the representations in our social self-image, which render people with RBD disability anomalous; or we can focus on changing modes of treatment that endow them with less-than-full social standing.[67] Of course, given the interconnectedness between these two elements,

[67] Arguably, there is yet another option: the reclamation of an anomalous position of "freak" by artists and activists with disabilities, such as Matt Fraser (Feeney). This is a highly controversial position that challenges the very need

changing one is bound to affect the other. But there is an important distinction between these two strategies in what they take to the be their primary focus. I will argue we have reason to favor focusing on changing modes of treatment first.

6.1 Changing Representations First

One way to think about social change is to start from the idea that we will tend to treat people differently if we no longer represent them as anomalous. But, for that to be true, we need to operate a more profound change in our social self-image, on the preconditions of legibility it dictates for social subjects. In effect, we need to undo the fundamentality of being RBD 'able-bodied', if we are to undo the anomalous character of RBD disability. One example of this approach is a strand of argument in Sunaura Taylor's *Beasts of Burden*.

Throughout the book, Taylor points to how our social representations of animality and humanity[68] form an essential backdrop for the marginalization of people with RBD disabilities.[69] Taylor's political proposal is that we question and undo those boundaries in the background: "what if the distinction between human and animal was blurred?" (Taylor 2017 94). Taylor provocatively suggests that doing away with a clear social understanding of the differences between animal and human appearance is a key step in making people with RBD disabilities no longer anomalous and no longer transgressive:

> *What would it take to claim the word "animal"? If, as I've written, animals can be crips, then can crips be animals? (…) Recognizing my animality has in fact been a way of claiming the dignity in the way my body and other non-normative and vulnerable bodies move, look, and experience the world around them. It is*

for social inclusivity and integration of people with disabilities within the community. I will set it aside for the purposes of this discussion.

[68] Where animality is also the devalued aspect of this pair.

[69] I am offering here only a plausible reconstruction of a strand of argument in Taylor's work. For a more comprehensive characterization, see this popular encapsulation: "Disabled people should be proud to associate themselves with animals, Taylor argues, because the same ideology, ableism, oppresses both groups. If you're cognitively or physically disabled, it's ableism that tells you that you're worth less than a more capable person; similarly, if you're an animal, it's ableism that makes eating you permissible, since you can't do what humans do" (Rothman).

> *(…) an assertion that my animality is integral to my humanity. It's an assertion that animality is integral to* ***humanity****. (Taylor 2017 115)*

I think Taylor's second use of 'humanity' can be understood here as referring to something like our social self-image, our culturally imagined "human standard". To say animality is *integral* to humanity, in this context, is to reconfigure and reshape our social self-image. Taylor's approach then is one that foregrounds how social representation conditions our treatment of both animals and of people with various forms of disability. It suggests changing this social representation as a focal point of intervention.[70]

Although Taylor's analysis is insightful, we should be skeptical of these more forward-looking suggestions. The categorical representations and distinctions in our social self-image are plastic, but they are neither optional, nor superficial for social subjects within the community. They are part of our social self-image and, therefore, they seem to us particularly 'natural' and indispensable. This is bound to make tackling these representations *directly* not just difficult, but exceedingly so. Representational boundaries like animal/human form a horizon of intelligibility that we both inhabit 'from the inside' and that allows us to have a coordinated sociality with others who similarly take it for granted. What this means is that societies have a very important investment in the stability of these boundaries. Any kind of rethinking of them will have to contend with the myriad strategies we have for eliminating, avoiding and accommodating anomalies (thereby preserving our representational categories against any challenges). Moreover, as Murphy points out, many of these representations have

[70] Authors like Eunjung Kim make even more radical proposals by suggesting something like the end or suspension of social representational boundaries delimiting 'humanity' altogether. "To think disability from a critical inhumanist position is not to recalibrate our understanding of the human in a more accurate and inclusive way but to open up diverse ontologies that make any declaration of value and classification irrelevant, as well as to abandon the able-bodied schema as a normalizing goal of cure, re/habilitation or assimilation" (Kim 305). Like Taylor, Kim focuses on changing representations, their boundaries and the classifications they generate. I take this kind of proposal to be intractable on a social standing framework. It ignores the need for a somewhat coordinated social self-image, which I have argued for in the previous chapter.

to do with constant features of the human condition: concerns with life, death, wholeness and the place of humans in the natural world. “Disability concerns our irreducible humanity” (Murphy 224). It is no accident then that distinctions like human/animal are so meaningful in our culture and in so many others. This adds to the sense that tackling these representations directly will be overwhelmingly difficult.

6.2 Changing Treatment First

Regardless of how we think about others, we can combat marginalization by *treating* them differently. What is suggested by this thought is an alternative approach that takes the primary locus of political action to be, not the representation of people with disabilities, but their *treatment*. This resonates with an important asymmetry in social standing recognition: representation mediates it, but it is treatment that *constitutes* recognition. In other words, representation only matters because it conditions how people are treated.[71] A ‘treatment first’ approach has two major advantages. First, it much more tractable. Treatment is observable, it can be sociologically investigated and regulated by legal and other social means. Secondly, it works as a way to challenge these deep social representations and indirectly change them.

One example of this strategy can be found in what Robert Bogdan calls “citizen portraits”. In his study of photographic rhetoric around disability in America, Bogdan gathers under this description a set of early 20th century American photographic images. They include people with visible disabilities, but their distinguishing feature is that, in these pictures, “disability photographic conventions are not employed or, if they are, they do not dominate the image” (Bogdan 2012 144). “Disability photographic conventions” are ways of arranging,

[71] I take this to be what Bogdan and Taylor point to when they argue, in relation to severe and obvious disability, that “the definition of a person is not determined by either the characteristics of the person or the abstract social or cultural meanings attached to the group of which the person is a part, but rather the nature of the relationship between the definer and the defined” (Bogdan and Taylor 135).

posing and picturing that make central to the photograph the person with disability and their 'disabling' characteristics. In these 'citizen portraits', people with disabilities are instead

> *photographed as ordinary members of the community – regular citizens and family members. The rhetorical devices of family, friend, and other typical membership roles trump disability photographic conventions. (144)*

Subjects are portrayed in everyday settings, with family, friends, colleagues or employees. They are always dressed in ordinary ways and made to pose with objects that point to their "typical membership roles". We see a young man with cerebral palsy with the rest of his family, a man in a wheelchair at a desk, amputees at work with colleagues and employees, and a child with Down Syndrome sitting in his room (see appendix fig. 2-7). There are portraits of brothers and sisters, postmen and farmers, high school students and church groups. In one of the most interesting examples, "dwarf with dead deer, 1915" (appendix fig. 3), the conventions of a hunter's pose are so strongly invoked, that the size of the hunter becomes patently secondary. In all of these photos there is someone with an RBD disability. In all of them, the picture makes that an incidental feature of the scene.

We can think of these photos as a form of *normalization* that works by anchoring people with RBD disabilities firmly in the context of their existing, smaller social network. In doing so, it recognizes them as able to partake in an ever-expanding array of social relations.

> *Primary groups belong to larger networks of human relations. When severely disabled people are integrated into primary groups and have their humanness declared there, they have a vehicle to be included in the social web that defines community membership. (Bogdan and Taylor 145)*

What the photos seems to declare is the following. If these are mothers, brothers and husbands, if they are co-workers and friends, if they are church members and classmates, these people must surely be the kinds of entities that can be citizens. 'Citizen portraits' are then the opposite of 'freakshows'. In the circus context, people with RBD disabilities appear isolated, without

others and with props that distance them from everyday life. Interaction has nothing to do with their family or their profession. It is entirely premised on their corporeal difference and its anomalous character, just like in the case of Julia Pastrana. In 'citizen portraits' anomaly is diminished and set aside by foregrounding other aspects of people's lives. Appearance is managed in ways that "downplay visible [RBD disability related] differences and accentuate individual identities as members of families, churches, and communities" (Bogdan and Taylor 143).

It is important to note two things about these portraits. Firstly, the 'normalization' aimed at by this strategy is quite different from the 'normalization' in examples like that of Lucy Grealy. Grealy's 'normalizing' surgeries tried in vain to erase the difference in her jaw. On the contrary, in 'citizen portraits', differences in appearance are in plain sight. This is a form of normalization that starts with social relations, not with people's bodies. What it aims to render ordinary first and foremost is not their appearance, but their social existence. Secondly, it is also important that 'citizen portraits' were not part of some public awareness campaign. They do not engage in what Robert Bogdan calls a "self-conscious production of normality" (Bogdan 2012 145). These are personal keepsakes, photos to be sent to family and friends, to be hung on the walls of offices and churches. They constitute *a social practice*. This is why they can function as a way to affirm social standing. They are not a meta-discourse about forms of treatment. They *are* a form of social treatment.

As a way of enmeshing people in social practice, 'citizen portraits' also indirectly change our social representations and meanings. We can think of these postcards and photographs as reducing the *obtrusiveness* of RBD disability. I described RBD disability as both *perceptible* and highly *obtrusive*. One of the things that diminishes obtrusiveness is familiarity. Routinely engaging with a certain kind of unexpected bodily difference, under

ordinary social conditions, makes that difference recede in the social interaction. It makes it seem "secondary" (Bogdan and Taylor 146). We can think of this as a gradual 'de-anomalization' of people with RBD disabilities. Their differences become less obtrusive with time, and they come to be integrated into our social self-image, through the looping between treatment and representation. Our social self-image needs to be in tune with our social practices of recognition, otherwise we are bound to lose confidence in it. And social self-images adapt, they accommodate difference. One way to bring about such changes is to start with altering the predominant forms of social treatment in our community: the people we encounter and how we encounter them.

Let me end by saying that 'citizen portraits' have contemporary counterparts. In an opinion piece for *The Telegraph*, Tom Shakespeare pointed to popular characters like *Game of Thrones'* Tyrion Lannister as a laudable artistic portrayal of someone with restricted growth. The reason: "Tyrion is witty and clever and his storylines do not revolve solely around his size. (…) I'd like to see restricted growth actors performing in roles (…) for which their height is incidental" (Shakespeare 2015). Again, the show is far from ignoring the character's height – he is known in the fictional universe as "The Imp". Nor is the show a disability-awareness campaign. It is just another fantasy TV show. In our own, non-fictional universe, changes in our legal system, in accessibility and in social practices can work to render RBD disability much more incidental, or unobtrusive, in this way. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points to this in her commentary of a photo of Theresia Degener accompanied by fellow academic Gisela Hermes (see appendix fig. 8). The two women are portrayed by a riverbank on a summer afternoon, comfortably gazing at something outside the picture.

> *The two women seem simply to be going about their day (...). They make, in short, an extraordinary sight ordinary. When people with stareable bodies such as Degener and Hermes enter into the public eye (...) the visual landscape*

> *changes. Their public presence can expand the range of the bodies we expect to see and broaden the terrain where we expect to see such bodies. (Garland-Thomson 2009 9)*

Garland-Thomson emphasizes that what brings about "this new public landscape" are things like "laws, social practices, and changed attitudes" (9). Once this change in landscape starts happening, our representations of human variation – our social self-image – starts changing as well.

7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have applied the notion of social standing to explaining the marginalization of people with types of disability socially understood as 'radical bodily differences'. I have argued that RBD disability is a form of representational anomaly with respect to our social self-image. Consequently, being RBD 'able-bodied' is *fundamental* in our social community, it is a precondition for having full social standing. Murphy is right in saying there is something special about the social marginalization that people like him experience: it is not just a matter of social status, but also a matter of social standing. I have used the conceptual framework of social standing to explain three elements in Murphy's account of life as a person with an RBD disability: social anxiety, ambivalence and social isolation. I have argued that we should not try to explain these phenomena in terms of individual attitudes of shame, as Nussbaum suggests. Instead, I have offered an interpretation that is much more thoroughly social, where we can see these phenomena as responses to representational anomaly. Finally, I have argued that we should pursue strategies for social change that are focused, first and foremost, on extending social *treatment* to people with RBD disabilities, rather than trying to change social representations. What the framework of social standing tells us is that, as Bogdan and Taylor

put it, “what and who others, as well as we, are depends upon our relationships with them and what we choose to make of them” (Bogdan and Taylor 146).

This application of social standing exemplifies how it can be an important tool for social analysis in our own context. At the same time, it also helpfully places RBD disability within a broader picture of our social life, drawing interesting connections. Even though we would not think of Pastrana, the Mursi or the Emperors as people with disabilities, the notion of anomaly draws parallels between their existence and that of people with RBD disabilities. RBD disability tracks a cluster of anomalies generated by lack of legibility with respect to various representations in our social self-image. In the next chapter, I will argue that gender, as a mode of social identification, works in a similar way. Just like being RBD ‘able-bodied’ is a precondition for full social standing, so is being gendered. They are both *fundamental* modes of social identification.

Appendix

Figure 1 Part of "Self-Portrait With Manatee" by Sunaura Taylor (2014, oil on paper, apx 10" x 10").

Figure 2 "Child with down syndrome, ca. 1910. Photo postcard." In Bogdan 2012 146.

Figure 3 "Dwarf with dead deer, 1915. Photo postcard." In Bogdan 2012 161.

Figure 5 Part of "High school class picture including a young man with a disability, ca. 1915. Photo postcard." In Bogdan 2012 151.

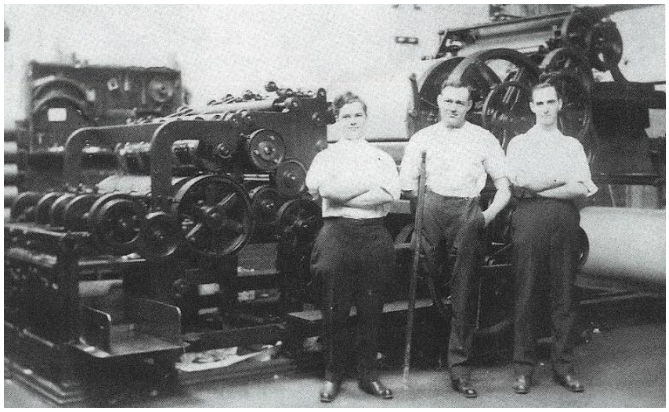

Figure 4 "Man with missing leg in factory, ca 1912. Photo postcard." In Bogdan 2012 149.

Figure 6 "Church group with man in wheelchair, ca. 1911. Photo postcard." In Bogdan 2012 151.

Figure 7 "Siblings and puppy with boy in wheelchair, ca. 1916. Photo postcard." In Bogdan 2012 159.

Figure 8 "Martin Glueck, photo of Dr. Theresia Degener and Gisela Hermes." In Garland-Thomson 2009 8.

Chapter IV Gender and Social Standing

1 #Genderreveal

> *How to Host a Gender Reveal Party - The moment you learn the sex of your baby is magical. Share it with friends and family by hosting an epic reveal party. (DeLoach)*

Gender reveal parties are a relatively new but booming trend.[72] Parents-to-be gather family and friends for a party culminating in a 'reveal' moment: the unleashing of pink/blue balloons or the slicing of a pink/blue-filled cake. The 'reveal' is filmed and posted on social media, where #genderreveal has become a staple of many millennial newsfeeds. The trend seems to have emerged around 2010 and remains primarily North-American.[73] It is wildly popular, profitable, but not everyone is thrilled. Commentators have called the practice egocentric and even "a mild symptom of cultural despair" (Packer). Others complain that it ignores intersex and trans people, confuses gender and sex[74], "reinforces the gender binary" and trades in sexist stereotypes via themes like 'Riffles or Ruffles' and 'Heels or Wheels' (Hafner; Mencia). And yet, gender reveal parties have only grown more popular and elaborate (Vincent).

Why do people engage in these celebrations? Part of the explanation certainly has to do with the excitement of expecting a new child. But then there is also the feeling that knowing whether you are 'having a boy or a girl' is a particularly momentous first step in starting to envision a new family life. As one mother put it in a 'gender reveal post':

[72] Thank you to Mercedes Corredor for this example.
[73] Though not exclusively. See Smith 2015.
[74] I take these parties to be a *gendering* moment, even when they only purport to 'reveal' sex. They trade very obviously in masculine and feminine scripts, roles and meanings, which they then ascribe to the unborn child.

> *There is really nothing like this moment. All of a sudden you to start to really dream about what this little human is going to be like and the relationship that you are going to have with them and the adventures that you are going to go on together. (@mollymaethomps)*

In trying to imagine their future relationship with their child, gender becomes central to many parents. And ambiguity will not do. A purple-filled cake is a good sit-com joke[75] but it would be probably confusing, if not upsetting, to most real-life parents. Even parents who forego the party report the (private) gender reveal to be a tear-inducing experience (Sirois). Critics admonish that, from a practical perspective, the important things are whether the baby sleeps well and what food it prefers – not whether it is a boy or a girl (Winter). But, for all this reasonable advice, gender continues to seem like a crucial distinction for an overwhelming number of parents.

These controversial gender reveal parties encapsulate the intuition that I will explore in this chapter: that gender seems to play a *special* role in our social life. Gender distinctions seem to have a ubiquity, centrality and persistence that many other axes of social difference do not have. This is not to say that gender always neatly determines what we do and how we interact. It is also not to say that gender is unique in this respect. But gender difference is *special* in at least two ways. Firstly, gender distinctions are *pervasive*, structuring shared social norms across an incredibly wide range of contexts. Gender helps set what you and others should do in almost all domains of social action and interaction: what box you should tick, what clothes you should buy, what career you should have, what linguistic forms should apply to you, and how you should be greeted. Gender seems to be 'everywhere'. Secondly, there is an important *social anxiety* about certain forms of gender ambiguity. Settling on 'boy' or 'girl' is important, not just to expecting parents, but to most social actors. Consider the discomfort many people

[75] Both popular shows "Grace and Frankie" and "Jane the Virgin" have used this situation.

experience when they cannot tell the gender of their interlocutor, even when they could easily omit gendered language. Encounters with gender ambiguity oftentimes produce an uneasiness that is hard to pin down.

Pervasiveness and *social anxiety* set gender apart from other social identities in contemporary North America. Our professional occupation, for instance, shapes our life opportunities, our social circle and our individual orientation towards the world. And yet, it is rare for someone to feel uncomfortable or awkward when they cannot clearly tell what their new acquaintance does for a living. Religious affiliation might similarly shape our social life, but it is not taken to be a relevant factor in how one should walk and sit in public transportation, in our society. Even if it is not unique, gender is at least special in that it is unlike most other axes of social difference.[76]

In this paper, I will offer an explanation of gender's special role by claiming that gender is a *fundamental mode of social identification*. To say that gender is fundamental is to say *that gender legibility is a precondition for full social standing.* Roughly, this means that being positionable along gendered lines is crucial to our ability to even enter most social relations in our community. Note that, in defending this view, I am drawing a parallel between being RBD 'able-bodied' and being gender legible. They are both preconditions for our existence as full-fledged social subjects. Moreover, I take this claim of gender's fundamentality to be primarily about the role of gender in contemporary North America, though it can be plausibly extended to other societies.[77] I also take it to be a claim, not about what gender *is*, but about *the role* that

[76] As I have argued in chapter 3, RBD disability is also special in virtue of its connection to social standing. It remains an open question whether some other axes of social difference – e.g. race – are also special in this way.
[77] Whether gender is fundamental in any given society is always a substantial and empirical question.

gender plays in our social normative life. Although I will lean on some philosophical commitments about the nature of gender, this will not be my focus.

In the first part of this chapter, I elaborate on this fundamentality explanation of the role of gender. In section 2, I start by briefly recapitulating some key points of my account of social standing. In section 3, I explain gender legibility and distinguish it from gender conformity. I then consider what gender *illegibility* looks like in our social context and offer two detailed examples, in section 4. With this in place, I argue that my fundamentality explanation improves on prominent competing accounts of the role of gender. I focus here on those offered by Judith Butler, Linda Martín Alcoff and Charlotte Witt. In the second part of this paper, I argue that this fundamentality account is not just plausible, but that it adequately captures the intuition that gender is special. I do so by showing it explains both *social anxiety*, in section 6, and *pervasiveness*, in section 7. Finally, I conclude by providing a sketch of the normative implications of my view for feminist politics, which I will explore in the next chapters.

2 Social Standing, Anomalies and Fundamentality

Recall that to have social standing is to be widely recognized as able to stand in social relations with others. Social standing comes in degrees: one can be recognized as able to stand in more or fewer social relations. Rocks and wild animals are generally not recognized as able to stand in any social relations: they have *no social standing*. Social subjects, on the contrary, are widely recognized as able to stand in most social relations in the community. Social subjects are ordinary social interlocutors, entities with *full social standing*. I have also argued there is a third group of entities in this continuum: those with *less-than-full social standing*. These are ambiguous subjects who are part of our social world but whose ability to integrate social relations is conspicuously limited.

In chapter 2, I described the process through which we come to have social standing. *Social standing recognition* is constituted by certain practices of social treatment and is mediated by cultural representations of social subjects. When I treat someone as my colleague, for example, I am thereby recognizing them as able to enter into that relation. But that treatment is always already mediated by social representations that *guide it and make it intelligible*. In this way, my treatment of my colleague is guided by the fact that they meet common expectations about what colleagues should look, talk and move like. It makes sense for me to treat them like a colleague because they seem like one.

More generally, when we treat someone as a social subject, we 'read' them through our *social self-image*: a set of socially shared representations that function to delimit the range and axes of *perceptible variation* along which we expect social subjects to vary. We employ these "ways of seeing" others to discern them as common interlocutors, rather than rocks, whales, ghosts or something else (Wilchins 31, 43). So, for example, we expect people to be taller and shorter, darker or paler, but not more or less transparent. Note, however, that representations mediate our treatment, but they do not fully determine it. I could find a colleague surprising but then still try to treat them collegially. Additionally, mediation is not unidirectional. The way we treat entities partially shapes how we represent them as well. So, by being collegial to my surprising colleague they are likely to seem more ordinary to me over time. Nevertheless, social treatment is never completely independent from social representations.

I have argued that social standing is a distinct category of analysis. Having full social standing is different from having *moral status*. We can give ethical consideration to non-human animals, treat them humanely, and even with dignity. And yet, this is all compatible with thinking they are not the type of beings who can have families, get married, vote, go to prom,

have neighbors over for dinner or run for mayor. Social standing involves giving entities a *certain kind* of consideration associated with social treatment – treatment that enmeshes someone in our social practices.[78] Social standing is also different from *social status*. Social standing is about our ability to enter into social relations. Social status refers to our relative position within them. Therefore, one could have full social standing and low social status. Consider a feudal peasant, who occupies a low rung on the social ladder. And yet, they are very much *on the ladder*. There are shared norms regulating their participation in the civic and religious life of the community, their interaction with superiors, and their constitution of widely recognized families. Conversely, one could have a high social status and less-than-full social standing. This is the case of ritually isolated powerful figures, like the Byzantine emperors in chapter 2. Being a social subject is compatible then with a variety of locations along hierarchies of power.

Social standing recognition is constituted by forms of treatment that integrate us in the network of social relations. Less-than-full social standing is the product of strain or breakdown in this process. Recall the example of Julia Pastrana, analyzed in chapter 2. Pastrana was clearly embedded in some social relations and had some social standing. But these relations were restricted by her handlers who profited from the show being an exclusive opportunity to see her (Garland-Thomson 1999 89). During the show, she was the object of a form of staring that effectively constituted a breakdown in social standing recognition. Pastrana, as the enfeebled "sensitive monster", was "*beside* people, instead of *with* them", kept as an "alien" at a strategic

[78] Notice, however, that full social standing does not guarantee that one will be treated rightly. In fact, certain kinds of wrongs can only be inflicted on someone with full social standing. One could not publicly disgrace a pet, for instance. Full social standing is also compatible with being the target of violence. It is incompatible, however, with particularly degrading or 'dehumanizing' violence. For a congenial analysis of 'dehumanization', see Smith 2016.

distance from the audience. I have argued that this constant display "as a freak" turned her into an entity with less-than-full social standing.

I have also pointed out that this pattern of treatment only made sense in light of Pastrana's appearance. Dressed up by her handlers, she elicited both interpretations as a man and as a woman, as a human and as an animal, as a 'civilized lady' and as a 'wild savage' (Garland-Thomson 1997 74). These 'readings' interacted with each other. For instance, she was billed as a "Root Digger Indian", while being clothed and portrayed like a European 'lady' (Henderson 55; Garland-Thomson 1999 83). But "Root Digger Indians" were themselves already "semi-human": like social subjects but not quite. This particular mode of racialization is arguably itself a form of ambiguous representation along, at least, human/animal lines.[79] All these forms of ambiguity did not just add up but *compounded*. They rendered Pastrana particularly representationally *anomalous*, in the eyes of her audience.

To say that something is anomalous is to say that it constitutes a troubling social "metaphysical threat" (Smith 2016 433). Anomalous entities "transgress culturally sanctioned metaphysical categories", threatening our shared (social) metaphysical order (430). This explains two things. Firstly, it explains why anomalies typically elicit intense ambivalence: they polarize our attitudes into a push-pull pattern. On one hand, the anomalous being is horrible and repulsive, it is our metaphysical picture of the world *gone wrong*. And yet, at the same time, we are fascinated by anomalous beings. They are haunting challenges to our way of making sense of reality and reminders of its infinite potential for new patterns. Secondly, anomalies

[79] As I explained in chapter 2, this mode of racialization underlies 19th century displays of people "whose only difference lay in the fact that they belonged to an unfamiliar race and culture" as "freaks" (Bogdan 1990 177). Not all forms of racialization necessarily put social standing in question in this way, though. It is plausible that, in some racialized regimes, devalued racial features are not strains on social standing recognition.

always call for a social response. Anomalous figures threaten the necessary basis for social coordination that is our shared metaphysical order. Therefore, all societies must develop ways to deal with them. The patterns of *partial social isolation* that constitute less-than-full social standing are one such strategy. They mark a special and controlled place for the anomalous subject, as such, within the social world. This is why, in the case of Pastrana, the audience was free to be fascinated, instead of running away screaming. As long as she was on stage, stared at as a "sensitive monster", and not among them as a potential interlocutor, she could remain in the social world, as a highly controlled metaphysical threat.

Lastly, I have argued that some modes of social identification can be thought of as *preconditions for full social standing*. They are what I call *fundamental*, for short. By precondition I do not mean an on/off factor, but rather a degreed element that can introduce more or less strain into our recognition of social subjects. I have argued that being RBD 'able-bodied' is fundamental and that having an RBD disability makes one anomalous and metaphysically threatening. I will argue below that gender is also fundamental and can similarly make and unmake social subjects.

3 Gender Legibility as a Precondition for Full Social Standing

To claim that gender is a fundamental aspect of social identity is to claim that it is a precondition for full social standing. But one may worry that this is just not how gender works. Gender, at first glance, does not seem to be in the business of regulating inclusion or isolation from social relations. It seems rather to be a matter of hierarchy.[80] Being a man or a woman has an impact on one's *social status* and success by masculine or feminine standards carries implications for

[80] Theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Catharine Mackinnon and Sally Haslanger have all compellingly argued for thinking about gender as a matter of hierarchical position. For critiques see Butler 1991 and, more recently, Jenkins.

this as well. This is also the case for many other social hierarchies. For instance, professional occupation carries a similar relative position. And successfully embodying the norms that apply to one's group – being a reputed lawyer or a reliable house worker – also impacts one's relative status. But we do not want to claim that professional occupation is a precondition for full social standing. Why should we not think of gender as *just* another hierarchical mode of social identification?

The answer lies in prying apart two dimensions of gender: *gender legibility* and *gender conformity*. We are gender legible when we can be assigned a position in the social representational matrix of gender, when we can be placed *somewhere* along representational lines of gendered variation. But this is compatible with a wide array of positions, some of which are socially devalued and penalized. One could be an effeminate man or a masculine woman, for instance, and be gender legible. *Gender conformity*, which I am here also using in a technical sense, refers to something more substantial: to one's success by normative gendered standards, to being a really feminine woman or a really masculine man. Non-conformity impacts one's status in complicated ways, but it need not plunge us into illegibility. So, for instance, a woman who behaves like 'one of the boys' at her corporate job may be gender non-conforming in some ways that benefit her status at the office. Outside of her professional environment, she may be much less well received. But in none of those contexts does she ever become a representational anomaly. She remains legible, as perhaps a 'cool girl' or a 'bossy' career woman.

We can distinguish then between *failures of conformity*, which impact (hierarchical) status, and *failures of legibility*, which, I argue, are effectively cases of anomaly along gendered lines. Failures of gender conformity do not unmake social subjects, but failures of gender legibility do. For example, in the case of Julia Pastrana, part of what contributed to her

anomalous character and, consequently, to her less-than-full social standing, was the way in which she elicited interpretations as both a woman and a man. For an even clearer example of gender illegibility consider the practice of political eunuchism in the Byzantine empire.[81]

As I have described in chapter 2, the sovereign of Byzantium was a sacral absolutist: not just appointed by God but regarded as a semi-god himself. I have claimed that semi-divinity made the emperor a metaphysically transgressive figure. I have also argued that this transgression explains a historically remarkable pattern of ambivalent treatment by the people of Byzantium, who both revered and sadistically tortured their emperors. Another curious aspect of Byzantium was the great number of eunuchs who populated imperial life. The most important of them was the "emperor's chief personal attendant or chamberlain" who lived with the ritually secluded sovereign and was in charge of supervising the palatine service (Patterson 317).[82] Eunuchs were not only allowed to be the sovereign's closest servants, but they also filled the most important ranks in the bureaucracy and had key roles in political, military and administrative power (Kaldellis 2017 64). Collectively, they formed then a very powerful group in Byzantine society. Nevertheless, eunuchs were universally reviled as having a "natural dirtiness" and thought of as "physically weird and considered the lowest of the low among human beings" (Patterson 320, 321). And most importantly they were *imperial slaves* for life. In his study of political eunuchism, Orlando Patterson tries to tackle the following puzzle: why would these divine sovereigns prefer, or even need, these reviled eunuch slaves?[83]

[81] This may apply, to some extent, to other contexts of political eunuchism, such as Imperial China, but I am here restricting my claims to Byzantium.
[82] Kaldellis analogizes this role to "a kind of prime minister or chief of staff" (Kaldellis 2017 58).
[83] "How could an emperor who sat daily beside an empty throne held to be occupied by the living spirit of Jesus be served solely by creatures considered to be such obscene perverts?" (Patterson 322)

Patterson claims that eunuchs were uniquely fit to act as the contact between the isolated semi-god and the world. This is because they were not just gender non-conforming but approached gender illegibility. In the Byzantine gendered matrix, they were neither clearly effeminate men, nor masculine women. The eunuchs did not aspire to femininity but could not aspire to masculinity either. Consider this description by Manuel Philes, a Byzantine poet.

> *There is a race that lives in the heart of the palace,*
> *Feminine compared to men, but masculine compared to women;*
> *It has traces of both, without being either one or the other;*
> *It has nothing to do with women, but its masculinity is eroded.*
> *It rules everyone but is enslaved by all. (…)*
> *Decorous, humble, mindless, speechless, chatty,*
> *Servile, violent, spirited, cowardly greedy,*
> *Born of the mixture of extreme opposites,*
> *The greatest evil emerging from evil. (Manuel Philes quoted in Kaldellis 2017 68)*[84]

Eunuchs were perpetually stuck in a "transitional state", impossibly hard to place along gendered lines (Patterson 322). This state mirrored exactly that of the sovereign: neither mortal, nor god. If we think of the gender matrix as part of the Byzantine social self-image, we can see that eunuchs were representational anomalies as well. This anomalous character, according to Patterson, made them uniquely fit to interact with the sovereign. They were immune to his metaphysical threat because they themselves were metaphysically transgressive, along gender lines.

A clear symptom of the eunuch's anomalous character were the characteristic attitudes towards them. They were regarded as "freaks of sorts" and met with horror, disgust and fear (321). But they were also an object of fascination, associated with the divine and the immortal,

[84] Kaldellis mentions another similar instance of "an infamous letter" from "Basil of Caesarea" that accused eunuchs of being both "unwomanly" and "unmanly" and became a repository of common insults that traded on this idea that eunuchs had the worst vices of men and of women (Kaldellis 2017 64-65). See also Ringrose for an extended treatment of gender in Byzantium in relation to eunuchism.

uniquely able to penetrate the realm of the semi-god sovereign. We find here the usual ambivalence towards anomaly as well as the presence of social strategies of management and containment. There is a good case to be made that eunuchs had *less-than-full social standing* in Byzantium. They were contained, physically separated from the general population like their emperor, and lived outside of the formal social system. They were thought to lack a place, high or low, as subjects in the social community. They were unable to enter into family and professional relations. This made them 'socially dead' and it rendered their enslavement perfectly commensurate with their power (331). Like the sovereign, their power was inextricable from their diminished social standing. They had "no place in the social system" because they, as embodied beings, brought together "what should have remained wholly separate" (322).

In Byzantium, being gendered, in the sense of being gender legible, was part and parcel of the process of recognition involved in social relations. Thus, marginalization on the basis of gender illegibility was not reducible to a matter of power and status. No amount of power, wealth, or status would help the eunuchs. And that is because power could not overcome their more basic social isolation. The eunuchs were so hard to place in the gendered matrix that they were taken to be 'creatures' and 'slaves'.[85] They were not just stigmatized social subjects – they were barely social subjects. Gender was, not only a principle of social hierarchy, but also a precondition for full social standing. I want to suggest that we should think similarly about the role of gender in our society.

[85] One could argue that it is the fact that the eunuchs were *slaves* rather than gender illegible that compromised their social standing. However, I take Patterson's argument, in part, to be an explanation of this form of slavery *in terms of* gender illegibility. Because these individuals were *eunuchs* they became, as Patterson puts it, *the ultimate slaves* required by the ultimate sovereign (Patterson 330). Thank you to Victor Mendoza for helpful discussion on this point.

4 What Does Gender Illegibility Look Like?

So far, I have outlined a way to understand gender as fundamental. I have claimed that gendered representations condition our very legibility as social subjects. I offered as an illustration the historical case of Byzantine eunuchism. But when we look at our own social context we see no comparable institution. Can we even find gender illegibility in contemporary North America?

The question is complicated by the fact that, in our society, gender categories are extremely capacious. They include various non-normative configurations that can make sense of a wide range of gendered lives. Jack Halberstam articulates this point in the following passage:

> *Because so few people actually match any given community standards for male and female (…) gender can be imprecise and multiply relayed through a solidly binary system. At the same time, because the definitional boundaries of male and female are so elastic, there are very few people in any given public space who are completely unreadable in terms of their gender. (Halberstam 20)*

Most people are *legible* as men or women, even if everyone is failing to *conform* to masculinity and femininity ideals to some degree. This failure is not metaphysically threatening because it is built into our representational matrix of gender, through its non-normative configurations. But if this is true, is anyone ever gender illegible? In this section, I will suggest two major ways in which we use the "flexibility and elasticity" of gender to avoid construing subjects as "unreadable" (27, 20). Nevertheless, those strategies sometimes falter, and we are left with what can be aptly categorized as gender illegibility. I will provide two examples of this: the 'bathroom problem' for butch women and the media controversy surrounding tennis player Serena Williams.

4.1 Gender Disambiguation Strategies

We should not be surprised if cases of gender illegibility are rare, contextual and fleeting. To be gender illegible is to representationally anomalous, and representational anomaly is a serious matter. In the eyes of the community, it threatens the basic metaphysical assumptions that support social coordination and cohesion. For the anomalous individual, it constrains their ability to navigate significant portions of the social world. Thus, human societies generally try to avoid the open and unmanaged existence of anomalies. Recall Mary Douglas' typology of strategies to manage anomalies:

> *There are several ways of treating anomalies. Negatively, we can ignore, just not perceive them, or perceiving them we can condemn. Positively we can deliberately confront the anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place. (Douglas 38)*

We seem to be extremely effective at deploying a couple of these methods in the face of potential cases of gender illegibility. We both *ignore them,* and we *expand our 'patterns of gendered reality'* in response to them. These are two ways in which we disambiguate gender ambiguity that could, if left unresolved, turn into illegibility. Although distinct, these are not mutually exclusive mechanisms and they often overlap and work together.

Firstly, we ignore gender anomalies. We do this all the time by interpreting individuals that straddle gender categories as non-normative instances of one or the other. Effectively, we take ambiguity that could be illegible and turn it into gender non-conformity. This is usually not a conscious process, but rather something happening automatically in the background of social interaction. Some evidence of this strategy of disambiguation is the difficulty many people report in being understood 'outside the gender binary'. People who wish to be socially identified as neither men nor women report being most often interpreted in relation to these categories: sometimes as a man, sometimes as a woman – or as a "blurred version of either male

or female" (Halberstam 20). The phenomenon referred to as 'non-binary invisibility' is an example of this.[86] Because we generally want to avoid being confronted with metaphysical threat, and because the social categories available in our shared repertoire are 'man' and 'woman', we systematically collapse ambiguity into non-conformity.

Secondly, we also disambiguate by expanding our gender categories. One could argue that enormous gains in gender equality have been brought about in precisely this manner. We have steadily expanded the ways in which we can imagine women and men as acting and interacting within social practices. But this has been perfectly compatible with keeping a socially normative binary distinction relatively stable – and even disappointingly rigid.[87] This mechanism of expansion is particularly well suited to dealing with large scale social change that could threaten our metaphysical categories. Instead of ending up with an overly large number of non-conforming instances, we reshape our normative gendered representations to accommodate these phenomena. Think about the way in which many threatening moments, historically speaking, have become simply part of our normative representations: from giving women the vote, to long hair for men, and the mainstreaming of co-educational systems. Binary gender distinctions have morphed and adapted by incorporating potential anomalies as non-normative cases, but also by expanding the normative parameters of gendered representation.

[86] For example: "Those of us who don't perform gender correctly — whether cis or trans — are often told to pick a side, or become tossed to the side entirely. We're generally invisible to the wider community (…). People look at us and don't know how to include us, love us, hear us, fuck us, or value us (…)" (Alxndr). See also McNamara and the statements by nonbinary teenager Kelsey Beckham analyzed in Dembroff, e.g. "'I don't want to be a girl wearing boy's clothes, nor do I want to be a girl who presents as a boy'".

[87] Halberstam makes this point. "More women, perhaps, feel able to push at the limits of acceptable femininity, and more men, maybe, find ways of challenging dominant forms of masculinity, but the effects of even gentle gender bending have not been cataclysmic. We still script gender for boys and girls in remarkably consistent and restrictive ways, and we continue to posit the existence of only two genders." (Halberstam 118)

4.2 Gender Illegibility: Two Examples

If these disambiguation strategies allow us to avoid construing others as gender illegible, why is anyone ever illegible? Sometimes these mechanisms fail. Halberstam provides an interesting example of this failure: the "bathroom problem" for butch women. Consider the moment when someone is interrogated by a security guard called to check on an alleged male intruder in the women's bathroom.

> *Obviously, in these bathroom confrontations, the gender-ambiguous person first appears as not-woman ("You are in the wrong bathroom!"), but then the person appears as something even more scary, not-man ("No, I am not," spoken in a voice recognized as not-male). Not-man and not-woman, the gender-ambiguous user is not androgynous or in-between: this person is gender deviant. (Halberstam 21)*

I take "gender deviant" here to mark something very much like illegibility, in contrast with some kind of non-normative position like 'androgynous' and 'in-between'. This is therefore a situation where disambiguation fails. There is an attempt to construe the person as a non-conforming man, which is undercut by a reading of the person as a non-conforming woman. For a moment then, two *opposing* interpretations co-exist.[88] Representational anomaly is generated by this inability to settle on an interpretation. This may very well be only a moment in the interaction – once the person exits the stall, the security guard may settle on a non-conforming, but non-metaphysically threatening understanding of her as a 'masculine woman'. But what Halberstam is reporting is a moment where the security guard genuinely *does not know how to place* this person. This is, I take it, a moment of gender illegibility.[89]

Why do disambiguation mechanisms fail here? I want to suggest, borrowing from Heath Fogg Davis, that the key explanatory element is the "discretionary leeway" given to

[88] Like many other examples of gender illegibility, the contradictoriness between visual appearance and voice plays a very significant role here (Davis 55-56).
[89] For another clear example see the case of Khadijah Farmer in Davis 55-56.

certain agents to police and enforce gender segregation in these spaces (Davis 10). Our social norms and institutional arrangements give employees and officials the power to step in and "play the part of gender inspectors" in gender segregated bathrooms (142).[90] In contrast, in gender segregated clothing stores, for example, no such power is given. A complaint about a 'male intruder' in the women's section is unlikely to prompt any action by a security guard.[91] In bathrooms, when agents do decide to use their "discretionary leeway" normative gender ideals become highly salient. They are called up as ways to identify who counts as a man and as a woman (11). For example, in Halberstam's story, the woman interrogated in the bathroom stall is being evaluated according to normative ideals of "how we should appear in public as boys and girls, and men and women" (57, 2). In turn, this foregrounding of normative representations impacts the background processes of 'reading' that are part of social standing recognition. The salience of gender *ideals* changes the operative gender matrix in our social self-image. It makes it thicker and restricts the range of variation encompassed (e.g. women are a broader category than feminine women). The range of non-normative gendered configurations available is smaller and, consequently, the possibility of simply collapsing ambiguity into non-conformity diminishes. The use of gender normative representations as a 'measuring stick' also rigidifies them, so they are harder to expand. In this way, ambiguity is more likely to be left unresolved and turn into metaphysically threatening illegibility when normative gender ideals are brought to the fore.

Consider now the case of Serena Williams, the star tennis player. Williams has been in the media spotlight not just for her success, but also for her body, her behavior and her

[90] For other cases when administrative agents are given this power think of passport control agents or see the case of SEPTA bus drivers in Davis 1-7.
[91] The case of gender segregated fitting rooms is likely closer to the case of bathrooms, though.

appearance. She is notoriously competitive and driven in her games and has an athletic, muscular build. She has been routinely considered "manly" and unfeminine by commentators. For at least a decade, online conspiracy theories have made the case that "she was born a man" and has illegitimately infiltrated women's sports (Dawson; Hodgkindon). She has also been called a "gorilla", characterized as "savage" and routinely described in sub-human ways.[92] It is telling that defenses of Williams counter by emphasizing her displays of hyper femininity. Indeed, the last few years have seen an increased feminization of her public persona through photo shoots, forays into the fashion industry, a white wedding and her newfound role as a mother (Berckes; Stern).[93] Bringing her back into normative femininity seems to work, in this context, as a reassertion of "her success, her intelligence (…) her graciousness, her *humanity*" (Blay, my emphasis). This tying together of the gendered aspects of Williams' public image to her 'civilized' humanity is revealing. What is at stake is not just her femininity, but her very legibility as a (gendered) social subject.

Williams' slide into illegibility is temporary and contextual of course. Her athletic prowess shields her from these doubts in most contexts.[94] But when Williams is playing at her most muscular and athletic, there is a parallel with the case of the bathroom user. She brings together masculine and feminine social representations. Most people can resolve that ambiguity almost immediately and they never come to experience it as disturbing. This is where the two mechanisms of disambiguation come in. Serena Williams is seen by many as an uncommon

[92] Some examples, taken from tweets in 2012: "Today a giant *gorilla* escaped the zoo and won the womens title at Wimbledon… oh that was *Serena Williams*? My mistake. / I don't see how in the hell men find *Serena Williams* attractive?! She looks like a male *gorilla* in a dress, just saying! / *Serena Williams* is half man, half *gorilla*!" (Leonard). For a critical discussion of Williams' active confrontation of these kinds of insults and of racist reactions to her victories see Rankine.

[93] Williams had surprisingly lower endorsements compared to other female players until 2016 (Bain; Badenhausen).

[94] Social standing is not determined by a single interaction but by *patterns* of social standing recognition. So, even though these forms of treatment are part of Williams' social life, they are only *one* way in which she is treated.

woman, as routinely happens with female athletes. More interestingly from a feminist perspective, many people often expand their understanding of what women can do and be like by watching players like Williams. But, sometimes, both of these disambiguation mechanism falter, and ambiguity is experienced as metaphysically threatening categorical contradictoriness. Notice that sports are like bathrooms in an important way. They are gender segregated practices where agents – federations, regulators and even audience members – are given the power to police and enforce that segregation. And the stakes are purportedly higher, with fairness and athletic competitiveness on the line. One could therefore be tempted to explain Williams' slide into illegibility in the same way as 'the bathroom problem'. But not all highly muscular women in tennis are treated like Williams. Australian player Samantha Stotsur, known for her biceps, is not the object of the same intense controversy (Ra). The difference-maker seems to be race.

One way to think of the racialized dimension of this example is to note that there is a cultural history of representing African-Americans as metaphysically transgressive 'quasi-humans': not unlike the "Root Digger Indians" of Pastrana's show.[95] This is not the only way to think of races as hierarchical, but it is arguably a historically significant strand of racist social representations that still taints much of mainstream America's operative social self-image.[96] This helps explain how insults to Williams slide so easily from accusations of masculinity to words like "gorilla" and "savage". Ambiguity can veer into illegibility through the *compounding* logic of anomaly. Representational anomaly is a matter of degree. The more difficult one is to 'read' through our social self-image, the harder it is to discount or

[95] This is not the only way to think of the racialized dimension of this example. We could highlight instead stereotypes of Black femininity as hyper aggressive and their role in this slide to illegibility.
[96] This is not to say that race is fundamental in any racialized society. This remains an open question.

disambiguate their anomalous features. This is precisely what happens in the case of Julia Pastrana, who is displayed as transgressing several important distinctions in the social self-image: man/woman, human/animal, civilized/savage. Each of these axes exacerbated and consolidated the others, undercutting possibilities for disambiguation. In the case of Williams, there is a similar compounding effect. Instead of disambiguating Williams' gendered appearance, the audience takes it as evidence of a suspected further illegibility linked to a 'savage' amorphousness. Gender ambiguity is turned into illegibility through the compounding effect of this racialized representation.

Gender illegibility is a relatively rare and fleeting occurrence, though it is systematic and costly for those who are construed as illegible. Because we collapse potential anomalies into gender non-conformity and are able expand our gender categories, most cases of ambiguity are resolved. When these mechanisms fail, we see a slide into illegibility. I have suggested two kinds of situation where disambiguation may falter. In the 'bathroom problem', the discretion given to various agents to police gender segregation ends up foregrounding gender normative representations in a way that restricts possibilities for disambiguation. In the case of Williams, illegibility along gendered lines is amplified and compounded by shared racialized representations of 'quasi-humanity'. This is not to deny, however, that there are other (even more fleeting) cases of illegibility that do not have these features. When, for some circumstantial reason, ambiguity becomes hard to disambiguate, it can be experienced as illegibility, even if only for a moment.

5 Competing Accounts of the Role of Gender

We have then in place the theoretical resources to understand my proposed explanation of the role of gender: gender is a special social identity because *gender legibility is a precondition for*

full social standing. Gender is *fundamental*, for short. Before I continue, I want to first compare my view to other existing accounts. Relative to the flourishing philosophical debate on what gender *is*, this question of what *role* gender plays in our social life has been perhaps underappreciated, but not forgotten. Theorists like Judith Butler, Charlotte Witt and Linda Martín Alcoff have all remarked on the special role of gender and tried to give an explanatory articulation of it.[97] As a competing account, the idea that gender is a fundamental aspect of social identity has some key advantages.

Firstly, fundamentality explains what is special about gender in more concrete detail than accounts like Butler's. For Butler, one's "socially meaningful existence" depends on one's gendered existence (Butler 1987 132). Gender, as a social normative structure, works as a precondition for the *social meaningfulness* of social subjects. It plays this role by constituting a "condition of cultural intelligibility for any person" (Butler 2004 52). The problem is that Butler's view remains largely abstract. It leaves unexplained what, concretely, is the difference between a socially meaningful existence and a meaningless one. Butler's view also leaves us with the puzzle of understanding exactly how gender – as an abstract structure of cultural meaning – comes to endow concrete people with this sort of existence. It is at these junctures that the conceptual apparatus of social standing, and the accompanying notion of anomaly, yield a more detailed and informative picture. This is in part because the fundamentality explanation is more responsive to existing social scientific literature, drawing explicitly on existing analyses and case studies. This also makes it better positioned to make predictions and provide

[97] Other theorists that reference this special role of gender include Lois McNay, who says that "it is difficult, if not impossible, to have a socially meaningful existence outside of the norms of gender identity" (McNay 90). Anthony Appiah claims that racial identity is intuitively "apparently less conceptually central to who one is than gender ethical identities" (Appiah 497). Rogers Brubaker also states that "gender is not just a *social* structure but a *symbolic* structure, a cognitive lens through which we perceive and interpret the social world as well as our own embodied selves" (Brubaker 120). And John Stoltenberg claims that "sexual identity", as a man or a woman, "is among the most fundamental ideas with which we interpret our experience" (Stoltenberg 9, see also 194).

comparisons across cultural contexts. Nevertheless, I take Butler's view to be the one that most resembles my own proposal.

Another key virtue of the fundamentality explanation is its ability to capture something genuinely *special* about gender that cannot be said of many other social forms of identification. Although many social differences help determine the way we live in the social world, not many have the power to make and unmake us as social subjects. I take this to be a significant advantage over an account like Alcoff's, who claims that that race and gender "are fundamental rather than peripheral to the self – unlike, for example, one's identity as a Celtics fan or a Democrat" (Alcoff 6, see also 120, 126). In her most explicit explanation of this point, she says that:

> *(…) one's racial and gender identity is fundamental to one's social and familial interactions. It contributes to one's perspective on events (…) and it determines in large part one's status within the community and the way in which a great deal of what one says and does is interpreted by others. (92)*

The problem is that this fails to differentiate gender (and race) from other social identities. One's professional identity similarly determines one's "social and familial interactions", "perspective on events", "status within the community and the way in which a great deal of what one says and does is interpreted by others". But we do not register the same phenomena of pervasiveness or social anxiety about being a lawyer, a plumber, or a visual artist. That is because one's professional identity is not *fundamental*, even if it is extremely important.

Finally, my view does not take the role that gender plays in our social life to be unique. It leaves open the possibility that there are other fundamental identities in our social community and, in fact, draws a parallel between gender and other forms of social identification, namely, being RBD 'able-bodied'. Charlotte Witt's understanding of the role of gender rules out this possibility. In *The Metaphysics of Gender,* Witt starts from "the centrality of gender in our

individual lived experiences" to offer a systematic and detailed account of what gender does in our social life (Witt 2011 xiii). She argues that gender is a "mega social role" that organizes our other social roles into a coherent set of norms that apply to us as "social individuals" (90-91). It is crucial to her argument that we, as social individuals, need one mega social role and *only one* (97-102). However, this view is implausibly strong. It is telling, for instance, that in the case of gender reveals, there are similar phenomena to do with physical typicality, with the concern for whether the baby has 'ten fingers and toes'. Intuitively, gender seems to have a special, but not necessarily unique, status.

The fundamentality explanation is more detailed than competing accounts, more responsive to social scientific literature, and it captures something special, though not unique, about being gendered. Nevertheless, for it to be more than a plausible hypothesis, it must actually shed light on the phenomena that I pointed to in section 1 as indicative of gender's special role: *social anxiety* and *pervasiveness*.

6 Explaining Social Anxiety Using Fundamentality

> *Few things are more uncomfortable than seeing someone whose gender you can't discern (…). (Wilchins 56)*

One of the things that marks gender as special is *social anxiety*: gender ambiguity is often the source of deep-seated, but unarticulated discomfort and even panic. Some of this discomfort was already present in the examples of 'the bathroom problem' and the media coverage of Serena Williams. In this section, I will offer some more concrete examples of *social anxiety* and argue that we can account for them by appealing to the notion of gender illegibility.

For an updated and amplified version of what Halberstam called the "bathroom problem" in 1998, consider the more contemporary 'bathroom laws'. In March 2016, the North Carolina legislature passed a controversial bill forbidding citizens from using public bathrooms

that do not match the "gender" marked on their birth certificate. The defenders of the bill claimed it was aimed at protecting women and children from dangerous intrusions by "biological males" and at "preserving a sense of privacy". But the bill was met with outrage and resistance. Protesters pointed out that forcing trans people to use bathrooms corresponding to their "birth gender" would put them at risk of harassment and even brutal violence. The root of the problem, one trans woman in North Carolina said, is that people would be "freaked out" to see her enter the men's bathroom.[98] As one headline announced after the law was passed: "uncomfortable encounters have begun" (Grinberg).

As a law against sexual predators, the bill was almost nonsensical.[99] However, as Katherine Franke, director of Columbia Law School's Center for Gender and Sexuality Law, explained, "the anxiety isn't men in women's bathrooms, it's about masculinity in the wrong place" (Dastagir). What motivates this kind of legislative initiatives[100] seems to be a deep sense of discomfort with an "extremely new social norm" around gender change.[101] Those opposing the bill claimed that, in fact, trans people have been managing this discomfort as best as possible for years. They often present as one gender, use the designated bathroom and no one even notices (Davis 63-64). The bill was misguided because it thwarted these efforts. Nonetheless, what no one in this public debate seemed to doubt was that these bathroom encounters were and would remain profoundly "uncomfortable".

[98] So-called 'trans panic defenses' pick up on this socially shared anxiety. See "Gay and Trans Panic Defenses Resolution" by the American Bar Association.
[99] The bill is even more ineffective when you consider that, in North Carolina, citizens can alter the sex markers on their birth certificates (Davis 57).
[100] There have now been several legislative initiatives similar to the North Carolina example. See Kralik.
[101] Public debate revolved around trans identified citizens. But masculine-looking women, regardless of trans identification, are actually one of the most frequent targets of this discomfort. See Davis 57 and Halberstam 20-21.

Anxiety often takes a much more mundane form. In a recent lecture, Judith Butler recounted with humor a situation where a hotel employee became visibly distressed.

> *In London I stayed at a hotel (…) I just arrived, I wasn't even unpacked (…) and there is a knock on the door. And a man is there and he looks at me and he says "excuse me, mister, madam, mister, madam [repeats stuttering until visibly agitated/distress]. Couldn't get through it. Wanted to check the mini bar, apparently. (…) And I was in a bad mood (…) I lean forward and ask "Is it really important to determine my gender in order to check the mini bar?". (…) He said, "of course not, of course not! Mister, madam, mister, madam…. [laughs] (Butler 2015 min. 32)*[102]

Not only must the man get to the bottom of the matter – what gender to assign his interlocutor – but this seems to leave him "in panic (…) trying to handle the anxiety" (Butler 2013). I take this to be an illustrative but not idiosyncratic example. Similar anecdotal cases are common, as are those of even milder reactions. The rise of practices of social introduction that include gendered pronouns is plausibly, partially, a way to manage these situations.[103] These practices include asking for someone's pronouns when meeting them for the first time – "My name is Dan, and my pronouns are he and him. What about you?" – having everyone introduce themselves by name and pronoun in classrooms and avoiding 'calling roll'. In the last few years, these conventions have been embraced and institutionalized by numerous universities.[104] Designed to prevent emotional distress, they have as an interesting consequence that *explicit gender positionality* is now one of the very first pieces of information that one is expected to receive and provide in these social exchanges.

[102] There is an obvious classist element to this interaction that Butler acknowledges, stressing how guilty she felt later about not being sensitive to it at that moment.
[103] I am not here denying that most people are at least partially motivated by genuine respect towards others in these practices. For more data see Brubaker 44.
[104] These examples come from a Bryn Mawr College document "Asking for and Using Pronouns: Making Spaces More Inclusive". See also Anderson 2016.

The fundamentality of gender explains these phenomena by appealing to gender illegibility and its significance. In cases like Butler's, we may think there is some social inaptitude at play. But there is also genuine uncertainty: there is little for the man at the door to go on when trying to settle on Butler's gender. All he has access to is her visual appearance. Note that this is also often the case in social introductions. The man at the door hesitates then because he is unable to quickly settle on a non-anomalous interpretation of his interlocutor. But why does he start stuttering instead of just moving on and avoiding gendered words? Gender illegibility *strains* and even disrupts the 'reading' of social subjects through our social self-image. Given that this 'reading' is crucial to the process of social standing recognition, what gender illegibility disrupts is the very recognition of others as social interlocutors that forms the background of all social interactions. In this way, the strain in legibility introduced by a figure like Butler is bound to be felt as a *difficulty in interaction*. One cannot simply move on because what has been undermined is the fluidity and normalcy of social relations.[105]

What should we say then about cases like the North Carolina bathroom laws? Here the anxiety is not just about interaction. Much of the phenomenon revolves around quasi-imaginary figures that haunt the public space. The sexual predator passing as a (trans) woman to get into the girls' locker rooms is largely unsubstantiated as a systematic phenomenon, but it still constitutes a powerful rhetorical device (Davis 73). One way to read this imaginary 'trans predator' is as a manifestation of the very possibility of anomalous illegibility, made culturally salient by a context of rapid change in public norms around gender. The attitudes fueling phenomena like the bathroom laws are then characteristic responses to the haunting interpellation of anomaly. 'Trans predators' are dangerous and disturbing, but also the object

[105] Note that this parallels the social anxiety introduced by RBD disability as a strain on social standing recognition.

of an endless fixation – hence the need to be vigilant and to legislate. Finally, understanding gender as fundamental sheds light on the strangely diffuse and inchoate nature of this social anxiety. What people are afraid of is not physical or even economic threat. It is a (barely imaginable) threat to their very system of cultural and symbolic order.

7 Explaining Pervasiveness Using Fundamentality

> *(…) anything and everything can be gendered, for example: ships, clothing, sexual positions, pens, bowls, hand positions, head tilts, vocal inflection, body hair, and different sports. (Wilchins 25)*

As I mentioned in section 1, gender seems to be everywhere. Indeed, expectations about how we should sit and how we should walk are gendered, as are norms regarding how we should manage our professional life, family life, friendships and the conflicts between them (Young; Witt 2011 93-97; Davis 16). Perhaps this is unsurprising. But consider the way gender distinctions shape norms in more surprising contexts like, for instance, academic Philosophy. There is a commonly understood norm that attire should be unimportant for philosophers (Weinberg). However, when it comes to *women* philosophers, the norm seems changed. As one forum on the blog "The Philosophy Smoker" showed, "the consensus is that a woman philosopher's professional attire should include make-up, discreet jewelry, and low heels, but no "hooker" boots, tight sweaters or plunging necklines" (Witt 2012 2).[106] The norms of hegemonic femininity, with their emphasis on attention to attire and respectability, seem to trump the norms of academic philosophy. The fact that this priority relation is widely understood shows that this is a genuine social norm that women are evaluable under, regardless of their individual beliefs or feelings. Thus, being a (socially) good philosopher is a gendered

[106] This particular online forum aimed to advise women job candidates in Philosophy. It contained "a fascinating compendium of almost 100 comments many of which describe in some detail how a woman ought to present herself as an aspiring philosopher" (Witt 2012 2).

matter, just like being a good friend, consumer, politician, citizen, athlete or menial laborer. Part of the rich legacy of feminist scholarship is a systematic uncovering of these 'double standards'.

Gender distinctions have also come to constitute what is known as "pink taxes": prices differ for haircuts, dry cleaning, deodorant, entry to clubs (an exceptional "blue tax"), and even toys. Gender differentiation in prices penalizing women is most prominent in grooming and clothing products – hardly surprising given our shared notions of masculinity and femininity (McGee; Kurtzleben). Prices aside, gender differentiated marketing is, mysteriously, a winning strategy for just about every product, including children's chocolate, ballpoint pens, ear plugs, tape, sandwich bags and computer cables (Sharp; Nias). The bratwurst sausage 'for him' and 'for her' might be the ultimate clue that our social world is ubiquitously structured by gender (Gates). The question then is why are so many norms and roles, in so many domains of our social life, recognizably *gendered*?

To see how fundamentality may help here, consider a precondition for social standing in some Aboriginal Northern Australian societies: scarification patterns.[107]

> *You must have the cuts before you can trade anything, before you can get married, before you can sing ceremonial songs and before you can blow a didgeridoo at big burial ceremonies. In the past, everyone had to have all these cuts and a hole in their nose. If they didn't, they were 'cleanskin' or unbranded, and unbranded people couldn't do anything. (…) Yidumduma Bill Harnie, Wardaman Aboriginal Corporation, Northern Territory, Australia. ("Aboriginal Scarification")*

[107] Although very often scars are markers of *status*, there is evidence that they primarily marked *social standing* in some Aboriginal societies. For example, literature on the Bathurst and Melville Islands at the beginning of the 20th century suggests that scars marked social membership but did not track "totem, class or particular tribe" (Spencer 43). Although we lack enough anthropological evidence to be certain of how scarification worked, I take this to be a very plausible reading.

In societies like these, the function of scars is to bring the human body in line with the social self-image. We can then imagine that those without scars, the "unbranded", suffered a type of social isolation akin to less-than-full social standing. Thus, gender legibility and scarification are parallel as preconditions for being a social subject. However, there is one conspicuous difference. Scars are made one day, in an initiation ritual, when the child reaches a certain age. They then act as a 'marker of entry' into the social world. But, in this Northern Australian example, scarification does not structure interactions, norms, expectations and social practices. Scars are not intuitively *pervasive* in this society, and gender is not just a 'mark of entry' for us. The difference, I argue, lies in what it takes for scars to be legible and for gender to be legible.

One thing that is common in scarification practices is that the ensuing marks usually continue to have a certain amount of visibility. This must be so to avoid confusion between 'branded' and 'unbranded' people. Thus, faces and exposed torsos are scarred, not inner thighs. In the example of this Aboriginal society, if one happened to have one's scars hidden accidentally, this would probably generate anxiety in interlocutors encountering them for the first time. To avoid this disruption, scars should be visible at all times. There is then a *constant perceptibility requirement* on those things that qualify an individual for social standing. Only then can they play their part in the 'reading' of social subjects through our social self-image.[108] Gender is also subject to this requirement.[109] This is what Halberstam calls "the cardinal rule of gender: one must be readable at a glance" (Halberstam 23).[110] Gender distinctions must be

[108] Here I follow Erving Goffman in using 'perceptibility' as a more accurate alternative to 'visibility' (Goffman 48).
[109] In the case of gender there are extra incentives for this perceptibility insofar as it allows one to demonstrate gender conformity and reap rewards linked to gender hierarchy. I am bracketing this here.
[110] See also Davis 5 and Lorber 23.

'everywhere' in our social life for this to be the case. *Pervasiveness* is gender legibility satisfying the *constant perceptibility requirement*.

What turns the *perceptibility* of gender into *pervasiveness* is the relational nature of gendered positions. Gender is a complex *relational* matrix. To be positionable in it is to be positionable in a feminine or masculine way *within social relations*. Consider, for example, how one's delicate femininity or rebellious tomboyishness always involve dressing *like* certain people, playing *with* other people, talking up or down *to* people – relating to others in socially mediated ways. I take this to be what is meant by saying that gender has an important *performative* dimension, that it is something that we *do* in a social setting (Butler 2013, min 16; Wilchins 24-25). Gender is primarily "a mode of social relations" and gender distinctions are always "adverbial, normative, relative and relational" (Théry 12, my translation). Given this, there is a constant pressure on social practices to be gender structured. Only then can they afford us a backdrop against which we can be 'read' as having a gender.[111] Pervasive gender structuring of norms and roles forms then a necessary backdrop for constant gender legibility. For one's gender to be perceptible at all times, there needs to be a large amount of social practices in which we can be positioned in gendered ways.

Both scar legibility and gender legibility are preconditions for full social standing. Given this, they must both be constantly perceptible. But what it takes to be perceptible for these two elements is quite different. The distinction scarred/non-scarred is much easier to display. It is also clearer, and less prone to ambiguity. Gender distinctions, however, can only

[111] This raises again the problem of how to have a non-binary gendered social identity. Given that there are no (or very few) non-binary gendered positions in social relations, it is hard if not impossible to be 'read' as having a non-binary gendered social identity, even if one identifies as having a non-binary gender.

be displayed by our participation in gendered social practices. Gender's pervasiveness is then a richer counterpart to the scar's constant visibility as a precondition for full social standing.

8 Our Attachment to Gender: Implications for Feminist Politics

In the last two sections, I have argued that thinking of gender as a fundamental aspect of social identity adequately captures the special role that gender has in our social life. It explains *social anxiety* and *pervasiveness* in terms of gender legibility's mediation of social standing recognition. Fundamentality also explains why the (unambiguous) gender of the unborn child seems so central to expecting parents. Gendering is the point at which "you to start to really dream about what this little human is going to be like", it is a precondition for the intelligibility of the child *qua* social subject. By way of conclusion, I would like to sketch some political implications of this social theoretical account, which I will develop in next chapter.

Why should we be concerned, politically speaking, with the fundamentality of gender? The role that gender plays as a precondition for full social standing is an important linchpin that keeps gender-based domination in place. It is a driving force behind a type of insidious and ongoing backlash phenomena driven, not by hierarchical motivations, but by our *shared attachment to gender* as part of our social metaphysical order. These backlash phenomena attempt to reinstate clear and highly recognizable gendered norms and meanings and usually end up reviving various forms of patriarchal hierarchy.

Return to the gender reveal parties. Even if we understand why parents engage in the practice, there is a further question about why this became a trend when it did (i.e. around 2010, see appendix). Surely the timing of the phenomenon is partially linked to the rise of social media platforms like Instagram. But, as one online commentator put it:

> *(…) it can't be sheer coincidence that the internet went nuts over an Army Special Forces member and his fiancée blowing up a box of Tannerite and chalk*

> *to celebrate their fetus' blood-test results during the same week that North Carolina sued the U.S. Department of Justice over whether trans people in that state can use restrooms and locker rooms that correspond to their gender identities. (…) When a cherished social norm is starting to fragment, perhaps the best way to save it is to aim a rifle at it and pull the trigger. (Winter)*

Indeed, there is something of a reactionary feel to the gender reveal trend. The last half decade has seen the rise of celebrity gender-neutral parenting the increased debate around 'trans children' and 'theybies' (Morris).[112] In the face of these open and celebrated critiques of social practices around children and parenting, gender reveal parties seem like a way to re-establish clear shared notions of gender difference in this domain. In the process, they also re-establish highly patriarchal roles and norms.

This urge to react to a perceived fragmentation of gender norms has to do with *pervasiveness.* As I have argued, because gender is a precondition for full social standing there is a systematic pressure towards the gender differentiation of social practice. Without this, we would not be constantly 'readable' through the social matrix of gender. The erosion of gendered social norms is therefore felt as a threat to our very shared practices of social standing recognition. It is also perceived as dangerous to social coordination in those domains, which works along gendered lines. Phenomena like gender reveals are driven by a need to preserve social intelligibility and coordination, even if this means perpetuating patriarchal oppression. In the next chapter, I will argue that movements like early 2000s 'raunch feminism' are particularly clear and important examples of these social dynamics. They evidence the same doubling down on gender hierarchy, not because one is necessarily profiting from it, but because it serves as a basis for social coordination. In this way, the fundamentality of gender

[112] Theybies are "babies whose parents had decided not to reveal their sex, who used they/them pronouns for their children, and whose goal was to create an early childhood free of gendered ideas of how a child should dress, act, play, and be" (Morris). Thanks to Mercedes Corredor for this example. A search on Google Trends shows interesting correlations between some related key words and searches about gender reveals. See appendix.

constitutes a major obstacle to gender equality that must be addressed by an effective feminist strategy.

Appendix

The following graphs show how often some keyword have been searched on Google by internet users, over time. Data source: Google Trends (https://www.google.com/trends). Accessed last September 21, 2018.

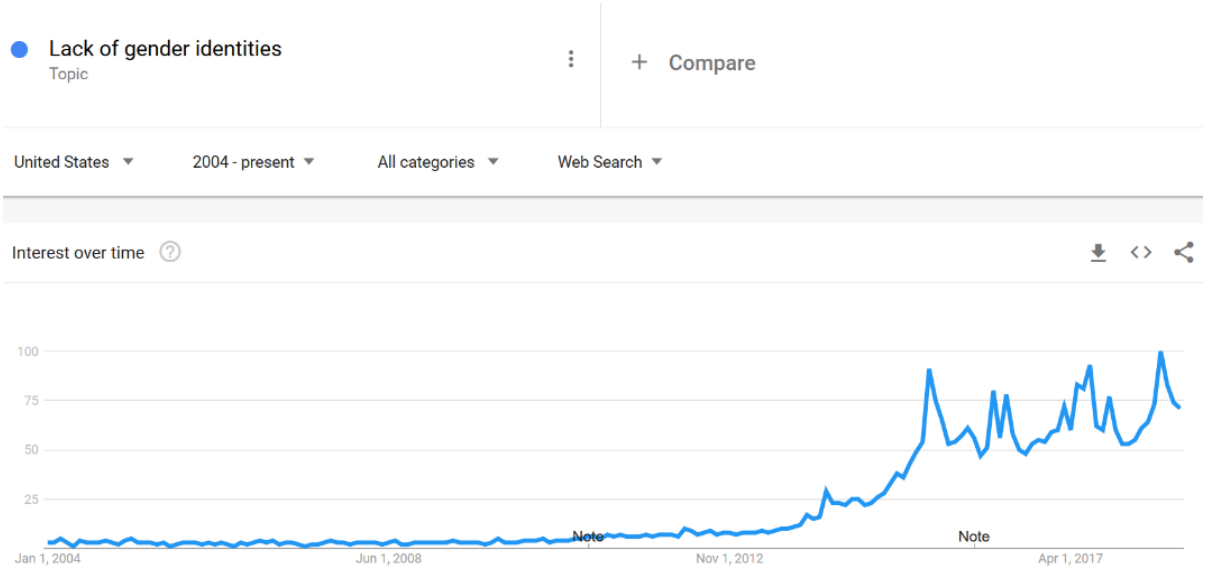

Figure 9 Google Trends graph for searches of the term "lack of gender identities"2004-present.

Figure 10 Google Trends graph for searches of the term "gender reveal"2004-present.

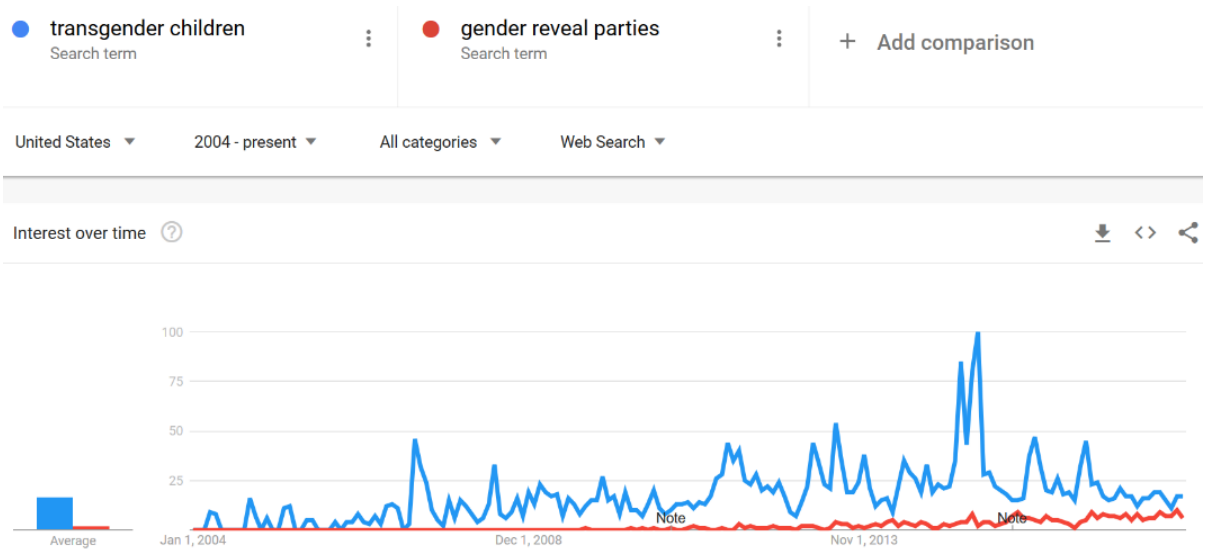

Figure 11 Google Trends graph comparing searches of terms "transgender children" and "gender reveal parties" 2004-present.

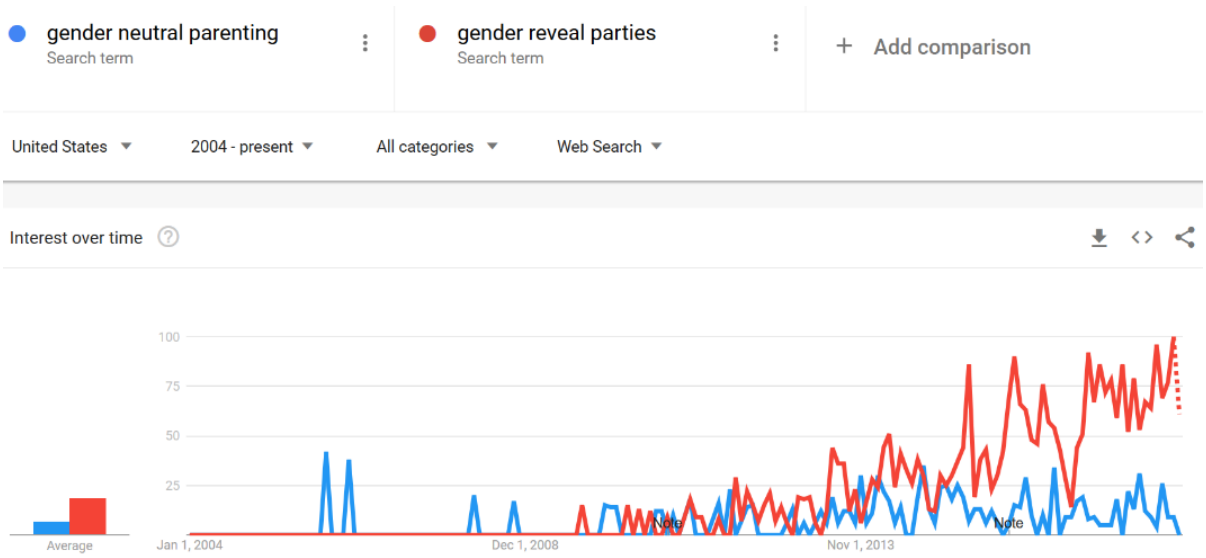

Figure 12 Google Trends graph comparing searches of terms "gender neutral parenting" and "gender reveal parties" 2004-present.

Chapter V Misogyny and (Post-)Feminist Backlash

In her 1991 book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi described what she saw as a large-scale, reactionary push back against the feminist victories of the sixties and seventies. In the fifteenth anniversary edition of the book, published in 2006, Faludi wrote a new preface, and traced the contours of a new and more sinister problem than the original backlash. She asked:

> *[While the conservative backlash campaign continued during the nineties] what were the rest of the nation's women doing? Fighting back? (…) Alas, they were running in a very different race. As it happened, the right wing wasn't the only demographic pursuing a distorted version of feminism. So was much of mainstream female America.* ***Which is why, as I say, there are some things worse than backlash.*** *(Faludi xiii, my emphasis)*

Indeed, the early twenty-first century saw a surprising rise in women-led practices and movements that appeared to reinstate hierarchical gender relations: from the return of 'purity culture', to the newfound popularity of corsets. One could say that this is nothing new: women have always enforced their own submission, to some extent. However, what is unique about these movements is their 'backlash-like' quality, the way they rise in the aftermath and in reaction to major changes in the status of women.[113]

Some of these movements claim we live in a 'post-feminist' world, where equality has been achieved and where we can now embrace these patriarchal ways of life as a matter of apolitical 'personal choice' (Anderson 2015 1, 6). But the most perplexing groups are those that seem *to recreate hierarchy in the name of feminism*. These are women with a robust

[113] For a conceptual analysis of 'backlash' see Cudd 2002.

understanding of feminist politics and theory, and who strongly identify as feminists. They call attention to genuine issues around equality and female pleasure, highlighting the importance and value of women's sexual expression and desire. And yet, their activism consists in a celebratory embrace of practices historically criticized as oppressive by feminists: from striptease and pole-dancing, to mainstream commercial pornography.[114] I will call this wave of confounding early twenty-first century feminist movements *(post-)feminist backlash*.[115]

The question these cultural phenomena pose to any feminist theory of oppression is a classic and difficult one: how is hierarchy sustained over time? And, more particularly, how do we explain the sometimes disconcerting role that women seem to play in sustaining it? Kate Manne's recent work on misogyny attempts to provide an answer to these questions. Manne characterizes misogyny as a property of social environments where women who are perceived as violating patriarchal norms are met with hostile reactions. This hostility 'keeps women down' and systematically stifles their efforts to exit their subordinate position. In this chapter, I will argue that misogyny cannot adequately explain (post-)feminist backlash. (Post-)feminism is animated by a different logic: that of *meaning vertigo*[116], a form of discomfort and disorientation about social meanings and social coordination. This is a *distinct phenomenon*, independent of misogyny and that calls for a different type of political intervention.

To show this, I will first briefly explain Manne's account of misogyny. Secondly, I will introduce (post-)feminist backlash. I will point to various relevant trends here: from 'new

[114] Feminists have largely but never unanimously condemned these practices. For defenses of pornography see Cornell, Kipnis, Paglia, Royalle, Willis. For a recent feminist defense of pole-dancing see Holland.
[115] The use of the parenthesis in (post-)feminist backlash distinguishes it from post-feminist backlash: backlash by those who do *not* identify as feminists and see feminism as redundant given the alleged reality of gender equality. Post-feminists see patriarchal behavior, like stripping, as an individual apolitical choice. For an example see Taylor 2006.
[116] The term is modeled on Manne's use of 'social vertigo' in her book proposal and drafts, available online before the publication of *Down Girl.*

burlesque' performance, to the feminist fandom of porn star James Deen and the more recent 'celebrity feminism'. I will focus, however, on an illustrative example: the 'raunch feminism' of CAKE, a group famous for its 'sex-positive' parties, held from 2000 to 2007. I will then argue that an account like Manne's, focused on penalties and rewards, cannot adequately explain why the women of CAKE surprisingly turned to raunch as a form of feminist activism. I will propose instead a different story, one that draws on gender's fundamentality and its effects.

Recall that, because gender is fundamental there is a *constant perceptibility requirement* that it must satisfy. In other words, for gender legibility to function as a precondition for full social standing, it must be the case that one's gender legibility is constantly perceptible to others in the social world. We can see that the same happens with other preconditions for full social standing, like having scarification marks (in Northern Australia) or being RBD 'able-bodied' (in our own society) These are straightforwardly perceptible modes of variation. In the previous chapter, I explained that gender is different from these other preconditions in that it is *relational*. One can only be gender legible insofar as one is relating to others in ways that are mediated by gendered norms and meanings. This is what explains the *pervasiveness* of gendered distinctions in our social practices. Gender's fundamentality exerts a constant pressure on our social practices to be gendered, i.e. to have gender as one of their central principles of organization. Only then can they afford us the socially normative backdrop we need to be constantly gender legible. It is through this pressure that gender comes to be central to so many domains of our social life.

The explanation I want to give of phenomena like raunch feminism emphasizes this entrenched, continued centrality of gendered distinctions to our social normative life, even as gendered social meanings become increasingly contested. This tension triggers the vertiginous

sense of disorientation that I call *meaning vertigo* – the reactionary impulse at the heart of (post)-feminist backlash. I will argue that meaning vertigo stands in the way of women's liberation even in the absence of misogyny, but that it can also rekindle and exacerbate misogynistic trends. This both complicates the answer to Manne's main question – "why is misogyny still a thing?" (Manne 2017 xii) – and suggests the need and opportunity for a feminist political intervention that positively articulates a new vision of sexuality. The contours of this kind of intervention will be the subject of the next chapter.

1 Kate Manne on Misogyny

Kate Manne's recent work on misogyny aims to develop an ameliorative account[117] of the concept that can do useful feminist work (41-43). She wants to reject what she calls the "naïve conception", according to which misogyny is like a phobia: an individual, psychological attitude of hatred of all women, or at least women generally, simply because they are women (32, 49). Manne compellingly argues that, among other problems, this naïve conception is too narrow and apolitical (45-49).[118] Consider a patriarchal social environment where most men are served by some women in a docile manner.[119] Why would any such man develop a general hatred of women? The absurd conclusion is that, according to the naïve conception, misogyny will be a marginal occurrence in well-functioning patriarchies.

In light of these shortcomings, Manne proposes a different conception of misogyny, moving away from a narrow psychological notion and towards the current feminist usage (34, 81). Misogyny is then primarily a property of a social environment: a misogynistic social

[117] For an account of ameliorative conceptual analyses see Haslanger 2012 376.
[118] It also makes misogyny epistemically inaccessible, hard to diagnose and prosecute Manne 2017 44-45.
[119] According to Manne, a patriarchal social environment is one where widely-supported, extensive institutions and social structures are such that "most men will be dominant over some woman or women" in virtue of their gender (Manne 2016).

environment functions to enforce patriarchal social relations by visiting hostility and social adversity on women who are held as violating patriarchal standards, norms and expectations (13, 19, 33-34, 63). Individuals and their behavior are derivatively misogynistic insofar as they reflect or perpetuate misogyny in their social context, regardless of their psychological state (66).[120] In all its diverse manifestations, misogyny works as the "law enforcement" branch of the patriarchal order, defending it against women's non-compliance (78).

It is worth emphasizing, firstly, that this is a capacious conception of misogyny. It includes any structural mechanism, practice or form of treatment that systematically *functions* to enforce patriarchal relations in the face of non-compliance (34, 68).[121] Examples range from subtle moralizing to killing sprees. Secondly, misogyny is "*the* system" that ultimately perpetuates the subordination of women (33, my emphasis). It is true that patriarchy enlists other ways to stabilize hierarchical relations, namely by promoting the internalization by women of certain norms and narratives as natural and valuable.[122] But Manne claims that these 'soft' strategies are systematically insufficient (47). You may socialize women into submission but, ultimately, the threat of punishment is what guarantees compliance. Finally, misogyny is not a sui generis phenomenon, but a version of a more general phenomenon of hierarchical insecurity. Consider for instance, how the entrance of a very small number of women into a traditionally male workforce may cause men to feel like they are being replaced, even if that does not track reality. These insecure men are then likely to lash out against women.[123] But this

[120] Manne argues that we should reserve public use of the term "misogynist" for "overachievers" in this category (Manne 2017 66).
[121] Manne's denial of a "universal experience of misogyny" means that "misogynistic forces can be distinctive for girls and women located in different positions in social space" (19, 64). This is a distinctively intersectional feature of her account.
[122] Manne calls these mechanisms 'sexism': "the "justificatory" branch of a patriarchal order, which consists in ideology that has the overall function of *rationalizing* and *justifying* patriarchal social relations" (79).
[123] The women they lash out against do not have to be their new colleagues (20, 63, 68).

"inchoate discomfort and hostility" is not peculiar to men. We could plausibly run the same example with other well-entrenched hierarchies (61). Misogyny is therefore no different from aristocratic or white-supremacist reactionary movements, in this respect.

This analysis of misogyny has two key upshots. Firstly, it explains women's enforcement of their own subordination. On Manne's account, misogyny works by imposing penalties on women who do not conform to patriarchal expectations, and by bestowing rewards (at the very least by an absence of penalty) on those who do (19, 111).[124] It is, for any woman, a "hostile force field that forms part of the backdrop to her actions (…). She may or may not face these hostile potential consequences, depending on how she acts" (19). Given this, it is unsurprising that women will have internalized misogynistic attitudes and engage in misogynistic enforcement themselves (256). They are likely to be excessively prone to guilt and shame if they violate patriarchal norms. They will probably police other women's bodies and behavior, distance themselves from 'bad' women, actively signal their loyalty to patriarchal figures and try to excel by patriarchal standards (192, 256, 263-266, 19). Importantly, Manne's view here is in line with a broader and influential approach to explaining 'self-inflicted' oppression in terms of rational choice and adaptation. This approach maintains that the unjust social distribution of penalties and rewards explains the perpetuation of hierarchy by those at the bottom, through their individually rational choices and adaptations. One of the best known articulations of the approach is Ann Cudd's account of "oppression by choice" (Cudd 2006 146).[125] Cudd claims that even if women do not take their subordinate position to be 'natural' or desirable, there are costs and benefits that give them good reason to remain in it. In her central

[124] Manne prefers not to describe the valorization of women who comply with patriarchal expectations as 'misogyny' "lest the label loose its affective connotations". She considers "soft misogyny" as a better alternative (192 fn 7).

[125] For another example of this approach see Joseph Heath on "The Myth of the Beauty Myth" (Heath 368-370). For an articulation and critique see Allen.

example, women in contemporary Western societies, "in the face of certain prejudices and economic forces of oppression", systematically choose occupations with lower wages and sustain the vicious cycle of powerlessness that oppresses them (146-154). Another way to put this is to say that there is a misogynistic backdrop of socio-economic penalties that works as a coercive element, co-opting women to sustain their oppression by choosing low paying jobs. These background structural disincentives constitute then the ultimate obstacle to women's liberation on views like Ann Cudd's and Kate Manne's.

Secondly, Manne's analysis allows us to understand why misogyny peaks at times of unprecedented gender equality. Misogyny is reactionary because it is triggered by the perceived violation of patriarchal norms by women.[126] Therefore, we should expect a rise in misogyny at times when there is a rise in violations: ongoing enforcement becomes then Faludi's "backlash" (Manne 2017 101, 156). For any successful stride we make towards gender equality, there will be inevitable fall out, given the logic of misogyny. And this has important normative implications. It is clear we have reason to oppose misogyny (27). But it is extremely unclear how to do it. On one hand, if we try to make certain misogynistic moves socially unacceptable, or to "call out" misogynists, we will be effectively questioning gender hierarchy.[127] This will only trigger more violent and dangerous misogynistic reaction (28, 289-290). On the other hand, if we try to appease misogynists we will be feeding their sense of patriarchal entitlement (290). This is again a self-defeating strategy. In light of this, Manne offers her account as only

[126] The perceived violation may be in the past or merely foreseen. Misogyny may be pre-emptive (Manne 2017 19, 63).
[127] Women 'calling out' misogyny will be seen as withholding feminine attention, admiration and respect, stealing the 'moral spotlight' and refusing to be "moral listeners". These are all violations of patriarchal norms (289-290).

a "moral diagnosis" with no normative prescriptions regarding how to go about combating misogyny (28-29, 287).[128]

Feminist progress is genuinely dangerous and difficult in the face of misogynistic hostility. However, by complicating the framework within which we understand the perpetuation of patriarchal hierarchy, we can point to other sites and modes of feminist political action that can circumvent this dichotomy between overt moral condemnation and misplaced sympathy

2 Raunch Feminism as (Post-)Feminist Backlash

I would like to turn now to a specific example of what I am calling (post-)feminist backlash, which seems to challenge the adequacy of this misogyny-centered explanation of how women perpetuate gender hierarchy. In her 2005 book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs,* Ariel Levy documents the rise and embrace by mainstream American women of what she terms "raunch culture". Raunch culture is a heavily sexualized, hierarchical and heteronormative paradigm of gendered behavior, shaped by the norms of the sex entertainment industry. Examples of it are the mainstream popularity of 'Lad Mags', pornographic actors, vaginoplasty surgeries and 'fitness pole dancing' studios (Levy 1-3, 23). The most puzzling example of all is women's participation in these practices *in the name of feminism*.

For "raunch feminists" (Levy 76), raunch is as an empowering, liberating ideal that ought to be actively celebrated.[129] It is important to note that these are not simply women who see raunch as *compatible* with feminism. Their claim is stronger: for them, raunch *is* feminist activism. It is not an individual choice but a collective social movement. It is firmly placed

[128] She suspects it will be a "piecemeal process", a "messy, retail business that permits few wholesale answer" (29-30).
[129] Not all uses of raunch in feminist activism are part of 'raunch feminism'. SlutWalks may be an example of a non-celebratory use of raunch.

within the broader feminist project of sexual liberation as a positive assertion of women's desires as sexual beings. Raunch feminism sees itself as a cutting-edge movement. At the same time, it strongly echoes feminist authors of the eighties who emphasized free sexual expression and who highlighted that "women are agents (…) who desire, seek out and enjoy sexuality" (Duggan, Hunter and Vance 1995 63).[130] What is distinctive of raunch feminism, though, is its insistence on the liberatory potential of forms of sexual expression that come almost directly from the mainstream sex entertainment industry.

CAKE was a 'sex-positive' club, founded by two young women, Emily Kramer and Melinda Gallagher[131], in New York City. The general agenda involved reclaiming female pleasure and educating women to feel more comfortable with their body and sexuality, largely in heterosexual contexts. The club provided members with a weekly "newsletter installment of editorials about emerging female sexual culture", launched books and promoted very popular parties from 2000 to 2007 in New York, San Francisco and London (CAKE). The gatherings were billed as "feminism in action": men paid double and had to be accompanied by a woman. The themes included 'porn parties' and "striptease-a-thons" (Levy 71, 75). For the founders, this was a feminist space, an environment over which women had control (Krum).

> *It feels so empowering (…). The mentality of the whole organization is supposed to give you the feeling that I can define sex by my terms, and you can't come into my club if I don't want you to. (McGregor)*

These were the words of a female Princeton University senior[132] visiting CAKE who was enjoying "her newfound power as she stood in line to get in, while guys begged her for an

[130] A similar point is made by Candida Royalle: "I wanted to make films that say we all have a right to pleasure, and that women, especially, have a right to our own pleasure" (Royalle 54). See also Bright, Califia and Rubin.
[131] Matthew Kramer is also a co-founder of CAKE. Kramer rarely appears in press about the group and is reported to have joined his sister (Emily Kramer) and partner (Gallagher) at a later stage of the development of CAKE (Huang).
[132] CAKE promoted a workshop at Princeton University, prompting protests and debate (Walker; McGregor; Renny)

invite" (McGregor). Indeed, reports suggest that there was no lack of male attendance at the parties (McGregor; Levy 72).[133] The result, was often a strangely familiar panorama of scantily clad women on strip poles and fully clothed young men observing them (Levy 72; Siegel 155). For Levy and many others, it was unclear why this was any different from what she called "the old objectification" (Levy 81).

CAKE is a particularly fascinating (post-)feminist backlash example. Firstly, it was very popular, and, secondly, surprisingly profitable (Globerman). The club received wide attention by mainstream media, with *The Guardian* referring to it as a "sex empire". Indeed, by 2004, fifteen thousand women had become members, a privilege for which they had to pay a steep annual fee and submit a personal essay. CAKE was highly effective in their self-professed goal of "mainstream messaging". As Kramer said of their logo (a "sexy cartoon silhouette of a lean, curvy lady"), "women respond well to it, it resonates" (Levy 79, 81; Krum). Thirdly, Kramer and Gallagher were an educated, articulate duo with seemingly genuine feminist commitments. Both daughters of feminists, Kramer had graduated from Columbia University as a Gender Studies major and Gallagher had obtained a master's degree in Human Sexuality from NYU (Huang; Krum; Levy 74, 78). In their many interviews, the two women discussed social attitudes towards sex and depictions of sexuality "as dominated by men" in "critical feminist texts" (Levy 79; Sales). Their vision of CAKE was an avowedly political one from the start.

However, Kramer and Gallagher are far from idiosyncratic. Many other contemporary trends share a similar 'sexy' (post-)feminist flavor. Pinup fashion from the forties and fifties, for instance, has been embraced by young feminists as subversive and liberating.[134] Pinup glamour photo shoots have been reclaimed as politically "empowering", improving self-esteem

[133] The percentage of men at CAKE parties has been reported as, on average, 30-40% (Nie).
[134] For a history and defense of the 'feminist pinup' see Maria Elena Buszek's *Pinup Grrrls.*

and making a "body-positive" statement in the face of contemporary beauty standards (Lankston; Matson; Marie). Likewise, the popularity of "queen of burlesque" Dita von Teese has soared in the last decade. Von Teese became known in the early 2000's as a 'tightlacer'[135] and 'neo-burlesque' performer. She is now also a designer and business-woman, with a following of women who declare a *feminist* commitment to her aesthetic (Lerum; Smith, Erica W. 2016).[136] Finally, there is the surprising wave of enthusiasm over pornographic actor James Deen in the early 2010's. Once hailed as a feminist icon, Deen amassed an unprecedented cult among young women and teenage girls. Explanations point to his boyish looks, sense of humor and his declarations in favor of sexual consent and equal rights for women. However, he left most feeling disappointed in 2015, when several co-stars accused him of violent sexual assault (Williams; Friedman; Wiseman). Overall, this feminist eagerness to explore and elevate what seem like the most patriarchal eras and aspects of American pop culture is, at the very least, puzzling.

At this point, one may insist: why should we agree that raunch feminism perpetuates a patriarchal hierarchy in the first place? After all, the concerns that move these women – sexual autonomy and pleasure, the 'male gaze', oppressive beauty norms – are unquestionably important parts of any feminist agenda. As feminist author Jennifer Baumgardner stated, defending CAKE: "We are sexual beings, and if young women want to feel the power of themselves on display, fine" (Krum). Women are in control, as organizers, performers and audience: why think this is not "feminism in action"?[137] Although I cannot do full justice to this question here, I would like to explicitly articulate some considerations in favor of

[135] 'Tightlacing', or 'corset training' is the practice of wearing corsets to cosmetically reduce one's waist.
[136] For a discussion, contextualization and qualified defense of this burlesque revival see Jacki Willson's *The Happy Stripper*.
[137] Baumgardner further claimed that "even though a Cake party might look like a male fantasy, it's a zone where women are in control of their behavior" (Krum).

conceptualizing the activism of CAKE as actually supporting patriarchy.[138] The first is that it trades on false advertising. What goes on at CAKE parties is not that different from 'old' forms of sex entertainment. The standards for success in these genres continue to be very much the same. And this is because practices like stripping still revolve around putting (mostly) women on display for a gaze that has been trained to oversexualize and objectify women's bodies. Anti-patriarchal intentions are not enough to change this because no complex social practice of this kind is decisively determined by the participants' own political commitments. Consider the following conversation between two professional-looking women observing a set of lingerie-clad dancers grinding and humping onstage at a CAKE party: "the girls are much hotter here than at the last party," (…). "You think? Look at that one, (…) She's basically flat!" (Levy 73). Patriarchal language and standards of appearance are alive and well in this illustration. Even if women are now both performers and spectators, and their intentions are feminist ones, the standards of appreciation that delineate these practices continue to be firmly patriarchal.

Secondly, raunch feminism is used to silence feminist concerns. In particular, it frames women who protest sexual objectification as 'uptight', 'old-fashioned' and 'conservative' (Levy 75, 40, 92; Murphy 2013). Levy illustrates this in her recounting of a Q&A with Sheila Nevins, executive producer of the show *G-String Divas.*[139] A woman in the audience asked Nevins: why would she make a show about strippers and why was it still the case that "if you're going to have a series about women on television, it has to be about their bodies and about their sexuality". In response, "Nevins whipped around in her chair. 'You're talking fifties talk! Get

[138] Levy thinks of raunch feminism in this way. For similar analyses see McRobbie (3), Siegel (10, 157-158), Paul (112), Krum, the Princeton protesters against the "self-objectification of women" in Walker, Murphy 2011 and 2013. For criticisms of Levy see Baumgardner (59-64) and Jesella.

[139] *G-String Divas* is "a late-night 'docu-soap' Nevins executive produced, which treated audiences to extended showings of T & A sandwiched between interviews with strippers about tricks of the trade and their real-life sexual practices." (Levy 91)

with the program' she barked. 'I love the sex stuff, I love it! What's the big deal?'" (Levy 91). What is new is not the aggressive dismissal of concerns about sexual objectification, but the way in which it is now couched in (raunch) *feminist terms*. Arguments against pornography and stripping are 'fifties talk', easily dismissed as prudish symptoms of some women's retrograde discomfort with their own bodies.

Finally, raunch feminism was not a niche phenomenon, nor has it been relegated to the experimental margins. In the early 2000's, CAKE placed itself as cutting-edge within the feminist landscape and it meshed increasingly well with a broader cultural climate where raunch was on the rise (Levy; Murphy 2013). A decade after the end of the parties, the idea that raunch *is* feminism has become central to the popular uptake of 'celebrity feminists' like Beyoncé, Miley Cyrus, and Nicki Minaj.[140] Feminism has become "hot" and "sellable", in great part because of their successful casting of oversexualization as political conviction in the popular arena (Zeisler xii). Trends such as the 'feminist crop top'[141] and the 'sex-positive (nude) selfie'[142] are symptomatic of the extent to which CAKE ideas *did* go mainstream and are now, more than ever, part of many young women's political worldview. Just like their CAKE counterparts, these newer figures highlight important questions surrounding sexuality and liberation. They point to the need to recognize and value women's desire for sexual interaction. And this is right: we are sexual beings, as Baumgardner says. But, like CAKE, the new 'pop

[140] Beyoncé's 2014 performance at the MTV Music Video Awards famously featured both a ''stripper'-like pole-dancing performance" and the word 'FEMINIST' "glowing in neon lights behind her" (Hobson 20; Zeisler xi). For a defense of Beyoncé's engagement with oversexualized imagery see Hobson and Zeisler (111-114). For criticism see hooks 2014. For discussions of Cyrus and Minaj see Wang, Orenstein (25-32) and Grigoriadis.

[141] Crop tops (revealing bare midriffs) with explicitly feminist messages have become a fashion trend endorsed by young celebrities like Demi Lovato, Vanessa Hudgens, Willow Smith and Ariana Grande (Miñoza; Johnson; Wass; Zhao). The phenomenon is related to 'Crop Top Day', a protest action against sexist school dress codes started in Toronto by student Alexi Halket, in 2015 (Deschamps, see also Orenstein 7-9).

[142] For examples and discussion see Dunham, Phelan and Sekyiamah. For uses of the 'nude selfie' in contemporary feminist art see Leah Schrager's work (Lehrer). For a contemporary popular feminist project that uses female nudity in a similar celebratory way see actress Caitlin Stasey's online project "Herself" (2018). Thank you to Mercedes Corredor for this example.

sex-positivity' quickly settles on a celebration, not of interaction, but of sexualized *displays*: stripping, performing, self-photographing. And this relentless emphasis on display practices arguably fosters a systematic attitude of taking pleasure primarily in being *found* pleasurable, in being 'hot', not in being sexual or *interacting* as a sexual being. 'Feeling good' is reduced to 'looking good' (Bauer; Orenstein 2, 12-14, 43). The worry then is that this mode of feminine sexual enjoyment is not particularly revolutionary. In fact, it eerily echoes Paris Hilton's infamous statement: "I'm not sexual. Sexy, but not sexual" (Levy 30; Orenstein 31; Wade 233).

3 Misogyny Misdiagnoses Raunch Feminism

What should we make then of this reinvigoration of patriarchal culture by young feminists? For theorists like Manne, misogyny is supposed to explain why women comply with *and* enforce patriarchal norms, even when they do not take gender hierarchy to be good or 'natural'. This points towards an answer. If raunch feminists enforce such norms, it must be because they have internalized broadly misogynistic values or are trying to show allegiance to dominant men. They are reacting, in some way or other, to the social penalization of women who are seen as, for example, sexually withholding. This then purports to explain patriarchal complicity by the women organizing and attending CAKE. But what do we make of their 'feminism'? There are a couple of options for a Manne-style approach in explaining these apparent feminist commitments. But in all of them the feminist activism of CAKE comes out as a facade rather than a genuine phenomenon. What is *really* happening is not progressive politics, but a self-protective reaction to misogynistic penalties.

The first explanatory strategy is to say that raunch feminists are calculating liars and they are neither committed to, nor motivated by, feminist values. They seek solely to profit – materially and in terms of cultural capital – from compliant behavior within the patriarchal

structure. Feminism is a mere marketing ploy.[143] However, this seems too quick. CAKE's political aspect was more than a strategic front, as shown by the importance they placed on online forums and traditional activism (Levy 71). Founders Kramer and Gallagher both had a history of engagement with feminism which undermines the idea that they were simple mercenaries.[144] The same thing could be said of the Princeton undergraduates who enthusiastically supported CAKE or of the many feminist scholars and activists who are also neo-burlesque performers (Renny; Lerum). For an even clearer example, think of the anonymous, teenage fans of James Deen who had little or nothing to gain by celebrating the actor as a feminist icon. Although there is certainly money to be made, it appears unlikely that the 'feminism' in raunch feminism is nothing more than a marketing ploy.

The second way to account for CAKE's rhetoric is to maintain instead that these women are not scheming hypocrites, but that they are themselves in the grip of patriarchal ideology, displaying some kind of 'false consciousness'. They are therefore somehow deluded, failing to understand what is really happening. This is a much more plausible line of argument. There are several ways to fill out the details of this story, but I will sketch only one illustration. Consider an analogy. Imagine I befriend a group of anti-war activists. They invite me to attend the next protest march and I enthusiastically join them. It may very well be that I genuinely espouse pacifist values, but that is not *really* why I am going. What I am really doing is getting my new friends to like me. Likewise, no matter how interested raunch feminists are in liberating female sexuality, the *real* project they are engaged in is excelling by the patriarchal standards misogyny

[143] One could compare feminism, on this reading, to environmentalism in corporate 'green-washing'.
[144] Kramer's gender studies thesis was reportedly on "how the power dynamics of sexuality should ideally allow for both men and women to explore, express and define sexuality for themselves" (Levy 78-79).

enforces. On this picture, what raunch feminism comes to is not feminist activism, but a disguised form of misogyny.

Nevertheless, even when coupled with this plausible false consciousness explanation, misogyny cannot adequately explain what is going on in raunch feminist activism. Let me make clear that I do not wish to discount the partial role of misogynistic values in fueling the participation of many women in phenomena like CAKE. However, any such misogyny-centered story is bound to leave unanswered an essential question. *Why did these women turn to raunch, rather than some other paradigm?* The particularities that made raunch feminism perplexing to cultural commentators seem hardly elucidated.

CAKE was an elite phenomenon. It was attractive primarily to young, successful, educated, privileged women who talked articulately about patriarchal ideology, sexual consent, and feminist theory.[145] Let us entertain then, for the sake of argument, this plausible story that someone like Manne, or even Cudd, may offer: CAKE was a self-protective reaction to misogynistic penalties, obscured by some false consciousness. Having violated patriarchal expectations in education, work and political consciousness, these women could reasonably foresee that they now risked social disapproval. After all, the women of CAKE belong to a generation raised during the misogynistic backlash of the eighties and early nineties, chronicled by Faludi. They were well positioned to internalize this fear of being branded as 'bad women' by their misogynistic environment. According to this explanation, embracing CAKE was an attempt to compensate for their transgressions against the patriarchy and to minimize their exposure to misogynistic hostility. So, on this view, the problem they were trying to solve with raunch was *how to make themselves more palatable to a patriarchal world*. But, if this is right,

[145] Publicity photographs seem to show a (perhaps self-conscious) racial/ethnic diversity at parties (Sales).

the ideal they chose – the intellectually-minded, pole-dancing feminist – seems like a surprising and even inapt way of scoring patriarchal points.

There are two reasons to think this. Firstly, these women had *viable, alternative* and more *conventional* ways to show their allegiance to the patriarchal order. Re-traditionalization choices, focusing on homemaking, child rearing and marriage have been, historically, the most popular way for similarly placed women to react to misogynistic penalties (MacRobbie 8; Faludi 19-60). Why did they not go the usual route of trying to excel at being "loving wives, devoted moms, 'cool' girlfriends" (Manne 2017 47)?[146] They could have taken any of these strategies and infused it with their (false consciousness) feminism. They could have been 'mom feminists'. These were genuinely open alternatives to these women, given their status and social position. No one was expecting them to go pole-dancing on Friday night and there were no foreseen penalties for not doing so. Part of what is puzzling about raunch feminism is precisely the way in which it seems historically discontinuous with these more conventional options (Levy 3-5; McRobbie 1-4; Siegel 10).

Secondly, there were actually some risks associated with joining a club like CAKE. Recall that this was not just a combination of public feminist activism with a 'raunchy' private sexual life. Their message was not that you could be a feminist by day and pole-dance on the side. These women were *publicly* engaging with raunch as feminist activism. But, in a patriarchal world, this seems dangerous. It means that they risked being easily oversexualized in light of their raunch feminist pursuits. And, for young, successful professional women and outspoken feminists, oversexualization and sexual harassment are routine misogynistic

[146] A more nuanced version of this may be the 'cool girl' or a light 'female chauvinist pig' (Levy 93). These are women who distance themselves from 'girly girls' and become 'honorary men', signaling their allegiance to patriarchal figures by behaving like them in important respects. This can be done apolitically but can also be couched in feminist rhetoric.

mechanisms of dismissal and penalization. In other words, not only were re-traditionalization alternatives more conventional, they were also *safer*. In light of this, raunch seems like an excessive, risky and puzzling choice.

Raunch feminism reveals the limits of the misogyny framework. Explaining the behavior of the women of CAKE cannot be done by simply pointing to an ongoing scheme of misogynistic penalties, and then accommodating their feminism as false consciousness. This model fails to tell us what made raunch a particularly attractive option for these women.

4 An Alternative Diagnosis: Meaning Vertigo

I would like to propose a different reading, one where a movement like CAKE is both genuine feminist activism *and* a form of reactionary backlash against it – though not the misogynistic backlash Manne has in mind. There are two distinct projects in raunch feminism. Instead of trying to explain it away as a surface phenomenon, we should take the feminism of Kramer and Gallagher seriously, as one of those projects. They take themselves to be advancing an ongoing conversation around sexuality by focusing on pleasure, rather than abuse. Their brand of activism is celebratory because they are trying to move beyond a feminist critique of sexuality and into a *feminist sexuality* they can live and experience.

If we acknowledge that raunch feminism is a genuine attempt to elaborate a positive proposal for women's sexual liberation, we are left with a familiar question. *Why use raunch to articulate it?* According to Levy, the women of CAKE use raunch

> *(…) because they can't quite figure out what else to do. And it is a tough one – how do you publicly express the concept of "sexy" without falling back on the old hot-chicks-in-panties formula? It's a challenge that requires imagination and creativity that they do not possess. (Levy 82)*

On this view, our patriarchal history creates an imaginative challenge to feminist sexual representation. It structures verbal and visual language in hierarchical terms which are inimical

to feminist aspirations – how does one dress in a way that can be generally recognized as 'sexy' without oppressive feminine lingerie? According to Levy, CAKE is the result of this lack of vocabulary to convey a feminist message.

However, this view of raunch feminism as failed activism is not sufficiently explanatory either. There are many things CAKE women could have done in the face of this lexical paucity. They could have suspended their actions, been more tentative, or they could have dug deeper for a different sexual paradigm. Instead, they rapidly looked to Hugh Hefner for inspiration (Huang; Levy 70). I want to propose that the solution to this mystery lies in understanding raunch feminism as also involving a second project of (post-)feminist backlash. As *backlash*, this is a reactionary trend that goes from a perceived loss to a push for perceived compensatory action. Raunch feminists were not just interested in working out 'non-patriarchal sexiness'. They were also moved by a positive need to react to what they perceived as the emptying of 'sexy' by earlier generations of feminists.

Feminist activism of the sixties, seventies and eighties – what is often called second-wave feminism – emptied 'sexy' insofar as it mounted a critique of existent social meanings surrounding (hetero)sexual practice.[147] Before going further, it is worth clarifying what a 'social meaning' is. To say that something has social meaning is to say that it has "significance by virtue of our collective [cultural] understandings" (Haslanger 2013 13). For instance, in many contexts, public spitting means disrespect and pink means girl. Social meanings are the basis of social practice and coordination. They are shared, non-optional and they therefore constitute a necessary "cultural backdrop" to our activities *together*. Because we are socially embedded

[147] My use of '(hetero)sexual' is meant to mark a focus on heterosexual contexts as most straightforwardly structured by gendered meanings. I am also tracking CAKE's heterosexual focus. Nevertheless, I take what I am saying here to be applicable, to a great extent, to non-heterosexual contexts since "lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals [also] identify as men or women, and their sexuality is influenced by their gender and by the gender of their intimate partners" (Lorber 25).

agents[148], constantly implicated in social practices, the internalization of social meanings is crucial to guiding our action and interaction with others and with the material world (14). For instance, our social practices of greeting are undergirded by culturally-specific meanings of gestures, arranged in broader schemas or scripts of interaction. Because we share these meanings, we find greeting fairly uneventful. We understand what others mean and expect when they hug rather than shake hands. All of this breaks down, of course, when you meet someone from an unfamiliar culture. Then you may receive a shockingly familiar, although politely intended, kiss on the cheek, prompting awkwardness and discomfort. Indeed, social life without social meanings would be like an unimaginable sequence of disorienting encounters with strangers and artifacts from faraway lands. Social meanings are necessary for *meaningful* and *fluid* social action, interaction and coordination.

Part of what North American second-wave feminists did was protest and destabilize patriarchal social practices by questioning their underlying social meanings. For instance, they pushed against social meanings that eroticized the suffering of women in their denunciations of pornography. In the wake of these initiatives, not only did men lose some power, but there was also a significant erosion of many widely understood schemas and scripts guiding gendered interaction. For instance, it could no longer be taken for granted that eroticized depictions hinting at torture would evoke curiosity rather than repulsion and outrage.[149] Typical expressions of 'sexy', like the contrived pinup or the corset, were publicly denounced, became increasingly contested and undermined.

[148] Haslanger explains socially embedded agency in the following way: "the terms of our action and interaction are not up to us as individuals. What is valuable, what is acceptable, even what we do, and want, and think, depend on cultural frameworks of meaning" (Haslanger 2013 7).
[149] The protests surrounding the Rolling Stones' controversial *Black and Blue* billboard, in 1976, were an example of this turn (Bronstein).

And yet, gender continued to be a fundamental mode of social identification, a pervasive social distinction, and a central axis of social coordination. Today, gendered social meanings are still crucial to our judgements of social acceptability regarding what clothes you should wear, how you should talk, sit and walk. Spheres of interaction like (hetero)sexual conduct continue to be deeply structured around gender in ways that seem to us normal and even inevitable. Whether a coy look and contrived pose are 'sexy', or whether picking up the check signals interest – these are still highly gendered matters in contemporary North America (Sabean; Hackman). Although sexuality may be a particularly gendered domain of social life, it is not exceptional in this regard. Fundamentality means that there is a general pressure on *all* our social practices to be centrally organized by gender distinctions. Therefore, gendered social meanings are implicated in scripts and schemas for a multitude of social roles and positions. The way in which we recognize and expect a parent, an academic or even a friend to behave is gendered. There is still much anxiety surrounding gender ambiguity and the prospect of a society without men and women as we know them is an imaginative stretch at best for most people. As I have argued in previous chapters, the pervasiveness of gendered social meanings is such that "it is difficult, if not impossible, to have a socially meaningful existence outside of the norms of gender identity" (McNay 90).

By the early 2000's, gender distinctions continued to be crucial in this way. And yet there had been a significant erosion of (*hierarchical*) *gendered* social meanings surrounding sexuality, after second-wave feminism. This draws the contours of a deep tension that began to emerge. Consider next the following point. For the entire extent of our patriarchal history, to be gendered has been to be relationally positioned in a hierarchy. Simone de Beauvoir, Catharine MacKinnon and, more recently, Sally Haslanger, have all compellingly argued for this view of hierarchy as not separate, but as part and parcel of our gender system (de Beauvoir 6; Haslanger

2012 234-235; MacKinnon 113). Given this, if hierarchical notions of what is 'sexy' are no longer shared, but gender is still central to our sexual interactions, we face a problem. We cannot simply opt out of gendered distinctions in the sexual domain, but we also no longer have a shared sense of what they mean socially. It is as if we knew we had to greet people wearing green differently but lacked a common understanding of what that difference was taken to be. Similarly, we can know sexual interaction is meant to be gendered, but no longer have a shared idea of what that involves. This is a hard problem in light of our need to navigate sexual interactions – which are a valuable and important part of human life. Feminist movements have been attempting to create and retrieve alternative visions of sexuality that could step in as new common understandings for how to interact in this domain. But this remains a remarkably difficult task. As Levy puts it, it's a "tough one".

Young women in the early 2000's felt this tension between the centrality of gender to (hetero)sexual social practice and the apparent lack of shared, gendered meanings about sexuality. This left them feeling like they were losing their grip on how to navigate the social world in this domain. I will call this symptomatic feeling of discomfort and disorientation *meaning vertigo*. Meaning vertigo refers to this perception of a vertiginous and unsettling emptiness at the level of social meaning.[150] It is an emptiness that seems to threaten our very ability to interact and communicate in a gendered world. Although it may not exactly track reality, it nevertheless constitutes a very real disorientation. In turn, this motivates an attempt to reinstate *some* form of a *clear* system of gendered meanings that is imaginable and available

[150] For a similar notion see R.W. Connell's "gender vertigo", used in the context of discussing the experiences of "men who have attempted to reform their masculinity, in part because of feminist criticism" (120). Undoing the effects of their social masculinization – what Connell calls the "the annihilation of masculinity" – is experienced by these men as both a goal and a fear. "(…) masculinization structured the world and the self for them in gendered terms, as it does for most men. To undo masculinity is to court a loss of personality structure that may be quite terrifying: a kind of *gender vertigo*" (137, my emphasis). See also the use of the term in Risman, borrowing from Connell.

to be socially shared. Meaning vertigo is an unacceptable state from which we try to exit by somehow getting 'on the same page' again. Note that there is always an urgency to this reaction because the matter is never purely theoretical; rather, it is about getting on with one's life. Whether it is relating to a sexual partner or doing political activism, these shared meanings are necessary for fluid interaction. (Post-)feminist backlash is then an *urgent project of social meaning clarification*, in response to meaning vertigo.

It is worth noting that the young, educated and professionally successful American feminists of CAKE were likely to experience a particularly acute version of meaning vertigo. They were both well aware of patriarchal ideology and its oppressive nature, and deeply enmeshed in the mainstream structures where gender remained a central distinction. Two factors contributed to this enmeshment. Firstly, these women had mostly high paying jobs and bright futures ahead. They stood to lose all of that if they were to decide to live their lives outside the mainstream. Secondly, there was also a feminist commitment to being able to live a feminist life *within the mainstream*. By the start of millennium, gender equality was taken to mean that women could now live professionally fulfilling lives, with an unprecedented degree of sexual and financial autonomy, without having to cut themselves off from the world of mainstream employment and heterosexual relationships. The era of rural lesbian separatist communes was over. Young feminists had then strategic and principled reasons to not give up on being mainstream. Given this, they found themselves living their lives in circles where sexual interaction remained heavily gendered.

With this picture in hand, we are now in a position to answer the question that a misogyny-based explanation could not: why did the women of CAKE turn to *raunch*, rather than some other paradigm? Raunch is a system of meanings around sexuality – a 'favorite' sphere of second-wave feminist critique, but also one where gender remains very central.

Raunch was therefore highly *pertinent* to the problem at hand. Moreover, burlesque, pinups and porn stars were outside of a traditional, and hence unacceptable, scheme of hegemonic, white, patriarchal sexuality, marked by respectability, domesticity and repression. This association of raunch with a marginalized 'underworld' gave it a seemingly *subversive* edge congenial to young, politically active feminists.

But perhaps the most important aspects of raunch were its *familiarity* and *clarity*. These practices are familiar because they come from within the patriarchal worldview that is historically well known to us. They were therefore *imaginable* and *available* to be shared by a critical mass. Importantly, they had an attractive clarity. The world of pinup models, porn stars and burlesque dancers is a show-based universe. Its aesthetics and norms are formulaic and they overtly involve role-play. Hence, these paradigms deliver a system of relatively unambiguous social meanings surrounding sexuality and gender: precisely what was needed to appease meaning vertigo. This is what made raunch seem like a "liberating and necessary language for self-expression" (Buszek 313).

What I am suggesting then is that raunch answered these women's need for an endorsable and communicable picture of what gender differences meant in the sexual domain. Raunch's (alleged) *subversive character* and *communicability* made it into a viable set of 'feminist-approved' social meanings that these women could use to navigate the world, but also employ in their activism. It provided them with both a creative break and a much needed socially shared continuity. However, this reestablishment of social communication and coordination was so urgent to these feminists that it led them to disregard the patriarchy-perpetuating features of their new vocabulary. They could now talk about sexuality, but only in terms that were anything but revolutionary and were even counter-productive. Their project of

social meaning clarification took priority and constrained their feminist activism in ways that made it self-defeating.

5 (Post-)Feminist Backlash, Misogyny and Dismantling Patriarchy

(Post-)feminist backlash – backlash animated by *meaning vertigo* – is a distinct type of reactionary social pattern. While misogynistic backlash tries to correct perceived deviation from the norm, (post-)feminist backlash tries to *reinstate some shared norm*, where it sees none. If this is right, then misogyny is not the only way in which the patriarchy is practically enforced and upheld. Manne's account is incomplete insofar as it does not give us explanatory resources to understand the logic of phenomena like raunch feminism. One could argue, though, that this is just a limitation in the scope of her project. However, I want to suggest that this is a particularly problematic incompleteness for two reasons.

Firstly, (post-)feminist backlash is independent from misogyny and can reinstate gender hierarchy, even in the absence of misogyny. Imagine that our social environment magically ceased to be hostile to women and girls who were held to violate patriarchal norms. This would also mean that patriarchal norms and meanings would cease to be a shared basis for social coordination. They would cease to guide our reactions to others and our judgement of their actions as appropriate or transgressive. Without misogyny, patriarchal norms would effectively cease to function as genuine social norms.[151] But since we depend on patriarchal gendered meanings for social coordination in various (gendered) domains, this situation would leave us with huge gaps in our shared normative repertoire. Because this is an unacceptable state of affairs, and because we are so unacquainted with alternatives to patriarchal understandings of gender, particularly regarding sexuality, we would likely come running back to the patriarchal

[151] They would constitute perhaps an idiosyncratic or obsolete code of conduct.

norms that we had magically left behind. In short, the elimination of misogyny is not enough for gender equality. Were it to happen, by magic, we would likely be left with a reactionary wave of (post-)feminist backlash fueled by acute meaning vertigo. The most entrenched obstacle to gender equality then is not the "hostile force field" of misogynistic penalties, but our collective dependence on recognizably gendered shared meanings for social coordination.

Secondly, (post-)feminist backlash triggers and exacerbates misogyny. This kind of backlash is a reaction against the perceived absence of shared norms and meanings as a result of successful feminist critique. Therefore, movements like raunch feminism lead to a renewal of relations of gender-based domination, in the midst of extremely successful steps towards gender equality. This makes for perfect conditions for the re-emergence of misogyny. It brings together a reinvigorated sense of hierarchical entitlement and a salient object for hierarchical policing. Consider, for example, the way raunch feminism normalized patriarchal sex entertainment, like stripping, in the face of ongoing and well-established feminist criticism. It showed men, and women who internalize misogynistic values, that there was still something to defend. Suddenly, it was worth pushing back against what had become culturally common concerns about the objectification of women in mass media. As Sheila Nevins' reaction illustrates, (post-)feminist backlash rekindles even vestigial misogyny.

6 What to do?

This conclusion may seem to compound Manne's general normative pessimism. Recall her concern: appeasing misogynists will only feed their sense of entitlement, while 'calling them out' will only trigger more hostility. If it is hard to know what to do about misogyny, it seems even harder to know what to do about misogyny rekindled by raunch feminism. But thinking

about how to control meaning vertigo, and the (post-)feminist backlash that it triggers, can actually present us with a new and different place for feminist intervention.

Cases like raunch feminism cast the patriarchal problem not just as one of moral condemnation and reform but also of imaginative limitations and cultural creativity. The way to address it is then to refuse to celebrate a ready-made ideal like raunch and, instead, take on Levy's "tough" imaginative conundrum. We must work on an alternative, non-patriarchal vision of our shared sexual meanings and norms if we are to avoid the feeling of vacuum that constitutes meaning vertigo. As I mentioned, this is something feminists have been concerned with, but it also remains a big challenge. Jennifer Baumgardner's response to Levy highlights this.

> *(...) people are great at pointing out all of the ways that female sexual expression is screwed up or inauthentic, but we have very few examples of this vaunted genuine, healthy, feminist-influenced sexuality. We know what incorrect female sexuality is, but what's correct? (Baumgardner 64)*

And the problem is not new. Twenty-five years earlier, bell hooks identified the same struggle.

> *It has been a simple task for women to describe and criticize negative aspects of sexuality as it has been socially constructed in sexist society (...). It has been a far more difficult task for women to envision new sexual paradigms. (hooks 1984 148)*

If we are to avoid new waves of (post-)feminist backlash, it is this difficulty that we must face. Recall that the meaning vertigo at the heart of movements like CAKE is born out of the tension between the centrality of gender in the sexual domain and the perceived lack of socially shared gendered sexual meanings. This suggests two possible strategies going forwards. The first option is to come up with a viable non-hierarchical *understanding* of gendered sexual meanings that is responsive to our egalitarian aspirations.[152] The second option is to downgrade the *role*

[152] This possibility with regards to gender more generally is suggested in Haslanger 2012 254.

that gender plays in our scripts and norms around sexuality to the status we currently attribute to other things like hair color or regional identity. This would lead us to develop a much less gendered social understanding of sexual interaction. An important consideration in choosing between these two strategies will be the extent to which any recognizable notion of gender, for us, must be tied up with hierarchy. As I will argue in the next chapter, non-hierarchical but heavily gendered sexual scripts may be a dangerous mirage. But regardless of which path we take, we will be steering clear of deploying "juridical moral notions" or sympathizing with entitled misogynists (Manne 2017 28).[153] These are forms of political intervention that work, not via moral criticism, but via social meaning proliferation and social norm change.

What feminists cannot do is focus exclusively on promoting an oppression-free world and expect that a new social order will work itself out in the process. Patriarchal gender is such an entrenched structure in our social lives that understanding the social world without it seems almost impossible. This make us panic, in the face of significant and destabilizing critical action. And it is this panic that triggers that insidious return to old habits that Faludi termed "worse than backlash". The only way to overcome it is to have feminist critique be accompanied by a positive vision of what a more egalitarian sexuality may look like. This is both a difficult challenge and an opportunity to start radically reimagining our social world.

[153] Efforts towards moral reform are important. They can certainly accompany the project I am gesturing towards.

Chapter VI Degendering as a Feminist Strategy

Fundamentality poses a deep obstacle to feminist social change. Because being gender legible is a precondition for full social standing, there is a constant pressure towards making gendered distinctions central to our social practices. This is what explains the *pervasiveness* of gender. By examining the case of raunch feminism in the last chapter, I showed how the centrality of gender to certain domains of our social life can create *meaning vertigo* in the face of feminist critique. Meaning vertigo, in turn, prompts a reactionary reinstatement of patriarchal gender norms. It constitutes therefore an important roadblock to progress towards gender equality.

By way of conclusion, I want to briefly consider how feminist politics can proceed in the face of this difficulty. Second-wave feminism failed to account for the possibility of meaning vertigo. In its insistence on critique, the sixties, seventies and eighties feminist movement left many feeling this dangerous sense of vertiginous vacuum at the level of social meaning. I have argued that, to avoid this, we should complement feminist critique with a positive feminist proposal - something to fill the vacuum. But what does that look like? I will tentatively explore one answer to this question. We may be able to minimize phenomena like raunch feminism by adopting a mode of feminist politics that not only interrogates and erodes our gendered meanings and norms, but also *systematically downplays the centrality of gender to our social practices*. I will call this a *degendering* strategy. Degendering has two steps. First, it challenges the importance of gender by highlighting the social normative complexity of our lives. Men and women are never *just* men and women and they encounter each other under many other social guises. Secondly, degendering foregrounds some of these other forms of

social identification as alternative bases for social coordination. In this way, degendering does not aim to eradicate gender, nor does it try to radically reshape our understandings of femininity and masculinity. Instead, it tries to minimize our dependence on gender by pointing to other substantive values, roles and norms that we also care about and that we have in common. Although a substantial explanation and defense of degendering is beyond the scope of this project, I want to offer the claims in this last chapter as promising directions for further work.

In the first section, I outline in more detail the two broad strategies for a positive feminist proposal that I mentioned at the end of the last chapter: reinventing gender and degendering. I argue that the egalitarian reinvention of gender faces particular epistemic obstacles that make it a less attractive option. In section 2, I move on to explaining and exemplifying the degendering strategy. To get clearer on it, in section 3, I distinguish degendering from three nearby political views: gender blindness, gender eliminativism and nonbinary politics. In section 4, I consider the relation between degendering and the fundamentality framework and suggest that degendering is compatible with gender remaining a fundamental mode of social identification. Finally, in section 5, I return briefly to meaning vertigo in the domain of sexuality and consider degendering as a direction for future inquiry in this domain.

1 Two Strategies Against Meaning Vertigo

Recall the predicament in which would-be raunch feminists found themselves in the early 2000s. They needed *gendered* meanings and norms to move through a *gendered* world – and especially through highly gendered domains like (hetero)sexual social practice. But the systematic critique of patriarchal norms and meanings seemed to have robbed them of this tool. Their ensuing disorientation – meaning vertigo – was the motor driving raunch feminism. The upshot of this case study is that feminist politics cannot just take down forms of patriarchal

social organization, and then walk away leaving a void in people's social normative repertoire. Feminist politics cannot focus only on eliminating oppressive norms and meanings. It must also propose a vision of what the world could be like without them. Below, I want to outline two initial possibilities for such a vision.

1.1 Reinventing Gender?

If our patriarchal understandings of masculinity and femininity must be jettisoned, then one intuitive solution is to replace them with some genuinely non-hierarchical counterparts. We should *reinvent* gendered norms and meanings in light of our egalitarian ideals.

Feminist social change is always difficult. But reinventing gender along genuinely egalitarian lines faces a particular epistemic obstacle. As I pointed out in the last chapter, our gendered representations are and have historically been deeply tied to hierarchy.[154] They are also part of our social self-image: they constitute conditions of legibility for social subjects. Therefore, we can say that these hierarchical gendered representations are part of our *cultural horizon of intelligibility*, they delimit the ways in which we can even imagine social interlocutors as varying. This does not mean we cannot reflect on these representations, but insofar as we inhabit them *from the inside* we cannot simply transcend them. Therefore, the idea that we can radically rethink gender – that we can step outside this horizon of intelligibility altogether – should be greeted with caution. There is a danger that anything that looks like a gendered mode of social relations to us is going to encode hierarchy in some way or another. Given this, we may just not be in a position where we can come up with a conception of gender completely free from hierarchy.

[154] Femininity and masculinity are, at least partially, constituted by a position in hierarchical relations. See de Beauvoir 6; Haslanger 2012 234-235; MacKinnon 113.

Some evidence of this is the tension we see emerging in many articulations of purportedly 'non-patriarchal gender'. Take the example of contemporary efforts to cultivate 'non-toxic masculinity'.[155] One immediate question about this new, non-oppressive set of norms seems to be: what is *masculine* about them? If non-toxic masculinity is about men exhibiting less domineering behavior, being more empathetic and eager to participate in care work, for example, is this not just about men becoming *better people?* For an answer, consider these 'Good Men Project' non-toxic role models.

> ***1. Terry Crews/Terry from Brooklyn 99: Masculine****… This man is a mountain of dancing muscle wrapped in brown skin and a shaved head. (….) His character on Brooklyn 99 is ripped, shredded, and doesn't take shit. He's a boss.*
> *…* ***But Nontoxic!*** *He's not violent. (…) He's sweet. And gentle. He shows love, affection, vulnerability. He's into his family and farmer's markets. (…)*
> ***2. The Queer Eye Crew: Masculine****… These guys are physically fit, very strong, healthy, sexually expressive, and socially confident. They travel in a bro posse and Bobby Berk rebuilds entire suburban homes in like 20 minutes, nbd.*
> *…* ***But Nontoxic!*** *They're also empathetic, physically affectionate, emotionally available and vulnerable, supportive, verbally kind and tender (….).*
> ***3. Lin-Manuel Miranda: Masculine…*** *Rich, powerful, successful, Lin-Manuel Miranda is a rapper from NYC, a father of two, and a certified fucking genius. (...)*
> ***… But Nontoxic!*** *Dude, you can't FIND a clip or a tweet of this guy not feeling ALL the feelings. (Anthony)*

Why are these non-toxic masculine characters *masculine*? According to these descriptions, because they are physically strong ("ripped", "fit", "healthy"), because they are smart, good at building things, "rich", "powerful", "successful", and "sexually expressive". This is an all too familiar picture of masculinity, and one we may be reluctant to celebrate as feminists. These are norms for roles that are *in tension with* vulnerability, care and empathy and that shape men

[155] For other earlier efforts to rethink masculinity along egalitarian lines in the 20th century see Connell.

for dominant positions in non-egalitarian settings.[156] We are left feeling masculinity and 'non-toxicity' do not quite go together in these descriptions.

And the same problem happens with non-patriarchal femininity – what is *feminine* about it? Think about women athletes, often seen as prototypically anti-patriarchal icons. To be a woman and athlete are compatible things, but to be a 'feminine athlete' is to be a locus of tension. The norms of femininity themselves inhibit what is needed for real athleticism. They require that one pay too much attention to one's appearance and that one look relatively fragile and small. This is why women athletes are often reluctant to develop muscle mass, even when "bulking up" would enhance their performance (Rothenberg, Kendall). This is not to say that we could not try harder to truly reform our gender system. But we seem to always find this epistemic roadblock on our way to accessing these representations. This should motivate us to look for other ways of making progress that do not run into this particular difficulty.

1.2 Return to the Gendered Bathrooms

What if, instead of trying to come up with alternative, more egalitarian, gendered meanings, we came up with a less gendered world?

Return to the case of bathroom gender segregation, examined in chapter 4. There, I argued that bathrooms are particularly likely to give rise to moments of gender illegibility for two reasons: they are gender segregated public spaces, and they involve officials and agents that are socially given the power to enforce that segregation. When a security guard, or even another user, finds themselves in the position to police segregation, they have to think quite consciously about what men and women are like. Suddenly gendered representations become

[156] To be clear, physical might, wealth and power may well be compatible with empathy, care and vulnerability. But insofar as they are *masculine* norms, they are ways to shape men – *not women* – for roles linked to competitive advantage, leadership and household rule, as we can glimpse from these quotes.

thicker and less flexible – because they are being used as a yardstick, because they are being called on to provide answers. There is something very similar happening in the case of raunch feminism. Would-be raunch feminists were left with a problem by second-wave feminist critique: how should men and women interact in the particularly gendered domain of sexuality? This parallels bathroom selection. They are both questions about practices that are taken to be *centrally gendered*. They therefore demand recognizably gendered answers. And when we try to give those, we end up reverting to all-too-recognizable, traditional and patriarchal conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Perhaps we should try changing the questions we are asking. Think again about the case of the bathrooms. One could think that the way forward is to educate and train employees and bathroom users about the nuances of masculinity, femininity, the need to respect transgender people, or masculine women. But the direction suggested by Heath Fogg Davis and others seems even more effective (Davis 80-83, Lorber 35-36). Why not just withdraw the authority to police gender segregation, or, go further, and end gender segregation altogether? Instead of rethinking gender, this is a strategy that rethinks the *centrality* of gender to certain social contexts. This example provides a good model for what I call *degendering.*

2 Degendering

Degendering is not a new idea. It is a strand of argument deeply embedded in feminist political thinking. I will not be giving a full explanation and defense of the view here.[157] However, I

[157] For a recent articulation and defense of degendering see Lorber. Although I do not subscribe to all its details, Lorber's view is close to my own. It is also motivated by a similar appreciation of the link between the pervasiveness of gender and the reappearance of gender inequality, in phenomena like CAKE: "Feminism has to go beyond critiquing the processes of gender inequality and challenge the ubiquitous division of people into two unequally valued categories that undergirds the continual reappearance of gender inequality" (Lorber xx).

want to suggest it as perhaps a promising way to minimize meaning vertigo that escapes the epistemic problems of gender reinvention.

As long as we keep asking centrally gendered questions, we are bound to keep looking for centrally gendered answers. This is what leads us to meaning vertigo and to the reappearance of patriarchal modes of social organization. To avoid this, we should *degender* our practices: make gender distinctions *peripheral* to the norms, meanings and scripts that govern social practices and interactions. This is the equivalent of constructing gender integrated bathrooms. Instead of having two sets of norms (one for men and one women) we can 'build' a single one for various kinds of people, some of which are men, and some of which are women. In the case of bathrooms, this involves designing spaces that fulfill the needs common to all bathroom users: privacy, hygiene, ability to be accompanied by a care taker. Analogously, degendering involves asking of each social practice: what do both men and women have in common here? And what would the practice look like if we made those commonalities its center? This does not require us to think about masculinity and femininity. It asks us instead to focus on other goals, values and roles. Below, I want to survey some recent changes in our social life and some proposals for changes that exemplify this strategy.

2.1 Degendering in Practice: Some Examples

Think of the way in which we understand a workplace, like an academic department, that is *well-functioning*. One of the things we presuppose is that, in any such ideal department, people should treat each other, first and foremost, as colleagues, teachers and students. Of course, in any department people also stand in various other significant social relations to each other. Some are close friends, others may not get along at all. Some are from the same country, others are not. But it is part of our contemporary ideal that none of the norms that attach to these relations trump the collegial norms of the department. In the workplace, professional roles

should have priority. Similarly, people may stand in gendered relations to one another, but gender should not play a central role in shaping norms and expectations. It should remain subordinated to professional modes of identification. Our very ideal of a well-functioning department already commits us then to degendering, to downplaying gender distinctions.

To see this, consider what it means to say gender is peripheral in this academic context. Interpersonally, it means that collegiality is the set of norms that people employ in conducting and assessing interactions with each other. So certain ways of interacting are inappropriate because they violate this priority. Differential treatment towards friends or family is unprofessional. Manifesting approval or animosity towards a colleague on the basis of their political affiliation is inappropriate. Doing something analogous for gender – for instance, systematically giving up seats for female colleagues[158] – is also unacceptable. Institutionally, it is important to maintain a collaborative atmosphere. Therefore, tasks in a well-functioning department are either allocated by rotation or by other measures of competence and experience that do not disproportionally burden any particular person. In the same spirit, policies against sexual harassment that are responsive and well-crafted serve to preserve collegiality and a climate of professional trust. There may not be parity between the numbers of men and women in a well-functioning department, but numbers cannot so imbalanced that they make gender salient, and there must be a culture of generally mixed-gender interaction. In a well-functioning department, being a woman or a man is just another feature of who one is, like being from France or India, being tall or short. Degendering in the academic context means promoting, first and foremost, values we all care about: collegiality, academic collaboration and pedagogical

[158] For another example, consider the following remark by Barbara J. Risman. "For example, when a man holds a door open for a woman, his conscious motivation may simply be to behave politely. But if that woman is his colleague, he has differentiated her from himself (…). He has re-created and supported a system of meanings in which she is woman before all else." (Risman 7)

effectiveness. Doing this minimizes the role of gender and, consequently, the impact of gender-based disadvantage.

For a more concrete example, consider how mother and journalist Sara Clemence found herself degendering her children's wardrobe. Clemence highlights that her lack of respect for gendered labels started very much out of convenience. She never asked any questions about the gender of her son and daughter. Instead, she reflected on their common needs as toddlers:

> *When her older brother started outgrowing his clothing, I put a lot of it aside for Lia. The hand-me-downs saved money and let us squeeze a little more enjoyment out of those tiny jackets and sweet sailor shirts. (…)* ***I didn't set out to turn her into a pint-size fashion iconoclast. But by the time Lia was a year old, I was buying most of her clothes in boys' sections.*** *When she started walking, then running and climbing and jumping, I looked for clothes that were as functional as my son's: pants that would buffer her knees against falls and have pockets to hold the rocks and leaves she picked up in the park. (Clemence, my emphasis)*

Clemence is very clear that she has not enlisted in the "color wars" over children's clothing.[159] Pink flowery dresses are not banned from her daughters' closet. But she confesses that "increasingly, I find it silly that we have 'boys' and 'girls' clothes at all." She would rather have clothes be determined by children's needs and their "actual interests", as well as by the family's attachment to certain "sweet sailor shirts", and by financial common sense. Clemence anchors her challenge to the relevance of gender distinctions in various non-gendered values: practicality, thriftiness, encouraging children's play. These motivate choices that blur gender distinctions, without ever rejecting them outright. Instead, gender is relegated to the background, as a relatively less important consideration. In the process, feminist critique

[159] This sets her apart from parents raising their children in gender-neutral manner or without an assigned gender – the phenomenon popularized as 'theybies'. See Morris.

became much less threatening. Clemence found herself increasingly open to actively disapproving of patriarchal pressures in the socialization of young girls and boys.[160]

If this seems like too much of an individual case, let me turn to yet another concrete example, but one that works explicitly at the level of institutional design. In 2003, the Israeli army decided to gender-integrate their short-term officer training courses (Lorber 9). Equal numbers of women and men were placed in every unit. The result was not great. Firstly, gender became the primary factor of comparison in tests, evaluations and informal comments by both instructors and students, with "an idealized masculine model as the comparative touchstone" (9).[161] Secondly, the required training marches in these gender-integrated units were marked by male insistence on carrying heavier weights coupled with complaints by the men that women got away with less physical effort. In gender-segregated units, by contrast, each soldier carried equal loads during the marches and never complained. Judith Lorber was asked "by one of the assessors to suggest ways the program could really be gender-integrated". She claimed that having women in the program was not enough. They needed to turn to what she called "degendering practices":

> *(….) make a rule that on a march everyone carries the same load the same distance and that in the classroom everyone talks at least once and not again until everyone else has had a say. (…) set up the formal evaluations (written and physical) for comparisons, first by level of education, ethnicity, marital and parental status, height, and weight, and then, by gender. (…) forbid verbal comparison by gender in the first month of the course (…). (Lorber 10)*

[160] "I eventually realized that, even in an age of female fighter pilots and #MeToo, boys' clothes are largely designed to be practical, while girls' are designed to be pretty. Now when I shop for Lia, I hit the boys' section first. It's not just about avoiding skinned knees, but also the subtle and discouraging message that's woven right into girls' garments: *you are dressed to decorate, not to do*." (Clemence)

[161] "The staff claimed that girl students cried, whined, were shoddy, swore constantly, chewed gum, were orderly and organized in their studying but didn't speak up or argue in class the way they did in the women-only courses. The boy students were cleaner, more disciplined, learned better but relied on the girls' note taking, volunteered more, were physically more capable." (Lorber 9)

What do all of these recommendations have in common? They attempt to create an environment where gender is downplayed and the commonality of being a soldier is brought to the fore. One way to do this is by highlighting other important differences between the students in the formal evaluations. Another is to institute egalitarian distribution of opportunities and burdens, suppressing a central way in which masculinity and femininity are enacted in this setting, but also highlighting an ethos of shared experience and comraderie. Degendering is then a kind of 'gender-integration' that requires more than placing men and women in the same space. It can involve corrective measures, both in the short and the long-term, to positively de-emphasize gender distinctions.

Finally, consider a more challenging proposal: degendering parenting. In this domain of social life, the major gendered dynamic at play is the asymmetric assignment of care work to mothers. This is may be most noticeable in different-sex, two-parent contexts, but it can play out in other ways in single-parent households and in same-sex parenting contexts. Degendering is a push to minimize this gender imbalance by appealing to the *shared parenting role* of mothers and fathers – their shared goals in promoting their child's development and well-being, and their equal interest in enjoying the parenting experience without giving up "half their life" (Lorber 43). Mothers and fathers who *share* primary care of their children can both have an intense involvement in raising their children and pursue other social and professional projects. They can also provide better care. When there are two parents in the household, a child is better off with "two primary caretakers": two equally emotionally involved parents who can care for the child even in the absence of the other partner (Lorber 57). The basic idea is that *shared* parenting is *good* parenting in two-parent settings.

Not all shared parenting arrangements need to be exactly alike or observe a strict parity in task division. But shared parenting means that there are no different responsibilities and

expectations assigned to men and women regardless of their individual talents, needs or of broader norms of reciprocity.

> *(...) degendering means that we do not understand parenting styles and responsibilities as gendered. Dividing household tasks equally is part of this. Also, thinking that parents of either gender may have various different things they are good at, that there is no pre-existing template. Instead, people can do what they are better at. (Lorber 58)*[162]

One may think that this is too controversial in the face of a strong, continuing tradition in North America of thinking that it is proper and right that mothers and father contribute very differently to children's development. There may therefore be no shared parenting role that we can appeal to. But there are some reasons to think otherwise. Today, same-sex parenting couples are much more common, often challenging mother/father normative dichotomies. Changes in fathers' involvement in parenting have also been dramatic in the last 50 years and social expectations have consequently changed.[163] Seven-in-ten Americans now consider it as important for new babies to bond with their fathers as with their mothers, for example (Parker and Livingston). What degendering aims to do is to continue this major shift.

Judith Lorber helpfully points to at least four elements of this project of degendering parenting. Firstly, "for more couples to share parenting equally, women have to give up being the chief child-care expert, and men have to learn how to be one" (Lorber 62).[164] Individuals need to push against gendered expectations in ways that may be hard. Secondly, degendering parenting requires the implementation of formal work place policies and institutional reforms

[162] For a very similar point see hooks 1984 137.

[163] Mothers are still perceived as better equipped to care for a new baby (53%), but the idea that mother and fathers are equally equipped is a close second (45%). More than half of people who think that having a stay-at-home parent is important say either mothers or fathers will do. Most fathers (63%) say they spend too little time with their kids, compared with only 35% of mothers who say the same. Fathers are also less positive about their own parenting abilities than mother (Parker and Livingston).

[164] In a study of American parents in 2015, fathers were markedly less positive about their own parenting abilities than mothers 39% said they did a "very good job" raising their children, compared with 51% of interviewed mothers. (Parker and Livingston)

that make room for both men and women to dedicate significant time to parenting (43). One example is parental leave, with ear-marked time for fathers. Thirdly, on top of these formal policies, there needs to be "encouragement of their use" (62). Consider the systematic failure of actually getting fathers to use formal parental leave policies to dedicate time to their newborn children. And, finally, degendering requires the existence of "an affordable system of supplemental high-quality child care outside the home" (Lorber 62). The end goal of all these measures is, first and foremost, that children have the best care possible and that all parents can enjoy being involved in their child's life. In so doing, these measures also minimize the biggest gender disparities in this domain and contribute to more egalitarian social arrangements.

2.2 Theorizing Degendering

The broad strategy that emerges from these examples proceeds in two steps. Firstly, it highlights that men and women are never *just* men and women (Théry 25). They are gendered social beings, but they also have professional roles, class differences, familial roles and individual idiosyncrasies. Men and women do not form monolithic or unified groups.[165] Recognizing this complexity "of social hierarchies and statuses helps to undercut the strength of the constant gendering" of social practices (Lorber 8). It opens up the space to *question*. Does gender really matter, in a department, in a parenting household, in the military? Could we organize these contexts differently? Secondly, degendering goes on to take relevant commonalities between men and women as alternative structuring principles of social practice. Because both men and women are parents, colleagues, soldiers and toddlers, they have common values, projects, roles and norms. These overlaps can serve as our anchors in restructuring social practice. They can be foregrounded in ways that end up relegating gender to a less determinant role in social

[165] This is highlighted by thinking of identity as *intersectional*.

coordination.[166] Indirectly, degendering also minimizes patriarchal hierarchy by diminishing the importance of gendered dynamics in particular social domains.

There are some important characteristics of this strategy that can be seen in the previous examples. Degendering is not a suggestion that we make gender less central to our social life *tout court*. It is a pattern of localized interventions, aimed at concrete social domains like parenting or the workplace. Parity is neither necessary nor sufficient for degendering. A department could be degendered without having a 50/50 gender composition and equal numbers in the Israeli army example did nothing by themselves to degender the institutional setting. Degendering is also a gradual process. There are more or less gendered/degendered domains of our social life and this is something that we can investigate sociologically. Think here, for example, about the changes over time that we register in parenting, or in children's clothing. We can track progress by looking at changing social practices.

Degendering helps us minimize meaning vertigo by making us less reliant on gendered meanings and norms. Feminist critique does not feel so disorienting when the stakes are lower, when we can easily lean on other forms of social identification that we take to be more important anyways. Sara Clemence, for example, is happy to embrace new and stronger feminist criticisms of the socialization of little girls because gender is less of factor in dressing her children.[167] At the same time, degendering does not face the epistemic obstacles of gender reinvention strategies. It does not ask us to imagine a way of being (socially) that we are yet to see in the real world. Instead, it invites us to reflect on norms and meanings we already care about and have some grip on: good parenting, military comradery, academic professionalism,

[166] We could think of degendering as systematically creating what anthropologists have called "relations of undifferentiated sex" where individuals still have a gender, but for the purposes of this relationship's norms and expectations, this is taken to be an irrelevant feature of their social identification (Théry 234).
[167] For a similar point about the relation between degendered parenting and increased openness to feminist critique see hooks 1984 136-140.

toddlers' messy play. Degendering does not ask us to jump into the unknown. Instead, it tries to expand our horizons by prompting a reflection from within our epistemic limits.

This is not to say that degendering is either easy or uncontroversial. As I have admitted, in domains like parenting, degendering solutions involve ongoing deep changes to the status quo. The hope, however, is that these changes can be motivated by drawing on things most people already care about. Whether this is enough to make it a viable strategy is a complicated question that I cannot fully answer here. Furthermore, for degendering to be plausible, we will need to decide what domains and practices should be targeted and in what order of priority.[168] I leave these outstanding issues open as starting points for future work.

3 What Degendering is Not

In the previous section, I sketched the contours of a possible feminist political strategy that can actively minimize meaning vertigo. I have argued that we should aim to not only critique the way in which our world is gendered, but to also actively *degender* it. In this section, I want to very briefly distinguish degendering from three nearby positions: gender blindness, gender eliminativism and nonbinary politics.

Degendering is not a form of politically motivated 'gender blindness'. It does not aim to move beyond patriarchal social organization by just strategically requiring that our social practices ignore gender distinctions. In fact, degendering does not commit us to treating men and women in the same way. It only requires that we *question* the current gendered distinctions

[168] Judith Lorber, for example, targets the family and the workplace for degendering because she considers them "the two main social institutions in Western societies that are built on and maintain gender inequality" (Lorber 41). We may also want to take into account how easy degendering may be in a particular area, or how much social prestige that practice carries.

that we observe in social relations.[169] Degendering may include normative recommendations of differential treatment aimed at rectifying persistent gendered dynamics. It must also be sensitive to "the effects of biological sex, particularly in procreation and illness" if it is to be a truly egalitarian strategy (Lorber xiv, 7, 36). Degendering practices on a case-by-case basis allows us to better take all these important considerations into account.

Degendering is not a kind of gender eliminativism. It aims at downplaying or containing gender, not at making it disappear from social life. Consider this articulation of the eliminativist position by Christine Overall:

> *I propose that the next step in radical feminist thinking about gender is to advocate its demise: the end of woman and man, femininity and masculinity, the end of all prescriptions couched in terms of gender and/or sex. What is left if one is consistently radical in criticism of gender is not its transformation but rather nothing that could be called gender at all. (Overall 34)*

Degendering certainly does not aspire to eliminate gender distinctions from our shared repertoire of social meanings. It does not even necessarily aspire to decenter gender in *all* domains of social life. Whether this is feasible or desirable is an open question. In any case, the view I am sketching here is more modest than eliminativism, but it continues to be thoroughly radical. As Judith Lorber puts it, "a world completely without gender may be unattainable, but a world without gender all the time is revolutionary. That, to me, is the goal of degendering" (Lorber xx).

Another key difference is that degendering is concerned with minimizing meaning vertigo, but gender eliminativism has no such concern. Eliminativism seems in fact moved by

[169] I take Heath Fogg Davis' methodology in *Beyond Trans: Does Gender Matter?* to be a prime example of this kind of reflection. Examining various social practices, Davis asks, do they need to be gender structured? While he defends bathrooms should be degendered, he is less sure about competitive sports.

the idea that the demise of gender will unleash not a worrisome disorientation (meaning vertigo), but new creative ways of relating to each other.[170]

> *With the disappearance of women and men there would develop the possibility that new kinds of persons might emerge – as well, perhaps, as a resistance towards hasty categorizations and more emphasis on the specialness of individuals. (…) we would not adhere so committedly to adult/child distinctions, to racial and racialized categories, or even to the supposedly self-evident human/non-human distinctions. We might evince more interest in bonds/networks/friendships among individuals and beings who are now considered very different as well as among those who seem similar. (Overall 45)*

Gender eliminativism sees individuals as able to flourish freed from social modes of categorization, capable of relating to each other without the constraints of social rules, norms and meanings. But this is a misguided picture of human sociality. It is premised on the "myth" that there is such thing as interaction and cooperation between individuals absent the mediation of social normative frameworks (Strathern 289).[171] Gender eliminativism is therefore blindsided to phenomena like meaning vertigo because it fails to take seriously our reliance on social norms and meanings for effective and fluid social communication and coordination.

Finally, I want to distinguish degendering from another increasingly influential political position: call it 'nonbinary politics'. Both strategies have a concern with the pervasiveness of gender distinctions in our social world. The nonbinary political solution consists then in taking a personal stance of rebellion and rejection against this constant bifurcation. Robin Dembroff articulates this in the following passage:

> *I am tired of living in a society where everyone forces each other into a blue or a pink box. (…) I don't want to put up with it any longer: my identity is a petition for an escape hatch. (…) I consider nonbinary identity to be an unabashedly*

[170] Without gender we "could liberate our thinking and knowing", "difference and diversity would not be diminished but rather enhanced if gender and its conventions were to disappear" (Overall 36, 39).

[171] "The new myth is that one can interact as individuals, communicate as human beings, without the mediation of society. Spontaneous emotion and self-expression can create new kinds of bonds which depend not on social categories and rules but on a simple consciousness of common humanity. (…) Analytically it is a contradiction in terms. Interaction can only proceed within the framework of rules. Whether these rules are instinctive or learned, or combinations of these, they are a premise of collective life" (Strathern 289). See also Théry 580.

> *political identity. It is for anyone who wishes to wield self-understanding in service of dismantling a mandatory, self-reproducing gender system that strictly controls what we can do and be. To be nonbinary is to set one's existence in opposition to this system at its conceptual core. (Dembroff)*

This nonbinary political strategy is a form of *political self-understanding*. To be nonbinary is to make some political demands and proposals. According to Dembroff, nonbinary identity is independent of one's reproductive features, aesthetic expression or even conformity or non-conformity to existing gender norms. It is a "radically anti-essentialist" and "opt-in only" identity, much like affiliation in a political party (Dembroff).

Openly claiming a nonbinary self-understanding may be a way of posing a challenge to the centrality of gender in our social practices. But it does nothing to minimize meaning vertigo. This sets it apart from degendering. Consider this passage where Dembroff recounts what nonbinary teen Kelsey Beckham said in a 2014 interview:

> *'I don't want to be a girl wearing boy's clothes, nor do I want to be a girl who presents as a. '**I'm just a person wearing people clothes** (my emphasis).' Beckham's claim gets at the heart of nonbinary identity. Beckham does not deny that they have female- or male-coded sex characteristics. They do not deny having a gendered social position. They do not insist that they have an androgynous aesthetic. In my view, Beckham's claim is best interpreted as a challenge: Why do you insist on perceiving me through binary gender concepts? (Dembroff)*

Beckham poses a helpful question: why should gender be the most salient thing to clothing selection? But, confronted with Beckhams' demand to be seen as just a person wearing "people clothes", one is likely to ask: what are "people clothes"? After all, when entering most stores, we cannot help but look at clothing as gendered, and we have never dressed as 'just people'. So, the blunt injunction to eliminate gendered distinctions from our clothing is likely to be met with, at best, perplexity[172] and, at worst, a doubling down on traditionally gendered garments.

[172] For an example of some of this perplexity, see the Saturday Night Live "Levi's Wokes" sketch, a satirical advertisement for non-gendered jeans that look like amorphous, brownish pieces of cloth held by a belt. They are

Nonbinary politics, like eliminativism, makes the mistake of taking gendered meanings and norms to be something we can do without, if we are truly committed to ending patriarchal hierarchy. Therefore, the nonbinary strategy feels no need to present a substantial understanding of "people clothes" that can step in and substitute our current system.[173] In posing this challenge to our modes of social coordination and walking away, it leaves the threat of meaning vertigo intact.

In sum, degendering is not gender blind because it is not committed to recommending the exact same social treatment for men and women. Degendering also sets itself apart from both gender eliminativism and nonbinary politics in that it is centrally concerned with minimizing meaning vertigo. Those strategies have no such concern. They offer instead challenges to our social order that may in fact trigger a sense of vertiginous vacuum at the level of social meanings and norms.

4 Degendering and Fundamentality

Can degendering be effective if gender remains a fundamental aspect of social identity? As I argued in chapter 4, fundamentality creates a constant pressure on practices to be gender structured. This is in part why gender does not simply wear away with feminist critique, it morphs and shows up in other social domains. But if this is right, degendering seems to be nothing more than a whack-a-mole game.

The worry is an important one because we have good reasons to think that *gender will continue to be fundamental* for any human society. Gender is constituted by the social meanings

"sizeless, style-neutral, gender non-conforming denim for a generation that defies labels". These jeans "don't come in men's and women's", they come in "person's" (Saturday Night Live). Thank you to Eduardo Martinez for this example.

[173] Contrast this with Sara Clemence's degendering of her toddler's clothes, where a positive articulation of what 'toddler clothing' should be like (boxy for movement, reinforced at the knees) was the starting point.

we give to the embodied reality of sexual dimorphism and sexual reproduction. This does not determine the institution of gender as we know it. However insofar as sexual differences are salient for any human life, we should expect all societies to have *some* social representations of gender as part of their social self-images. This means that we should expect gender to function as a precondition for full social standing in all human societies. This is why, in spite of the diversity of gender regimes across space and time, we have yet to find one that does not attribute social significance to sexual difference.[174] Gender distinctions of some kind seem to be an enduring parameter in social self-images transculturally and transhistorically. Why would our society be an exception to this?

This point raises a challenge for the viability of degendering that I cannot fully address here. Nevertheless, I want to note that even though gender's fundamentality creates a *pressure* towards the pervasive gendering of our social life, *pressure can be resisted*. In chapter 3, I suggested that there is a constant perceptibility requirement for anything to function as a precondition for full social standing. The wrinkle with gender is that legibility here is *relational*. There has to be a backdrop of social relations and modes of engagement within which we can be placed as occupying a gendered position. But it may take relatively little to form this kind of gendering backdrop. In other words, the fundamentality of gender does not, by itself, determine how much or how little of our social practices must be gendered. It certainly does not necessitate the amount of gendering we observe today.[175]

[174] Charlotte Witt for instance, claims that as long as we are sexually reproductive beings, gender will continue to be a key organizing principle of social life (Witt 2011 104). Irène Théry suggests that our very mortality makes sex differences socially salient. We die because we are born, and we are born out of sexual reproduction. We are always already embedded in relations that involve sexual difference. If humans are the kind of beings that endow death and mortality with a major cultural significance, it is only expectable that they will do also do this for sexual difference (Thèry 313, see also 15). See also Haslanger 254.

[175] This is why many gendering examples look silly to us. For some of these see chapter 4, section 7.

To a certain extent, the whack-a-mole phenomenon is true. Pressure to structure our world by gender will always be there. But one reason to be optimistic about the possibility of sustained progress here is that we already observe stable differences in how gendered various societies are.

> *In the countries that are most degendered in the sense of treating women and men the same legally and bureaucratically, women and men have more equal statuses. (…) Degendering is already common in many [more] gender-equal societies, such as Sweden and Norway. The extent of degendering in those countries is in sharp contrast to the forcefulness of gendering in such countries as Saudi Arabia, where every aspect of women's and men's lives is controlled by gender, to women's marked disadvantage. (Lorber 164)*

Arguably, gender is fundamental in both Sweden and Saudi Arabia. It is still a factor conditioning social standing in both societies. But there is a difference in in how pervasive gendered distinctions are in the two social fabrics.[176] For gender legibility to be possible, there has to be some perceptible difference in the way men and women relate to the social world. So there have to be some gendered meanings and norms. But this vastly underdetermines how gendered a society needs to be.

5 Degendering Sexuality

In this concluding chapter, I have tried to tentatively sketch a strategy for feminist politics that is responsive to my analysis of the role of gender in our social life. I have suggested that degendering may be able to help us make feminist progress, while warding off meaning vertigo. In addition to criticizing the contents of oppressive gendered norms and meanings, we should attempt to also decenter gender as an organizing principle of our social practices. The goal is

[176] For an extended case study of a society where gender is fundamental, but that seems both more egalitarian and less gender-structured than its neighbors, see Maria Lepowsky's work on the island of Vanatinai.

not to eliminate or overhaul gender, but to downplay it by foregrounding other modes of social identification that we already understand and care about to some extent.

I would like to end by returning to the case of raunch feminism as (post-)feminist backlash. This was a phenomenon fueled by meaning vertigo, by a perception of vertiginous emptiness at the level of *sexual* meanings and norms. I diagnosed this perceived vacuum as a side-effect of the successful internalization of the second-wave critique of (patriarchal) sexuality by these young feminists. According to what I have suggested so far, to avoid phenomena like raunch feminism, we should complement this critique with efforts to *degender the domain of (hetero)sexual social practice*. If we do not see gender as central to sexuality, we will be less 'panicked' by the erosion of patriarchal gendered norms and meanings in this domain.

But what does a degendered sexuality look like? Certainly, our practices of romantic and sexual encounters remain extremely gendered. One need only wait for 'Valentine's Day' to see thriving social rituals and industries dedicated to highly gendered scripts of sexual attractiveness: from asymmetric paying and gift-giving, to the lingerie and the wedding industries. We can understand what 'playing' with these gendered meanings or mixing them up may entail.[177] But the idea of *degendering* sexuality, of making these meanings much less important, seems baffling – or at least not very sexy – to most people.

This hints at a particular difficulty. In the examples of degendering I have provided, looking inside the practice revealed to us other relevant, rich modes of social identification that could be further elaborated and foregrounded. In academic departments we found collegiality, and in parenting we found children's well-being, for example. The problem when we turn to

[177] For a plausible example of this see the web publication Salty World.

sexuality is that we find no such norms or values. What being someone's sexual partner or being 'sexy' means to us seems to boil down to feminine and masculine social meanings. As Riki Wilchins puts, it seems that sexual "desire *itself* is gendered" (Wilchins 57).[178] Our sexual identities and our gendered identities seem to be intimately linked. Gender seems to provide us with the social vocabulary we need for sexuality. To highlight non-gendered modes of social identity in the sexual domain therefore seems to be either 'off topic' or to be a positively desexualizing move.

I will not try to dissolve this skepticism here. But it is important to remember that degendering does not require us to take gender out of sexuality altogether. It only requires us to foreground other forms of social identification, other social vocabularies at play in the sexual domain. And skeptics must admit that they exist: we never interact with each other as *just* men and women, even in the sexual domain. People have sex with each other as gendered beings, but also as individuals with many other similarities and differences along lines of race, age, class, disability, religious affiliation, professional occupation, or political orientation. These things shape sexual interaction. We recognize this, for instance, when we worry about sex between bosses and employees, or students and teachers. We recognize that people continue to stand in those relations to each other, even in the sexual domain. So, there is more to sex than gendered meanings and norms. This may be all degendering needs to get off the ground.

Degendering sexuality hinges on our ability to understand the sexual domain as one where people "come together as whole individuals with a particular relational history, not as

[178] Wilchins uses this point to argue against a separation between our understanding of gender and sexuality, even in same-sex contexts: "But watch any butch with big biceps, tight jeans, and a lit Camel walk into the local gay bar. Or a butch queen at the gym spending hour upon hour pumping and primping so he's buff enough to catch the eye of that cute new number with the tight butt, long eyelashes, and rippled abs. Or watch them in bed, one raising his butt, spreading his legs, and moaning to arouse the other. (…) These [gendered] behaviors are how we make ourselves attractive to others, are attracted to them, and make love" (Wilchins 57). "Gender is a system of meanings and symbols (…) for power and sexuality (…)" (25). See also Stoltenberg 32.

emblems of a gender" (Stoltenberg 106). We may then be able to think through ways of highlighting certain relations and social identities that seem particularly promising. I leave this here as a point of departure for future work. This is an ambitious project. But the payoff may be a form of sexual politics that can carry on the promise of second-wave feminism, while minimizing the setbacks of meaning vertigo.

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