

**Searching ‘Beyond the One’
Exploring European Feminist Practitioners’ Relation to
Femininity**

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Abstract

The intersection of oppositional and traditional sexism¹ creates an environment where masculinity is seen as strong and natural, while femininity is perceived as weak, vulnerable, even artificial (Serano, 2007). Thus, people who identify with femininity, whether they be biologically male, female, intersex, or trans, are universally demeaned compared to their masculine counterparts. This Master's thesis aims to explore femininity through identifying different lived experiences of six European feminist practitioners, and highlights the question: is femininity a social construction or a 'gender core?' Approaching this question helps one recognize femininity in a masculine world and begins a discussion that seriously considers sexual difference. Through a focus group interview, the women recount their relation to and struggles with femininity to learn together how one can more fully understand the complexity of femininity – through performativity, geopolitical contexts, and age differences – within the broader field of gender studies.

¹ Oppositional sexism is “the belief that female and male are rigid, mutually exclusive categories, each possessing a unique and non-overlapping set of attributes, aptitude, abilities, and desires” (Serano, 2007, p. 31). Traditional sexism is “the belief that maleness and masculinity are superior to femaleness and femininity” (Serano, 2007, p. 32).

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Theoretical Framework.....	8
Theory of Performativity	8
Sexual Difference Theory.....	11
Method and Methodology.....	14
Chapter Structure of the Thesis.....	17
Chapter I – What is Femininity: A Gendered Performance or a Gendered Core?	18
Framing the Debate.....	18
The ‘Right’ Femininity	20
Sexual Difference Returned.....	22
Conclusion	24
Chapter II – The Power of Location: Geopolitical Femininity.....	25
Relational Femininity.....	25
‘The West and The Rest’	28
Feminism as ‘Social Suicide’.....	29
Conclusion	33
Chapter III – How Old is She?: Uncovering the Entanglement between Femininity and Age	35
Life Course Theory.....	35
Generational Femininity	37
Femininity as an Obligation.....	40
Conclusion	41
Conclusion	43
References.....	45

“Is femininity secreted by the ovaries? Is it enshrined in a Platonic heaven? Is a frilly petticoat enough to bring it down to earth? Although some...zealously strive to embody it, the model has never been patented. It is typically described in vague and shimmering terms borrowed from a clairvoyant’s vocabulary.”

– Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Introduction

The setting is Vilnius, Lithuania on a chilly Spring morning in April 2017. I am in a small room with high ceilings and bright windows, surrounded by six women of diverse ages and nationalities. All are attending a gender studies conference focused on bringing like-minded feminist practitioners, activists, and students together to address issues within the field of feminist research. These women have agreed to meet me amidst the busyness of this conference to speak about femininity. I want to learn how this specific group of feminists relate to femininity, how that relationship has transformed over time, and if they see gender as a core identity. Thus, my research question is as follows: how do different European feminists engage with femininity?

To begin this hour-long session and get the women’s thoughts dialed in on gender and femininity, I ask “Who is your icon of femininity and why?” (Focus Group Interview, 2017) The first respondent is Aurelija, a twenty-three-year-old Lithuanian woman. She says, “I first think about Natalie Portman and actresses” (Focus Group Interview, 2017). She catches herself generalizing what femininity looks like though by later claiming that “there is no one specific answer” because, according to her, “femininity is constructed” (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Subsequently, she feels conflicted in answering this question of mine definitively. Aurelija is the first one to point to the convoluted character of femininity.

The next answer comes from Milda, a middle-aged Lithuanian woman set to speak later in the conference about the differences between feminism in Eastern and Western Europe. She answers clearly and decisively: “Penelope Cruz because I find her sexy and she has a strong character” (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Femininity for Milda is clearly linked with women being sexually attractive and using their sexual power to create a strong character role.

Lotte speaks next, an older Dutch woman who has been working and teaching within the field of gender studies for many years now. Her answer differed from the first two ladies in the fact that she did not specify one woman who embodied femininity for her. Rather, she thinks of

“women in public places with responsibility that take care into politics” (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Thus, femininity for Lotte is connected to one’s profession, and their demeanor in that professional work place, rather than a certain physical appearance.

The next answer comes from another Dutch woman, Marjolijn, a thirty-year-old PhD student. “Who comes to my mind,” she said, “is Madonna...in the 80’s” (Focus Group Interview, 2017). This version of Madonna embodies femininity for Marjolijn because Madonna plays with the gender binary. For example, Madonna was “feminized with the makeup and the moves that she’s making,” but she is also wearing a suit and “narrating the *femme fatale*” (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Subsequently, femininity for Marjolijn is about blurring normative gender roles.

Sanne, another young Dutch woman in her 30’s, has a similar answer to Marjolijn’s. Sanne recalled the drag queens of Amsterdam visiting a professional makeup shop she used to work at when she was a young girl. These queens embody femininity best because they also blur gender and perform femininity in some of the most convincing ways. In Sanne’s words, they are “the most beautiful women,” and for this reason they are her ideal of femininity (Focus Group Interview, 2017).

Irena is the last one to answer my question. Irena is a middle-aged Lithuanian woman who “[has] issues with femininity” (Focus Group Interview, 2017). She right away expresses her concern about the definition of femininity because, for her, femininity reminds her of “weakness, domestic space, long dresses, [and] crocheting” (Focus Group Interview, 2017). When she gives her response though, her answer was Princess Diana or her mother because not only are they both feminine, as related to their appearance, but each are also “[not] a passive actor” (Focus Group Interview, 2017). A person who embodies femininity for Irena is a woman who can balance traditional aspects of femininity, in terms of appearance and residing in a domestic space, with a strong career.

These answers vary quite a great deal, ranging from some of the most iconic sexy women in Hollywood, to nameless women doing work in the social sector. What is femininity then and how did these women come to these answers? Furthermore, how did these women’s experiences within the field of gender studies affect their answers? Has an engagement with feminism influenced the way they perceive and relate to femininity? Early questions such as these sparked

a curiosity in femininity for me, and were fundamental in shaping this thesis. This curiosity, however, has a much earlier beginning in my life.

My interest in femininity sparked as a young teenager when I began to experience all the different ways young girls and women are disadvantaged in society for being, or not being, feminine. From being called 'bimbos,' 'sluts,' and 'hoe's' for looking too feminine, to 'stupid girl,' 'ugly,' and 'tom-boy' if not appearing or acting feminine enough, it is not hard for young girls (and boys) to see that they are not fully supported to experiment with femininity based on the plethora of derogatory names that critique it.

Subsequently, understanding how to be the 'right kind' of feminine was always confusing for me due to this double bind arguably all women experience at one point or another. How should I express femininity? Do I have to express femininity? This tension furthered when I learned about Judith Butler's theory of performativity in late high school and early college that suggests gender is socially constructed and does not represent some deeper gender core. Since birth though, I've been told I am feminine. Was this all a ruse? Some trick played on me by my family or society? Do I have a gender core, or am I socialized to think I have one? These questions have peppered my mind as I have grown and matured over the years.

This confusion later turned into rage when I began to learn in depth of all the different negative positions, both subtle and direct, that women (and men) are put in when they express femininity. This realization of how trod upon femininity is became particularly prominent for me while taking a class on sexual difference theory earlier in the Fall of 2016². Like sexual difference thinkers before me, I want to search 'beyond the One' (read: men and masculinity) and seek new ways one can understand, value, and support femininity. Even if one is confused about their femininity, is unaware about the socialization of their gender, or reversely feels deeply convinced that their gender core is feminine, I believe no one should be punished for exploring or expressing femininity.

The reason why searching 'beyond the One' is such a relevant task today is because, "No form of gender equity can every truly be achieved until we first work to empower femininity itself"

² In brief, sexual difference theory proposes that femininity must become recognized in a world that only values men and masculinity. There are two genders, yet only one is fully recognized and supported. I review this theory in more detail later in the thesis.

(Serano, 2007, p. 20). This means that to fully achieve equality between the sexes, society should recognize both as valid. Doing so, however, does not solely mean giving women the same rights as men. While that is essential, sexual difference is calling for something deeper and more complicated. Equality also involves understanding femininity as completely valid in the first place, never as 'less than' masculinity. If sexual difference is realized, I believe all individuals will have more freedom to explore their femininity and decide for themselves where they fall on the gender scale. While this is an ambitious and provoking ideology, it must be further discussed if our world is to ever get closer to realizing sexual difference. This thesis serves as one such entry point into the discussion.

Theoretical Framework

This thesis will use two main theories/frameworks to provide a structure for analysis. They include the theory of performativity and sexual difference theory. The following two sub-sections will outline each theory's background, premises, and provide a working context through which I will engage.

Theory of Performativity

The theory of performativity is derived from speech act theory and owes an intellectual debt to the philosophical/linguistic work of J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). Speech act theory holds that language is not just an abstract system of negative differences; rather, speech is social, involves specific speakers and audiences, and can never be entirely divorced from extralinguistic contexts (Austin, 1962). A 'performative' is one type of speech act, which derives from 'perform,' the verb associated with the noun 'action,' which indicates that the issuing of the performative is the performing of an action. The performative does not describe or report anything, and thus cannot be true or false; rather, it is, or is part of, the doing of the action it states (Austin, 1962). Susan Stryker, a transgender studies scholar, gives examples of performative speech acts, such as, "vowing ('I do'), marrying ('I now pronounce you man and wife'), or being bar mitzvhaed ('Today I am a man')" (2006, p. 10).

Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist, uses Austin's speech act theory to suggest that gender is also a performative act. It is accomplished by 'doing' something rather than by 'being' something. Gender, therefore, is not subject to falsification or verification, and does not need a material referent to be meaningful. The biologically sexed body guarantees

nothing and has no deterministic relationship to performative gender. In her words, gender is “a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (Butler, 1988, p. 520). Thus, seemingly normal decisions one makes every day – what to wear, how to walk, how to speak – are repetitive and stylized performances that constitute one’s gender as either masculine or feminine over time.

Butler’s ideas also build on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, an early French feminist, social theorist, and political activist, and specifically her seminal phrase in *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman³” (de Beauvoir, 2009, p. 330). In this light, to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, “to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman’” (Butler, 1988, p. 522). This means historical context also conditions how one performs and perceives gender. One’s gender is influenced by a culmination of past and present cultural gender norms – a cultural archive⁴, so to speak. Butler frames this nicely when she writes, “The act that one performs, is... an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene” (1988, p. 526). Butler’s theory of performativity as it relates to gender thus highlights the relation between acts and social contexts, in which certain gender performances become possible, even conceivable as acts at all.

Gender reality is performative, meaning that it is only real to the extent that it is performed (Butler, 1988). Many people, however, believe that gendered acts express a gender core of identity, and that these acts somehow relate to a spiritual or psychological correlate of one’s biological sex. This idea infers that gender is something essential that exists prior to the act. Butler’s theory of performativity interrupts this implicit and popular belief, however, by making a distinction between the notion of a gender core and performativity. As Butler says, “if gender attributes and acts...are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured” (1988, p. 528). Differently put, gender does not express an interior self or a gender core, but rather an act, which normalizes the social fiction that gender is fixed. Thus, gender in Butler’s framework is not binding, apparent, true, or false.

³ In the original French translation: “*On ne naît pas femme: on le devient.*”

⁴ The cultural archive is the “repository of memory in the heads and hearts of people in the metropole,” a collective agreement or unspoken understanding of what constitutes the norm (Wekker, 2016, p. 19). Gloria Wekker uses this notion to analyze race. I use her same reasoning and framework, but shift the category of analysis from race to gender.

Even though Butler convincingly argues that gender is performative, society still subscribes to the notion that gender is of a permanent nature. This rigid view maintains relations of coherence among the chain of significance between sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. Subsequently, one lives in a world where gender is stabilized, polarized, and rendered discrete and intractable (Butler, 1988). The reason why this naturalization is problematic is because those who perform their gender 'incorrectly' are punished in ways both obvious and indirect. This is because gender norms uphold a binary frame of heteronormativity, which further reinforces those same norms.⁵ Challenging that binary, however, and embracing gender in fluid ways oftentimes scares others because doing so suggests that gender is not a stable category of identity. Butler expands on this idea by giving the example of seeing a transgender person on a theatre stage compared to a public bus. If one sees this person on a stage, the viewer can relax because, "this is just an act" (Butler, 1988, p. 527). Reality, in this example, is clearly separated from play. If this person is seen on a public bus, however, the act of inhabiting the opposite gender one was assigned at birth becomes dangerous because the presumption dissolves that the act is distinct from reality. That same transgender person on the bus openly challenges heteronormativity and can subsequently compel feelings of rage, betrayal, fear, and violence.

As a final note, I also address a tension between Butler's notion of performativity and trans experiences in transforming from an "unlivable, fragmented body into a livable whole" (Hayward, 2013, p. 182)⁶. Butler is critiqued in some feminist circles and transgender scholarship for suggesting that gender is merely a performance, and is somehow not 'real' (Stryker, 2006). As Julia Serano, a transgender activist and poet, states, "I break with past attempts in feminism...to dismiss femininity by characterizing it as 'artificial' or 'performance.'" Instead, I argue that certain aspects of femininity (as well as masculinity) are natural and can both precede socialization and supersede biological sex" (2007, p. 19). Like Serano, some believe that performativity trivializes trans experiences because it questions whether the subject of gender is in charge or not. Many trans people understand their gendered self not to be subject to instrumental will, not a form of play. Rather, they see their gendered sense as inescapable and inalienable. So, to suggest

⁵ Butler terms this cyclical reinforcement the heterosexual matrix, which serves as a source for gender binarity and complementarity. This means that gender upholds the heterosexual matrix, and the heterosexual matrix also upholds gender.

⁶ I will readdress this tension in more depth within the theory of performativity later in Chapter I.

otherwise is to risk great misrecognition of their personhood, their mode of being. This reasoning forms the base of the main critique against Butler's theory of performativity.

This rhetoric, however, is arguably too simple because it reduces performativity to solely a performance – “it focuses on a single instance of a gendered practice and so forgets the historical chain of repetitions that makes each instance possible” (Gerdes, 2014). Butler is not claiming that gender, like a performance, is completely irrelevant and that gender is pointless. Quite the opposite. Butler suggests that the way one has been socialized means that gender is inextricably linked to the way language genders bodies, the way we gender bodies, and thus to what we want them to be like, how we clothe them, and even how we call them. So, while Butler's theory of performativity suggests gender is a social construct, that does not mean gender is inconsequential, elective, or non-existent. Instead, Butler proposes that the way one talks about those feelings, and the social construct of gender in general, “expresses nothing” (Butler, 1988, p. 530).

In sum, gender is performative because it inscribes itself as a discourse each time it inscribes itself on a body as a lived experience. Thus, performativity is the connection between gendered embodiment, gendered experience, and gender's discursive force (Gerdes, 2014). This does not mean though that one's deep-seated feelings of gender identity are a sham. Rather, the language one uses to address those feelings of identity along with the material realities that pressure gender to exist in a certain way are what is constructed. Subsequently, one can argue that Butler's theory of performativity does not belittle trans experiences and/or identities, but rather critiques the language and wider system that monitors and suppresses them.

Sexual Difference Theory

Luce Irigaray, a thinker from the school of French feminism, is a leading scholar within the field of sexual difference theory. According to her, sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues of today, one that if thought through more carefully could serve as “our salvation” (Irigaray, 1993, p. 5). Irigaray suggests that the gender binary, with femininity on one end and masculinity on the other, is not binary at all. As Grosz expands on Irigaray's thoughts in her book *Time Travels*, only men and masculinity have ever been fully acknowledged throughout (Western) history as a human subject, “a singular and universal neutrality” (2005, p. 176). All prevailing forms and practices of knowledge solely represent the interests and perspectives of one

sex (male) (Grosz, 2005). Thus, there is no space in culture, according to sexual difference theorists, for two sexes.

Women in this framework are always caught within a phallogocentric discourse and economy that assigns the sexes to precise roles, poles, and functions, to the detriment of the feminine (Braidotti, 1994). This phallogocentric register refuses alternative positions and spaces for women and femininity, refuses the right of autonomous representations, and refuses to grant women the possibility of being otherwise than defined in some necessary relation to men (Grosz, 2005). Thus, there is no space in culture for "women as women" (Grosz, 2005, p. 174). More elegantly put, "Women have only ever been represented as a lack, the opposite, the same as, or the complement of the subject, the unique human subject (conventional man)" (Grosz, 2005, p. 174). Sexual difference theory would challenge this phallogocentrism and reinterpret *everything* concerning the relations between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, and the subject and the cosmic (Irigaray, 1993).

This leads to the main purposes of sexual difference theory. First, one must acknowledge "the failure of the past to provide a space and time for women as women" (Grosz, 2005, p. 173). In other words, it is necessary to undo the association of masculinity with rationality and universality through the rereading of the history of Western ontology (Braidotti, 1994). Linked to this recognition comes the second purpose of sexual difference: to realize the "necessity, in the future, of providing other ways of knowing, other ontologies and epistemologies that enable the subject's relation to the world, to space and to time, to be conceptualized in different terms" (Grosz, 2005, p. 173). This means that women must voice and embody in their own texts their own feminine, as distinct from the kind of feminine that is linked to the phallogocentric register. As Braidotti suggests, women's voices have been buried underneath man's words (2003). The project of sexual difference is to recover, un-veil, and express those hidden voices.

To fulfill these two purposes of sexual difference theory, a complete transformation of the ways in which one understands space and time, which in turn affect understandings of matter, subjectivity, politics, and lived realities, must take place. Sexual difference theory would have one push through this transformation to recognize both masculinity and femininity as valid. Irigaray understands this as becoming 'beyond the One,' or 'beyond the phallic' (1993).

Embracing sexual difference to see femininity as its own entity calls for a space in culture, language, art, history, and science for women as women⁷ (Grosz, 2005).

Irigaray argues that feminism has only barely begun to think through the intellectual depths of sexual difference. This project is difficult to realize because one must envisage and engender a future unlike the present without begin able to specify in advance what that future entails.⁸ This project is also tricky because overtures have been made to the world of women, meaning concessions have been established by those in power to fight gender inequality. Irigaray believes this is not enough though. No new values have truly been forged that fundamentally shake phallogocentrism at its core. There has been no push forward towards embracing the feminine as a new symbolic and discursive economy. Subsequently, sexual difference has yet to take place, and may never come – not without considerable creativity, risk, and effort.

There is also pushback against sexual difference theory because Irigaray is not a theoretician of the male homosexual and of the lesbian experience. The sexual politics of this project work towards a “radical version of heterosexuality,” in the sense of full recognition of sexual difference by each sex (Braidotti, 2003, p. 46). Therefore, this theory can initially come across as a manifesto for monogamous heterosexual couples. Furthermore, there is also concern that sexual difference will “become a reification which unwittingly preserves a binary restriction on gender identity and an implicitly heterosexual framework for the description of gender, gender identity, and sexuality” (Butler, 1988, p. 530). In other words, there is worry as to how trans and genderqueer embodied subjects can fit within Irigaray’s framework, which can be deemed as biological-determinist and gender-essentialist (Salamon, 2013).

As Braidotti explains, Irigaray makes it quite clear that the politics of radical heterosexuality must serve as the underlying theme of the project of sexual difference “to ensure the emergence of female subjectivity and of an imaginary and symbolic system morphologically suited to female corporeal reality” (1994, p. 133). Thus, to truly embrace femininity and challenge

⁷ Irigaray is not calling for an essential ‘Woman.’ She recognizes that women are very different, but uses the term to challenge the phallogocentric register that refuses to acknowledge its own limitations, biases, and specific interests. Thus, she does “not seek the ‘real’ woman,” but works to see *female* as a sex that exists on its own, without having to be in relation to *male* (Grosz, 2005, p. 174). If sexual difference can be actualized, different discourses, knowledges, frames of reference, and political investments can be realized (Grosz, 2005).

⁸ For inspiration on how to “leave the woman of yesterday,” and learn of exit strategies from phallogocentrism, read more on *écriture féminine*, in *The Laugh of Medusa* (1976), as well as Irigaray’s tactic of mimesis (Cixous, 1976, p. 892).

the phallogocentric register, the sexes must acknowledge their difference first, even if that means working within a heterosexual framework. I would build on this idea to suggest that the weight of the promise of sexual difference is far too great to get caught on this noted shortcoming. If sexual difference is realized and femininity is embraced, the heteronormative binary, along with categories of gender and sexuality, will bloom into a multiplicity, allowing for more blurred genders and sexual identities, such as 'feminine masculinity' and 'masculine femininity.'

In conclusion, sexual difference theory implies that there are at least two ways of doing *anything*, from abstract forms of thought to concrete forms of production. If sexual difference can be realized, not only will new epistemologies⁹ be created, but also the existence of a world that must be conceptualized as bifurcated (Grosz, 2005). Yet, if femininity is continuously registered as inferior to masculinity, society cannot overcome the gender binary and deconstruct the traditional (male) subject of discourse. One must first acknowledge femininity to be a legitimate category at all. As Braidotti writes, "In order to announce the death of the subject, one must first have gained the right to speak as one" (1994, p. 254). Subsequently, to overcome the gender binary it must be recognized as such in the first place. In doing so, *Woman* can take back her image and find her own authentic voice, and femininity among all bodies can be celebrated. This shift in thinking will arguably allow individuals the ability to express femininity however they choose. I now move to my method/methodology section where I review how I facilitate a research structure where women are given the opportunity to express their own voice regarding femininity.

Method and Methodology

I chose to conduct one mini-focus group interview with six women (three Dutch, three Lithuanian) for one hour at the AtGender Spring Conference in Vilnius, Lithuania. This focus group interview that I draw my data from lasted one hour and took place in the Institute of International Relations and Political Science at Vilnius University in room 3.08. The discussion held therein has been digitally recorded and can be listened to upon request. The interview was also conducted in English. I acknowledge that this decision privileges the Dutch women to a certain extent because speaking English in the Netherlands is far more common than in Lithuania (Žemaitis, 2017). The Lithuanian women struggled at times with the language, which arguably

⁹ This refers to new ways of knowing which fully recognize and affirm the existence of at least two different types of knower, new ideals for knowledge, evaluation, methodologies, and goals.

affected the ease they felt in expressing themselves due to a limited vocabulary. Nonetheless, English was the only mode through which all the interviewees could communicate¹⁰. Lastly, please note that I use alias names to respect the privacy of the interviewees. In the remainder of this section, I review what a focus group is, the benefits of using this method, and why I chose it.

Defined in the *Handbook of Feminist Research*, “a [mini-]focus group is a small group discussion [with four to six participants] focused on a particular topic and facilitated by a researcher” (Munday, 2014, p. 220). While focus groups have not always been seen as an appropriate primary research method because they were associated with “assumptions of positivism, behaviorism and empiricism,” in the 70’s this research method slowly began to gain ground within feminism (Munday, 2014, p. 222). This is because the focus group is the most egalitarian research method available, according to Munday, because participants are given the chance to co-construct and negotiate meanings, rather than have meanings imposed on them by the researcher. In this setting, it is easier for women to be empowered because they are in a supportive and collective setting, opposed to an individual and isolating one.

The next reason why I chose to use a focus group is because this method allows for feminist objectivity and situated knowledges to be produced. According to Donna Haraway, knowledge and truth are partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational (1988). In listening to my interviewees’ stories and personal experiences, I avoid a positivistic¹¹ research approach, and instead cultivate a more personal one that acknowledges these women’s lived experiences and struggles with femininity. To maintain feminist objectivity, as a Western feminist researcher, I also call attention to the partiality, fluidity, and situatedness of my knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2006). I recognize that the knowledge I produce is partial because I cannot be completely objective in the traditional sense, although this is not my aim. My values, power relations, positionality, and politics shape the way I engage with this topic (Sultana, 2007). Thus, my white privilege, middle class standing, and U.S. perspective all affect my understanding of my own relationship to/with femininity, which I cannot escape. It is with this partial perspective that I carry out my focus group interviews.

¹⁰ I address this issue again in Chapter III as it relates to an unequal power dynamic between the women.

¹¹ “Positivism is a traditional research paradigm based on ‘the scientific method,’ a form of knowledge building in which there is only one logic of science, to which any intellectual activity aspiring to the title of ‘science’ should follow” (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2006, p. 8).

My method of a mini-focus group was also chosen on the foundation of postmodern feminism. An important methodological principle of postmodern feminism is to focus on “small, localized and contextually specific stories, rather than exploring over-arching master narratives that take for granted specific assumptions about society, gendered power differentials, emancipation and particular priorities as regards intersectionalities” (Lykke, 2010, p. 148). This is key when analyzing focus groups because they are not a reproduction of a wider society in miniature, rather they are a specific context which does not act as a mirror that reflects society or the population as a whole (Munday, 2014). This is important to note in my research because it can be easy when analyzing these women’s responses about femininity to draw much wider conclusions about their country or native population in general. I will not do this because six women surely cannot represent an entire population. Furthermore, lumping them together with the wider population would do a disservice to this research and their individualized answers. I instead analyze how each participant’s personal engagement with their culture and/or location affect their relationship to/with femininity.

At this point I must also offer an explanation as to why I interviewed women only from the Netherlands and Lithuania. At the beginning of my research project, I wanted to see how different women in a European context related to femininity. I chose a European context solely because I am now living in Europe myself. A European context, however, is far too broad to explore in relation to the limited resources and time I had to complete this thesis. Therefore, I thought it best to whittle down this context to two countries. I chose the Netherlands and Lithuania because I served as an intern for a Dutch organization (AtGender) hosting a feminist gender studies conference in Lithuania. Thus, I had practical access to people in each place. Furthermore, I only interview women because they were the main attendees of AtGender’s conference. If I had more time and resources, I would include men and trans individuals of more ages and nationalities to diversify my research sample.

In sum, choosing the method of a mini-focus group benefits this research because it helps replicate a nonhierarchical and empowering environment. All participants receive a greater opportunity to speak of their lived experiences and fully express their views without me having to intervene as much. The focus group, in this light, creates a supportive, empowering, and collaborative environment where I could generate data not just on content but also on the process through which that content was produced.

Chapter Structure of the Thesis

To engage with my curiosity of femininity and the related questions I have previously outlined, I divide my thesis into three chapters, which review the themes of performativity, geopolitical context, and age. Chapter I explores the tension related to the question: is femininity performative or a gender core? It begins with the interviewees making the connection that gender is performative, relating to Butler, along with the debate over who can perform femininity and how, specifically regarding trans women. I also bring in work by trans activist Julia Serano, who suggests that gender can be natural and precede socialization. Concluding the chapter I propose a critique of this debate through the lens of sexual difference theory.

The next chapter establishes that femininity is relational to one's geopolitical context, meaning that one performs and engages with gender differently depending on location. Furthermore, one's gender performance is affected by power relations within those locational contexts. Even feminists should be aware of how gender performance is impacted by the immediate environment of one's academic and professional fields because the power relations within them can create 'in' and 'out' groups. The power relations embedded in one's location also function against a backdrop of a much larger discourse between Eastern and Western Europe, which I expand upon.

The final chapter builds on Glen Elder's life course theory and reviews how age is a fundamental part of situating one's experiences related to historical, political, and cultural contexts. I argue that age is a key factor that affects how one learns to engage with femininity, and how that relationship changes over time. I also analyze how the age dynamics between the women themselves affect power relations within the focus group conversation. With this brief outline in mind, I set out on my search 'beyond the One.'

Chapter I – What is Femininity: A Gendered Performance or a Gendered Core?

This chapter dives into the tension between femininity as performative or a gender core. At first, the feminist interviewees draw on Butler's theory of performativity and their own experiences to suggest that indeed femininity is performative. However, who engages with that performance and how they do so was thoroughly critiqued among the women, specifically regarding trans women. If trans women express hyper femininity, for example, are they upholding stereotypical norms within the gender binary? While some of the women said yes, I bring in Julia Serano's work to complicate this discussion, which proposes gender can precede socialization (2007). Yet even if gender is performative, why is femininity still so harshly critiqued? This question returns at the end of this chapter where I reengage with sexual difference theory and argue that to challenge binary gender norms, one must first shake the idea that femininity is inferior to masculinity.

Framing the Debate

In the focus group interview, the women made the connection that gender and femininity is performative. As Marjolijn stated, "I think automatically of gender performativity and Judith Butler" (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Others also drew connections to Butler and her theory of performativity, which suggests that gender "is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (Butler, 1988, p. 520). I expected this link to be made because these women are trained and work within the field of gender studies. Thus, I assume they know of this seminal theory. Marjolijn continues to explain that she also sees gender as existing on a sliding scale, where masculinity and femininity are not "defined boxes" (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Rather, she sees them as fluid categories. While the other women in the interview did agree with this statement, there was debate as to who can do this and to what extent, which I will return to.

Sanne also supports this idea of gender being fluid when she recounts her experience of working as a sixteen-year-old girl in a professional makeup shop in Amsterdam, where drag queens would come and restock their supplies. She remembers that this experience was the first moment she seriously reflected on gender as a performance and became conscious of its constructed nature because she would watch these men transform themselves into "the most beautiful women" (Focus Group, 2017). These drag queens helped Sanne realize how arbitrary categories of gender are as

they changed themselves to completely embody femininity in a visual way. This made her reflect on her own femininity as well because she vividly remembers questioning who was performing femininity more – the hyper feminine drag queens with their “glitter and nails,” or herself as a biological female (Focus Group, 2017). This conversation with Sanne frames the fundamental debate within the field of gender studies – is gender an unchangeable expression of identity or a performance, and are these two categories mutually exclusive?

Judith Butler's theory of performativity frames one side of this debate, which suggests that gender is a socialized expression. Now, while Butler's theory is profound, one cannot too quickly jump to the conclusion that she argues gender is merely a performance¹². Firstly, this notion disregards many trans experiences where people endure violence, stigma, severe depression, and financial suffering to transform their gender, even to a point of surgery, to inhabit the opposite gender they were assigned at birth. Secondly, this idea that gender is merely a performance takes Butler's theory too literally and misses its philosophical nuances. Butler acknowledges that gender can have a deeper personal meaning to individuals, but suggests that the way one engages with that meaning is what is socially constructed.

On the other side of this debate are feminists, such as Julia Serano, who oppose Butler's perspective. In her book *Whipping Girl*, Serano breaks with past attempts in feminism and queer theory to dismiss femininity as characterizing it as performative at all. Rather, she argues that aspects of femininity (as well as masculinity) are “natural and can...precede socialization” (Serano, 2007, p. 19). In other words, gender is something more natural and less socialized. Serano takes her argument a step further though. Rather than solely questioning whether gender is performative or not, the pressing issue for Serano is that people who are feminine, whether they be female, male, or transgender, are universally demeaned compared to their masculine counterparts (2007). Serano wants to hone in on this issue of why femininity is seen as such a threat in the first place because, until this question is solved, “No form of gender equity can ever truly be achieved until we first work to empower femininity itself” (Serano, 2007, p. 20). Differently put, Serano suggests one must first recognize the binary as such for equality between the sexes to be achieved. I return to this point at the end of Chapter I.

¹² Revisit page 10-11 where I review in more detail that performativity does not equate with performance.

The 'Right' Femininity

The discussion between Butler and Serano frames a central debate within gender studies: is gender constructed or can it be inhabited on a deeper level? With an understanding of both sides of the argument, the women in the focus group side with a more Butlerian perspective as they struggle with the latter idea that one can inhabit gender in an innate way – the idea that femininity and masculinity can be an essential part of an individual that is not solely controlled by processes of socialization. Furthermore, they express concern as to who can perform femininity and to what extent. For example, while all the interviewees agree that trans women are indeed women, there is still debate about their gender performance.¹³ This is clear when Irena expresses that while she sees gender as a performative act, she is frustrated with the fact that:

Men want to be turned into women and look like super sexualized versions of women – that really piss... – that really annoys me. Be a man and wear a dress! Cut your hair, grow your hair, play with the body you have, but do not change into a different sex and play a very narrow...version of femininity (Focus Group, 2017).

Irena in the passage above states that to be feminine one does not (and should not) express a neoliberal image of *Woman* involving 'glitz and glam.' The image of hyper femininity for her is too culturally defined, too narrow of an understanding of femininity. Irena in this excerpt claims that because gender is completely constructed, to transform oneself to present a narrow version of femininity only ends up reinforcing the gender binary. Simply put, she asserts that trans people, and trans women in particular, are more invested in dichotomous gender categories and are not interested in the in-between spaces of gender (Spade, 2006).

Stryker further explains Irena's position about transgender women: "...such feminists [contend] transsexuals [alienate] themselves from their own lived history, and [place] themselves in an inauthentic position that misrepresent[s] their 'true selves' to others" (2006, p. 4). In other words, some feminists believe that trans people's genders are 'fake' because not only are they socialized within the patriarchal gender binary, but also because they shape their gender to fit an

¹³ I acknowledge that our conversation was not as rich as it could have been because no self-identified trans women were there. This limited the dialog. Conducting interviews with a more diverse focus group is something to consider for future research.

extreme version of masculinity or femininity within that binary. This reasoning infers that those who problematize the gender binary are those who have more invested in it.

If gender is socially constructed, as Irena firmly suggests in her previous reasoning, then why is it an issue if gender is performed in one way or another? If gender is as meaningless as she makes it out to be, why is it problematic for one to perform a hyper feminine version of their gender? Furthermore, why was this only discussed in relation to trans women? Is this a trans women's burden? I argue the answer is no. Irena's reasoning arguably falls short. Her gender-as-a-social-construction viewpoint is not supported by her rationale. By challenging certain feminine gender performances, she reinforces normative notions of gender by suggesting that trans women should perform a more 'mild' version of femininity.

Trans women who perform femininity in a traditional way for Irena are visible symptoms of a disturbed gender system. Yet, her arrival at the conclusion that trans people are more deeply committed to normative categories of gender than non-trans people is facilitated by her failure to question the strategic value for trans people of adherence to gender normative notions of transsexuality (Spade, 2006). Furthermore, it must be realized that saying trans people are more invested in adhering to normative categories of gender does not consider that the medical notion of 'transsexuality' requires gender normative performance. A successful transition hinges upon full participation in the normative, sexist, and oppressive culture of gender. Simply put, "transsexuals are in a double bind" between expressing their gender as they see fit, and navigating a medical world that requires them to adhere to a normative gender binary if any gender change is to come at all (Spade, 2006, p. 238).

Absent from Irena's reasoning is also the consideration that many trans people do not perform a hyper feminine or traditional version of femininity, nor do many get surgery, although these were both main points in her reasoning. According to a 2009 study in the U.S.¹⁴, "80 percent of transgender women and 98 percent of transgender men have not undergone genital surgery" (Spade, 2011, p. 145). Spade goes on to suggest that these numbers might even be higher if one considers that this study did not capture trans people living in prisons, those without secure houses or health care, and others in highly vulnerable situations. This is all to say that social systems are

¹⁴ *National Transgender Discrimination Survey Report on Health and Health Care*, conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and National Center for Transgender Equality.

not just hypothetical or ideological. They have material consequences and can be incredibly difficult to navigate. One must keep this in mind when discussing how trans individuals engage with their gender.

Marjolijn also follows this point in the interview to address Irena's argument. Marjolijn reminds the group that it does not matter which stage of transition trans women are in or "if they want to cut off their penis, yes or no" (Focus Group, 2017). Rather, "it's all about what they would like to bring out," which I interpret as what gender core they want to express (Focus Group, 2017). This notion is at odds with the group's previous conclusion though that gender is a performance. Thus, Marjolijn's comment returns me to my starting point: is gender essential or constructed? Irena's positioning points to the belief that it is constructed, although her reasoning does not fully support her position when further analyzed. Serano, on the other hand, provides a persuasive critique that gender is more than mere social construction. Spade further complicates this dilemma when he points to the fact that trans people in their double bind *must* follow gender norms if they are to navigate the medical world and ever get closer to their gender core.

While the question of whether gender is socially constructed or essential is perplexing, I follow Serano's lead and suggest that the more pressing question related to this debate is: why are people still asking themselves if anyone wants to aspire to femininity? If a trans man chooses to be masculine, would Irena critique his choices as heavily as she did the hyper feminine trans woman? I believe the answer is no. The difference in this response relates to the fact that "our society feels threatened by the existence of men who choose to become women" (Serano, 2007, p. 16). At this point, I return to sexual difference theory to provide insight into this deeper concern of femininity.

Sexual Difference Returned

Throughout the interview, some of the participants regularly critique hyper femininity. For example, Irena states hyper femininity is too narrowly constructed of a gender to aspire to, Lotte declares wearing makeup and appearing very feminine is "terrible," and Sanne suggests looking hyper feminine as a feminist requires one to be "extra queer" to prove one's competence (Focus Group, 2017). In my reading of these women's responses through the lens of sexual difference theory, they are not helping deconstruct the patriarchal gender binary by rejecting (hyper) femininity. To confront binary gender norms, I argue one must challenge the idea that femininity

and femaleness is inferior to masculinity and maleness (Serano, 2007). So, while these feminist practitioners may assume they challenge binary gender norms by heavily critiquing femininity, I suggest that in fact they uphold the same norms they are trying to dismantle. Change comes, as Irigaray suggests, when people are given space to engage with and perform femininity in whatever way they choose. In this light, trans women move one step closer to challenging the male-centered gender hierarchy where it is assumed that men are better than women and that masculinity is superior to femininity.

I also want to point out that while speaking on the topic of femininity, the interviewees mainly speak of this gender in relation to women. Men are hardly discussed as being feminine at all, minus Sanne's drag queen example in the first part of the focus group. The only other time men are brought up in context of femininity takes place when the feminist practitioners are speaking of trans women, which I find problematic because trans women are women, not men¹⁵. Thus, the feminist practitioners appear to be quite exclusive and essential in the way they speak about femininity. Even though they may try to dismantle the gender binary by critiquing forms of femininity, I suggest they do the opposite. This is because – as Serano, Irigaray, and other sexual difference thinkers suggest – the gender binary cannot be overcome if femininity itself is not empowered in the first place.

The idea stemming from the mini-focus group that hyper femininity is undesirable arguably draws a parallel to the deeper concern that society, and even the gender studies community, is nowhere near the point where gender can be viewed as a multiplicity. Rather, ideas like those previously mentioned by Irina and others only further solidify the gender binary and uphold phallogocentrism in supporting the notion that only women can only be feminine, and that femininity is somehow negative in the first place. This is a myth that one must see through, one that is able to be broken by sexual difference theory. Sexual difference would explode the category of femininity and allow it to be recognized in and by both sexes. In doing so, men and women can engage with femininity in a less taboo way.

¹⁵ Some of the feminist practitioners mistakenly called trans women 'trans men' without realizing the inappropriate misclassification until pointed out by others.

Conclusion

In this chapter I review a fundamental debate within the gender studies community: is gender essential or performative? To do this, I give a short summary of both sides of the argument as explained through Butler and Serano. The interviewees agree that femininity is a type of performance in one way or another; however, there is quite some disagreement over how trans women should perform their gender. The question is posed: If trans women pass as hyper feminine women are they strengthening the gender binary, or are they deconstructing its normative nature? Sexual difference thinkers would suggest the latter. Trans experiences cannot so easily be put into categories of 'normative' or 'non-normative.' This is because gender is a wide swinging spectrum through which many circumstances and power relations shape the way trans people approach their femininity.

Furthermore, I propose that one reason this focus group may have been extra critical of trans women's femininity is because femininity, through a masculinist lens, is viewed as insufficient in the first place. Sexual difference theory suggests that women and femininity are always viewed in relation to men and masculinity. Subsequently, even feminists thinking about gender arguably are shaped in one way or another by this phallogocentric register. To expand on this idea, I am curious if the group would have been so critical of trans men convincingly performing masculinity? While more research is needed to answer this question, I hypothesize that the answer is no. It is at this point I transition to my next chapter, in which I review how femininity is relational.

Chapter II – The Power of Location: Geopolitical Femininity

The feminist practitioners make it clear that even their own relationship to/with femininity changes depending on their location and where they are from. Cultural mores and power structures in different areas affect how individuals relate to femininity and either engage with or spurn it. Chapter II explores how this relationship to femininity changes in different geopolitical contexts, as well as how the women in the interview cope with these variations and understand them. The chapter begins by explaining how femininity is relational, meaning that it varies for people depending on their locational whereabouts and the power structures that reside therein. The second part of Chapter II expands on how power relations shape one's gender by touching on the discourse of 'The West and the Rest'¹⁶. I begin that section by providing two theories to explain how this East/West dichotomy came to be. From there I weave the theories into the women's lived experiences¹⁷. Lastly, I bring back the theory of sexual difference and propose that the underlying reason this tension between femininity and feminism exists – no matter one's geopolitical context – is because femininity is seen as problematic within the phallogocentric register in the first place.

Relational Femininity

The women in the focus group express the idea that one's performance of femininity is relational to location. This means that one will perform femininity differently depending on where they are specifically situated. For example, the interviewees make it clear they have many international experiences being feminist academics, professors, and/or activists. Depending on where they are though, their own performance/engagement with femininity changes. Sanne sums this up nicely when she says, "...for me it's very much a relational term, femininity...I realize...[I] adapt to different spaces where I perform gender" (Focus Group, 2017). She goes on to explain that "I have my unique style, but...I very much notice that my style is relational, which means that either I bring my unique style to different places and people read my unique style differently...or...I adapt to those different spaces where I perform gender" (Focus Group, 2017).

¹⁶ This phrase is coined by Niall Ferguson (2011).

¹⁷ It is not my aim to create further divide between Eastern and Western Europe, which I clearly state later in this chapter. However, this East/West discourse of difference over time has arguably created real differences – material, cultural, and ideological. I suggest one way these differences manifest themselves is through one's relation to/with gender.

From this excerpt, Sanne makes it clear that the phrase 'style' for her is synonymous with her engagement with femininity. Sanne earlier in the interview argues that femininity for her is a performance, so this word choice is in line with her previous explanation. This excerpt also shows that, in Sanne's experiences, femininity changes depending on location – for her as the performer and for the observing viewer.

Sanne gives an example of this flexibility when she recounts how her outfit she was wearing in the interview would be received in Vienna compared to the UK and the Netherlands. She states:

If I teach in Vienna like this – I'm wearing a skirt now, but I'm not wearing a suit jacket – if I'm teaching in Vienna like this I know I will be read as very much a cis woman. If I teach in the UK [and the Netherlands] like this I will be seen as pretty funky and not so classically dressed¹⁸ (Focus Group, 2017).

The perception of Sanne's femininity changes depending on which cultural bubble she resides in. Furthermore, Sanne explains that she will choose whether she wants to 'fit in' or 'stand out,' regarding her femininity and the locational context she is in, depending on her mood. As she explains, sometimes to be political and radical one makes decisions 'against the grain.' Other times one is tired or just "needs to get that job," so one makes decisions 'with the grain' (Focus Group, 2017). Now, it should be clear that while these gendered decisions to go with or against the grain seem trivial, they are quite meaningful because they function within operating structures or power. So, the way one is read in terms of gender means a lot, as it can impact safety, financial stability, and/or fair treatment.

This idea connects to the previous discussion touched upon in Chapter I about trans experiences. Trans individuals cannot be understood outside of the social context they exist and function within. Subsequently, whether people are concerned with passing as something, they might be more concerned with wearing stereotypical clothing or doing actions that are seen as more traditionally masculine or feminine to fit within the heteronormative gender binary to ensure a variety of factors, such as safety, in one place more so than in another. If trans individuals feel safer and more comfortable to play with gender in a particular context, then they might feel more

¹⁸ 'Classically dressed,' in the way Sanne uses it, refers to a traditional Western style of femininity (read: mid-length skirt, blouse, suit jacket, sheer nylons, and heels).

comfortable to openly experiment with it. This is all to say that gender performance, and gender itself, is relative, which infers that femininity changes for individuals relative to power structures within their locational whereabouts.

Marjolijn also provides a personal example to support the notion that gender “depends on the context” (Focus Group, 2017). She recounts an experience she had with femininity and location while completing a part of her academic career at Lund University in Sweden at the Department of Gender Studies. While there, Marjolijn had to attend a Christmas party and was concerned with what she ought to wear. Should she be business-like and wear a suit, should she wear a frilly dress, were heels necessary? Gendered questions such as these filtered through her mind before this event. When she asked her colleague for advice, however, she remembers them telling her, “...you can wear what you’re wearing now. Come on, this is a gender studies department” (Focus Group, 2017). As Marjolijn continues her story, however, it becomes apparent that casual and less feminine attire would not be appropriate at her current university in Italy. There she says she would appear as “quite an outsider” if she did not wear more traditionally feminine clothes because there is “way more hierarchical structure within [Italy’s] academia” (Focus Group, 2017). So even though Marjolijn was at two gender studies departments where they both engage with similar issues and read the same works, she still performs her gender differently depending on location, culture, and hierarchical power structures therein. As Marjolijn sums up, “The [locational] hierarchical structure and the [related] norms and behavior have a lot of influence” over whether one can play with gender or must conform (Focus Group, 2017). One must not discount the influence of hierarchical structures of power that impact femininity.

Hierarchical power relations fundamentally shape environments that either encourage or hinder one’s freedom of expression regarding gender performativity. As Marjolijn and Sanne explain, they have resided in places that allow them to feel freer to challenge gender norms, and other places where they feel more pressure to conform. Marjolijn even encounters these pressures in gender studies environments, which was not a unique experience to just her. The other women are also acutely aware of these power dynamics within the field. Sanne gives an example of how gender studies environments can also be normative when she says, “I think that gender studies environments are liberating, but they can also be quite normative and oppressive in and of themselves. There are certainly places where if you would come in with a dress you would have to prove that you’re a good feminist and queer enough” (Focus Group, 2017). In this excerpt,

Sanne shines a light on the fact that as a feminist, one must also be aware of how gender performance is impacted by the immediate environment of one's academic and professional field(s), even if it is a 'liberating' one. Lotte follows up this idea in suggesting that feminists within the field of gender studies can oftentimes feel like a part of the 'in group,' and subsequently become exclusionary. To not see this power structure of an 'in' and 'out' group would be to deny the normative power relationships that fundamentally shape the field of gender studies. Recognizing these power relations is crucial in identifying how femininity can be either stifled or liberated. Even those within gender studies must question how they do gender and what political ideologies they ascribe to certain gender performances.

'The West and The Rest'

The power relations embedded in one's location that influence how one will engage with femininity also function against the backdrop of a deeper discourse between Eastern and Western Europe. According to Larry Wolfe (1994) and Edward Said (2003), the West is assumed to be wealthier and more progressive, while the post-socialist East is viewed as backwards, and close-minded. These stereotypes that paint the polar relationship between the East and West also arguably affect the field of Gender Studies (Koobak & Marling, 2014). The West appears to be more established within the field, while the "post-socialist CEE [Central Eastern European] feminist studies [are] 'lagging behind' the West" (Koobak & Marling, 2014, p. 333). With this constructed division between East and West in mind, which also influences the field of gender studies, I want to further question how this discourse affects the way these feminist practitioners from Eastern and Western European countries approach femininity.

Before I dive into this question, I provide an explanation of two theories that help one think through how the East and West have come to be pitted against each other through a discourse. I begin with Said's theory of orientalism, which explains how the East, which is much more of a project than a place, has become portrayed as the 'natural' opposite of the West. In his text, Said explains how the East, or as he refers to as the 'orient,' is an extreme fiction. Clichés, stereotypes, and bad justifications have been used throughout history to reduce people of certain geographical locations into falsely unifying rubrics, such as 'The West,' or 'The East' (Said, 2003). Yet even when these geographical boundaries shift, the concept of the 'orient as other' remains the same. This reductive thinking is further complicated by the believed notion that the West is a place of

reason, progress, and civilization, further isolating the image of the East as mysterious, backwards, and even violent (Bakić-Hayden, 1995). Said sums this up best when he writes, "...neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other" (Said, 2003, p. xvi). Like Butler's notion of gender and performativity, the East and West for Said are also social constructs.

Building on Said's notion of orientalism (2003), I next explore the framework of nesting orientalisms, developed by Milica Bakić-Hayden (1995). Bakić-Hayden takes the analysis of orientalism one step further to suggest that the 'orient' is not as far East as one might imagine (read: India, China, Arabia). Rather, Eastern European countries can also be looked at as an 'orient' of sorts, specifically the Balkans (as it relates to Bakić-Hayden's research). In other words, Bakić-Hayden suggests there is a gradation of 'orients,' that she calls nesting orientalisms, which compose a pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Said's orientalism is premised (1995).

In sum, orientalism and nesting orientalisms allow one to see the 'orient' as a racialized project that is geographically much closer to Western Europe than one may originally assume. An understanding of these theories ultimately helps one realize how the East has come to be seen as distinctly separate from the West. I propose these power relations that separate Eastern and Western Europe can also influence the way individuals approach gender and even express femininity. The next section will explore this proposal and draw connections from the women's answers to their geopolitical contexts. Do understand though that it is not my aim to further create a divide between Eastern and Western Europe. I have tried to avoid this by providing a thorough explanation of the previous theories that show how fabricated the polarity between Eastern and Western Europe is. That is not to say though that differences do not exist. The discourse that has come to separate Eastern and Western Europe has indeed shaped opinions, mindsets, and even material differences. Thus, I aim to point out how these feminist practitioners' embedded knowledges and located experiences within Eastern and Western European geopolitical contexts affects their relationship to femininity.

Feminism as 'Social Suicide'

When asked how geopolitical context shapes these feminist's relationship with femininity, Milda from Lithuania quickly remarks that being a feminist in her country is "like [committing]

suicide from a social point of view” (Focus Group, 2017). She explains, this is because feminism is assumed to turn women away from traditionally feminine tasks. In her perspective, these include undertakings such as cooking, doing arts and crafts, or even wearing a nice dress. Milda, as a feminist herself, recounts that she once aligned herself with this perspective and rejected femininity in these ways too even though, admittedly, she loves doing each of them. Aurelija, another feminist from Lithuania, also agrees with this idea of feminism as ‘social suicide.’ She builds on this point that feminism in Lithuania is somehow equated with a lack of femininity. In her own experiences, Aurelija felt this tension between her cultural surroundings to appear and act more traditionally feminine, and a pressure from feminism to reject that traditional image.

Aurelija and Milda feel trapped within a double bind between their culture and aligning themselves with a feminist agenda¹⁹. On one side, they feel spurned from their culture for not ‘living up’ to traditional gendered expectations. Reversely, they want to be ‘good feminists’ and reject those embedded cultural stereotypes. Are these two experiences of being hyper feminine or a ‘good feminist’ mutually exclusive though? I suggest they are not, and instead propose that feminism allows one freedom and flexibility in gender expression. Feminism can encourage one’s experimentation with femininity and allow for more porous categories of identification. One must consider, however, that I speak from a Western perspective, which arguably affects the way I view the intersection of femininity and feminism (read: open). Nonetheless, the fact that these women feel a pressure to decide between these two options in the first place is telling of the strict relationship with the gender binary in their Lithuanian cultural context.

There is a difference between the interviewees’ responses to the confluence of femininity and feminism in their specific geopolitical contexts. The Lithuanian women responded with feelings of feminism as a ‘social suicide,’ while the Dutch women remained quite indifferent. While it is tempting to frame these differences as a lag discourse²⁰ between Lithuania and the Netherlands, doing so would fall into the orientalist trap explained by Said, which compares geopolitical and cultural differences in hierarchical terms of progress/lack of progress. Avoiding

¹⁹ I argue there is not one feminist agenda. In the perspective of Aurelija and Milda, however, the feminist agenda was rejecting hyper femininity to push against patriarchal norms.

²⁰ By ‘lag discourse’ I mean that there is some sort of hindrance in Lithuanian discourse, political ideology, or culture that affects the progression of feminism, and its core ideas of gender fluidity, female empowerment, and a freer form of femininity, compared to the Netherlands, where one can argue feminism is more developed and socially accepted. It is important to avoid this lag discourse thinking to escape the assumptive allusion that Lithuanian women are living in a ‘slow’ or regressive feminist world compared to the Dutch women. There is no lag discourse, just differences.

this lag discourse framework, however, does not mean that one must ignore real differences between the feminists' responses about femininity and feminism. The Lithuanian women did relate to femininity and feminism differently than the Dutch women did.

The fact that the Lithuanian women, who live in country which is part of the European Union, still feel that feminism is a form of 'social suicide' is not only an example of a difference between the Netherlands and Lithuania, but also a case of nesting orientalisms. It was somewhat strange for some of the Dutch women to acknowledge that the Lithuanian women experience this form of extreme ostracism in their communities for their association with feminism. Yet, at the same time, there was also an understanding that 'of course' this would happen in Lithuania, as evidenced through the head nods and utterances of agreement. The Dutch women, who surely have had uncomfortable encounters with others because they are proclaimed feminists, most likely have never been shunned in the Netherlands to the point where they would also feel they are committing social suicide. The fact that it was understandable for the Dutch women that this phenomenon would take place in an Eastern European country, however, shows that the East is still seen by some to be fundamentally differently than the West – in this case as it relates to femininity and feminism.

The Dutch women viewing the Lithuanian women as 'other' within the conversation arguably was furthered by the fact that the dialog was held in English, which benefited the Dutch women and disadvantaged the Lithuanian women. According to the English Proficiency Index, the Netherlands has the highest English-proficiency rate in the world (Education First, 2017). Continuing with that report, nine out of ten Dutch people speak English as a second language. Speaking English at this proficiency rate in Lithuania, however, is much lower, where only thirty percent of Lithuanian citizens speak English (Žemaitis, 2017). The most popular foreign language remains Russian²¹. Subsequently, the older Lithuanian women in the interview struggled speaking English fluently, which arguably created a power difference between the women, with some being able to express themselves fluently, while others were forced to remain quieter due to a lack of vocabulary. Language in this situation built a metaphorical hierarchical barrier between the Dutch and Lithuanian feminists, which I propose fosters 'othering' feelings.

²¹ Russian was taught to students in soviet times in all Lithuanian schools up until 1991 (Žemaitis, 2017).

While being a feminist in all corners of the world can arguably be framed as a 'social suicide,' it seems that this deadly visualization was particularly relevant to the Lithuanian women. None of the Dutch women openly agreed or claimed that being a feminist was a form of 'social suicide' in their country. The Dutch feminist practitioners did, however, reflect on the notion that being feminine within a feminist environment can pose challenges and hinder one's expression of femininity. Lotte points to the fact that neoliberal consumerist culture has affected both Eastern and Western Europe, where sexualized images of women permeate in all societies. Subsequently, "clothes and makeup have become such a big part of the culture" and commodified images have come into fore (Focus Group, 2017). Due to this commercialized trend, all the interviewees agree that expressing femininity within the world of gender studies is difficult because if they do this, they feel as if they are "betraying the political aim of the group," which they collectively agree includes challenging these mainstream images (Focus Group, 2017).

From this conversation, the women suggest that expressing femininity is taxing because it somehow is assumed that if one is feminine they are naturally complicit in the consumerist culture that feminism opposes. This tension between engaging with femininity or feminism often enters the realm of debate within the field of gender studies, arguably in all geopolitical contexts at one point or another. I suggest that the reason this tension exists at all is because being feminine is an offense in the first place, according to phallogocentrism, which shapes even feminists' thoughts and opinions to one degree or another. Considering sexual difference theory, which provides an escape from this black-and-white thinking, I propose these Dutch feminists who feel conflicted to choose between femininity and feminism can learn from the experience of Milda and Aurelija as they learned to reengage with femininity, which I explain below.

While Aurelija and Milda recount their early experiences of wanting to spurn femininity at the early stages of their entrance into the world of feminism and gender studies, they each recall that, over time, feminism served as a vehicle to reengage with their femininity. Learning about feminism re-opened the category of femininity for them in a new light and somehow made them feel 'allowed' to engage with it. For example, Milda says, "later in my life I...revitalized those parts of my femininity, which were actually suppressed for a long time because they didn't meet the right understanding about femininity...[feminism] definitely made much broader [of an] understanding of who I am and how I live" (Focus Group, 2017). Feminism for Milda through time thus served as a catalyst to reengage with her femininity, rather than to spurn it. Aurelija felt

similarly as she remarks that feminism eventually helped her “quit this fear to be feminine” (Focus Group, 2017). Sometimes feminists, according to Aurelija, are afraid to be feminine and explore that side of themselves because being feminine is often equated with being weak or less than. In time, however, feminism also helped her let go of this notion and allowed her a space to explore her own femininity in a way she wants to, while feeling justified and empowered to do so.

This feeling of empowerment through engaging with feminism relates back to sexual difference theory. Sexual difference theory aims to find ways women (and men) can reengage with femininity, as well as how one can find newfound confidence in that gender expression. Both Aurelija and Milda appear to do just this as they each revitalize their own femininity and embrace, rather than spurn it. While this is hopeful that Aurelija and Milda find a sense of freedom through their own expression with femininity, Irigaray and other sexual difference thinkers still heed a word of warning that the way one re-engages with femininity must be different than how one traditionally thinks about femininity. This new engagement with femininity must not serve the phallogocentric register, rather it should stand on its own. This project is difficult to realize because one must imagine and engender a future that is unlike the present without specifying in advance what that future femininity entails. Nonetheless, I suggest that exploring and playing with one's own interaction with femininity, as Milda and Aurelija do, is a strong step in the right direction in recognizing femininity 'beyond the One.'

Conclusion

One's performance of femininity is dependent on location, which means that femininity is relational. An example of this is evident with Sanne and Marjolijn describing how they present their femininity in alternative ways at different universities. The fact that they change their image to reflect a different gender performance though does not mean gender is meaningless. Rather, gender is still crucial because it still functions within systems of power. Therefore, many people feel forced to fit in within the patriarchal heteronormative gender binary because doing otherwise and challenging those power relations risks too much. These power relations that influence gender work on micro and macro-level scales. An example of power relations working on a micro-level scale is evident in the fact that gender studies departments can become exclusive by creating 'in' and 'out' groups. On a macro-level scale, these power relations also exist against the backdrop of a deeper discourse between the East and West.

To explain this East/West discourse and its fabricated nature, I review two theories: orientalism and nesting orientalisms. Explaining these theories is an attempt to not further create a divide between Eastern and Western Europe; however, differences still exist in the fact that this East/West discourse affects mentalities and material realities. For example, pushing against traditional gender norms of femininity is relatively harder for feminists in Lithuania because doing so is deemed a form of 'social suicide.' Feminists from the Netherlands, however, do not express parallels with this experience, nor do they relate something of a similar nature. Instead, there is an unspoken understanding that this would happen in an Eastern European country, which I suggest compels 'othering' feelings, which arguably is in line with the rhetoric of nesting orientalisms. This is not to say that gendered forms of social suicide do not exist within the Netherlands – they do. From the interview though, they are not discussed. Furthermore, the fact that English was the language this conversation took place in furthered a power difference between the women, where the Dutch women arguably feel more advantaged.

Lastly, the feminists from both Lithuania and the Netherlands suggest that engaging with traditional forms of femininity can be difficult to do within gender studies contexts. There arises a tension between being feminine and being a 'good feminist.' Being feminine oftentimes gets lumped together with the hypersexualized images of women produced in a neoliberal market. While I agree that these images are problematic because they serve a masculinist perspective and economy, sexual difference theory suggests that the deeper reason for this rejection of femininity, even within feminism, is because one's perspective is shaped to a certain degree by phallogocentrism, which ultimately rejects all forms of femininity as self-sufficient. Sexual difference scholars would thus propose that one must not pull-back from femininity, but rather lean in to and work with femininity, even in moments of discomfort, to find new ways to express femininity that go 'beyond the One.'

Chapter III – How Old is She?: Uncovering the Entanglement between Femininity and Age

As discussed in the previous chapter, location and geopolitical context influence the way one engages with femininity. Age, however, determines when one will be exposed to those specific contexts. Subsequently, age is a fundamental determinant that influences one's historical, political, and cultural situatedness. Relating this to gender, one's age affects how one learns to engage with femininity, and how that relationship changes over time. This is because age creates a gap between "the way things used to be for [our] younger selves...and [our] present condition as older selves...in a postmodern, postindustrial society" (Utz & Nordmeyer, 2007, p. 711). Thus, as times change, age increases, and political and social environments shift, older people can experience a collision between modernity and tradition in relation to gender roles. Building off the work of Glen Elder's life course theory (1998), this chapter explores how age relations affect the way these feminist practitioners relate to femininity. I first explain the structure of Elder's life course theory and go through each point of his model. I then use his framework, along with the supporting work of Utz and Nordmeyer (2007), to analyze the interview responses and identify where age may cause differences in opinion regarding femininity. Lastly, I analyze the dynamic between the power and stigma of old age, and explore how this tension manifests itself in the conversation.

Life Course Theory

To analyze how these feminist practitioners' age differences affect their responses to questions of femininity, one must first have a clearer understanding of sociologist Glen Elder's life course theory. This paradigm focuses on ways of thinking about social change, life pathways, and individual development as modes of behavioral continuity and change (Elder, 1998). The life course paradigm has four basic principles:

1. The macro-level forces of history, culture, and place mold the opportunities and constraints that are available to an individual;
2. The timing of particular events of the life course (turning points and transitions) have both immediate and enduring effects on the remaining trajectory of an individual's life.
3. Individual lives are linked and therefore are shaped by friends, family, and others who encounter the individual;

4. Individuals are agentic actors, choosing which direction their life ought to take, but must act within a culturally defined set of constraints and expectations.

The first principle of this paradigm suggests that age and history intersect to impact the lived experiences of individuals. This helps one think more holistically about how lives develop over time and across changing contexts. The second principle points out that the timing of life transitions, such as the birth of a child, has long-term consequences. Differently put, the temporal order of life events matters greatly as it impacts one's life trajectory through subsequent transitions. The third principle explains that historical events and individual experience are connected through family and the "linked fates" of its members (Elder, 1998, p. 3). Thus, the misfortune of one family member can impact another member through shared relationships. The final principle proposes that when faced with challenges, people can still use their agency. Differently put, one can make choices and engage in effective adaptations within available options and constraints. In sum, the four main principles in Elder's theory include, "historical time and place, the timing of lives, linked or interdependent lives, and human agency" (Elder, 1998, p. 4).

In Elder's paradigm, as one goes through the different stages in their life they realign their actions and beliefs to reflect not only the personal decisions and desires that define one's past, but also the cultural norms and expectations assigned to that certain stage of life. Relating this notion to gender and femininity, one can see that the culturally prescribed norms and expectations assigned to the various stages of a person's life do not always keep pace, leaving women (and men) to balance new and old gender norms. In other words, the experience of engaging with femininity is going to be different for the eighty-year-old versus the twenty-year-old. Thus, the life course of an individual must be considered in this feminist analysis to better understand how age and the situated lived experiences of these women differ.

While this theory is used mainly within the field of sociology, Utz and Nordmeyer draw a strong connection between Elder's theory and feminism. They use it to analyze the perspectives of aging women and how those women balance traditional familiarities (gendered social norms) with new modernities (advances in gender equality). This gap can cause a dissonance between "What she wants to do...[and] what she ought to do or what others expect her to do" (Utz & Nordmeyer, 2007, p. 706). Utz and Nordmeyer explore this phenomenon and research how women are impacted by this difference in age and time. Furthermore, they use this theory in a

feminist way as they review age as an inequality. They investigate how age relations privilege the not-old at the expense of the old. I build on this work as I also engage with Elder's theory to not only identify the ways in which age and life experiences affect the interviewees' relationship with femininity, but also to question how the dynamics of age affect the ways in which the women interact with one another.

Generational Femininity

Societal standards of femininity and one's relationship to gender change over time and generations. For example, the women in the interview discuss how using cosmetic products have become more popular in the last three decades. As Irena puts it, this is because "in the 90's...the neoliberal culture has commercialized the female image so badly...[that] now you almost cannot be taken seriously...unless you communicate a message with...every single detail – clothes and makeup have become such a big part of the culture" (Focus Group, 2017). In this excerpt, Irena compares the freedom she felt as a feminist in the 70's and 80's when "there were so many ways of being a woman," compared to the 90's when femininity was radically changed by social media images, such as those in *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones Diary* (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Thus, Irena proposes that the consumerist culture blooming in the 90's has radically affected the way individuals relate to femininity, and not for the better. According to her, many women now feel a greater pressure to apply makeup and fit a traditional picture of femininity.

Lotte, another older woman²² in the focus group, whole-heartedly agrees with Irena's statement that consumerist culture has made it more difficult for women to engage with femininity today without wearing makeup. In her words, "Not using makeup as a woman in a professional context is now a more radical decision than it was in the 90's. In the 90's it was easy and normal – I never used makeup...today [though] it is more of a statement" (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Lotte points to the fact that norms surrounding femininity have become stricter as of late. This leads the older women in the group to reminisce about the days when they felt less pressure to

²² The 'older' women I refer to in this section, including Irena, Milda, and Lotte, are over 40. Although this hardly should count as 'old,' the age gap between them and the youngest interviewee at 23 is significant. As I characterize the participants in terms of age in this footnote, I find it quite awkward to do so, unlike characterizing them in terms of race, class, sexuality, or gender. Why is it awkward to name a woman's age? Utz and Nordmeyer suggest this is because of the stigma surrounding old age (2007). Women are not supposed to age. Stigma and shame, however, are not the only attributes that accompany old age. Further in this chapter, I also explore how authority and power also attend old age.

wear cosmetic products and fit a certain image of femininity that lends credibility to their professional work.

The younger women in this focus group, specifically Aurelija, however, do not agree with the previous arguments. Aurelija suggests that women can still wear makeup today and be taken seriously in high-ranking positions of power, including those of academia. Furthermore, she claims that makeup can become a part of expressing one's personal style that ultimately cultivates one's unique approach to femininity. Regarding her university experience, she says that wearing makeup "doesn't affect [professors' and professionals' work] performance, and it didn't affect the way I accepted them" (Focus Group Interview, 2017). While Lotte agrees that women can wear makeup and that she does not judge them for it, the point still stands for her that doing so affects power relations within professional contexts.

In my analysis of this disagreement, I suggest Aurelija gives justifications that reaffirm Lotte's reasoning that not wearing makeup today is a radical decision. Aurelija supports cosmetic use because it enables personal expression and agency, but the point still stands that doing so shapes femininity in one way or another and feeds in to a certain pressure some women may feel, even subconsciously.²³ Due to the differing opinions between the women, which are arguably rooted in an age gap according to Utz and Nordmeyer, it is difficult for Aurelija and Lotte to come to an agreement. Since Lotte has more work experience and is double in age to that of Aurelija, one must consider that her way of thinking is affected by her life course differently than Aurelija's.

This example of disagreement among the women can be explained by a difference in age regarding the way femininity is perceived. While the older women in the group identify wearing makeup with stereotypical sexualized images produced in the 90's, the younger interviewee did not see this connection as that extreme. Within the framework of Elder's life course theory, there is a generational gap in attitude towards this question of femininity (i.e. makeup use) in this conversation. Arguably, the women view this matter differently because trends are time specific and thus, age specific. So, while the older women may view wearing heavy makeup as extreme and working against the feminist agenda, whatever that may be, the younger women may see the same trend as an act of freedom or personal expression, working with a feminist agenda. The view

²³ The pressure to appear feminine exists in many forms and changes over generations. I argue that today wearing makeup is one of those pressures, while fifty years ago it may have been dressing modestly. These norms change over time.

one takes on an issue then, such as femininity and/or wearing makeup, is arguably relational to one's age according to Elder's paradigm. Age affects the type of values that are instilled in people and subsequently changes the experiences they have while growing up in a certain period.

Not only does age affect how the women relate to/with femininity, age differences also play into the dynamics of the conversation between the interviewees. While Utz and Nordmeyer show that age is discriminated against and can retain a residue of shame and stigma, age in this conversation also brought with it assumed wisdom and power. For example, Lotte is one of the oldest feminist interviewees in the room, and is known internationally by many in the field of gender studies. Her longer life and subsequent professional experience appear to give her words more weight in the conversation. This is evident in the fact that the women often agree with Lotte, rather than question her, throughout the interview. The younger women, on the other hand, challenge each other's arguments more frequently. Thus, age arguably creates a power dynamic between the interviewees because the older women bring assumed authority with them, while the younger feminists have less. This authority and power that comes with age is in sharp contrast to the stigma and shame of ageism, as discussed by Utz and Nordmeyer. In this situation, however, age works in the older women's benefit to lend creditability to their words.

Building on the focus group dialog, Milda goes on to suggest that younger women, even feminists, obsess over femininity more so than older women. Young people, in her perspective, are more concerned with understanding femininity and their relationship to it because they are seeking to understand themselves. Older women, on the other hand, are more established and have had further time to learn about themselves, their identity, and how they relate to gender within specific contexts. In her words:

Young women [today] ...are trying to find out what this 'femininity' is, and sometimes it's very, very strange how they try to understand...so it's funny, it's a little bit dramatic, but I understand for young persons [that] they need something to explain themselves and to understand themselves...It's a tough process and it's not easy...in your young days...you have to find out how to function, I think that's very complicated (Focus Group Interview, 2017).

As Milda proposes in the excerpt above, learning how to do one's gender is essential in learning how to function. Butler would agree with this claim because that gendered process of development

makes oneself intelligible within society (1990). Thus, learning how to perform gender is part of becoming a recognized adult. For this reason, it is understandable why approaching femininity with curiosity, even apprehension, is more common among young people who have had less time to grapple with it.

Femininity as an Obligation

While discovering one's relationship to femininity is important in learning how to function and become a part of society, as Milda suggests earlier, she snickered as she expressed this view because, in her perspective, worrying over one's femininity is somewhat silly. She hints at the fact that searching for femininity is a shallow endeavor. Older women in the focus group agree with this, and laugh alongside Milda because femininity for them is no longer something they revere, fear, or strive to obtain. Age, along with time in the field of gender studies, arguably has brought them a newfound sense of self-confidence, power, and likely different priorities to concern themselves with. Thus, they do not find as much significance in unveiling the inner workings of femininity as I, a much younger woman, hoped to achieve. Irena frames this nonchalant attitude best when she declares, "I just tend to not care about [femininity] anymore – it's the most liberating thing ever just to not care whether or not I am feminine. I am who I am. Deal with it" (Focus Group Interview, 2017).

Irena in the above excerpt claims that people are who they are, and thus should not become perplexed about strict gender norms, such as wearing makeup, to perform femininity.²⁴ One reason she says this is because she has different priorities in her life now than she did twenty years prior. Irena's attitude on this matter of gender has changed over time, as evident with when she recalls her younger self as, "...trying to conform very hard...to certain stereotypes" (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Today, however, she does not do this anymore because "...it just didn't work" (Focus Group Interview, 2017). Her transition with her relationship to/with femininity shows how the dynamic of the intersection between age and femininity change over time.

The age of these older feminist practitioners affects their relation to femininity considering they have made choices in their life that are not easily undone. This notion is explained in Elder's

²⁴ I want to point out once more that this lax attitude does not align with Irena's earlier critique of trans individuals. If gender should be approached in a 'care free' way as she suggests and even does here, then should she have harshly critiqued trans women for performing a hyper feminine gender? Her gender-as-social-construction viewpoint falls through once more.

second principle, which suggests that the timing of certain events can permanently affect the trajectory of one's life. In other words, when irreversible life transitions or events take place – such as having a child or getting married – questioning core identities, such as femininity, may become uncomfortable because doing so challenges those old decisions. Irena expresses this discomfort when she says:

I made certain decisions in my life: I got married, I had a child, I didn't divorce my husband – I could have...left him for another woman, I didn't...so now it's like, ok, I am who I am. It's a life process and when you have so much already behind you and you're left with what you're left with, it is maybe easier [not to question femininity] because certain decisions have already been made so I say, 'oh, I don't care' (Focus Group Interview, 2017).

In discussing alternative forms of femininity, such as those of trans women, Irena throughout the interview is quite critical. The passage above shows the potential source of that discomfort though. Irena has made choices in her life that align with a more traditional style of femininity. This is partly because of the culturally prescribed norms and expectations that were assigned to her in her early life, which relates back to the point of geopolitical location and relational femininity in Chapter II. Those same norms and expectations, however, have arguably not kept up with society today, meaning that their value has changed (Utz & Nordmeyer, 2007). This leaves Irena to struggle between tradition and modernity in relation to femininity.

In sum, life transitions are not so easily undone. Rather, they permanently shape one's life trajectory in lasting ways. So, if a woman's life transitions, especially those related to her femininity, are structured by a set of values or a framework within a specific period, it is understandable why questioning those same decisions is a worrisome process. Subsequently, age is a crucial factor when analyzing one's opinion towards femininity because that perspective most likely will differ in young and old.

Conclusion

Elder's life course theory helps one understand how lives develop over time and changing contexts. I use this theory, along with the supporting work of Utz and Nordmeyer, to address how age impacts one's relationship with and opinion about femininity, making the point that one's relationship to femininity is different for a fifty-year-old woman compared to a twenty-year-old

woman.²⁵ For example, differing opinions about femininity become apparent between the older and younger women specifically regarding the topic of makeup. The older women make the point that wearing makeup is a product of consumerist culture stemming from the 90's that negatively affects women's power relationships in professional contexts, while Aurelija suggests makeup is an empowering form of personal expression and style. According to Elder's life course paradigm, this tension arises due to differing norms between changing times, histories, and cultures among the different ages of women.

The older women in the focus group also make it clear that they no longer hold much stock in trying to understand femininity on a deeper level. They even laugh at certain points regarding this endeavor. One explanation for this is that they have had more time to grapple with gender and figure out how they relate to femininity. Furthermore, they have more experiences within the field of gender studies to arguably develop a deeper sense of self-confidence, which may also impact one's relationship to femininity. Additionally, considering some of the life choices the older women have made, questioning femininity can be an unsettling process because it uproots the reasoning and justification behind those decisions made years ago. Lastly, while Utz and Nordmeyer suggest age brings with it stigma and shame, the older women in this focus group experienced seniority and power because of their age, which causes a power dynamic between the old and young feminists. This is all to say that age is another significant factor that impacts one's relationship to femininity.

²⁵ I am not suggesting that solidarity can never be found between older and younger feminists. I am sure there are many instances when old and young can agree. I merely point to the fact that different opinions can be explained through the notion of age, as an older life will have been exposed to different period-specific values, compared to someone younger.

Conclusion

The theory of performativity and sexual difference theory are red threads that weave the analysis of this thesis together. With these two theories, I explore a fundamental tension in feminism: is femininity a socialized construction or a gender core? I frame this argument in Chapter I through a comparative analysis between the work of Butler and Serano. I then turn to the interviewees' responses to identity how their opinions fit within this larger discourse. The feminist practitioners claim gender is performative, yet there continues to be significant discussion as to how and who should perform femininity. To expand this debate, I turn to sexual difference theory, which suggests that the deeper issue at hand is why individuals still question whether some people want to express femininity in the first place.

I then move to the notion that femininity is relational in Chapter II. Geopolitical contexts and cultures, as well as the power relations within those places, affect gender performativity. Subsequently, gender is not meaningless because performing one's gender 'incorrectly' in different areas can have major impacts on one's being and safety. An example of this is evident when the Lithuanian women express that being a feminist in their country and not appearing feminine enough is a form of 'social suicide.' Gendered power relations also extend into the field of gender studies. All the women express that gender studies environments stifle one's engagement with and expression of femininity due to the tension between being feminine versus being a 'good feminist.' Related to these power relations is also a deeper discourse between Eastern and Western Europe, as expanded upon by Said's theory of orientalism (2003) and Milica Bakić-Hayden's nesting orientalisms (1995). By engaging with their work, I do not seek to further divide East and West. Rather, I wish to gain insight as to how this discourse affects geopolitically specific interactions with femininity and creates differences among the women.

In the final chapter I make the connection between age and femininity. The work of Glen Elder (1998) and Utz and Nordmeyer (2007) helps one identify reasons why age can cause a difference in opinion between the older and younger feminists. Through the example of cosmetic use, the focus group discussion shows there is a generational gap in perceptions of femininity – the younger feminists view the act of wearing cosmetic products as a strong personal expression of femininity, while the older women see it as hindering feminism and supporting patriarchal norms. Lastly, while age is a form of discrimination, shame, stigma, and

inequality, age in this conversation also lends power and credibility to the older feminists. The older women have more weight in the discussion due to their age, suggesting that the 'playing field' between the feminists was not equal to begin with. The power dynamics are also amplified considering that the focus group is in English, which arguably benefits the Dutch women.

In exploring these three areas of femininity – performativity, geopolitical context, and age – this thesis shows readers how fickle femininity is. It is not permanent or stable. Rather, femininity changes, it is flexible, and it takes on new forms in new contexts and with new people. Femininity is also fiercely personal and shapes people's identities and positions in the world. Most importantly though, through the creation of this thesis, I find that femininity is hopeful. People live in a world today that undervalues femininity, while at the same time bolsters men and masculinity. Sexual difference sheds light on the fact that there is only one recognized subject in the phallogocentric register, leaving femininity always as secondary and in relation to. What would the world look like though if both sexes were recognized equally? How would one engage with gender differently if femininity was valued in its own sexual register? While sexual difference has not yet occurred, this thesis serves as a small step forward in approaching this new future by creating a space for the interviewees to speak freely about femininity. More work must be done to further discover how one can search 'beyond the One' to successfully cherish, support, and advocate for femininity in new, positive, and non-masculinist ways. It is my hope that this step forward in the direction of sexual difference is a call to all readers to remain open to femininity, to embrace it in new and unpredictable ways, and to support others in their experimentation with their own gender expression. Remaining open to femininity, no matter its form, is essential if binary categories of gender are to be challenged.

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