Song of Wisdom's and Self's Love

Philosophical Systems of Gender and Transness and the Journey to Genderqueer Worlds

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Though love of wisdom tried to set me free

Peace comes only through living life as me

Abstract: In this paper I attempt to find a metaphysical framework of gender in which the philosophical study of nonbinary experience can be grounded. I go about this by first examining the metaphysical systems of gender and transness put forth by Talia Mae Bettcher and Robin Dembroff. Subsequently, I find that both accounts have parallel structure despite differences in grounding. While I find that Dembroff's model lacking due to their framing of kind, I also find that their distinction between modest and extreme ontological pluralism to be an important concept. This leads me to construct a modified account of Bettcher's system. Next, I consider the account of genderqueer as gender kind put forth by Dembroff. Finally, after finding Dembroff's account once again lacking due to the language of kind, I use Dembroff's account in conjuncture with the modified version of Bettcher's system of gender to construct a new account of "genderqueer worlds."

I ask, “what is this sense of self I feel?”

I think of how it was when I was young

When I tried to be made of gold and steel

Until I cried as to myself I clung

I remember the future that I saw

Those years when I had first assumed a name

And wisdom’s love filled me with hope and awe

That artistry of self could bring acclaim

Only to find within dark sea’s expanse

Leaving me lost between wrong and not-right

My performances only supplying strife

But in the shining joy I feel in dance

And love I have for myself in moonlight

I know to know is just to live the life

In recent years nonbinary identity has increasingly emerged as a topic of public debate. Yet despite this, within the field of philosophy nonbinary identity and experience remains a marginal and understudied topic of inquiry. Such absence is caused in part by a general lack of supportive frameworks for philosophers of nonbinaryness to ground their thinking in. Therefore, before a comprehensive account of nonbinaryness can be constructed it is first necessary to find metaphysical account of gender to ground such study in. Two of the most developed existing accounts come from the trans philosophers Talia Mae Bettcher and Robin Dembroff. Although they have many fundamental differences, both Bettcher's "world"-traveling account of transness and Dembroff's rejection of the "Real Gender" argument in favor of what they deem moderate ontological pluralism both possess the same basic structure by similarly grounding transness in a reality other than dominant social systems. Subsequently, it is possible to use Dembroff's account of genderqueer as gender kind to construct a possible account of genderqueer worlds within Bettcher's framework, providing a starting point of further philosophical explorations of nonbinary experience and identity.

Before we can consider such an account, however, we must first understand its grounding theories of transness. Bettcher's development of her model of transness can be traced throughout her work. The first reference to this model can be found in her 2012 article "Full-Frontal Morality: The Naked Truth about Gender." In this work, Bettcher lays out what she believes to be the basic logical structure of dominant common-sense beliefs about gender. Near the end of the article, Bettcher writes the following in response to concerns about the system she presents:

> "One response to this concern is that those who are oppressed tend to inhabit a plurality of cultural "worlds" (see Lugones 1987). This means that while a human may be constituted as one kind of intimate person in one "world" (or perhaps not a person at all),

I

Eyes wide, into the looking glass I stare

Ghosts of past selves do not know what they see

High heels, a bra, short skirt, fishnets, long hair

Are these all the things that consist in me?

I greet the world as Kai-Ling Su, they/them

When asked I have a list of words to give

Trans / gender / queer, enby, femby, transfem

Do these words form the sense of life I live?

I pull new stings of thought across my mind

And weave a net made of knowledge's love

World-traveling, acting, resistant in kind

Can these from self's despair hold me above?

The answers reflect back like light on snow:

Only the eyes within the mirror know.

> she may be constituted as different kind of intimate person in another. Thus, while a trans woman may be constituted as intimately male (and hence invulnerable to violations of the intimate female) in the main stream "world," she may be constituted otherwise in a trans-friendlier, subaltern "world.""[1]

Here, then, we find the earliest outline of Bettcher's world-traveling model of transness. The reference being made here is to the article "Playfulness, "World"-Traveling, and Loving Perception" by María Lugones. In that work Lugones, drawing on her experience of perceiving herself as having different and conflicting attributes at different times and in different places, proposed that there exist a multitude of different "worlds." While the exact nature of these "worlds" is left purposefully vague, what is clear is that each world constructs its inhabitants differently, such that the same individual can be a different person if they were to travel to a different world. As Lugones herself simply puts it, "Those of us who are "world"-travelers have the distinct experience of being different in different "worlds.""[2] What Bettcher is suggesting, then, is that a one way to understand the experiences of trans people is to assert that transness involves a type of "world"-traveling, through which trans people gain access to other, nondominant worlds in which their gender is constituted differently. It should be noted that at this point in her thinking Bettcher presents this model as one of multiple possible solutions to a particular anticipated challenge to her conception of dominant gender systems, and not as a complete system in its own right. Despite this, the basic form of the model will remain essentially unchanged even as it is developed further in later works.

Bettcher takes up this model fully two years later in the article "Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance." Here, Bettcher states that she became

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[1] Bettcher, "Full-Frontal," 333-334
[2] Lugones, 11

II

A child knows that he does not belong

With others called his kind, but cannot name

What true difference could make him not the same

Still and silent within a rowdy throng

Until he starts to scream an angry song

Swearing he'll take no part in twisted games

Unable to explain but to proclaim

"It is unfair. It is unjust. It's wrong."

If I could go back as I am today

Kneel down so I can meet him eye-to-eye

And clasp his hand, I'd tell him that he's right,

It's wrong, and I promise you'll learn to say

Exactly how it hurts. For now, just cry

And mourn all that you'll lose trying to fight.

motivated to develop her own theory of transness because of her dissatisfaction with the two most common theories of transness employed within trans activism. The first of these models, the "wrong-body" model, states that transness consists of a mismatch between an innate gender identity and a gendered body.[3] The second, the "beyond-the-binary" model, states that transness consists of a failure to fit into a strict gender dichotomy.[4] For Bettcher, both of these theories fall short for a number of reasons: the "beyond-the-binary" primarily because it cannot back up binary trans people's claims to fully be women or men, and the "wrong-body" model because it fails to provide a solid metaphysical grounding for gender and is incompatible with a commitment to the social construction of gender and sex foundational to feminist philosophy.[5] Her model of transness, then, is meant to correct for these issues. It is at this point that Bettcher re-introduces her "world-traveling" model of transness. The basic form of her argument here is the same as it was in "Full-Frontal," although it is presented in a more definite, complete, and focused form. Besides asserting the existence of trans worlds of sense instead of simply presenting the possibility of them, Bettcher provides more details as to what such worlds entail. Specifically, trans worlds are ones in which the meaning of gendered words such as "woman," and the gender practices that accompany them, are such that they resist the dominant logic of those words and practices.[6] Thus by this argument the issue with the "wrong-body" and "beyond-the-binary" models of transness is that they "take the dominant meanings of gender terms for granted, thereby foreclosing the possibility of multiply resistant meanings."[7] That is, both models are situated within the logic of the dominant, transphobic world, instead of being

[3] Bettcher, "Trapped," 383
[4] Bettcher, "Trapped," 384
[5] Bettcher, "Trapped," 387
[6] Bettcher, "Trapped," 389
[7] Bettcher, "Trapped," 390

III

The sages say joy is found in the thought

And not the world; the same's true of despair

So should I seem to be cold-iron wrought

It's only to survive a world unfair

The sages say fight fate we cannot

And in acceptance alone we're free

So should I seem resigned to my lot

It's only my only way to be

The sages say that all things change

And we change with them, always

So should I seem from self estranged

It's only that I'm still the same

Wear a suit to show no shame

Ever I'm still the same

situated within the logic of a trans world. Notably, Bettcher does not spend time in this piece, or indeed anywhere in her work, to lay out what the gender logic of one or more of these trans worlds looks like in the same detail that shed does the gender logic of the dominant world. This is understandable, given the multiplicity and unfixed nature of such logics (as I have witnessed firsthand). Still, this does present an opportunity for future research.

Robin Dembroff lays out their model of transness in the article "Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender." Dembroff is motivated in this piece to provide their own account of transness because of what they perceive as a weakness in the arguments used to refute trans-exclusionary statements. Specifically, Dembroff is opposed to the acceptance of what they refer to as the "Real Gender" assumption by such arguments. According to Dembroff, the Real Gender assumption takes the form of the statement "Gender classifications should track the operative gender kind membership facts."[8] That is, people should be treated as having a particular gender if they meet the criteria by which that gender is defined within the context they are situated in. An argument against trans exclusions that accepts this assumption, then, would say that if a trans woman (for example) is refused recognition as a woman due to a failure to meet a certain criterion (by having XY chromosomes, maybe), then that criterion must be incorrect because the trans woman *is* a woman. Dembroff takes issue with such arguments because they fail to recognize the possibility that the criteria by which gender is defined are in fact such that they exclude trans women. To explain this, Dembroff turns to their own concept of "ontological oppression." According to Dembroff, ontological oppression "occurs when the social kinds (or the lack thereof) unjustly constrain (or enable) persons' behaviors, concepts, or affect due to their group membership."[9] While this is clearly a very broad concept, what matters in this instance is

[8] Dembroff, "Real," 29
[9] Dembroff, "Real," 26

IV

It starts in the points of the shoulder blades

Slicing up through the sleeves of your dress

You grip them, trying to hold in your distress

With knives in palms you hope that it will fade

Next swords cut deep across your chest

Sharp slivers stabbing along your legs and your arms

A burning plays above your lip to your alarm

You curl in bed but will get no rest

From your own doubts you cannot hide

Just try to wait

And pray to wake from this dark dream

Pressure swells inside

Until within it breaks the gate

and you scream and scream and scream and scream and scream and scream and

that, by Dembroff's logic, a social category can be unjust because the criteria by which it is established are exclusionary. Gender, then, is one such category. As such, instead of trying to incorrectly redefine the criteria for gender that are at work in dominant contexts, we should reject the Real Gender assumption by ignoring the operative criteria entirely, in which case we would then classify people according to the gender conditions that exist within contexts other than the dominant one within which such classifications are taking place.[10] While this solves the problem Dembroff has with Real Gender arguments against trans exclusion, it also raises the question of if these new gender classification claims can be verified as true. That is, if a trans person is currently in a dominant context would it not be correct to say that their claims to a trans identity are false, since the identity they are claiming does not exist in such a context? Dembroff answers this by turning to what they refer to as "modest ontological pluralism." According to Dembroff, modest ontological pluralism consists in the belief that "One is a member of many gender kinds, but the social relevance of these memberships change across contexts," as opposed to either an extreme ontological pluralism which holds that "One's gender kind membership changes across contexts," or a unitary ontology which holds that membership does not change.[11] By this schema, then, a trans woman is a member of both the categories of *man (dominant context)* and *woman (trans context)*. Thus, even when such a woman is in a context where the category of *man (dominant context)* is more important, it would still be true to say that she is a woman since she still possesses both categorizations. Here it should be noted that Dembroff, like Bettcher, does not give a complete account of what the criteria for these alternate gender categories might look like, once again leaving room for further development on the that front.

[10] Dembroff, "Real," 35
[11] Dembroff, "Real," 40

V

I’ve tried to this put down in verse before

The moment when I finally had a name

For that feeling that I was something more

Not odd alone but with others the same

Maybe the dawn above the chicken pen

Home far away, the podcast playing low

Maybe seeing the word on screen again

Shock mirrored by a character in glow

But I don’t think I truly understood

That others had lived life like me, myself

Until I heard them debate what is good

Until I saw their names upon the shelf

Even today, when from this path I’ve turned

Freedom from fate from wisdom’s love I learned

While there are many surface differences in terms of the types of reasoning and language they both use, Bettcher's framework of world-traveling and Dembroff's ontological pluralism are, at a basic level, extremely similar. While the exact language used differs between the two accounts, the basic structures of both are the same. Namely, both accounts posit a multiplicity of worlds of sense or social contexts, assert that each of these worlds/contexts have different logics of gender or kind membership conditions, and substantiate trans claims about gender by grounding them in alternate trans worlds/contexts with logics/kinds that support such claims. This is not to suggest that the concepts of worlds of sense and social contexts are necessarily equivalent; they are not, and in fact differ in important ways. Rather, it is to point out the way in which the overall arcs of both models line up. A partial explanation for this may be the fact that the lines of reasoning that both Bettcher and Dembroff take to arrive at their models are rather similar. As Dembroff themself notes, both they and Bettcher believe that the dominant gender criteria are inherently exclusionary towards trans people.[12] Subsequently, both Bettcher and Dembroff structure their arguments in opposition to accounts of transness that take these dominant logics for granted, be it through "wrong body" and "beyond-the-binary" models Bettcher lays out or the Real Gender assumption that Dembroff identifies. In this context, then, it makes sense that both accounts would need to find a way to make room for metaphysical groundings for gender beyond the constructions within dominant society. Thus, they both turn to a type of ontological pluralism to do so. This is interesting in part because Bettcher and Dembroff ground their models in very different ways. Bettcher's work, the earlier of the two, naturally make no reference to Dembroff's. And while Dembroff refers to Bettcher's work in several spots within their article, and indeed calls out Bettcher's work as not conforming to the

[12] Dembroff, "Real," 34

VI

An archangel from far afield sets down

A box is made to hide a signet ring

A hill becomes the homeland of a king

An image from the ring adorns his crown

A river runs like blood through a small town

A song made for a ring-crowned prince to sing

A melody of men wove into strings

That pull me to the river where I drown

Fading awash in blood and song I grasp

At anything to keep my self afloat

And feel a ring onto my finger sink

I surface from the river’s hold and gasp

Fresh air forcing a crowned name from my throat

As I soar free on angel wings of ink

Real Gender assumption,[13] they make no reference to either Bettcher or Lugones in the section in which they introduce their concept of ontological pluralism. This convergence towards similar models of transness despite different philosophical underpinnings strengthens both arguments, in my eyes at least, by indicating that there is something phenomenologically important being disclosed by the general model even if neither account is completely accurate.

Overall, however, I find Bettcher's account to be significantly more compelling than Dembroff's. This is in large part due to the fact that, at least in my experience, the type of language that Dembroff employs gets the experience of transness wrong on a certain level. Specifically, to speak of gender as a collection of categories, or "kinds," seems to me to reduce gender in a way that Bettcher's language does not. While it is undoubtably true that "trans," "woman," "trans man," and "nonbinary" are categories, within my experience these aspects of gender are also, and perhaps more importantly, qualities. Thus, for my own sense of gender it is less relevant that I belong to the category of trans people than it is that I possess the quality of transness. This difference in construction allows for different, more nuanced ways of describing experiences of gender. For example, my relationship to "woman" is a complex one. Working simply with the language of kind, if asked if I belonged to the category of woman I would have to respond no. With concepts of quality at my disposal, however, my answer could be more complex: while I do not belong the kind woman, I would feel comfortable saying that I possess some degree of the quality "womanness," which in itself may be different than the quality of "femininity." This is not to suggest that the concept of quality is the be all and end all of gender description. Rather, all I want to demonstrate with this example is one way in which adherence to the particular language of kind limits, and therefore weakens, Dembroff's account of transness.

[13] Dembroff, "Real," 31

VII

What does it mean to truly understand?

That feeling that makes some “eureka!” say

Places the truth always ready-to-hand

And gained never can be taken away

Perhaps to know is just to have the text

Arranged correctly deep inside your mind

Each word logically beckoning to the next

Each thought, each phrase ordered by type and kind

Or maybe ideas are meant to be grasped

And turned each way in front of the mind’s eyes

With no part left unseen, unknown, or masked

Till’s felt where each crease and where each edge lies.

Yet words or sense, both give me hope I’ll be

One day able to speak myself to me

The one place that Dembroff's argument does seem stronger to me is in its distinction between extreme and modest ontological pluralism. As Dembroff points out, if one holds that a person is defined only by the context/world they are currently in (extreme ontological pluralism), this then leads to the undesirable result that trans people do not have access to their non-dominant genders when in dominant contexts/worlds. Yet this type of extreme pluralism is exactly that which is put forth by Lugones; in fact, Lugones' theory of "world"-traveling is arguably stronger, since for her one is a completely ontologically different person in a different world. Fortunately, there exist alternate readings of Lugones' work that avoid this issue. On such reading is that put forth by Mariana Ortega in her work *In-Between*. In the chapter "The Phenomenology of World-Traveling," Ortega examines a number of important concepts from throughout Lugones' work. Part of this examination involves a refiguring of Lugones' account of world-traveling in order to correct for a number of ontological issues Ortega finds in the original account. Ortega's solution is to reject the plurality of selves that Lugones puts forth and instead posit the idea of "multiplicitous self," one which "highlights different aspects of itself, or different aspects of the self are highlighted or covered over depending on dominant norms as well as structures and relations of power at work in different worlds."[14] Thus for Ortega, the world-traveler always possesses each attribute they experience themselves as having in each world they inhabit; it is just the case that only some of these attributes are active at any one time, depending on the world one is in. Appling this to Bettcher's account of transness then, we find that a trans person within a dominant world can still be said to be the gender they experience themselves as in a trans world, even if their ability to animate that part of themself is inhibited, or

[14] Ortega, 101

VIII

It’s often said that all the world’s a stage

And men and women are but roles to play

No more or less real than an actor’s rage

Or joy or tears, as solid and as fey

Yet just because we all must play our part

Dose not mean each performance is the same

Acting’s as skill, as any other art

Some sputter out, while some shine like a flame

Myself, within the spotlights I will wear

A costume made of crushed velvet and lace

A manly poise, a grace without compare

A perfect blood-lipped smirk upon my face

The world’s my stage, and anyone can see

In this new role I’ve gained true mastery

completely perverted by the world they are currently in. Thus, we are able to resolve this disparity between Bettcher's and Dembroff's accounts.

Other issues remain with Bettcher's argument, however. Particularly concerning is the fact that world-traveling (and ontological pluralism) cuts both ways. That is, if it is true that a trans woman is still a woman even in worlds/contexts in which this logic is not recognized, would it not also be true that a trans woman, on some level, is a man even within trans-friendly worlds/contexts? I find this possibility to be rather distressing. To give a personal example, my ability to assert that I am not a man is equally, if not more important than my ability to assert that I am nonbinary. And I know this is also the case for many other trans people. There are, of course, multiple possible solutions to this problem. One option is to focus on the difference between an attribute that one chooses to animate and an attribute the world one is in animates irrespective of, or perhaps in spite of, one's efforts to the contrary. This is a distinction that Ortega draws in her work; in her own words, "I might animate certain aspects of my multiplicity differently in differently worlds, or these aspects might be highlighted given specific power dynamics."[15] While Ortega does not explore this concept further, perhaps a solution to our problem is to say that there is something importantly phenomenologically different about an active animating compared to a passive or received one such that the active holds a greater weight. Another possible solution might be to highlight the way in which even within dominant "worlds" a trans woman, for example, would not be constructed as fully or solely male. This is a possibility that Bettcher puts forth in "Full-Frontal Morality," giving the example of the fact a trans woman may be sent to a men's prison but face a greater risk of intimate violence there on account of their status as a trans woman.[16] While this example is grim, I do think there is

[15] Ortega, 101
[16] Bettcher, "Full-Frontal," 334

IX

There is a gravity I've yet to end

Within my mind- instead I've let it hide

Somewhere down deep, wherein old selves reside

Only to surface in the words I've penned

In my futile attempts to page transcend

And be to selves like mine of old a guide

Like others were to me- but mine own tide

Pulls back on me and drowning I descend

When drawn by moons I can be no north star

And Polaris herself shows me no way

To sail oceans of wisdom's love with ease

Except in how she shines from so afar

From arcs of lunar light, as if to say

"There's no salvation on theses stormy seas"

something darkly comforting in the fact that trans women are seen as less male than cis men are. Or perhaps the real answer is to accept that there is some truth to the fact that the logics of dominant worlds linger even when we would wish otherwise. Afterall, it would be naïve to think that we have the ability to fully escape the forces that animate use in painful ways just by fleeing into a different world. As Lugones makes clear, these worlds are necessarily and always in relation and sometimes conflict with each other; under such conditions, how would it be possible to isolate oneself from a world completely? Each of these solutions has, of course, its own flaws and merits, which deserve full consideration on their own. What matters for now is that possible solutions do exist, leaving room for a world-traveling account of transness to be taken up despite the linger concerns I have for it.

With this combined account of transness at hand, then, we can now turn towards an examination of nonbinaryness in particular. Bettcher's work, sadly, only ever addresses transness in general, and thus does not give us much to work with in trying to understand nonbinaryness. Dembroff, on the other hand, presents a complete account of nonbinary, or in thier terms "genderqueer," identity in the article "Genderqueer and Critical Gender Kind." After considering and dismissing models of genderqueerness that rely solely on either external (social, visual, etc.) or internal (psychological, innate, etc.) factors, as well as simple self-identification, Dembroff concludes that "genderqueer is a critical gender kind, such that its members have a felt or desired gender categorization that conflicts with the binary axis, and on this basis collectively destabilize this axis."[17] There are several things to explain with this definition. First and foremost, genderqueer is a "gender kind" because it is a type or category of gender, similar to "man" or "woman" in this regard.[18] Second, genderqueer is a "critical" gender kind because, in

[17] Dembroff, "Beyond," 16
[18] Dembroff, "Beyond," 4

X

I’ve always had a sense of what I’m not

That word in which my very selfhoods burn

I’ve marked myself so that I can’t return

And in claws of my own making be caught

But if not there, where do I throw my lot?

The other place I know I know will spurn

And though part of me truly wants to learn

There is a part the simply can’t be taught

It seems there is no place within this world

Where I can just into the background fade

While still allowing my self to be seen

And thus into the darkness I am hurled

Yet knowing this is the choice I’ve made

I venture out into the in-between

Dembroff's words, its "member collectively destabilize one or more core elements of the dominant gender ideology in […] society."[19] That is, as a group genderqueer individuals present a challenge to the constructions of gender within one of the dominant worlds discussed above. Third, the aspect of dominant gender system that genderqueer challenges, what Dembroff calls the "binary axis," is the assertion that there exist only two genders, male and female, and that these categories are both mutually exclusive and unchangeable.[20] Finally, this destabilization stems primarily from "a felt or desired gender categorization," as opposed to an ideological, philosophical, or political belief.[21] These four qualities, taken together, thus characterize the kind genderqueer for Dembroff. It should also be noted that Dembroff takes great care to clarify that this definition applies specifically to genderqueer as a category and does not disclose what makes any particular individual genderqueer.[22] Therefore, individual deviance from these criteria by any number of actual genderqueer people does not necessarily challenge their argument.

With this argument laid out, the question of how this definition relates to Dembroff's greater system of gender next arises. At the beginning of the article Dembroff states that thier intention is to explore how genderqueer individuals are understood within trans and queer, as opposed to dominant, contexts (and, interestingly, cites Bettcher as thier example in doing so).[23] This, then, firmly positions the definition that Dembroff gives within the non-dominant contexts discussed in "Real Talk about the Metaphysics of Gender." In doing so Dembroff is thus returning to answer the question of gender kind criteria left open at the end of the earlier article. Moreover, Dembroff's explanation of their model of genderqueer also supplies us with a limited

[19] Dembroff, "Beyond," 12
[20] Dembroff, "Beyond," 15
[21] Dembroff, "Beyond," 13
[22] Dembroff, "Beyond," 12
[23] Dembroff, "Beyond," 3

XI

I once removed a mask to try to find

What lay bellow, but only to replace

Mask with a mask that does not hide my face

But is the face, with noting true behind

Not even practiced hands to have designed

A work of art to wear with care and grace

Just threads starching across an empty place

Into which a visage has been entwined

In heart of hearts I know this to be true

But such emptiness cannot live a life

Of joy after one has already torn

Apart one face in hopes to start anew

And still bares scars from that self-wielded knife

Which now lodges between threads like a thorn

account of the model of gender that exists within dominant western contexts. Taken together, then, these two articles present a broadly complete, if not particularly comprehensive, account of gender kind construction within both dominant and non-dominant western contexts.

This just leaves the question of how accurate Dembroff's definition of genderqueer is. Certainly, I do not believe that any part of Dembroff's account here is necessarily incorrect to a significant degree. The basic components of the model, as laid out above, are all undoubtably parts of the kind genderqueer. Yet, like the broader account of transness in "Real Talk," I find this definition is incomplete or lacking. The primary reason for this is the same as with the earlier article: it is my belief that the language of kind is insufficient to capture the experience of gender. Nonbinaryness or genderqueerness is, in my experience, as much a quality as transness or femininity is, with all that that implies. There is also the fact that Dembroff's account of genderqueerness possesses only a negative mode; that is, it is defined only against dominant systems of gender. In contrast, within the many of the communities I exist in there is a real sense that nonbinaryness can have its own, distinct components that are not understood primarily in contrast to dominant gender categories.

I will note that it is entirely possible that this objection simply a difference of terms or difference of scale. Although I've been using them somewhat interchangeably up until this point, genderqueer and nonbinary are distinctly different terms, and may be more or less similar depending on who you ask. Additionally, both can act as specific identities or umbrella terms in different contexts. Within my anecdotal experience, genderqueer is usually used either an extremely broad umbrella that could include not only nonbinary people but also binary trans people and occasionally some cis people, or as a particularly vague individual identity often used when someone does not wish to define their identity further. On the other hand, nonbinary is

XII

I step into the loud and crowded room

For the first time I feel the waving air

And see the lights- something begins to bloom

Across my mind like flowers in my hair

And I begin to dance twirling along

Bright colored floors, the sea, fake bills falling

Past painted walls, dark house of art, the song

Fills hallowed halls with joyous life, calling

Even when I’m alone, enveloped by

Sound echoing over a silent lawn

Now loud, as smoke and mirrors fill the sky

And our lips meet just once before the dawn

My mind filled with music, content I bask

In moments without questions I must ask.

usually a narrower umbrella that can cover many, but not all, trans identities beyond trans man and trans woman, or a specific range of neutral-but-not-absent identities or presentations. Dembroff, however, is not concerned with these particularities. As they state when introducing their methodology, "the terminological taxonomy of gender classification need not, and I think does not, align with the most useful metaphysical taxonomy of gender kinds."[24] Thus, Dembroff's "genderqueer" is not meant to describe a particular experience or set of experiences, but instead the metaphysical category to which "the group of persons who do not exclusively identify as men or as women"[25] belong. Considering this, I concede that my own goal of creating a framework for understanding the experience of nonbinaryness may in fact be incompatible with the metaphysical project that Dembroff is undertaking. Yet this just brings me back to my earlier point: even if Dembroff's metaphysical account is perfectly correct, there remains something missing from it such that it fails to accurately capture the felt meaning of genderqueerness and nonbinaryness both.

If Dembroff's definition of genderqueer is thus incomplete, how might we go about improving it? One approach might be to attempt to combine elements of Dembroff's account with the world-traveling account of transness put forth by Bettcher. After all, in the case of the general models themselves we have already seen how applying concepts from Dembroff within Bettcher's framework resulted in an arguably stronger account. The question, then, is how we can translate Dembroff's genderqueer kind to something like a "genderqueer world." The first two components of Dembroff's definition, that genderqueer is a kind of gender and that this kind in critical in nature, are already present in Bettcher's account. As she explains it, "we can understand a trans world in resistant relation to a dominant world, where what is under

[24] Dembroff, "Beyond," 4
[25] Dembroff, "Beyond," 4

XIII

Like moonlight settling soft upon the skin

The blue light glows and dances on my lips

Across dark hair, warm checks, brown eyes, smooth chin

Pulsing in time, each blink like an eclipse

With each breath in the glow begins to flood

Into the mouth, the nose, the throat, the lung

From there it starts to mingle in the blood

With blue dissolving slow beneath the tongue

And spreads itself throughout the body wide

As tingling playing where the moonlight lands

As warmth before the heart, and to the side

As new death blooming forth below thin hands

Like moonlight settling soft down from above

I’ve nothing left to give myself but love

contestation are alternative gender practices."[26] Thus the elements of criticality and gender focus, in Dembroff's terms, indicate that a "genderqueer world" is a type of trans world. The third element of Dembroff's definition, resistance to the binary axis, is directly connected to their account of dominant gender logic. Therefore, a brief comparison to Bettcher's account of gender is necessary. According to Dembroff, the dominant western gender ideology has four main components: the already mentioned binary axis, which asserts that there are only two, mutually exclusive genders; the biological axis, which asserts that gender is grounded in a binary of biological sex; the teleological axis, which asserts that one's gender predetermines many of one's characteristics; and the hierarchical axis, which asserts that one gender's (male) features are superior to the other's (female).[27] Bettcher's account of dominant gender systems, as laid out in "Full-Frontal Morality," is considerably more intricate. In the article, Bettcher connects the metaphysical construction of gender to the moral construction of nakedness and intimacy, arguing that the genitals gain their metaphysical importance in dominant western systems as the final component of nakedness and the ultimate site of the completion of (cis, heterosexual) intimacy.[28] Because this system of intimacy both makes one's genital configuration immensely important while also preventing the direct disclosure of the genitals in all but the most intimate of situations, gendered behavior and presentation acts as a morally acceptable way of communicating ones genitals to others.[29] Thus, in Bettcher's account of dominant gender systems gender simply is one's genitals at birth, which must be indicated through correct presentation. Additionally, such gender can only be male or female due to the constraints of

[26] Bettcher, "Trapped," 389
[27] Dembroff, "Beyond," 15-16
[28] Bettcher, "Full-Frontal," 331
[29] Bettcher, "Full-Frontal," 329

XIV

I never found myself within the book

Or articles, the words, the sense, the line

Of thought, though thought, essence, and logic's fine

For greater truth- for me, I tried to look

Upon the page until the words a hook

Became, tearing what little self was mine

Out of my hands, with speech against design

Until the me I'd taken was retook.

Yet out beyond the confines of these halls

I've finally felt far more than I can say

With words confined by reason or by rhyme.

In living life, there's so much more that calls

Me by my name and gently asks I stay

To share a shining sense of self sublime.

normative heterosexual intimacy.[30] Comparing between the two systems, the most obvious parallel to Dembroff's binary axis, the one relevant to their genderqueer kind, is the assertion that there are only two valid genital configurations and thus genders. Therefore, a genderqueer world might be one in which this assertion is resisted. Yet on its own this seems insufficient. For example, if resistance to a binary of gender configuration was the only feature of a genderqueer world, I, as someone who possess "male genitals" but does not identify as male, might still be consider male within such a world. To resolve this, I believe that a genderqueer world must also resist the assertion that gender is genitalia. While this on its own is similarly insufficient for a genderqueer world, together these components allow the recognition of most, if not all, of the genderqueer and nonbinary identities I've encountered. Finally, the fourth component of Dembroff's definition, desired categorization, seems to me not to translate neatly to the concept of a genderqueer world, since it deals in collective motivation instead of collective construction or logic. In total, then, we can say that in accordance with Bettcher's world-traveling account of transness, a genderqueer world is a trans world in which the dominant western logic of gender is resisted in the aspects of binary genital configuration and equation of gender and genitals.

Of course, this account of genderqueer worlds no more reveals what the experience of nonbinaryness consists of than Dembroff's account of genderqueer kind does. Still, I believe that it is heading in the right direction; the overall structure of describing a general type of world leaves open a movement towards greater specificity that Dembroff's work disavows. A logical next step in the study of nonbinaryness is therefore a much more detailed analysis of one or more existing genderqueer worlds, with the goal of understanding what constitutes nonbinaryness within such systems. Such work, however, I leave to others. For me, the rest is silence.

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[30] Bettcher, "Full-Frontal," 331

My thanks to Professor Miller, for supporting me no matter what form this project took, Professor Berger, for his valuable feedback and advice, Professor Yurdin, for welcoming me into this discipline, and especially to Professor Mason, for showing me this was possible. I could not have done this without all of you, nor without the whole department, peer or professor.

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