

WHEN THE BODY BETRAYS US

NewPhilosopher

MIND

AND/OR

BODY?

ANTONIA CASE
Disembodied delinquents

MARK ROWLANDS
Running with the pack

PATRICK STOKES
The body replaced



Female Torso, Kazimir Malevich, 1933

by Mariana Alessandri

Gender outlines

When the hairdresser asked why I decided to shave the underside of my head I answered: “To make my outsides match my insides.” I might as well have referenced Nietzsche, telling her that I wanted to become who I am. Since I had spent my twenties and thirties becoming someone else – a professor, a mother, a wife – I figured my forties was a good decade to become myself. I suspected that my haircut would throw my gender into question, but I was willing to think in the flesh. I didn’t predict that words would fail me.

The proliferating terms surrounding gender – from non-binary to spectrum to fluidity to androgyny – rush to the aid of teens who ask social media users to name them. But when words clump as these do, it’s unclear whether we are trying to preserve gender or destroy it. I wondered: is the gender binary toxic by necessity or only by misuse? Similarly,

is imagining gender as a spectrum the best metaphor we can think of?

In 1994, gender was not a spectrum, at least not in New York City where I grew up. I was the co-captain of my junior varsity basketball team, and though I was likely mediocre, I felt unstoppable. I practised daily, and the basketball gods rewarded me with a feeling of excellence I have not had since. What seems even more remarkable, given how I think twenty-eight years later, is that using my strong body so aggressively never made me doubt that I was 100% girl.

At forty-three, I’ve started playing basketball again, perhaps in pursuit of what my eight-year-old is obsessed with: ‘glory’. I want to touch excellence, but at this point competence would feel like excellence. Trouble is, I find my body changed. When I double the waistband of my shorts onto my hips, my twice-used, now abandoned kangaroo pouch hangs over the drawstring. More significantly, my haircut and gym clothes make me look and feel androgynous. Still, the other players (all male) must have read me as female when I walked in as ‘wife’ to a basketball-playing, male-presenting male. During the game, the players apologised when they ran into me, never mind that I had set

my body to be run into. But when I began scoring, they stopped apologising. They no longer treated my body as defenceless or weak. Playing middle-aged basketball gives me the ‘man’ feeling I crave, like I could walk home alone in the dark or get into a fist fight.

Thinking outside the binary has helped me become a self who doesn’t wear make-up, uses only sports bras and men’s deodorant, and prefers barbers. Likewise, thinking along the spectrum has freed me to wonder if I am masculine of centre.

But the spectrum metaphor exacts a price. Although I have always been ‘boyish’, it is only since gender has become a spectrum that my masculinity pulls from my femininity. Recent salsa lessons with my husband reveal me as awkward, even though I have danced all my life. The body growing stronger on the basketball court now struggles to follow a male lead on the dance floor. It’s not that men don’t dance or that women don’t play basketball, but the spectrum is making a slide switch out of my gender. These days, when I wear a dress, I worry that I am betraying myself, acquiescing to cultural expectations. I did not feel so conflicted when gender was a binary.

The flaw in the spectrum language, at least for me, is precisely the existential discomfort I now feel dancing. Is there a metaphor for gender that doesn't divide us into percentages?

I live on the US-Mexico border, so I see a lot of binaries, boundaries, either/ors. I see policing and patrolling. I see people swayed by the politics of purity: language, food, culture, etc. But I also see rebellion: both/ands, neither/nors, and delightfully confusing middles.

Nationality is no spectrum: a Mexican-American is both/and, and can choose to highlight one or the other, like the social media challenge where users posted side-by-side photos of themselves as masculine and feminine. No betrayal here, just different looks on different days. Perhaps some of these individuals identify as bi-gender, but I suspect not all. A year ago, unbeknownst to social media and with considerable confusion, I did an experiment: Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays were my 'masculine' days, and Tuesdays and Thursdays were my 'feminine' ones. I modelled my gender presentation on

my bilingual home, where we alternate between Spanish and English days. But when I read the captions on those social media photos, including "I both", and *ello* (an amalgam of *el* [he] and *ella* [she]) – it hit me that borders can tolerate both-ing, just not at once.

If the border forces us to choose (or at least alternate) between genders, the borderlands that Gloria Anzaldúa described so richly is home to thirds, misfits, and *mitad y mitades* (half-and-halves). Spanglish speakers do not alternate between Spanish and English; they play with the border, celebrate the holy abundance of words, and honour a multiplicity of languages. The first time I saw a student on campus rock a beard and high heels I saw the Spanglish of gender incarnate. Not a spectrum in sight. In the borderlands we are genderful, we code switch, we are both at once.

Gendering as a Latinx in the borderlands has taught me that what's wrong with the binary is not the fact of two, or even of contrast, but the politics of purity. The Aztecs had binary pairs, including 'male' and 'female', but they were

not either/ors; they could occur in one body. The primordial god Ometeotl, for instance, represented both male and female by wearing a skirt and a loin cloth.

The American poet Alok Vaid-Menon defines beauty as "looking like yourself", which in my case would mean presenting sometimes as masculine and sometimes as feminine; sometimes as an ambiguous body and sometimes an androgynous one. If my husband and I ever decide to have a recommitment ceremony, I will wear a tuxedo. It will look odd outside the borderlands, because in 2022, the recognisable pairs are: two men, two women, or a man and a woman. But a masculine-presenting male paired with a masculine-presenting female isn't yet legible inland. It's always been up to the borderlands to give us new looks and new languages; new words for middles and mashups. If more people could appreciate the borderlands, lots of us would have an easier time of gender. We could cross the border but not destroy it; we could speak Spanglish and shapeshift; we could play basketball and dance. ▣

I did an experiment: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays were my 'masculine' days, and Tuesdays and Thursdays were my 'feminine' ones.