

The Razor Edge of Accommodation: Violent Perception and the Nonbinary Body in *Gender Failure*

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Abstract

What does it mean to be “retired from gender,” and what role does such an identity play in daily life? Engaging with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler, this project attempts to elucidate the experience of nonbinary – that is, external to the male/female gender binary – gendered individuals, and the ultimate unintelligibility of that experience. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to perception allows for an exploration of the social norms and regulations that determine how gender is defined in Western culture; combined with Butler’s significant work on gender, phenomenology proves a useful tool for revealing the constructedness of gender. Although an arbitrary system, the gender binary serves as a mechanism of so-called social truth: because the nonbinary reality rejects this truth the nonbinary gender performance not only appears unintelligible to the binary other but also represents a threat to social stability. This paper uses the memoirs in *Gender Failure* – written by two self-identified nonbinary individuals – to consider how social norms inform binary perception and how that perception constitutes the nonbinary self. Perceived from within the binary matrix, the nonbinary self appears unintelligible: as a result, the validity of their gendered reality is threatened. Conscious of the conceptual gap between nonbinary and binary individuals, this project explores gender as the subject of the perceptive act and not only outlines the delegitimization of the nonbinary reality but also suggests opportunities to make space for non-normative gendered experiences.

1 In the recent text adaptation of their live show *Gender Failure*, Ivan Coyote and Rae Spoon – two individuals assigned female at birth who now identify as nonbinary and use the singular pronoun¹ “they” – narrate their nonbinary gender experiences as products of the binary matrix. The nonbinary self lives external to the gender binary, identifying as neither male nor female, nor anywhere in between, thereby orienting themselves in opposition to the normative structure of gender.² The nonbinary performance can take any form, but the binary other rarely perceives the authentic nonbinary identity – that is, the identity the individual believes themselves to possess. Because it originates in subjective experience, the violent perceptive act

¹ About pronouns: Because of their position outside the gender binary, nonbinary individuals frequently prefer personal pronouns that reflect that position. Gender-neutral pronouns range from the familiar (they/them/theirs) to the unfamiliar (zi/zir/zirs). To avoid confusion – and because Spoon and Coyote have explicitly stated their preferences – I will use the third-person singular pronoun “they” when speaking about nonbinary individuals. However, “they” will also be used in its traditional binary – singular and plural – forms in this paper; to the best of my ability (given the constraints of language) I will make it clear what “they” refers to.

² Any discussion of nonbinary necessarily challenges the male/female binary at the same time that it creates a binary/nonbinary dualism. At present, I lack the meta-language to avoid the construction of this other binary.

superimposes the self's own meanings over the other's reality; this violence plays out most evidently at the point of contact between the nonbinary self and the binary other. This paper will use these memoirs to consider how the illegibility of nonbinary genders derives from binary gender norms and the ways in which those norms threaten the nonbinary self; I will also offer possibilities for making space for non-normative gender identities.

2 The stories in *Gender Failure* flesh out a gender narrative that resists categorization and familiarization. The nonbinary gender experience tends to alienate the individual owing to a social system that compulsively seeks to organize and stabilize threats to the binary order by erasing delinquent realities. Coyote and Spoon expound on such alienation, highlighting the centrality of illegibility to the nonbinary identity. As explicit objects in a perceptual field (whether stage or text), Coyote and Spoon recount lived illegible moments shaped in opposition to the binary hegemony, bringing attention to the binary perceptive violence that constitutes their nonbinary realities. At the same time, the materiality of their narratives – performed with their nonbinary bodies – reject the impossibility of the nonbinary; by using the physical articulations of their gender as narrative tools, Coyote and Spoon disrupt a binary audience's instinct to seek intelligibility in their performance. The result is space made for a legitimate – if illegible – nonbinary gender identity.

3 The nonbinary self refuses binary meanings, becoming an illegible figure for binary others. Thus, though the nonbinary gender experience varies by the extent to which individuals attempt to socially and physically perform their identity, it has a substantial impact on their relationship with the world around them. When a binary self perceives a nonbinary other, binary truths are forcibly applied to make the nonbinary other legible (Butler 57). Illegibility of the nonbinary gender experience occurs on multiple levels, most notably the physical body, language, and sociality. The struggle for – or resistance to – legibility characterizes the relationship between the nonbinary self and the binary world. Due to their position within a binary matrix, the nonbinary self destabilizes the predominant experienced worldview and as such poses a threat to the security of binary categories. Presumptions regarding the other's perceived gender identity necessarily erase the reality of that identity: if my experienced gender falls outside the binary, my gender will be read as a (delinquent) binary identity.

4 Phenomenology provides a useful system for understanding the ways nonbinary identities challenge gender intelligibility. Literally, phenomenology is the study of phenomena: our

perception of things; things as we perceive them in our experiences; and our experience of things and of our perception of things (Smith). More specifically, phenomenology studies consciousness as constructed by our experiences of the world. In a phenomenological approach to social interactions, processes of performance and perception create a system wherein self and other arrive at different and often conflicting conclusions about identity. The observing self perceives the performance of the other and supplements the imperfect impression with anticipated profiles that stem from the self's own modes of truth. The resultant synthesized image of the performing other cannot faithfully represent the reality of their existence, as the observing self cannot know the truths that define the other. Such a disparity of course occurs in all social interactions but it is especially pronounced in the perceptive relationship between the nonbinary self and the external binary world.

5 The gap dividing binary perception and the nonbinary experience is an insurmountable one. In a phenomenological framework, knowledge of the self – nonbinary or otherwise – is always complete and knowledge of the other is always imperfect: as the self observes, aspects of the other remain hidden as a result of distinct consciousnesses. The self must literally experience the consciousness of the other in order to accurately perceive the other's existence (Merleau-Ponty 359). This gap forces the self to make presumptions about the nature of the other's hidden reality, creating what Edmund Husserl calls a “world,” quotation marks suggesting an imposed reality that is somehow less authentic than the actual reality (138). This causes a distortion between how the self identifies and how the other perceives that identity. The only constant is the experienced world, which exists subjectively to every individual's position within it, thus lacking conformity in how it affects its subjects. In other words, although the nonbinary self and binary other experience the same objective world, their subjective identities determine the meanings they will derive from it: where the other moves in the binary world with relative ease, the nonbinary self must actively make space for its identity within a normalizing gender matrix.

6 For individuals with unintelligible gender presentations, the public restroom embodies this effort. Here, gender segregation reifies the gender binary and so gender presentations receive stringent scrutiny. Binary perceptions pose a threat to the nonbinary self, who may face persecution based on their gender presentation; likewise, the binary self may feel threatened by the uncategorizable (and therefore dangerous) body of the nonbinary other. Sexual morphology rarely plays a role in public interactions, as it is not on display and therefore the other cannot

perceive it. If morphology affects public life in any way, it is in the choice between gendered restrooms.

7 Coyote – who performs a butch masculinity – uses public restrooms only as a last resort, a result of having endured countless instances of harassment. Due to their anatomy – or perhaps because the other option presents a greater threat to their safety – Coyote chooses to use the women’s restroom when gender-neutral, single-stall facilities are unavailable (205). They know their gender presentation startles or even frightens women who perceive Coyote through a binary lens; as only two restroom options exist, so too must Coyote’s nonbinary self adhere to one of two accepted gender presentations. Coyote understands the fear their appearance elicits: women who support strictly segregated restrooms express concerns that men will use any leniency as a front for committing sexual violence (Benvenuto). Coyote’s own experiences, however, suggest that the nonbinary self cannot expect safety in the women’s restroom either:

[E]very time a nice lady in her new pantsuit for travelling screams or stares at me, I try to remember that this is maybe her first encounter with someone who doesn’t appear to be much of a lady in the ladies’ room. [...] She doesn’t know I have been verbally harassed in women’s washrooms for years. She doesn’t know I have been hauled out with my pants still undone by security guards and smashed over the head with a giant handbag once. (206-7)

Although in general the nonbinary gender experience resists binary categorization, the use of public restrooms requires compliance. Coyote chooses the restroom based on their anatomical configuration; however, the binary other cannot perceive this aspect of Coyote’s body – perceiving only masculine gender attributes – thus misreading Coyote’s presence as a threat. The nonbinary body, in its incoherence, signifies an existence that cannot be read as human by the binary other (Butler 28).³ The inhuman nonbinary self threatens the safety and stability of the binary other, demonstrated by Coyote’s experiences in the extreme binary apparatus of the public restroom.

8 The stage performance of *Gender Failure* toured internationally in 2012. As a result of minimal staging, the audience’s focus is only on Spoon and Coyote. This setup enables a transgression of gender norms at a micro level: the image of their physical bodies reifies the nonbinary experiences described in their narratives, forcing their audience to reconcile Spoon

³ Drawing on Hegel, Judith Butler defines the human as that which is recognized in terms of “socially articulated and changeable” norms. She adds that “sometimes the very terms that confer ‘humanness’ on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human” (2).

and Coyote's performances with their 'ready made' binary gendered meanings.⁴ The text reproduction transfers that ability, placing photos of the authors alongside personal essays. In both media, Spoon and Coyote control the discourse: the audience cannot escape the embodied reality of the nonbinary narratives they perceive and consequently struggle to overlay their binary truths onto the nonbinary other (James 2-4). The staging of the live performance as well as the creative control in publishing the book affords a significant ability to determine the delivery of their words; however, despite the deliberate presentation of their identity, the gap between their nonbinary selves and the binary other remains (Flegg).

9 A primary source of the illegibility of nonbinary genders stems from linguistic barriers: the binary matrix offers little space for the articulation of nonbinary existence without resorting to the use of binary language. As a result, nonbinary identities rely on the binary for articulation: even the term 'nonbinary' requires the existence of the binary for its meaning. Examining nonbinary genders from within a phenomenological framework reveals the indeterminacy of nonbinary realities that cannot be perceived by those who do not inhabit them: intelligibility may be attempted, but only on the terms of the binary matrix. Throughout *Gender Failure*, Spoon and Coyote strive to elucidate the nonbinary experience; however, for an audience observing from within the binary structure, perceptions of the performers' gender will always derive intelligibility from binary meanings: the masculinity of Coyote's body, for example, becomes meaningful according to the context of the butch woman, rather than that of a nonbinary experience.

Bodies and Embodiment

10 The body one feels oneself to inhabit is not necessarily the one the other perceives (Salamon 3). Mannerisms, body language, dress codes, and any number of cosmetic modifications contribute to bodily performance; however, the meaning of the synthesized whole depends on the observer's position in relation to the binary. In considering the body of the other the "very first of all cultural objects," Maurice Merleau-Ponty asks how an object in space can render an existence legible (348-9). The body-as-object occupies a place in the field of perception; this field accrues social and cultural contexts that inscribe meaning onto the

⁴ Such meanings – acquired through everyday interactions with the external world – are always already available to shape perception. They are therefore uncritically attached to the perceived object. For further discussion, see Merleau-Ponty 176-86.

perceived object. However, the whole of the object can never be perceived in one moment; instead, the perceived whole is the result of the synthesis of retained and anticipated profiles of the object (Detmer 103). The anticipated profiles are those informed by the perceptive field's social and cultural contexts and the observer's relation to them. Consequently, the meaning of these yet-to-be-seen aspects of the perceived body emerges from the observer's preexisting meanings, overwriting the reality experienced by that body. The public body, therefore, is never quite only our own: through the body "gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings" (Butler 20). While the self assumes autonomy over how the body is presented for recognition, the social meaning of that performance depends on external forces.

11 The nonbinary body resists recognition by the binary other. Perceptions of the nonbinary body that originate from within the binary matrix strip the nonbinary self of the reality of their existence. Judith Butler suggests that for those who depend on the boundaries of the gender binary for stability, the uncategorizable nonbinary body prompts a violent need to restore order (34). Coyote experiences violent retaliation in public restrooms because of their apparently delinquent body. The violence enacted upon Spoon – whose perceived androgyny frustrates expected femininity – emerges from external social forces and manifests as self-harm. In both cases, the violence acts as a regulatory mechanism for maintaining the order set by the gender binary. The friction between the body of the nonbinary self and the external world begins for both Coyote and Spoon in childhood. In a set of chapters entitled "Girl Failure," the authors describe the ways their bodies resist binary legibility before their nonbinary gender identities are realized.

12 Coyote's sense of 'girl failure' originates in the demise of a childhood friendship. In Janine, Coyote finds a friend who also loves sports and despises Barbies: a comrade in the struggle against the traditional narrative of girlhood (22). Around the cataclysmic start of junior high, however, Coyote begins to feel distanced from Janine, who shows a budding interest in home ec and cheerleading. In retrospect, what Coyote sees as the culprit in this estrangement was the interposition of womanhood, which includes Janine's devotion to cheerleading, her interest in boys, and her growing breasts (23). The moment that drives the decisive wedge between the two friends, Coyote says, is a slumber party. Rather than their traditional celebration of Janine's birthday – movies and a bucket of fried chicken shared between the two of them – Janine throws

a slumber party and invites her newer, more feminine friends in addition to Coyote. The party is unsurprisingly miserable, but it only gets worse after Coyote and the girls settle into sleep: curled in the dark on their thin bedroll, Coyote overhears Janine telling her friends about Coyote's genital configuration; although not diagnosed intersexed, Coyote's body is indeterminate enough that these preteen girls know to categorize it as physically abnormal. They giggle and shriek words like 'sick' while Coyote feigns sleep (24). Rather than attempting to force binary legibility onto Coyote's body, the girls create a third category that defines Coyote as abhorrent to the binary ideal, demonstrating the utility of the normal/abnormal (human/inhuman) binary in policing conformity to the gender binary.

13 Coyote marks this moment as the beginning of their fear of changing in front of others: in public locker rooms, they protect themselves from such gender policing by changing in toilet stalls and they have "a scar on [their] elbow where [they] split it open on the rough edge of a toilet paper dispenser to prove it" (24). As a result of that first vocalized fear of their physical ambiguity, Coyote learns to accommodate the concerns of binary others in public spaces and experiences their own fear of physical and psychic pain in the process. In some situations, such as public restrooms and locker rooms, Coyote has to take conscious steps to perform legibility in order to protect themselves from the violence intended to maintain the gender binary. According to Butler, "the person who threatens violence proceeds from the anxious and rigid belief that a sense of world and a sense of self will be radically undermined if [the nonbinary body], uncategorizable, is permitted to live within the social world" (34). The binary other's anxiety stems from the possibility that the strict gender categories on which they depend for social meanings are unstable or, worse, unnatural; thus acts of physical and psychic violence – only sometimes labeled 'hate crimes' – aim to reinforce the stability of the binary, sustaining the terms that define the human. Butler asserts that these terms are both "socially articulated and changeable" (2); that they are socially articulated is evident in the urgent need to punish those who transgress binary gender boundaries. The vehemence behind such acts, however, suggests that the person who threatens or enacts violence resists the changeability of such social terms, instead attempting to maintain order "on the basis of intelligible gender" (34). Whether the punishment takes the form of a group of giggling preteen girls, the existence of so-called 'bathroom bills,' or physical assault or murder, violence toward nonbinary bodies and performances is meant to delineate what can be considered human. Consequently, even

innocuous tasks in the public world – such as using a public changing room – run the risk of punishment.

14 For Spoon, ‘girl failure’ corresponds with a deep bodily shame. Raised in a Pentecostal household in Calgary, Alberta, Spoon comes of age steeped in conservative notions of appropriate gender roles and behavior. Despite having been socialized as a girl in such a strict atmosphere, Spoon says, “being a girl is something that never really happened for [them]” (27). This phraseology suggests that ‘being a girl’ is not an innate quality of the female body but rather something that has been imposed upon it, the social construction of the gender-neutral infant into a gendered being. Spoon feels they never went through this gendering process and instead remains fundamentally gender-neutral.

15 In an attempt to avoid verbal and physical retribution, Spoon adopts the performance of legible binary femininity expected by their parents and peers. The disruption of this disguise occurs in a sex-segregated junior high gym class. One of the first activity units for the girls is dance aerobics; outside, the boys play rugby, which “look[s] violent,” but not as dangerous as what Spoon expects to experience on the dance floor (28). Having been taught that dancing is sinful, Spoon finds that their body struggles with the movements that come so easily to the other girls. Spoon wonders whether their body also resists the overt feminine performance prescribed by an external social force (ibid.). The gym teacher expects all of the girls in her class to step easily into the binary femininity that is their birthright. Because the binary other perceives Spoon’s body as female, Spoon feels a compulsion to conform; they participate in dance class until “some distant part of [their] psyche” impels them to bolt in fear from the gymnasium, literally escaping the binary expectations the instructor and their peers impose upon them (29).

16 This coercive binary conformity instigates a violent relationship between Spoon’s internal nonbinary self and their external perceived body. In the locker room of that same gym class, Spoon overhears their classmates talking about shaving their legs; ashamed of never having performed this binary behavior, Spoon ducks into a toilet stall to change (27) – like Coyote, Spoon finds refuge in the only individual space in the public locker room. This ‘girl failure’ torments Spoon throughout the day. That night in the bathtub, they use their mother’s pink razor to shave; unskilled in this particular feminine act, Spoon cuts their legs (28). This attempt to conform to binary gender expectations literally wounds the self, both at the level of the skin as well as on a psychic level; the blood dripping from Spoon’s legs embodies the razor-

edged divide between acceptable and delinquent gender performances.

17 Intelligibility derived from the perceptive process depends on established meanings, especially those that have been set by a regulatory apparatus. The nonbinary self disrupts this process: operating from outside these limiting boundaries, Spoon and Coyote present bodies that defy binary readings. The resulting perception is an amalgamation of nonbinary identity and binary meanings. This incoherent being – and the reality of its unintelligible existence – demonstrates the extent of the constricting perceptive apparatus set by the binary. Thus perceptions from within the matrix threaten the nonbinary self: if their social performance is always read according to binary meanings, can a nonbinary self be considered legitimate? In order to encourage an accurate reading of their body, the nonbinary individual must take up the task of verbal self-articulation.

Speaking a Language That Can Be Heard

18 After positioning the physical body in the social world, the next strategy for articulating an existence is the use of language. For the nonbinary self, the articulation of existence inevitably comes up against the barrier of available language; no specific language for describing the nonbinary exists: articulation must be attempted via binary language. Gayle Salamon identifies self-definition as a linguistic act, thereby underscoring the power of language; at the same time, she acknowledges the difficulty in using language to articulate non-normative genders: “gender...must be separated from language in order to be seen clearly, and the labor of elucidating that which escapes language through the use of language itself is a formidable and frustrating task indeed” (82). The nonbinary gender experience already seems unintelligible to the binary other; the use of the established language – in both pronouns as well as the adjectival agreement in romance languages – undermines the project of articulation by situating the nonbinary experience within the confines of binary understanding. The nonbinary self only approaches intelligibility through a reliance on the hegemonic gender system, a means that necessarily strips away the crucial independence from the binary.

19 When language fails to achieve its goal, binary others cannot perceive the reality of the nonbinary existence; precise language allows the self to take up the other’s thoughts, and without it the distance between perception and reality cannot be bridged. Coyote describes this distance between themselves and the surgeon’s staff prior to their chest reconstruction surgery: although the

staff has experience working with transgender patients and conducts their task professionally and amiably, Coyote “never quite feels like [the staff] truly [understands them]” (96). Even when the binary other can take in the general sense of the narrative told by the nonbinary self, the reality of that self remains unintelligible. The staff’s only experience with non-normative genders comes from interactions with previous (binary) transgender patients; their ‘ready made’ meanings lead them to perceive Coyote’s gender according to these interactions, overlaying Coyote’s reality and creating Husserl’s phenomenological “world” (138).

20 Nonbinary gendered individuals know that the language to accurately define their existence does not exist. Merleau-Ponty explains that, when direct perception fails to create an accurate understanding of the other, the self must rely on observed correlations between the experience of the self and the other (352). While this precludes a wholly authentic representation of reality in general, it is especially evident in terms of the nonbinary identity, as the binary other lacks the experience to observe any actual correlations with the nonbinary self. Thus the nonbinary existence is silenced or erased in the act of being perceived. The internal hurt this causes in the nonbinary self reifies the lack of space afforded them in the binary world. Coyote acknowledges that the nature of communication between the nonbinary self and the binary other makes recognition impossible, and yet:

[The] truth is that every time I am misgendered, a tiny little sliver of me disappears. A tiny little sliver of me is reminded that I do not fit, I am not this, I am not that, I am not seen, I can’t be recognized, I have no name. I remember that the truth of me is invisible, and a tiny little sliver of me disappears. Just a sliver, razored from the surface of my very thick skin most days, but other times right from my soul, sometimes felt so deep and other days simply shrugged off, but still. All those slivers add up to something much harder to pretend around. (246)

Like Spoon, Coyote feels the razor-sharp edge of gender conformity. Their gender performance and identity is not legible for the binary other, and so the reality of the nonbinary self is pared away until only a skeleton of their existence remains. Without the language to correct binary perceptions, Coyote and other nonbinary individuals must resign themselves to a narrative that can be interpreted by binary observers but that does not accurately reflect their identity or experience.

21 In transitioning to a nonbinary gender performance, Spoon comes up against the question of pronouns. As the primary tool for delineating between gendered beings, pronouns pose a significant challenge in navigating the social world as a nonbinary person. Though many options

for gender-neutral pronouns are unfamiliar (*ze/zir/zirs*, for example), many nonbinary individuals – perhaps in an attempt to remain somewhat legible to binary others – use the singular ‘they’ (“Need”). When Spoon – not yet identifying as nonbinary – initially learns that people use this pronoun, they think “it would be pretty hard to get people to actually call you that outside the queer community” (200). This concern gets at the issue of legitimacy often tied up in the use of language to articulate a nonbinary gender identity: Western language depends on a binary system for intelligibility, and so any language that makes room for nonbinary articulation is perceived as illegitimate. Even as a member of the community, endeavoring to use ‘they’ for (queer) others feels like learning a foreign language for Spoon; still living according to the binary matrix, Spoon themselves struggles to accept this third gender pronoun as legitimate. As their gender identity shifts to nonbinary, however, “they” comes to feel more accurate: the gender-neutral pronoun gives Spoon space to perform their gender without allowing the perceiving other to rely on language to read Spoon’s gender (201). At first, Spoon worries that going public with their new preferred pronoun will end their musical career. For a few years they continue to use “he” professionally, requesting the masculine pronoun when people use “she.” Then, after one too many pronoun corrections at a music festival, Spoon comes to a realization:

It was the same difficult fight it had always been. [...] I realized then that I was always going to have to fight for my pronoun, and if I was going to have to do that anyway, I should be fighting for the one that made me the most comfortable, rather than a compromise that I thought would be more accepted. (202)

Spoon finds “taking the responsibility off [themselves] to earn [their] pronoun [...] to be more comforting than going by the ‘they’ pronoun is stressful” (203). They are frequently met with those who claim that the use of “they” as a singular pronoun is confusing or grammatically incorrect; however, many Canadian media outlets have responded favorably to Spoon’s request. The public use of “they” by Spoon and other nonbinary artists begins the work of expanding conceptions of gender, ultimately making more space “for all gender minorities” (ibid.)

22 Coyote, too, uses “they” because it feels more comfortable than either binary pronoun. That comfort plays a large part in creating a livable nonbinary life for Coyote (221). Coyote and Spoon both strive to be recognized as the gender they believe themselves to be; however, the terms that determine recognition originate in socially constituted binary gender norms. This, Butler claims, could make the subject’s life unlivable. Unlivability is not the terminus of imposed binary norms, however; the critical interrogation of the terms that delineate unlivability

allows for the possibility of “establishing more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation” (4). An opportunity for more inclusive conditions can be found in the acceptance of gender-neutral pronouns as legitimate. Pronouns, Coyote believes, should be used based on what makes a person comfortable (221). Unfortunately, this line of reasoning does not make sense for most binary-minded individuals, who understand that, even though the binary spectrum includes varying degrees of femininity and masculinity, “she” and “he” cover all possible gender identities.

23 A linguistic common ground must therefore be established so that the nonbinary existence can be made intelligible to the binary other, thereby creating space in the lexicon for nonbinary voices. Currently, Coyote finds that they have to use language in such a way that provides binary legibility rather than expressing their existence: by, for example, assuring the women in the public restroom that Coyote was also assigned female at birth (208). The common ground, then, is uneven. Because of their daily experience on such uneven ground, Coyote believes that a truly accurate language – binary or otherwise – cannot exist: “These are just words, and words are always imperfect, words are just sounds we make with our mouths that point our minds to think of things that cannot be fully described in words anyway” (247). Acknowledging the truth of this characterization of language – particularly the language meant to define the individual self – could establish a compromise – if not a common ground – where language is accepted as subjective. Such a compromise, while imperfect, would delay if not overcome the imposition of the other’s meanings.

The Nonbinary Self as Social Object

24 The meaning of an individual’s existence depends entirely on their interactions with the social world. The binary matrix is a permanent field of existence, and though the self may turn away from it, the meaning of their gendered existence will always be situated in relation to it (Merleau-Ponty 361); the pervasiveness of the binary matrix makes total escape from its constraints impossible. Friction between the nonbinary self and the external world – caused by binary others, gender norms, and physical spaces – threatens the stability of the nonbinary identity. As a result of their negative experiences with public restrooms, Coyote feels that such friction arises from the exclusion of nonbinary people from public spaces: “we live in a world that is unable to make room enough for trans people to pee in safety” (205). The physical and

social structures of the binary world are not accessible for nonbinary individuals, causing people – including Coyote – to seek out wheelchair-accessible, gender-neutral restrooms; consequently, the nonbinary gender identity becomes a literal impairment for navigating the external world. Coyote, though, does not see women in public restrooms as adversaries, but rather “the potential for many built-in comrades in the fight for gender-neutral, single-stall locking washrooms in all public places” (208). Sex-segregated restrooms allow gender-normative individuals to police unintelligible nonbinary bodies; gender-neutral restrooms would not only protect the safety of both groups but also make room for nonbinary people within the physical and social binary architectures.

25 An individual claims space within the binary social structure in their use of identity labels. The identity labels that nonbinary individuals use can sometimes overlap and conflict with binary notions of identity. Coyote, for example, still identifies as butch; in their usage, however, “butch” does not qualify the noun “woman” (233). Although butch is a binary term used primarily in the lesbian community to signify masculinity, Coyote has claimed it as a gender category for their nonbinary identity; for them, ‘butch’ occupies the non-space outside the gender binary, although others do not always read it as such. In all perceptive acts, the binary other will resist nonbinary readings and will instead project their ‘ready made’ binary meanings onto the nonbinary self. Coyote finds that, even in the queer community, others ascribe differing binary gender labels to them in an effort to ‘claim’ Coyote as a spokesperson. After a solo show in Seattle, a woman approaches Coyote and thanks them for speaking up for butch women; Coyote smiles, but does not feel that had been the crux of their show. Shortly after the woman leaves, a young man steps up to Coyote to thank them for representing transgender men; again, Coyote simply smiles, knowing that correcting the man will serve no purpose (233-4). Both communities, in claiming Coyote as their own, perform the binary violence of erasing Coyote’s actual identity. Coyote understands that the misinterpretation stems from “limited language and the scarcity of shared meanings of words” (235); as with heteronormative binary others, the nonbinary self can achieve a linguistic common ground with a queer other only if the language used can be expanded to provide space for the nonbinary experience.

26 Like Coyote, Spoon performs on public stages and faces the scrutiny and judgment of binary audiences. As a musician, Spoon has to negotiate their presence as an object onstage with their gender presentation. By situating their gendered body on a stage, Spoon offers it up to the

other's gaze. Merleau-Ponty sees this as constitutive of a dialectic of the self and other in which the gaze of the other has the ability to steal the body from the self. As a perceived object, the body is the first point of contact between the self and the other; should the nonbinary body be read according to binary meanings, the other not only imposes a familiar (binary) gender but also denies the possibility of nonbinary autonomy (Merleau-Ponty 167). When Spoon performs their music in homophobic and transphobic venues, the patrons' gaze steals Spoon's body as well as the gender identity Spoon inscribes at its surface. To preserve the meaning of their gender performance, Spoon begins to selectively choose venues where patrons allow Spoon to break gender rules; such patrons also seem more accepting of Spoon breaking musical genre rules, providing space for their musical style (164). Spoon's musical career can serve as a microcosm of their nonbinary gender experience: the hazards Spoon's objective body encounters in the binary social world constructs the performance of their gendered body; binary observers who find some intelligibility in Spoon's performance allow Spoon to bend norms (even slightly) to suit their identity.

27 Spoon's performing career makes them hyperaware of the violence of the other's perceptive gaze. They understand that in social interactions binary individuals compulsively assign a gender to one another and act out the appropriate script (217). The meaning of gender and gender performances depends on how others external to the self perceive and interpret a gendered existence, despite the self's autonomous quest for recognition. Butler calls this the "lively paradox" of gender presentation (21). Once intelligibility is acquired, the binary other imposes it on the nonbinary self, erasing the actual nonbinary existence. The reality of this erasure disrupts Spoon's performance of their nonbinary self: because the instinct is to assign binary gender narratives to the nonbinary self for intelligibility, Spoon must know how others read their gender in order to know how to behave so they might be recognized as human.

28 Spoon and Coyote – whose identities the binary other overwrites – experience the perceptive act as one that erases their gender identities. Because the available modes of self-articulation – bodily and verbal – become meaningful only in the other's perception, the nonbinary self must accept a compromise in their gender performance: Coyote, for example, allows themselves to be viewed as both a butch lesbian and a transgender male because they know those individuals need the validation Coyote provides in their work; they use the feminine pronoun when doing work in public schools because they "want those women and girls to see

every kind of she there can be” (222). Coyote’s nonbinary self loses its visibility in these interactions; however, the strategic production of binary intelligibility allows them to encourage gender difference and ambiguity in others, opening up the breadth of accepted gendered realities just a little.

Conclusion: Making Space

29 In May 2011, Kathy Witterick published an article in the *Ottawa Citizen* stating that she and her husband planned to raise their youngest child gender-neutrally. This would mean keeping the baby’s sex private from all but a select few and letting the child vocalize their own gender identity once that identity took shape. The family received over a hundred interview requests and were the subject of global debate about raising a child without gender; public response ranged from vocal support to accusations of child abuse. Their plan was not to force the child to identify as nonbinary but rather, by not imposing the gender binary, they could gift their child autonomy in defining its gender identity without the influence of social norms (Witterick).

30 Can a child be raised completely gender-neutrally? In a system where everything is defined by its relation to a binary, it seems unlikely that parents could totally avoid the influence of gender norms. Certainly the Wittericks’ alternative lifestyle makes their decision feasible: all three of their children are homeschooled, and the family lives off the grid in a remote area of Ontario (Poisson). Removed as they are from society, the child can grow up without imposed gender expectations, but not everyone has this luxury. In fact, Jack Halberstam believes that trying to avoid gendering a child is a futile task. Instead he calls for encouraging alternative forms of femininity or masculinity that go against social expectations – for example, encouraging forms of female culture that do not require dolls and makeup, or discouraging the masculine activity of bullying (Danbolt 4). These proposed alternatives – while certainly breaking from heteronormativity – seem to sustain binary intelligibility; indeed, Spoon’s and Coyote’s experiences demonstrate the difficulty of presenting an intelligible nonbinary gender identity – but does this mean that there is no space for nonbinary within the binary matrix?

31 Nonbinary individuals like Spoon and Coyote make small efforts every day to claim space for themselves: both have chosen gender-neutral pronouns; Spoon uses their music as an expression of their identity; Coyote pursues nontraditional (i.e. nonbinary) medical transition. While these small acts do not demand a gender revolution, they do make it possible for Spoon

and Coyote to live according to their identity. Their work as public speakers and entertainers presents the reality of the nonbinary experience; in doing so, nonbinary audience members feel their identity validated, while their binary peers are made aware of the broad spectrum of human experience.

32 The nonbinary gender experience – one that goes so completely against the binary hegemony – means there is an unbridgeable conceptual gap between the nonbinary self and binary other. However, this does not mean that nonbinary is illegitimate and untenable in a binary context; indeed, the existence of *Gender Failure* demonstrates that nonbinary as a category can be presented in such a way that it becomes accessible for a binary audience. Public speakers like Spoon and Coyote put themselves at the mercy of the violence of the perceptive act; although their authentic selves may disappear in the face of binary perception, the candidness of their gendered realities makes space for their existence, starting with those who choose to hear their stories.

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