

# The Ethics of Nobody I Know

## Gender and the Politics of Description

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### Introduction

Crossing the platform at a Melbourne train station some time ago, a woman shot briskly ahead of me, bag swinging in the rush of fumbled tickets and late arrivals. Before reaching the stairs, a stranger with a hard masculine stride lurched toward the woman and, pointing to the ground, said “you dropped something there”. As she turned to look the man quickly whispered something in her ear and she set off again – still briskly, perhaps more so. Barely glimpsing the offender’s face, I caught myself staring instead at the profile of the woman, searching for signs of a disturbance: anxiety, annoyance, embarrassment, nonchalance, humiliation. What will be her response? How will she wear it?

From this fastidious examination emerged a fuzzy description of someone I didn’t know, one that combined an affective response with a political orientation. I may have been trying to detect resemblances with a previous occasion where I had known, or had imagined to have known, how relations between men and women could best be understood, mediated, or otherwise transformed. And perhaps, chasing after the woman *as a man*, I could have reminded her of men who are “not like that” and who represent a majority “on her side”, converting the fluster of the encounter into a more tangible moral act.

Alongside feminist-allied men, pro-feminist men and progressive men, the phrase “male feminist” has been used to overcome simple binaries between patriarchal and non-patriarchal men, or between masculinity and femininity as immutable character traits (see Digby, 1998). And indeed, undertones in the anecdote above point to some version of the male feminist: the narrator might endeavour to be both a man and a person concerned with feminist politics without much hesitation. Nevertheless, the

phrase “male feminist” suggests several different stories about what having a gender or doing feminism might mean. Firstly, “male” is no longer understood as the monolithic biological, psychological or social category it once was. As sociologists and anthropologists have frequently shown, gendered self-presentation can require specialised habits of comportment and etiquette, ways of speaking and listening, facial expressions and explicit or implicit acts of naming. Gender is a vast orchestration of subtle mediations between oneself and others, not a latent private cause behind manifest behaviours in public. Secondly, the gendered modifier – from feminist to *male* feminist - could support a peculiar myth that for women “feminism” is an automatic and unthinking political affiliation, while for men it is an extraordinary moral acquisition. As Rosi Braidotti (2011: 132-133) points out, the “female feminist subject” is not a default partisan perspective inherent in “woman” but an intersection of complex desires and social transformations that exceed any single ideological formulation or identitarian alliance. Being a feminist can only make sense as a relational and social practice, even if these relations and practices are sporadic, virtual or otherwise “nomadic” (see Braidotti, 2001 throughout).

Taken together, “male feminist” suggests some harmonious agreement between these two kinds of social relationship, one which produces the effect of maleness and another that produces the effect of participating in, or contributing towards, feminism. And yet the concept of “men doing feminism” also highlights a disjuncture between the ideological aspects of political agitation and the actual work of reiterating one’s identity *for* a given field of political participation. This tension is most pronounced in cases where perceived “maleness” attracts particular kinds of political mobility or institutional comforts, and unfortunately this still describes most cases.

This article examines the entanglement of gender identity and political motivation, with special attention paid to the vicissitudes of “masculinity” in producing both positive and negative political identifications. It begins by considering existential approaches to politics, identification and the everyday, borrowing firstly from Martin Heidegger and then focusing on Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949). The following section turns to the problems of description raised by de Beauvoir’s work and considers the relationship between political statements, descriptive statements and social norms. Finally, I consider the work of Sara Ahmed, who in various ways demonstrates that the

efficacy of political *praxis* is shaped by commitments to the familiar and to practices of familiarisation, raising some distinct questions about the efficacy of interpellation and self-description in relation to gender identity and gender politics.

### **Doing the Right Thing**

I began with an anecdote about gender in a public space, not in order to better prove the argument that now follows but in order to provide what Meaghan Morris calls an “allegorical exposition” of “a model of the way the world can be said to be working” (qtd. in Probyn, 1993: 11). Later I will discuss the rhetorical effect of the allegory itself, and in particular, the choices involved in producing a narrator and narrated, a beginning and an end, through which to analyse an interpellative situation. But I want to focus first on “pro-feminist” political motivations as described by the narrator, in order to draw out tensions around what it means to seize a political identity.

Back at the train station: I could have offered the gift of friendship, perhaps through a pursuit leading to something along the lines of, “men like that are the *worst*, don’t you think?”. This would be an interpellation of sorts, but not one resembling Louis Althusser’s famous policeman shouting “Hey, you there!” (1971: 171-172). My pursuit would better resemble Althusser’s second interpellating gesture, “‘Hello, my friend’, and shaking his hand...” (Althusser, 1971: 172). The receiver of a friendly gift would become a friend in distress, while ambiguities around the difference between myself from the mysterious villain – exact content of crime, unknown – would be resolved in the political flagging of affiliation and disaffiliation. The crime would not be my own; as a declaration of friendship would implicitly confirm, the villain was not someone that I know.

And this might not be a bad thing. The interpellation of others is a structure and not a sin, and its outcomes are always uncertain. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to scrutinise potentially gendered modalities of political intervention. One reason is provided in Martin Heidegger’s commentary on “leaping in”:

[Solicitude] can, as it were, take away ‘care’ from the Other and put itself in his [sic] position in concern: it can *leap in* for him. This kind of solicitude takes over for the Other that with which he is to concern himself. The Other is thus thrown out of his own position; he steps back so that afterwards, when the matter has been

attended to, he can either take it over as something finished and at his disposal, or disburden of it completely. In such solicitude the Other can become one who is dominated and dependent, even if this domination is a tacit one and remains hidden from him. (Heidegger, 2008: 122 [158], emphasis in original)

The leaper hopes to mitigate the concerns of others by assuming “their issue” as his or her responsibility. This requires a displacement of sorts, the adoption of a role that implicates, or even demands, alternative roles for others – male-offender, woman-in-distress, and the irrational unknown Other. There is a possibility that the tenacious social insistence upon the connection between “femininity” and “womanhood” can be reaffirmed, in no uncomplicated way, by the type of “leaping in” whereby men seek to right the wrongs done to women by other men. This could also be called the “possessive logic” of humanitarianism (see Gall, 2008: 102-103): once a victim becomes unable, incapable, or inactive, a smorgasbord of condescensions become available to those who leap in. As a role and as a narrative, heroism is made convincing through the exhibition of “needy” bodies, or through the reorientation of perception such that some bodies come to seem intrinsically “needier” than others (Berlant, 1997: 122-123).

The presumed capacity of gender to deliver mundane truths about personal character can serve a broad constellation of desires well beyond the train station leap. Consider an example discussed by Riki Wilchins:

As a panel member at a gay journalists’ conference, I wanted to talk about issues, politics, gender-based hate crimes and job discrimination. But first audience members wanted to know what I “was”. As reporters, they needed a label to identify me to their readers, not to mention their editors. The predictable questions flew. Did I consider myself transgendered? Was I presenting myself as male or female? (Wilchins, 2002: 44)

Wilchins’ example points to the limitations of an emancipatory sexual politics not coupled with an epistemological and social critique of gender binaries themselves. The demand that one either present as woman or as man or as a post-operative transsexual is

inseparable from the ubiquitous violence of gender regulation as quotidian social practice (Wilchins, 2002: 43-44).

However, I want to tease out a different issue here, one connected to the notion of leaping in. While Wilchins' focus is rightly on the toxic effects of binary thinking, it is also notable that binaries can become sedimented as a key mode of political interpellation for those wanting, claiming, hoping, or demanding to "do the right thing". Questioning gender binaries "often engenders vertigo and terror over the possibility of losing social sanctions, of leaving a solid social station and place" (Butler, 1986: 42), and correspondingly, gendered taxonomies can provide fertile resources for those wanting to feel steady of moral high ground rather than floundering or free-falling. To "leap in" is to make gender politics a moral venture that fortifies an epistemology of self and others, one that ostensibly shields the leaper from any complicated involvement in the situation they seek to modify. The contradictory situation of social gendering, as both a resisted practice and as a conditioning possibility for viewing oneself or others as *unambiguously* politically resistive, can be resolved through elegant narrative formulations: fighting for women, fighting for men who love men and so on. The arrogation of familiar gender signifiers in order to "do the right thing" can thus unknowingly (but knowingly too) foreclose the promise of gender activism to challenge social orders dependent on the dimorphisms male/female and masculine/feminine.

Some brief assistance from contemporary political theory might be useful here. Prominent philosophers including Ernesto Laclau (2005), Chantal Mouffe (2013) and Jacques Rancière (1999) have sought to formalise accounts of something that, in a somewhat austere nominalised form, is called the Political. Chantal Mouffe suggests that the formation of political identity always involves "the constitution of a 'we' which requires as its very condition of possibility the demarcation of a 'they'" (Mouffe 2013: 5), while Jacques Rancière claims that "politics exists wherever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part" (Rancière 1999: 123). Whatever variant of the Political one chooses, a consistent theme is the ineradicability of antagonism or structures of inclusion and exclusion from social life (for Rancière "politics" is also "that activity which has the rationality of disagreement as its very own rationality", 1999: xii). Binaries like masculine/feminine, cis/trans, hetero/homo do not simply produce poor "representations" of the world; they also constitute political

ontologies wherein a multiplicity of affects, conflicts, and deviations become possible.<sup>1</sup> Such ontologies are neither uniform nor predictable in their outcomes: Michael Flood notes that, in addition to possible desires for politically acceptable forms of group solidarity based on gender, men seeking to actively construct non-violent masculinities may draw on “concerns for children, intimacies with women, and ethical and political commitments”, among others (Flood, 2001: 45). Nevertheless, once attached to political projects based on the coherence of such distinctions, one can also become attached to the social relationships that sustain these projects. Crude examples might be efforts to interpellate men as “courageous” when fighting sexism (consider Cosmo’s 2012 campaign, ‘Real Men Don’t Hit Women’), for courage can also be a conspicuously gendered operation for converting assertiveness and even violence into intrinsic social goods. Similarly, if men pledge “never to commit, condone or remain silent about [violence against women]” (Flood, 2001: 43), to what extent does this pledge either consolidate or disturb personal commitments to gender dimorphism? Without wanting to trivialise what are strategically important statements for shifting a broad discourse on men and violence, it does raise long-term problems around masculinity and femininity as resources for thinking through what is just or unjust, especially when one is forced to choose between gender-based “action”, on the one hand, and challenging the violence of compulsory social gendering, on the other.

### **Justice and the Everyday**

Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) is hardly a novel touchstone for the issues discussed here, but does allow certain problems around politics and sex to be posed with greater precision. In particular, it might be asked whether gender-based “justice” is a political outcome that individuals can desire separately from all those other wants that shape social fields of political participation. Certainly, the concept of justice continues to have clear benefits in activating radical political sensibilities (see Young, 1990: 6-7). An influential and compelling voice in the field, R.W. Connell has suggested that social justice could provide a foundation for masculinity studies and links this to the theme of democracy as a pressing issue for those challenging hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2002).

Nevertheless, justice – like politics – is a prickly concept. For Simone de Beauvoir, the much touted desire to execute justice on behalf of abstract, intangible, and selfless humanist ideals is not only implausible but actively deleterious to any complex understanding of human motivations. Ever wary about the excesses of moralism, De Beauvoir is disappointed by the claustrophobic reasoning of those who apply themselves to “a confused conglomeration of special cases”, substituting opinions about moral actions or personal virtue for the more difficult work of project-building and the creation of new collective goals (De Beauvoir, 1975: 616, 627). Correspondingly, future-oriented political gestures always carry with them something of the irrationality, a-morality and imbalance of their circumstances:

The individual who acts considers himself [sic], like others, as responsible for both evil and good, he knows that it is for him to define ends, to bring them to success; he becomes aware, in action, of the ambiguousness of all solutions; justice and injustice, gains and losses, are inextricably mixed. But anyone who is passive is out of the game and declines to pose ethical problems even in thought: the good *should* be realized, and if it is not, there must be some wrongdoing for which those to blame must be punished. (De Beauvoir, 1975: 618, emphasis in original)

In abandoning the moralistic ideal of a fixed Good against which misdeeds are measured, one must also refuse of facile symmetries between the oppressed and the oppressor, the victim and the perpetrator, the right and the wrong. This means, in turn, rethinking how the “objects” of gender violence are positioned *vis a vis* gender-based justice. In a broad reading *The Second Sex* criticises the liberal notion that justice can be rationally metered out by persons or institutions themselves shaped, and indeed made intelligible, through social antagonism and political struggle (de Beauvoir, 1975: 732; see also Moi, 1990: 40-47). But in a narrower sense, De Beauvoir is particularly critical of the persistent desire of men - not least of all those who identify as *radical* men – to see women as weak, a perception that can too easily reframe “just” acts as simply those that rectify the presumed disadvantages experienced by those who do not regularly exercise powers of social domination (1975: 698-699). Thus *The Second Sex* concludes with the suggestion that “[it] is not a question of abolishing in woman the contingencies and miseries of the

human condition, but of giving her the means for transcending them” (De Beauvoir, 1975: 736). The politicking of bodies necessarily requires drawing on, modifying, and transforming the capabilities that “gender” has both extended and foreclosed.<sup>2</sup> Effective action demands caprice and inconstancy in efforts to speak with and against gender in the same breath, and so one is often likely to find oneself baffled, irritated, mad, disgusted or delirious.<sup>3</sup>

Gender has an everydayness to it, which is quite a different thing from being culturally stable or readily cognizable. What matters in *The Second Sex* is not the victory of one gender-based ideology over another (although some are more reliable than others), but how a “total pattern” of everyday life is experienced and practiced through uneven distributions of action and inaction, visibility and invisibility, pleasure and trauma (De Beauvoir, 1975: 691). This total pattern has a fuzzy consistency, structured neither by unconscious laws nor by mysterious forces of organic social combination, but by a certain regularity that can only be understood over time, and through the discord of multiple successes and multiple failures. Where creative writing for women opens doors in one place, it closes them in another; where free expression announces itself in the female ballet dancer’s pivot, it later forecloses with unexpected landings (De Beauvoir, 1975: 542-567). The tumble of openings and closings comprises the “ambiguous situation” of femininity, it is “in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting” (de Beauvoir, 1948: 9). An ethical project would be one that develops and envelops the ambiguity of its particular situation, challenging gender not through a critique of false knowledge but by creating new ways to inhabit the ambivalences of the everyday and to make such habitation available to others. Meaghan Morris develops this theme further, noting that “[ambivalence] does not eliminate the moment of everyday *discontent* – of anger, frustration, sorrow, irritation, hatred, boredom, fatigue”, and that “[feminism] is minimally a movement of discontent with ‘the everyday’, and with wide-eyed definitions of the everyday as ‘the way things are’” (1998: 69, emphasis in original). This requires a shift from seeking out transgressions beyond the quotidian to a more sideways-looking interest in the tolerable and intolerable contradictions of the everyday itself, including the grime and gruel of habitual complicities with what, despite its now quite disparate connotations, might still be called phallogentrism.



Unfortunately, while de Beauvoir's work continues to prompt important critical questions for liberal approaches to the study of masculinity and femininity, the answers provided by *The Second Sex* are not always satisfying. As Susan Best (1999) notes, concepts like "project" and "activity" must be treated with caution, because this rhetoric of self-assertion risks overvalorising potentially insensitive or dangerous social gratifications. Just as importantly, both liberal and existential accounts of gender liberation can lead to a certain epistemological conservatism, because the politicisation of social identities can also lead to the over-formalisation of differences between "men" and "women", "masculine" and "feminine" bodies, loving the "same sex" and loving a "different sex", and so on. Even in reformed existential terms, a woman liberated from gender oppression must remain recognisably a "woman" to signify her liberation; correspondingly, struggles over masculinity and femininity without "liberated men" and "liberated women" as cognizable outcomes are ones that must also rethink how justice might be measured. Feminist scholars such as Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler have parted ways from Simone de Beauvoir in recognising that while gender politicking is always forced to begin with contemporary notions of what "man" and "woman" could or should be, the results of such efforts cannot be entirely anticipated from within existing epistemologies of gendered selfhood.

Which brings us to the problem of description.

### **Between Politics and Description**

If there are philosophical reasons why *The Second Sex* foregrounds the specificity of a "situation" over liberal conceptions of personhood, these also involve different textual practices: in particular, a revaluation of narrative, anecdote and prose description as viable philosophical utensils. Of these forms, description is less often scrutinised than narrative. Narrative storytelling attaches itself to beginnings and endings, origins that start with a *bang!* and conclusions that stick like burnt sugar. As a writer of narratives one can choose one's beginnings and endings, backdrops and stage centres, star actors and minor parts. These choices then re-emerge as imperatives worked into the text itself: the heroic moral act – the gift, the apology, the defense – can be upheld as an exemplary remedy to social violence, giving a "nowness" to a tangible economy of harm done and compensation offered. From a phenomenological viewpoint, however, we never actually

encounter a narrative in its totality. Rather, narrative elements are compiled from everyday repetitions, whether recurring statements, gestures, social interactions, images and sounds, recollections and future expectations, among many others. The same explicitly sexist gesture may pass from a locker room to a political speech to a train platform. It can be difficult to talk eloquently about gendered violence inflicted not last Tuesday but *often*, not just in Melbourne but in *too many* places, not by the mysterious villain but by *too many people*. The bare repetitions of everyday living (“catching the train”) can contain traces of the disguised repetitions of the not-yet and the already-happened, the psychic drama lived in and through the cracks of the quotidian.

In this context, “description” does not refer solely to prose writing or poetry. There is reason to be sceptical of the distinction between indexical writing that seeks to produce impressions of particulars, and writing that aspires to be universal in character and to produce generalisable conclusions. As Moira Gatens (2007) has recently argued, the classification of literature as a “non-philosophical” genre, or of philosophy as surpassing the nominalist trappings of literature, has itself been tied to the gendering of philosophical practice, and in particular, the dismissal of women writers from the philosophical canon. To say that all writing is inflected by latent genres of description is to challenge, if only at a formal level, the disciplinary reification of philosophy as producing more transferable truths than, say, poetry, cinema, music, or the novella. But description is by no means a redemptive practice; its capacity do to philosophical work only heightens the diversity of purposes, both desirable and undesirable, that description might serve. Here I will here pay special attention to three aspects of description: the hierarchy of elements, the production of an originary “I”, and the anticipation of readerly responses.

Firstly, as Phillippe Hamon suggests, a description assumes a particular referential function that “is interchangeable with, and in certain conditions equivalent to, a *word* (a common or proper noun, a name) or a *diectic pronoun* (him, this, that...)” (Hamon 1982: 148, emphasis in original). This referential unit has relative semantic autonomy “independent of its stylistic setting and of the meaning of its constituent elements” (148), so that all description has a hierarchical aspect. For example, Kath Woodward’s study of “affects” in boxing considers “the relationship between objects, the equipment... boxers, trainers, cut men, promoters, commentators and spectators”, and demonstrates that

boxing has “capacity to generate a particular version of hegemonic masculinity which has considerable purchase among networks of men” (Woodward, 2011: 492, 501). Despite the heterogeneity of the content included, the author must begin with the elevation of a unique semantic unit (“boxing”) to narrow the seemingly infinite world of causes and effects into a readable story about affect(s). In the Heideggerian patois, description brings forth the “thingyness” of the thing described.

Secondly, there is the “I” that authenticates a plausible *origin* from which a description could be produced. Sara Ahmed notes that although “the ‘I’ is transportable, it does not stay in one place”, and that in much postmodern writing about gender, the repetition of implied masculine “I”s can suggest “the determination of an enigma through a gendered modality of address in which woman remains the object of the naming quest” (Ahmed, 1998: 132). This complicates my own use of descriptive anecdote to stage the scene of the crime above: in the “heterosexual exchange which fixes woman as an enigma *for men*” (Ahmed, 1998: 133, emphasis in original), the assumed availability of the female body to scrutiny confirms to this gaze that femininity is, indeed, a thing to be seen.

Finally, there is a normative dialogical structure to descriptive writing. A statement like “Harry is masculine” not only produces a hierarchy between two terms (the adjective “masculine” is variable in a way that the inferred existence of a “Harry” is not), but also says to the reader, “were you to be a *normal* person meeting Harry under *normal* circumstances you *should* find him to be masculine”. The statement already presupposes a normative calibration of signifying systems and reading practices, and an acceptance of “the unhampered freedom of view that is indicated in the text”, which in turn “authorizes the author’s unhampered description” (Hamon 1982: 149). In the anecdote with which I began, the text insists that, had they been there, my reader *should* have seen a “hard” “masculine” stride in action; or that, at a certain point, the incident would naturally culminate in a decision between alternatives, and that one action would be more politically agreeable than another. But this is also why, as I will later show, the desire to resist norms in some contemporary queer scholarship can never be entirely reconciled with an equally important challenge, that of producing both adequate and dynamic descriptions of ordinary events.<sup>4</sup>

What is the relationship between descriptive statements and political statements? Anyone who has ever painted a banner, chanted at a rally, or lost patience arguing over a topical issue knows that effective political claims demand *subtractions*. ‘Enough Is Enough’, ‘Just Say No’, ‘We Are The People’: how much can be skinned from the bare bones of a slogan, how much waste can be culled from a collective chant or iconic image, while still retaining a tangible referential function? To make a political statement is to assert a unity of purpose while clearing the space *between* opposing purposes. Political antagonism is anti-descriptive, and for this reason political philosophers rarely claim to describe the Political. Judith Butler, for example, begins *Bodies that Matter* (1993) by insisting that “sex” is not something that can be given any kind of “static description” (xx), and that the “delimitation” of sex, “which often is enacted as an untheorized presupposition in any act of description, marks a boundary that includes and excludes, that decides, as it were, what will and will not be the stuff of the object to which we then refer” (Butler 1993: 11). Like many other political philosophers, Butler does not give credence to descriptions of things called “sex” and “gender” without first asking how a dissenting voice regarding descriptive statements could be accommodated. Descriptions of political situations cannot be safely mobilised until we have agreed what it would mean to disagree, but in when having such a discussion, the object(s) at stake must be vacated of as much substantive content as possible. As Viviane Namaste (2009: 15-17) points out in relation to Judith Butler’s *Undoing Gender* (2004), the phrases “gender politics” and “gender violence” in relation to assaults on transgender individuals in the United States can produce exactly such evacuations, scouring a landscape filled with class and labour relations, racialised urban stratification, and complex interactions between sexual identity, sexual practices and sex work, and producing instead a clean surface on which struggles over “the human” are imagined to play out.<sup>5</sup> This is not an accidental failing in *Undoing Gender*: Butler’s subtractions follow from her explicit commitment to politics *qua* the Political, which involves deferring fidelity to any single research object. Nevertheless, this begs the question of what kinds of work subtractive statements about Political structures (here, “gender politics”) hope to perform with regards both to their intended readers and to those about whom such texts are written (see Namaste, 2009: 25). In the next section I consider this problem in relation to *familial* descriptions in gender studies.

## Epistemologies of the Closest

Two facets of “familial” description might now be distinguished.<sup>6</sup> The first involves the development of affective attachments to one’s everyday habits and familiar persons, which in turn can be scrutinised for their broader social and political implications (a laudable example is Caluya, 2008). The second facet is the embeddedness of the “familial” in the theoretical and methodological choices made by scholars themselves, and that produce the conditions of possibility for any writing practice. If the first “familialism” is an object *of* scholarship and the second an approach *to* scholarship, then at key moments the two become hard to separate.

Let me give two examples, the first concise and the second more elaborate. Consider the effect when Richard Schmitt describes his “pro-feminist” male friends in the following way:

In our relations with women we are open to emotion: we think about our feelings and are prepared to talk about them; we are aware of what others feel and are ready to help, support, encourage, or cheer on. We have learned to listen and to pay careful and conscious attention. (Schmitt, 1998: 82)

Readers eager to practice skills learnt from critical theory may express scepticism about Schmitt’s assessment of his own friends’ dispositions. This passage is also prescriptive both in its intent (he implies throughout that men *should* be like this) and in its dialogical aspect (one *should* recognise this description to be true). Nevertheless, without intentional and dialogical prescriptions of some kind, the secondary behaviours described – help, support, encouragement, cheer – would be unintelligible. The problem is not simply whether the author speaks the truth or whether the reader believes this truth, but under what circumstances it would be possible to reflect on “help”, “support”, “encouragement” or “cheer” without passing by way of the overdetermined political context in which such claims tend to function (that is, as forms of a generalisable “relation” between men and women).

A second example of familiarity is more complicated still. In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), Sara Ahmed provides an anecdote as follows:

I arrive home, park my car, and walk toward the front door. A neighbour calls out to me. I look somewhat nervously because I have yet to establish 'good relations' with the neighbours. I haven't lived in this place very long and the semipublic of the street does not yet feel easy. The neighbour mumbles some words, which I cannot hear, and then asks: 'Is that your sister, or your husband?' I rush into the house without offering a response. The neighbour's utterance is quite extraordinary. There are two women, living together, a couple of people alone in a house. So what do you see? (Ahmed, 2006: 95)

The anecdote is striking in four respects developed in Ahmed's own phenomenological analysis. Firstly, it repeats in a most visible way an interpellation of heterosexual "normalcy" enacted constantly in most, though not quite all, workplaces, social gatherings, and of course, anonymous everyday encounters. This is one version of interpellation, a technology of "recruitment" that arranges spaces and subjects – around gender identity, around sexual practices, around whiteness, and so on (Ahmed, 2006: 133). Secondly, this language is being used by the neighbour to "familiarise" a stranger, not as belonging to the neighbour's family but as conforming by analogy to a model of proper familial belonging defined by way of exclusions (a sister living with a brother is also excluded). As Ahmed puts it, "[this] anecdote is a reminder that how lesbians are read often seeks to align their desire with the line of the heterosexual couple or even the family line" (Ahmed, 2006: 96). The third element is that heterosexual masculinity is here insinuated through structural implication ("*if not sisters, then husband and wife*"; Ahmed, 2006: 96), rather than through the attribution of stereotypical traits or behaviours. The compulsory allocation of a "masculine" space is more forceful and less easily challenged because no particular attributes of masculinity are named, except as the empty placeholder which "makes" coupled women either wives or sisters.

And yet (this is feature number four) the neighbour issues no commands or moral imperative. The injunction is already implicit in the "neighbourliness" of the conversation itself: as Ahmed puts it in an analogous discussion, the one who is perceived to have disrupted an assumed social consensus is "assigned to a difficult category and a category of difficulty" (Ahmed, 2010: 582). *Queer Phenomenology* explores aspects of such

difficulties from the viewpoint of the interpellated: “we hear the hail, and even feel its force on the surface of the skin, but we do not turn around, even when those words are directed towards us” (Ahmed, 2006: 107). Pursuing these moments when interpellation fails to actualised socially desired subject-positions (eg “husband” and “wife”), Ahmed’s conclusion further develops the theme of orientation and disorientation, noting that

Moments of disorientation are vital... Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel liveable. Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis. (Ahmed, 2006: 157)

There is no fixed subject for this crisis: it could happen to anyone. Ahmed is careful to show that disorientation is not always radical, that “disorientation can be defensive... [and the resulting form of politics] conservative, depending on the ‘aims’ of their gestures” (Ahmed, 2006: 158). A queer politics involves not a direct transcendence of lived spaces and situations, but a defamiliarisation of proximal spaces and objects as one acts upon or around them. In *Queer Phenomenology* this means re-encountering categories like “family” or “heterosexuality” as far more “strange” than we have been led to expect (Ahmed, 2006: 164-166).<sup>7</sup>

More has been written about disoriented reactions to interpellation than efforts to interpellate. However, one can never be completely on this side or that of interpellative practices: society is composed not of interpellators and interpellatees, but of collective practices of recognition and misrecognition, hailing and being hailed. So I want to return to our cast of unpleasant anonymous strangers – at a Melbourne station, at the gay journalists’ conference, in the local neighbourhood – and ask: who *exactly* are these people? Are they people that we’ve stopped being, that we must prevent others from being, or that we’re scared of becoming? I suspect not. They are more likely to be the unknown, intolerable, overbearing and gratuitous *non-relatives* of moral and political discourse. In particular, as Ahmed’s text indicates obliquely, these figures are vital inflections of the politics of familialism. One less often sees in villainous figures our familiars or ourselves – I *could* be complicit in what *they* are doing – and correspondingly,

we less often bear witness to the unfamiliar in friends. Practices of recognition acquire a distinctive valency at this point. Like the present article, *Queer Phenomenology* is populated by “male” and “female” characters,<sup>8</sup> as if they could make sense to all readers and in the same way. My Melbournian offender was described as a “man” but the clues I used were superficial, uncertain, and *ad hoc*, which is sometimes excusable because gender recognition itself is superficial, uncertain, and *ad hoc*. In some settings, this tacit appeal to the familiarities of being gendered makes sense. But certainly not all: when we read the words “man” or “neighbour”, for example, do we already assume by default that the person in question is “straight” and/or “cisgendered”? Undoubtedly, the norms of heterosexuality are not policed only by heterosexual couples, just as masculinity is not enforced only by “masculine” men (see Ahmed, 2006: 172-173). But as a reader and writer of texts, I do feel tempted to seize upon a certain version of the gratuitous Other and to find solace in the good selves who sit on *this side* of the interpellation. After all, what would a gender “politics” be without the Other who does gender more clumsily, more crudely, or more violently than oneself?

I am not denying the pertinence of Ahmed’s criticism of a heteronormative interpellation that is repeated often, in a profusion of social forums, and with severe consequences. The insidiously “neighbourly” neighbour was certainly not the first and will not be the last. But I do want to insist that this anecdote – like, indeed, all anecdotes – is *normative*. Not in the aggregative sense described by Michael Warner in his commentary on the scientific “normalisation” of gendered sexual practices (1999: 52-61), but in the dialogic sense suggested by Morris’ criticisms of a discourse (Mary Daly’s) that “tells you who people ‘are’, and if you know who they are then you can’t be deceived by their discourse – including attempts to share, to join, to make contact, or connect with your speech’ (Morris 1988: 41). Such a discourse depends on the dialogic premise that only innocents can perform the work of criticism and that criticism is motivated by a reliable intuition for refusing interpellations and for not interpellating others. This premise becomes most evident in the transit from people we know to the distanced stranger who, like a well used coat-hanger, wears the bad deed like it fits. *Queer Phenomenology* is not the most obvious choice of example to illustrate this argument, precisely because it produces an exceptionally nuanced feeling for ambiguity and ambivalence, one lacking in much extant social scientific research on “masculine” or



“feminine” behaviours. Nevertheless, the important point is that these textual doublings – the hero and the villain, the interpellated and the interpellator, the one who turns and the one who does not – belong to a shared social situation, to the knots that cast “gender identification” as a difficulty at one moment and a much needed political resource in another.

### **Conclusion: Norms and Descriptions**

The concerns brought to bear on gender politics are distinct in the life experience of the academic researcher from the mapping of nebulas or the breeding patterns of cuttlefish. We do not criticise “gender identity” or speak in the name of “social justice” as abstract and formal notions – we express particular outrage according to the manner by which we are entangled, complicit, or involved. By passing through Martin Heidegger and Simone de Beauvoir, I have tried to give greater precision to these concerns, suggesting that “politics” (or its corollary in liberal notions like “justice”) makes demands for gender recognition and self-identification that may preclude vital transformations around the persistence of gender dimorphism as a dominant social heuristic. These arguments will have been familiar to many readers, but they are worth reiterating when considering more recent intellectual developments within queer theory, most notably the rejection of normative classifications *tout court*. Lee Edelman (2004)’s polemic against libidinal investments in social and political norms is an important recent example; Ahmed also concurs with Tim Dean and Christopher Lane that queer theory “advocates a politics based on resistance to all norms” (Dean and Lane, qtd. in Ahmed, 2004: 149), noting that “normative culture involves the differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate ways of living whereby the preservation of what is legitimate (‘life as we know it’) is assumed to be necessary for the well-being of the next generation” (Ahmed, 2004: 149). Anti-normativity captures much of the impetus throughout the present article: its most acute question may be characterised as, “how can we talk about men’s relationships to gender politics without normalising some version of what it means to be men as distinct from women?” The issues around the violence of gender regulation raised by Wilchins, or the problems of justice and reparation explored in de Beauvoir, could also be reframed in terms of social norms and their deviations, insofar as the normalisation of sex/gender identities obstructs genuine political transformation.

However, I want to resist an unbounded push against norms, or the people who subscribe to norms, as the meta-villains of political combat. In particular, it is unclear how the Herculean effort of rejecting norms could be reconciled with an equally important project, that of accounting for those everyday, ordinary or patterned experiences of gendering and being gendered, from the spectacular to the banal. There can be no appeal to ordinary repetitions without a normalisation of the vantage point from which such regularities are observed. And no doubt, evidence produced from “pure experience” can take “as self-evident the identities of those who experience is being documented” and can thus “naturalise” their difference (Scott, 1991: 777). This, in turn, can lead to sharp ethnocentric inflections in the dialogic production of cultural verisimilitude (see Gilroy, 2000: 143). But insofar as gender scholars want to retain some purchase on the quotidian, there must be some tolerance for the normative work of description, or more precisely, for efforts to describe things *well*. Many academics endorsing formal arguments against normativity are less eager to embrace the solipsism that this would actually entail; more often, we want to retain some possibility of conveying to others a recognisable or familiar impression of concrete experiences, and we want our readers to have already been thinking in certain ways about these experiences. From Simone de Beauvoir to Sara Ahmed, feminist philosophers have consistently reminded their colleagues in political philosophy about the everyday character of politics activated by passers-by, shop assistants, or co-workers on the floor above. These reminders are vital because all scholars depend on familial knowledge about what is acceptable or unacceptable, done or not done, from people that we know to those we do not, and then again, to those we do not *want* to know. There is no defamiliarisation of social identity and social norms that does not appeal to some other version of what society *might* be like, according to some other plausibly everyday experience. Even observations of “new” gender formations (“masculinities in crisis”, “postfeminist identities”, etc.) inevitably involve re-foldings of the familiar – along new lines, perhaps, but with well-known surfaces. Robbed of our capacity to draw tacit knowledge from people that we know, how could we make unfamiliar situations make sense?

It may be objected that a certain existential dithering too often follows from over-emphases on “situated” dilemmas, or that phenomenology assumes too easily what Elspeth Probyn acutely characterised as the “self-centered self”, one that elides the

specificity of others by appealing to rhetorical modes of personal authenticity (Probyn, 1993: 80). In interrogating various anecdotes in a personal register, I have tried to avoid reproducing Anthony Clare's disingenuous claim that, despite having no "ideology" to profess, "What I *do* know is what it is like to be a man" (Clare, 2001: 1, emphasis in original). Speaking truthfully "as a man" cannot mean anything outside the social provisions that make such speech possible; sometimes appeals to experience simply provide new ways to be obnoxious and to forget oneself as a historically formed social creature. Nevertheless, it may require just a *little* dithering to ask how one's own interpellations produce those gendered candidates for whom political heroism is enacted, and to question the figure of the moral wrongdoer as rendered by the omnipotent voice of the scholarly text. The question posed by performative theories of gender is not only "how can we fight the power?", but also, and just as importantly, "[how] will we know the difference between the power we promote and the power we oppose?" (Butler, 1993: 241)

Perhaps nobody I know is like *that* at a Melbourne train station. But then, my own actions belong to "nobody I know" from the viewpoint many others. To communicate between disparate knowledges about what "ordinary people do", the formalisation of political differences may be of little help – in fact, there could be such thing as *too much politics*. It might be worth instead considering ways of describing, narrating, or prescribing that do not depend on first exorcising noisy Others as the unknowable obstacles to our own sound concerns.

## Notes

1 On political ontologies see Hage (2010: 115, 128)

2 On this particular reading of *The Second Sex*, see Butler (1986: 40)

3 See 'The Independent Woman' and 'Conclusion' in De Beauvoir (1975)

4 On gender and identification within qualitative research practices, see King (1999)

5 On the limits of Butler's "human" see also Edelman (2004: 103-105)

6 On familialism see Laurie and Stark (2012: 21, 24-25)

7 On strangeness and familialism see also Ahmed (2000)

8 There are the phenomenological descriptions, in which the "woman's body becomes the tool in which the man 'extends himself'" (Ahmed, 2006: 71), or where "nausea" becomes "a man losing

his grip on the world" (162), and there are also key players defined casually in gendered terms: the "woman writer", the "woman philosopher" (61) and the figures attending "same sex" desire (93), among others.

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