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*Inherent*

Clay, fabric, acrylic paint, glass beads

My piece focuses on certain impactful imagery I found in my research as well as my own personal experiences, such as the contempt I feel against my body for putting me through pain. The most inspirational source I found was titled The Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain by Leslie Jamison. I was captivated by every sentence as I read; the powerful metaphors, references, and reality stuck with me as I continued my project. As Jamison suggests, it's a fine line between talking about the “wounded women” and glorifying her. I felt this struggle in the making of my piece. I was trying to figure out where the line was and how I could avoid glamorizing the inherent pain that comes with having a body, especially one that fights against you, doesn't fit right, or represent who you are. My piece represents pain while still remaining delicate and beautiful. It asks the question of how much pain can we endure before we can no longer romanticize it? And how gorey and unsettling does something need to be before we empathize with it? I chose to use a lot of fabric and sewing despite my lack of expertise so the struggle I felt trying to make it take form and look good or correct felt representative of my topic itself and the struggle between oneself and their body. While it is based on my own experiences and feelings, it is not a self portrait.

At a Crossroads:

An Intersection of Gender and Body



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*WRITER'S NOTE:*

*This paper addresses my journey of learning to accept my position of being nonbinary in an AFAB body and what it means to me. We will dive into the female experience, what AFAB means, women in pain, and one of my favorite shows of all time: Fleabag. Next, we'll cover the question "what is gender?" and how we define, determine, and create it. You'll read about my own understanding of gender and interpretation of my research. I hope you can come along my journey and progression of my life through this paper as I grapple with womanhood/girlhood and the reality of the female experience while disconnecting myself from gender and the weight it holds.*

## **I. Introduction**

Coming to terms with your gender identity and presentation can be a long and harrowing struggle. I feel like I am in a place where I have learned to accept the body I have and how it affects people's perceptions of me. It's taken me a while to get here and I have no certainty that it will stay this way forever, but I'm grateful for it while it lasts. Many of my friends and I are nonbinary or otherwise genderqueer and we have talked about gender identity plenty but it will always be an ongoing conversation. This is because gender is extremely personal and unique to everyone. This paper will specifically be about my research and interpretation about what it means to be nonbinary in my AFAB (assigned female at birth) body.

## **II. The Female Experience**

Being born into this world in a certain body affects the rest of your life, the treatment you receive, your salary, socialization, and the dangers you face. People with female bodies hold unique disadvantages in this sense. Overall, the world has not been kind to AFAB people and continues

to be harmful and discouraging. The past is full of women being wronged by men, society, and gods. The stories of women were either forgotten or altered by the men that told them. AFAB people are constantly fighting to be taken seriously or respected. The female body has become the grounds of political disputes over modesty, ownership, and human rights. In “The Body: Gender and the Politics of Representation ” by Mgcineni 'Pro'Sobopha is the quote

... the [female] body is a highly contested site - its flesh is both the recipient and the source of desire, lust and hatred. As a pawn of technology [in a capitalist society], it is sacred and sacrificial, bearing the politics of society and state. The body is our common bond, yet it separates us in its public display of identity, race, and gender [class and age] ( 'Pro'Sobopha 2).

This quote encapsulates the exact situation that I have spent a long time dwelling over. Growing up I have been constantly fed information about the atrocities that befall women at the hands of men from the world as a way to educate me about the real world, but it made me all too aware of the wicked horrors that awaited me growing up.

### **III. Confiscation of the Female Body as Subject Matter in Art by Male Artists.**

The female body has been taken, used, and glamorized into something that it's not. It's presented as smooth, fragile, thin, and perfect. We see this in museums, magazines, and all over social media. Anything can be faked on the internet, it's perfectly curated to make you feel insecure. “Artists and art historians began to investigate how images in Western art and the media—more often than not produced by men—perpetuated idealizations of the female form” (MoMA, 2019). Marble statues and nude paintings of the female body are usually created by men who fictionalize the real women they see into what they imagine of them. The majority of nude pieces in the modern art

section of the Met Museum are female, 85% according to the Guerilla Girls statistic poster. It displays in bold text “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” followed by “Less than 5% of the artists in the modern art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.”

#### **IV. Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain**

The Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain is an eye opening article about the innate suffering that female bodies and women are subject to.

We may have turned the wounded woman into a kind of goddess, romanticized her illness and idealized her suffering, but that doesn't mean she doesn't happen. Women still have wounds: broken hearts and broken bones and broken lungs. How do we talk about these wounds without glamorizing them? Without corroborating an old mythos that turns female trauma into celestial constellations worthy of Worship? (Jamison 3).

Pain has become ingrained into what it means to be a woman. Pain from their bodies, from society, and their oppressors. There never seems to be a permanent escape. Not only physical pain but also the mental, the sometimes incurable suffering that our bodies put us through. Illness has been so glorified and portrayed as the ideal for AFAB people that we are carrying it on further and hurting ourselves. This contributes to higher rates of depression, mental illness, eating disorders, and self harm starting at young ages. There's a very precarious balance between talking about it, raising awareness, and perpetuating the standard that women have to suffer, or that they are defined by their suffering.

#### **V. Fleabag, Woman in Business**

In the 2016 award-winning comedic drama, *Fleabag*, many instances connect to the Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain, but one in particular stands out to me. The monologue given by the woman in business, Belinda, to Fleabag (the tv show's main character), in the bar. She starts by recounting a thought she had been waiting to share with someone. The premise of her speech is that "Women are born with pain built in. It's our physical destiny – period pains, sore boobs, childbirth. We carry it within ourselves throughout our lives." She connects this enduring lifelong pain as something ingrained in the female<sup>1</sup> experience. That it's born within us and our lives are spent fulfilling this "destiny" of suffering. She also touches on the objectification and use of female bodies for their reproductive properties, even to those not capable of having children in the first place. "The fucking menopause comes and it is the most wonderful fucking thing in the world. Yes, your entire pelvic floor crumbles and you get fucking hot and no one cares, but then you're free. No longer a slave, no longer a machine with parts. You're just a person. In business." Once she loses her ability to reproduce and in her case the thing that seems to separate her from others in her field, she just becomes another person. With this change she loses her individuality that segregated her from others and in turn gains freedom from the pressure and attention placed on her as a token.

## **VI. Determination of Gender**

There are many methods of determining and categorizing the gender of other people. As soon as we meet someone we start making immediate assumptions on their personality and defining qualities based on purely circumstantial evidence like the length of their hair, the pitch of their

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<sup>1</sup> Female

Adjective

of or denoting the sex that can bear offspring or produce eggs, distinguished biologically by the production of gametes (ova) that can be fertilized by male gametes.

voice, what they're wearing, and whether you feel comfortable around them. Sex can be determined by chromosomes and genitalia but sometimes they don't match. Intersex people can often have genitalia that doesn't reflect their chromosomes or reproductive organs. Despite not fitting into the concept of two sexes, they are mostly raised as one of the binary genders, usually the one that mostly correlates to their assigned gender at birth (AGAB) or legal sex assigned by the doctor.

Biology, sex, and chromosomes are of course real but they only have anything to do with gender when you make gender reliant on those factors. Gender is something we invented based on psychological and physical tendencies and correlations. The expectations for men are to be larger and stronger from the higher levels of testosterone that affects muscle retention/strength, fat distribution, and bone density. And the expectations for women are pretty much opposite. However, this is outdated and ineffective in modern society where jobs aren't reliant on gendered natural abilities and we're not hunters and gatherers anymore. These presumed physical attributes are also often wrong, bodies no matter the sex of gender come in all heights and strengths and don't reflect a person's gender. Gender is a complex and controversial topic to many, though I see it as something that simply exists in other people's beliefs, like God and the stock exchange.

There lies many perceived inherent differences between men and women, one being the intrinsic "danger" men pose and the "vulnerability" of women, which makes their gender specific places policed very differently. Because of these preconceptions, women's spaces become the focus of transphobic discussions in a feeble attempt to "protect" the women.

## **VII. Socialization and Creating Gender Through Parenting**

Parenting plays a large role in our personal understanding and definition of gender. If someone is raised by a family that strongly enforces gender roles and stereotypes then they will inherently

grow up with the preconceived expectations of how boys and girls will act. This is how things like gender roles were and still are passed down. The parents control the children's influences and monopolize this by teaching what suits their ideals. These often take the form of religious and political beliefs and discriminatory behaviors. With the perpetuation of gender specific behaviors and clear boxes to file people into, the children of these homes view boys and girls as very separate and often only know of binary genders. These definitions of what it means to be a girl or boy are based on usually incorrect assumptions of gendered behaviors such as girls like pink and boys like blue, girls with dolls, and boys with toy trucks. But who put the dolls with frilling pink dresses into the girls hands, and who told the boys to play in the mud and dirt, that it was alright to get messy? If you take a look at the differences in toys in the back of the big box stores, it's a stark comparison between the bright pink plastic dolls and model kitchens that line the girls toy aisle and the dinosaurs and guns that fill the shelves for boys.

When I was a little girl—and I was a little girl, because I didn't know I didn't have to be— I wanted to play in the mud and use my dad's old toy trucks that still stand, immobile, on the roof of his shop. And I hated shopping for clothes because the only clothes in my section of the store were uncomfortable, too short, and covered in bright neon colors, scratchy frills, and branding for shows I had never seen before. While the clothes in the boys section were soft, stretchy, plain, and functional. And on my first time in the toy aisle of the store I was deeply disappointed in the selection of toys offered to me. These differences in simple things build as we look at different parts of childhood and the education and socialization of children. Gender is real only because we make it. It is standard procedure to raise babies with female genitalia as girls, babies with male genitalia as boys, and those babies who don't fit the medical standard are often surgically altered with or without parental consent and then labeled as whatever box they fit into best.



Your community influences the expectations set for the genders, often these are seen as women and men and set a clear opposition to others. In communities where toxic masculinity is prevalent, the source of this epidemic can be found in those around them, often being other men with the same ideals and values. Toxic men raise toxic boys, and women who have only known men like them expect and foster more toxic masculinity in their young boys. While this toxicity affects everyone around them, it only ends up hurting themselves even more, they bottle up their feelings and force down the tears further worsening the wounds, to others this can make them seem apathetic or cold and push others away. (Fantastic job)

If a little boy is taught that boys are strong, reliable, and sensible, and he's taught that boys and girls are complete opposites, how do we expect him to think of girls, and treat them when he grows up. Sure these biases can be corrected and resolved in adulthood, but they often take years to get through, and that's if they are willing. The problem isn't in the boys and men themselves, but in the way they're educated, treated differently, and supported by others that informs their perception and relationship with women and the world around them.

## **VIII. What is Gender?**

No definition of gender will work for everyone. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines gender as “the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex.” However, The Oxford dictionary supplies a long and convoluted definition based purely on sex. That may align with some people's definitions, but this is very outdated and closed-minded. We created gender to categorize and separate people, so we can change it to whatever we need it to be. The European system of binary genders was spread with the expansion of their colonization of other civilizations. Before the English, French, and Spanish colonized and genocided the Indigenous

people of the Americas and Canada, these tribes had many unique systems of recognizing feminine, masculine, and a mix of both spirits in people.

The phrase “boys don’t cry” is an example of the societal gendering of emotions. This may have originated in the bible with the different expressions and levels of shame placed on Adam and Eve, with Adam demonstrating moral shame and Eve physical modesty, placing Adam in a position of superiority. The ancient theory of temperaments surrounded the ideas of hot and dry vs. cold and wet. The hot and dry emotions associated with masculinity were angry, rage, audacity, and hate, framing men as feared violent beings. While femininity was associated with the cold emotions of “modesty, sweetness, fear, shyness, and compassion, languor –”(Boquet 1) . However, in western culture, primarily America, emotions in general are perceived as feminine. This type of gendering emotions are not only harmful to women, but men, and those excluded from the gender binary. With emotions being specified to one side of the gender spectrum, judgment and toxicity can invalidate gender identities and presentations, as well as damage fragile masculinity. By enforcing apathy and teaching boys to not show pain or feelings, we affect the whole of the community by association. If we teach boys that feelings are weak and feminine, they learn to associate those together as well. This influences their relationships and treatment of the feminine people around them, and they promote these ideas to other men.

## **IX. My Understanding of Gender as it Applies to My Identity**

I think my whole life, even before I knew I wasn't a girl, I've been trying to deal with the fact that the body I have is the only one I'm gonna get. I'm stuck with all the little quirks and mishaps that my body remembers through scars and recurring bruises. My body may not be the best fit for my uses, and it may hold me back sometimes, but the conclusion is that my body and I are

synonymous, at least in this time, there is no way to separate us. The truth is that I have a female body and unless I make medical alterations, that fact won't change. But it doesn't define my identity, of course it is a part of it, but it does not make me who I am. I am at a crossroads of the falsehood of gender and experiencing "female experiences." I visit museums and I recognise the nude marble statues of body's like mine that seem so perfect and graceful put up on a pedestal. I will continue to experience things connected to being a woman, despite not being one, because of how I look, act, and dress. Strangers' perceptions of me that I have no control over may place me in a box I don't belong to. But nothing can make me exist differently than I choose. If gender is real because we make it so, then I reject the ideology that creates it.

#### Works Cited

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This source explores the history of socially gendered emotions and provides a “re-evaluation of the social uses of emotions.” In determining the emotional differences, or lack thereof, I used this information as another branch to explore in my search to answer the questions “What is gender?” and “How does socialization contribute to perceived gender division?”

Meyerowitz, Joanne. “A History of ‘Gender.’” *The American Historical Review*, vol. 113, no. 5, 2008, pp. 1346–56. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30223445>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023.

This article reviews Meyerowitz’s work and accreditation for her writing about gender.

Meyerowitz explores the history of gender as an idea and its origins as a word. She recounts the pivotal events of the past that contribute to our modern understanding of gender and all its interpretations. Using this source I took a look at the history and development of gender as a concept and discerned where, when, and if we got it all wrong.

Mgcineni ’Pro’ Sobopha. “The Body: Gender and the Politics of Representation.” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 63, 2005, pp. 117–30. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4066640>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023.

Mgcineni demonstrates female artists' use of their own bodies as subject matter to bodies as subject matter “to question, confront and negotiate issues of representations and their positioning in the white male-dominated South African visual arena.”.

Jamison, Leslie. “Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain.” *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 90, no. 2, 2014, pp. 114–28. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44714543>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023.

Jamison provides a framework for understanding the ingrained connection between female existence and perpetual pain. She examines the risk of discussing the “wounded women” because

it threatens to glamourize the suffering as the ideal for women. This source will not only help me to examine the essence of what “female” means but also how I interpret my own position and relationship with the female being and my own experiences in a female body.

WESTBROOK, LAUREL, and KRISTEN SCHILT. “DOING GENDER, DETERMINING GENDER: Transgender People, Gender Panics, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2014, pp. 32–57. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43669855>. Accessed 20 Apr. 2023.

This source covers many different ways that people, courts, and the government approach gender determination through both dated and recent events and studies. It takes a closer analytical look at instances of “conflict over who counts as a man and who counts as a woman”. This will help me with my determination and conflict with the legitimacy of gender as a concept and factor into my own image of self.

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Salk, Rachel H., et al. “Gender Differences in Depression in Representative National

Samples: Meta-Analyses of Diagnoses and Symptoms.” *Psychological Bulletin*,  
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