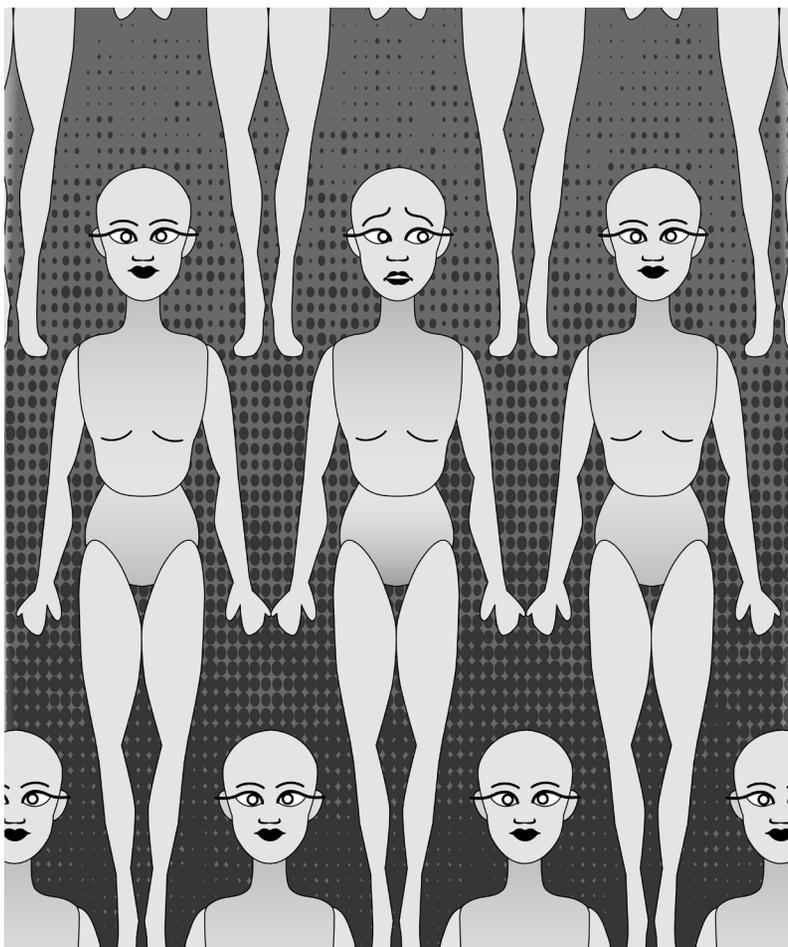


A GOOD LITTLE GIRL IS ONE WHO GROWS UP TO BE A WOMAN:

Simone de Beauvoir's *Other*, Ideas of
Social Contagion, and the Future of
Feminism



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ABSTRACT

In today's evolving understanding of gender, questions arise about the future of the feminist movement. Using Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Hugh Ryan's "Who's Afraid of Social Contagion," and Ben Kessler's "How the Idea of a 'Transgender Contagion' Went Viral—and Caused Untold Harm," this paper explores the concept of the Other to analyze social contagion and gender-based oppression. It argues that while feminism must adapt, its future lies in embracing the experiences of all classified as the Other. Through de Beauvoir's work, historical definitions of gender, and social constructivism, this paper proposes a new idea for the future of feminism.

DOI: 10.33043/S.171.98-109



I. INTRODUCTION

“One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.”¹ This revolutionary phrase first published in 1949 by feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir has arguably defined conceptions of womanhood in the years since. The category of woman is a series of traits and conditions, placed upon women so that they will become what society needs them to be: caregivers, subservient, and structures of support to a patriarchal system. But in recent years the gender binary of man and woman has begun to shift, some say warp, with new expressions and definitions rising to the cultural surface. It begs the question: What does it mean for feminism if the category of woman were to cease to exist or was no longer a central component to the construction of identity? While we may not be quite there yet, the rise of mainstream understanding of transgender and gender non-conforming identities invites new lines of inquiry into the classic theories of foundational feminist scholars like de Beauvoir and ultimately the future of feminism. Using the work of de Beauvoir, Hugh Ryan, and Ben Kessler, this paper will describe the idea of the Other to explore the phenomenon of social contagion and gender-based oppression. Ultimately these ideas will show that feminism indeed has a future, however, this future is one where the movement no longer centers on the experience of womanhood, but the experience of the Other which can encapsulate all those caught in the forces of gender-based oppression.

II. SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S OTHER

de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* can remain foundational to theories of feminism, even as feminism shifts away from centering on womanhood. To begin her work, de Beauvoir asserts that femininity, as we have been conditioned to know it, is a myth, meaning that throughout her piece femininity does not refer to a single person or experience, but to the “present state of education and customs” that dictate the experience of femininity and womanhood.² This is vital to understanding how de Beauvoir's work can continue to shape the feminist movement as it transforms with the times. Femininity and thus womanhood is a socialized experience, a set of conditions and traits taught to women to

shape who they must be within the confines of the patriarchy. However, it is divorced from biology or physical characteristics, besides their use as being one of the ways systems of power decipher who should be socialized in this manner. The idea of femininity as a social condition is one of the defining aspects of de Beauvoir's idea of the Other. It is an important baseline as we expand de Beauvoir's theory to describe the gender dynamics at play in the here and now.

Centrally, de Beauvoir argues that women are only defined in relation to others, thus making them the Other. She illustrates this claim through the comparison of the childhood experiences of girls and boys, writing that they share the same first pleasures through breastfeeding, the same experiences of bodily exploration as they grow, and can feel the same jealousy toward new children, showing that it is not biological impulses that separate men and women but, as she goes on to say, social forces. The traits attributed to women having timidity, subservience, and a quiet demeanor are not divinely pre-ordained but “because the intervention of others in the infant's life is almost originary, and her vocation is imperiously breathed into her from the first years of her life.”³ Through socialization, women first recognize themselves “only through the mediation of another.”⁴

However, from infancy men are conditioned to see those around them as a means to support their ends; de Beauvoir writes “from the time he recognizes his reflection in a mirror . . . he begins to affirm his identity: his self merges with this reflection in such a way that it is formed only by alienating itself.”⁵ To adequately become the patriarch, a man must alienate himself: “it is by doing that he makes himself be, in one single movement.”⁶ Through this tandem conditioning, man self-actualizes as an independent being free to move throughout the world, conditioned to expect support, whereas “the little girl when learning about the world, she grasps herself as a *woman* in it.”⁷ This conception of identity construction shows how transgender and gender non-conforming individuals' methods of identity construction align with that of de Beauvoir's conceptualization of a woman. Transgender and gender non-conforming people develop their identities within a structure whose paths are built only on the assumption of the sanctity of the gender binary; yet finding no path befitting their experience, they too build their identities as an Other since “only the mediation of another can constitute an individual as Other.”⁸ Thus, we are all

3 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 330–31.

4 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 330.

5 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 331.

6 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 342.

7 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 359.

8 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 330.

1 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 283.

2 de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 328.



condemned to struggle to resist the forces of socialization that push toward the oppressive path of the gender binary.

III. MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF GENDER

To better characterize this claim, it is pertinent to turn to the work of Hugh Ryan who outlines a brief social history of the definitions of gender that have led us to this current moment. Currently, a person is defined as transgender if they identify with a gender other than their biological sex, according to Maura Priest in *Transgender Children and the Right to Transition*.⁹ However, this was not always the case. As Hugh Ryan describes, in Victorian times before sexuality was understood to be a standalone identity from gender, those who did not identify with their assigned gender or who violated the conventions of gender were called “inverts.” People who fell into this category were not just thought to be different in their desires or personalities, but to have different physical bodies to their assigned gender; Ryan writes “so-called ‘born female’ inverts were thought to have bodies more like men, and vice versa.”¹⁰ This language and way of thinking persisted until the rise of urban living, which fostered the new social norm of heteronormative relationships and made the gender segregation of the Victorian era virtually impossible. This made any sign of gender inversion an indicator of hidden homosexuality. The conflation between gender identity and sexual orientation led the first generation of queer historians to lump together the experiences of queer people and those of gender non-conforming people.

Today, the internet has dramatically reshaped individuals’ abilities to communicate and form community, allowing more queer people to find each other. The internet “has also empowered queer people to spread their own ideas and experiences about sexuality and gender, based on their *internal* feelings, their own self-conceptions: what we call identity.”¹¹ The online era, which changed conceptions of identity, allowed popular knowledge to expand from the assumptions made due to a lack of representation and forced secrecy. Queer history highlights how the paradigm of sex and gender as it has been understood, and as theorists like Simone de Beauvoir would have understood it, rests on

9 Maura Priest, “Transgender Children and the Right to Transition: Medical Ethics When Parents Mean Well but Cause Harm,” *The American Journal of Bioethics* 19, no. 2 (2019): 10.1080/15265161.2018.1557276.

10 Hugh Ryan, “Who’s Afraid of Social Contagion?,” *Boston Review*, 2023, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/whos-afraid-of-social-contagion/>.

11 Ryan, “Who’s Afraid of Social Contagion?”

the binary of man/woman and their preferred object of sexual desire. Ryan asserts in this piece that twentieth-century notions of LGBTQ+ identity cannot adequately answer the questions of gender dynamics today, because they were not developed to understand the experiences of queer people: “they were developed to segment straight cis people off from the rest of us.”¹² This encapsulates how de Beauvoir’s idea of the Other and identity construction may not have explicitly included transgender and gender non-conforming people, but that it can be expanded and utilized today to help contextualize their experiences.

IV. MODERN REACTIONS TO CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF GENDER IDENTITY

To combat the fact that transgender and gender non-conforming identities fail to fit within and serve the patriarchal system, they have been subjected to punitive theories of disinformation leading to social consequences. Ben Kessler describes how transgender and gender non-conforming identities have begun to be described as a contagion characterized by the theory of “rapid-onset gender dysphoria.” Introduced in 2018 by physician and researcher Lisa Littman, rapid-onset gender dysphoria (ROGD)¹³ claims that young people with feelings of gender dysphoria, “the feeling of distress that one’s gender and assigned sex do not match,” identify as transgender or non-binary as a result of peer influence, especially from online communities.¹⁴ Kessler explains that the theory of ROGD claims that “they hide behind a false diagnosis of gender dysphoria . . . instead of confronting whatever issues are truly challenging them.”¹⁵ Littman argues that children become gender dysphoric through a process of immersion in social media, and once they identify as transgender or non-binary they can unwittingly influence their peers to do the same. She posits that this can explain the rising numbers of transgender-identifying and gender non-conforming adolescents and that the dynamic particularly affects those assigned-female-at-birth.

Since the original publishing of Littman’s work and the subsequent critiques surrounding its methodology, the study was reissued with a correction stating that Littman’s paper was simply exploratory and had

12 Ryan, “Who’s Afraid of Social Contagion?”

13 Lisa Littman, “Parent Reports of Adolescents and Young Adults Perceived to Show Signs of a Rapid Onset of Gender Dysphoria,” *PLOS ONE* 13, no. 8 (2018), 10.1371/journal.pone.0202330.

14 Ben Kessler, “How the Idea of a ‘Transgender Contagion’ Went Viral—and Caused Untold Harm,” *MIT Technology Review*, 2022, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/08/18/1057135/transgender-contagion-gender-dysphoria/>.

15 Kessler, “Untold Harm.”



not been clinically evaluated. In 2021, *The Journal of Pediatrics* published a comprehensive study that found little to no evidence of ROGD's existence, prompting more than sixty psychology organizations, including the American Psychological Association, to call for the retraction of the term.¹⁶ However, despite the scientific community's outcry and further studies showing that such a phenomenon did not have evidentiary backing, the term rapid-onset gender dysphoria has been adopted by anti-trans activists to further their agenda.

According to Kessler, Abigail Shrier's allegedly transphobic book *Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters* had sold more than 100,000 copies as of 2022, and Littman's work has been cited in anti-trans legislation—such as Florida's attempt to stop Medicaid funding for adult transition-related health care.¹⁷ Terms like “social contagion” and “rapid-onset gender dysphoria” not only directly contribute to the invalidation of transgender and gender non-conforming people's experience, but to real-world harm as well.

V. MODERN IMPLICATIONS

Though de Beauvoir may not have had the vocabulary to expand her ideas of the Other in *The Second Sex* to transgender and gender non-conforming identities, it is illustrative when speaking to the ideas that Ryan and Kessler present in their pieces. Individuals with transgender and gender non-conforming identities who have been traditionally socialized as men and women construct their identities relative to the ideas of gender that surround them. Here it is pertinent to turn to the work of Robin Dembroff to further illustrate this matter. In their work “Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Kind,” Dembroff describes how an externalist approach to individuals who “are perceived as *transgressing* binary norms of gender expression . . . or their body is perceived as androgynous, where this is understood as one's body being unreadable as male or female” is not wholly descriptive of a genderqueer person's experience of their identity.¹⁸ This account of the externalist approach to individuals existing outside of the gender binary epitomizes why de Beauvoir's account of the Other is ripe to be

expanded to include not only women but transgender, nonbinary, and gender-fluid people as well.

Unlike cisgender men, all of these individuals are not given adequate space to construct their identities as whole beings. Instead, they are forced to engage in identity construction only relative to the binary of gender that is societally enforced. The binary of man and woman exists as the only frame of reference by which identities are conceptualized. This process directly correlates to the process de Beauvoir describes for women, whose identity is constructed only relative to their roles in the service of men. This socialization process provides two narrow paths which every individual is forced to walk: the path of patriarchal dominance, reserved only for those who present as male, or the path of service to the structures of patriarchy, reserved for femme-presenting people who cannot be categorized as the dominant.

Moreover, the idea of social contagion can be seen as a punitive social paradigm that is meant to deter transgender and gender non-conforming individuals from expressing their identities as it goes against the values intrinsic to the patriarchy. It is the rigidity of the gender roles themselves that preserves the domination of men and successfully stifles the autonomy of women. If gender is fluid, or allowed to be a spectrum, the male dominant loses a large subset of its subservient population. Social contagion directly suppresses the existence of transgender and non-binary people by invalidating their experiences. These ideas are in keeping with the process of socialization that is required for women to fit their patriarchally assigned roles. Social contagion works by convincing parents that their kids have been persuaded to shirk their biological sex in favor of a new and threatening social identity. The crux of the message is that the parents of trans and non-binary kids know their children's identities better than they do. The process and values instilled by social contagion guarantee that parents will continue to carry out the traditional socialization processes that produce men and women willing to take their places within a patriarchal system. Understanding this socialization process is the first step to being able to deconstruct these gender roles, thus signifying the importance of having language like the Other to help conceptualize this process. Being able to identify the points where children are taught to conform to gendered expectations allows for the feminist movement to take decisive action and organize to change these cultural values and ultimately dismantle the systems of gender-based oppression like binary gender roles.

Philosopher Julia Kristeva gives what can be described as an emotional rendering of what it feels like to be socialized as de Beauvoir's Other in her work “Approaching Abjection.” Kristeva writes “Abject. It is something rejected from which one is not separated, from which one is

16 Greta R. Bauer, Margaret L. Lawson, and Daniel L. Metzger, “Do Clinical Data from Transgender Adolescents Support the Phenomenon of ‘Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria’?”, *The Journal of Pediatrics* 243 (2022): 224–27 [10.1016/j.jpeds.2021.11.020](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2021.11.020).

17 Kessler, “Untold Harm.”

18 Robin Dembroff, “Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Kind,” *Philosophers' Imprint* 20, no. 9 (2020): 1–23.



not protected as is the case with an object.”¹⁹ Abjection can be understood as the feeling that permeates an identity when there is a dissonance between the authentic self and the socialization that aims to create an individual’s identity. As described by Philip Roberts, Kristeva draws “on a psychoanalytic reading of subjective identity as a defensive construction” to weave her theory of abjection.²⁰ In terms of this argument, the feeling of abjection should be the very aim that feminism seeks to resolve within its work to help liberate those socialized as the Other. The feeling of abjection exists within us all as we contend with the dissonance between our socialized identities and who we believe we truly are. It is a rarity, and some might say a privilege, for one’s authentic identity to line up with the social construction of identity. For women and gender non-conforming people alike, the feeling of abjection is central to our very existence as we struggle against the oppressive forces which seek to push us down the narrow path delineated by the gender binary.

VI. THE FUTURE OF FEMINISM

The use of de Beauvoir’s language within *The Second Sex* shows that the future of feminism does not lie in forgetting the traditional texts of previous feminists, but in expanding their theories to create a more intersectional and inclusive feminist lens. Thus, the feminist movement must move in a constructivist direction to successfully dismantle the oppressive structures that hold in place these two gendered paths and existences. Scholar Ann Murphy describes de Beauvoir as a nascent constructivist due to “her insistence that women’s character was a function of her situation and *not* her essence (biological, metaphysical, or otherwise).”²¹ According to Murphy, social constructivism can be understood as expanding the possibilities for understanding the diversity of gendered experiences, which liberates sex and gender by acknowledging the plethora of ways “in which they are historically and culturally instantiated and brought to life.”²²

Feminism is still needed as a tool for the liberation of women because while there have been meaningful advancements both economically and socially in the realm of gender equality, as conceptions of gender shift, patriarchal systems will attempt to take advantage of the instability caused by the fear of the unknown. Politically, it can only be described as the classic move to capitalize on moments of social unrest to suggest a promise of certainty by harkening back to harmful historical structures of oppression. This has been illustrated through the rise of populist-presenting politicians all over the world in response to unrest caused by refugee crises and economic inequality. Without the feminist movement evolving to meet these times, it risks the positive change that the different waves of the movement have managed to garner. As feminism navigates a new time in which understanding of identity as it is related to sex and gender, for feminism to survive, and more importantly be a useful tool for liberation, the feminist movement cannot remain rooted in one understanding of womanhood.

The feminist movement has already seen influential scholars move away from a rigid conception of what it means to encapsulate the experiences of womanhood. Take for example the work of Judith Butler who read gender as “the cumulative effect of performative acts iterated over time.”²³ Butler furthered feminist scholarship through their understanding of gender as a performance that results in a materialized sexed identity. Butler drew inspiration from de Beauvoir, and I charge the feminist movement to do the same. By moving away from centering “the woman” or womanhood, the feminist movement opens itself up to completely dismantling the notion of gender. While historically—and more arguably, currently—the categorization of man and woman was useful for the feminist movement to develop its roots, today the binary is a hindrance. Strict conceptions of womanhood have started to cause strife and division within the feminist movement, with the newer ideals of “gender-critical feminism,” which has claimed its charge to be the opposition of gender ideology or simply, the very existence of transgender and gender non-conforming identities. Through these ideals, the feminist movement has been weaponized to perpetuate harm against already marginalized identities.

Yet still we can harken back to the bedrock foundation that the feminist movement was built upon, such as the work of de Beauvoir, and by doing so, feminists will find that the very language needed to guide us into the future is the language that our forebears have already provided. The use of de Beauvoir’s theory of the Other provides a conceptual framework that allows for the feminist movement to expand, bringing

19 Julia Kristeva and John Lechte, “Approaching Abjection,” *Oxford Literary Review* 5, no. 1 (1982): 125–49.

20 Robert Phillips, “Abjection,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (2014): 19–21, 10.1215/23289252-2399470.

21 Ann V. Murphy, “Feminist Philosophy since 1945: Constructivism and Materialism,” in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1945–2015*, ed. Kelly Becker and Iain D. Thomson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 416–26.

22 Murphy, “Feminist Philosophy since 1945,” 421.

23 Murphy, “Feminist Philosophy since 1945,” 422.



into the fold transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. By doing so, not only is feminism allowing itself to become more inclusive and more intersectional, but it is guaranteeing its future.

Feminism can only survive as an ideal for liberation if it is still needed. As the public conversation continues to evolve along the path that it has seemingly laid out, the idea of gender and the existence of the gender binary will begin to break down, and a movement solely for the biological female will become obsolete. Transgender and gender non-conforming people are the brothers, sisters, and siblings of the modern feminist movement and it is time that they are welcomed into our midst.

In closing, it is fitting to reiterate for the final time that de Beauvoir's work of conceptualizing the Other along with Ryan's and Kessler's discussions of transgender, gender non-conforming identities, and the social phenomenon of social contagion work together to illuminate the future of feminism. The future of feminism, our future, is indeed working to move away from a rigid conception of womanhood and using the conception of the Other to truly liberate *all* people from the forces of gender-based oppression.



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