

NEWS & OPINIONS

Double Trouble: Responding to Jenell Paris' Response, "Trouble at Every Turn"

Vincent E. Gil

Indeed, Indeed

Jenell Paris doesn't disappoint in situating our articles (Gil, Priest, Rynkiewich) within "masterful and engaging" prose;¹ with an analytic acumen of the sort she has already emboldened in her prior works, and which so effectively brings junctions (and more questions!) to the forefront. Thank you, Jenell, for spending the volume of time and mentation to move so expansively through our work, and bring in so much to also think about.

As a respondent to the respondent, I will mostly address Paris' response to my article, *Wither Sex? The Gender Takeover: A Position Paper*. Most specifically, and eventually, I'll try to concentrate on responding to "the final question" she poses to each contributing author individually.

I'll get to that: But first, some comments I deem necessary on her more general comments. If you've read my position paper and not just wandered into this piece, you may well recall its goal, which I reiterate briefly here: to distinguish what we lexically mean by "sex," and what we lexically mean by "gender," now that the two are erroneously treated as synonyms. While I try to "read individual corporeal contributions *back into* theories of the body and self" by illustrating from sources like neurobiology what the body contributions are to our self-ownership, I am by no means suggesting that fidelity to biology should only and always trump cultural influences on self-knowledge and identity. Both have their place. The big problem—as I've alluded in my position—is that

contemporary notions of *gender* have been given greater psychological valence on purpose, and thus of late are used to trump biological sex in importance.

Rescuing Trouble

In her section "Epistemological Trouble," Paris rightly alludes to the possibility of our articles being dismissed by *au courant* trends: because all of us are men; because none of us self-identify as LGBTQ+ authors; because it is presumed our authorial voice isn't grounded in any lived experience of non-dominant identities; or for not having epistemological authority save that which is culled from a scientific approach (which I garner means research and validation of facts, and not personal experience.) (Paris 2022, 84).

She thus makes a case for our rescue, by stating we (the authors) rest our knowledge bases on anthropology's gold standard: ethnography, ethnology, a traditionally scientific approach: empiricism, and a shared body of methods, modes of analysis, and theory (p. 84), since we do not use the personal, but do ask readers to trust empirically-generated knowledge. She goes on to state, "In a sense, the epistemology of anthropology is at odds with our society's elevation of identity-based knowledge, because the premise of fieldwork is to elevate the lived experience of others" while "the anthropologist holds their own perspective lightly to deeply understand and carefully represent the perspective of others" (p. 84). Such is, of course at odds with "activist epistemologies," which "value lived

¹ Meneses, Eloise. Comment on cover memo submitting Paris' response to us authors, so we could engage and comment back. Correspondence dated December 27, 2021.

experience, and without scientific methodologies and peer review, swiftly generate knowledge that is closely linked to sociopolitical goals and quick action” (p. 85). These are excellent distinctions and clarifications which, in the contemporary world we investigate, we need to keep in mind.

In rescuing our work and differentiating it from activist epistemologies, Paris makes room for what she describes (and we all have heard labeled) as “public anthropology”² which allows seepage of the individuated and non-empirical to mix with the empirical, developing what she labels as a “hybrid form” (p. 85) that then assumes to bring broader truths—if not more activist conclusions—to the table. Paris warns us (authors and readers alike) that “accepting knowledge because of the knower’s lived experience is one kind of epistemology” (p. 85). She is quick to note that while such carries *potential*, it also carries *dangers*: of limiting discursive norms; use of single social contexts; and of course, of self-deception (p. 85). I totally agree.

And yet, the trend of co-mingling what has traditionally been regarded as reliable methodology (the scientific and empirical) with lived experiences of “non-dominant identities”—the latter as a qualifier—is upheld today as what is needed for authorial voice to be valid and reliable.³ Thus, Paris rightfully notes that what we say may be critiqued, rejected in part or whole, since we do not claim any lived experience of non-dominant identities.

Addressing this trend first was not in the response I imagined, but I feel I should speak to it, since my position paper is all about challenging theories of self and gender that have no empirical grounding, but rather, rely on philosophies of self and self-experiences

while discrediting influences of the biological on self, body, and identity.

Double Trouble Now Begins

In her warning about hybridization, Paris also warns of “category errors” that come along with identity constructs and “the potential for self-aggrandizement and self-deception [which] expand along with the excessive categorical breadth” (p. 87). Yet the subjective embodiment of ‘truth’ that now seems needed to authenticate what is stated, dismisses the dangers Paris warns us about. The greater problematic is that the fundamental mode of knowledge production is not about *one’s self* or even the shared experience of a particular group; rather it is the overarching experience of many that coalesces and authorizes those experiences shared between and among members of a culture at large.

In this vein, let’s realize *meaning* is a public feature (Davidson 1984, 235), and the methods of science reflect on studied reality, so anyone can have an historical route back to confirm such data, no matter how temporal. Scientific authority may be perpetually questioned—it is legitimate and pertinent to question—but I am convinced that scientific authority (empiricism, evidence, method) should be redeemed today more than ever; certainly, held to a better standard than ‘validating’ empirical research via any one’s individuated experiences or claims, as is now the case.

It is now a common temptation to turn personal experiences into examples, generating “individual epistemologies,” that are now used to fact-check, even illustrate. Such pose dangers that runs deep. It is a shift

² Paris, p. 85. “Public anthropology” is not officially recognized as a subfield of the discipline, although since the early 2000’s and under the guidance of Robert Borofsky, it has been created as an application of anthropology to world issues, with a voice that extends beyond the “do no harm” paradigm (Website, Center for Public Anthropology/About). *The Center for Public Anthropology*, one of Borofsky’s creations, serves as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, and generates a dire critique of traditional anthropology. At once appearing academic, while contradicting and critiquing efforts of “traditional” anthropologist engaged in the public good, it does not shy away from subverting anthropological empiricism and advocating its own activist agenda and methods. It critiques what Applied Anthropology (which *is* a recognized venue in each subfield) and community development work has historically achieved despite many socio-political derailments world-wide.

³ Such is different from the ethnographic experience of fieldwork—a subjective experience in the field—where the anthropologist witnesses live those of another culture, “the other,” and attempts further objectivity through empirical data collection. Anthropological reflexivity by an ethnographer is a prominent means of transforming witnessed or participated social experiences in the field into anthropological knowledge. “Through this investment, the ethnographer arrives at an understanding not only of ‘culture’ or ‘society’, but more importantly of the processes by which cultures and societies are embodied in people, are reproduced, also transformed” (Hastrup and Hervik 1994, 1). The work of the anthropologist-ethnographer *does not require her to become the other*, or provide proof of such embodiment. Again, Hastrup and Hervik (1994, 2): “One of the targets of recent postmodernist criticism of anthropological practice has been the idea of realism, as expressed in the sustained and often sophisticated discussion of representation. With realism ‘gone’, it seems that we can only speak of ‘the empirical’ in quotation marks, forever distorted by our own concepts and subjective inclinations. However much the anthropologist is part of the reality studied, it is still real, and not her. Far from needing quotation marks that distantiate us from our object, the empirical needs direct engagement as a first step towards a generalized knowledge that englobes ourselves and the process of knowledge production.”

from explicit understanding to implicit knowing. While implicit knowing certainly has a place in “multiheaded epistemologies” about personhood, identity, and self (p. 87), individuated histories should only illustrate the personal and not the general. Paris rightly cautions us that in her slipping into first-person voice to illustrate, such isn’t to be taken as a reference for everyone’s experience (p. 87). She wants to underscore the categorical nature of our self-identifications as a means of deliberately focusing on the problematic: we have ever-expanding labels in the effort to rearrange our imaginary to be inclusive. What we wind up with is more categories, or a conflation of them, and more dissention.⁴

In my estimation, we need to exercise caution, since it’s easy to be driven by self-delineations to straddle that hybrid format. Paris’ resolve—highly personalized in this narrative—is to acknowledge her social privilege given the times we live in (i.e., the categories which she embodies: white, female, hetero, monogamously married, religious); to save herself from using self-labels whenever she can (again, those “categories,” because these are the very problem); and most profoundly, to encourage our trust in the “I AM” in “sheltering [our] unflinching exploration of the individual ‘I am’” (p. 88).

I have faith God can lead us Christian anthropologists into ethical explorations of personhood, and help us in the “tender vulnerability of knowing and being known before and without asserting power with

symbols” (p.88). And yet, that doesn’t change how much of *our own* “story” needs to be told nowadays to be regarded “authentic,” if not an authority. Paris mirrors the problem in her abrupt departure to first-person dialogue: Our disciplinary background and scientific experience are apparently not enough today. We must reveal our *self*. . . and illustrate through *our self-experiences*. . . given the “multithreaded epistemology that is always at play in these matters” (p. 87).⁵

My Double Trouble—Then We Get On

I’m tempted to explore this ‘first person narration’ in this response—since my position paper is all about categories of personhood.

To be “authentic” and have authorial voice, will I need to reveal a “lived experience of non-dominant identity” (p. 84). (since ‘nobody knows my truth unless I tell it’)? Would I qualify nowadays without telling; or does it require that you know the very nature of “my body, myself,”⁶ my immigrant, Hispanic+, non-native born and underprivileged American historical status? Is it then enough to be authorial *and* authoritative, “because my insights also stem from my experiences,” as Paris herself embodies in a part of her response? (p. 87).

Let’s be quick here, and get validating the ‘I am’ out of the way. *Please bear with me.*

I’m male. I’m heterosexual. I’m a “he/his/him.” That makes me heteronormative and cisgender. By

⁴ No better example exists today than the ever-expanding and inclusive LGBTQI+ acronym. Each representational letter is a signifier of a particularistic identity, now melded together *as if* all were equal, and the same in each other’s eyes; and of course, that of society’s. However, we know that is not the case; that each letter may in fact herald differences of being, identity, biology, sexual preferences, and political position—sometimes not just appositional, but outright oppositional. It is now the case that some lesbian groups disdain trans women and find their use of the term ‘woman’ as highjacked, generating not just verbal wars but political vitriol. See Julie Compton’s (2019) article “‘Pro-Lesbian’ or ‘Trans-Exclusionary’? Old Animosities Boil into Public View.” *NBC News*, January 14. Retrieved at <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/pro-lesbian-or-trans-exclusionary-old-animosities-boil-public-view-n958456>.

⁵ Paris’ efforts in “voice shifting” to demonstrate “*the multithreaded epistemology that is always at play in these matters*” (to mean exemplifying categorical language issues present in all three articles via her personalized referencing), nevertheless raises the ongoing debate in anthropology on subjectivity, challenging the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity by using self-experience—even when acknowledged as non-normative, or used as example. While it may be adequate to illustrate in this way the complexity of present-day epistemological, categorical problems in the lived experience of persons, the technique is hardly adequate to provide the logical ground on which to *further argue* how frequent any personal problematic is in a particular cultural context; or to settle aspects of the culture or society that “troubles” the issues with “excessive categorical breath.” Paris’ ultimate resolve is to frame our work as a “profound spiritual invitation,” and places the hope of such work in terms of “Adam’s work of naming creation with care and humility.” (I wasn’t there to hear Adam categorizing the animal kingdom; but if we are to be literalists here, then let me state for the record and from substantive research dealing with ‘categories’, that Adam probably bemoaned a lot in this profound process of categorization.) The larger question of how a hostile society—a “place of danger” with variegated peoples—can explore each other’s categories without a war, is left for me to answer. I try, later in this response. A more comprehensive answer is in my 2021 title.

⁶ Apologies to the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective and lead author Judy Norsigian for a ‘take’ on their now impressive classic, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1961/2011). Forget for a moment I’ve spent 38 years as a clinical sexual counselor to straight and LGBTQ+ populations. For some that alone doesn’t permit me an “authentic voice.”

many accounts, I'm white.⁷ These labels today, in and of themselves, make me privileged. However, by other accounts—those that conflate race and ethnicity—I'm not really white: I'm Hispanic. Maybe Black. Maybe Native of the Americas. None of these, however, reveal current requirements that can move me from “privilege” to a status of someone who *can relate* to “the other” of many formats; and I dare say, “*or Be the other.*”

Let's really begin: My first foray into the U.S. and N.Y.C. was at age 6, on a ‘green card’ with my parents, from Cuba (not from Castro, not just yet); with no family funds, no English to understand. We lived in a one-room (not one bedroom) flat with a shared bathroom down a Victorian hall in a Victorian-era brownstone turned rent-a-room.

And then troubles began. I went to a grade school where I was a “*Spic*”; where my English efforts were constantly ridiculed; and where my parents on Back to School Nights had to rely on me to translate to the teacher in faltering English. New York City wasn't kind in those days to Hispanics. Most were relegated to service jobs and factories; and their children considered part of the litter that infected the streets in tenements on the Upper West Side. Cuba? Where's *that*, if not the playground for rich Americans from southeastern states All these knew was *Tropicana* the night club, and Mojitos. (*Lucy and Desi* were just beginning their own invention.)

Trouble: By age 7 I had developed hypothyroidism, a condition that bloated my weight beyond control, so that by the time I was in 6th grade (12) I was “*Fatso, Fatso 2x4, can't fit through the classroom door!*” Here was a body abnormal, a person socio-politically considered an *alien*, in a city where *Spics* were those that cleaned your toilets, did your Deli's dishes, or worked in your factories. Being poor didn't help. Broken English didn't help. Growing up morbidly obese didn't help, either. When none of us progressed, we returned to Cuba, not foreseeing it was on the verge of a Revolution. By then I was 14.

Seven months on, Revolution happened. We escaped the latter part of that year and returned to New York City, penniless. Again, we lived in a one-room flat, this time a basement so dank it never felt dry. That year—am now 15—I finally got treatment for my thyroid, paid for by the Federal Refugee Assistance Act, and magic happened.

Over eight months I shed the weight, worked the muscles, and got a new body, the one I had hoped for. I could peel off my tight T-undershirts in the summer (ones I always wore under any shirt), and not have man-boobs to be ashamed of. I could sunbathe shirtless in Central Park (a subway token away) and not feel embarrassingly obese. The sun, I recall, felt especially good on my (white?) skin, now on an average teen's body not worth a second look.

Trouble: Then at 16, my father deserted Mom and I, and without telling, went back to Cuba to try and get his parents out. I had to quit high-school, get a job, eventually finish a GED with a prayer and three more years. (We never heard from Dad again.)

Today we talk about intersectionality as if its troubles were only recently discovered; as if those of privilege because of how they look, or what sexual and racial favoritism prevails, never seemed to have brought them harm.

But that's not my story. My story is one of knowing numerous intersections: of poverty, morbid obesity, body dysmorphia, gynecomastia, other-categorizations, put-downs, anti-Hispanic rage, familial disruptions, language and culture loss—what those of ethnic and gender variances also know: Double Trouble!

I *can* relate to being in a body that's not what you want. I *do know* what it's like to be conflicted, *soma to mind*. I *have* experienced inappropriate categorizations, labels, of self, of identity, of being. I understood well “a hostile world” during childhood. And yet, it is this history that made me determined, passionate, compassionate; and when I gained Christ in my life at 17, it made me want more education to reach others with the salve I now knew was available. I was in the USA! For the dispossessed, anything seemed possible if one tried hard enough.

What *Is* Authoritative, Authorial Voice? Double Trouble

Now that my history is “out,” I question whether if knowing my history adds anything to my authoritative, authorial voice, earned through an MA, PhD, two post-docs; professoring and undertaking granted research for decades; training as a clinical sexologist and counseling straight, gay, and all in-between-the-

⁷ Ancestry.com processed my DNA recently. I have quite a European mix: 58% Spanish; 22% Portuguese; 13% French; 1% Sardinian-Italian; also 2% Ethiopian and Eritrean; 2% Carib Indian; 2% Mesoamerican Indian. Am I “white”? Am I “Hispanic”? Am I “Black” (what percentage qualifies?), or am I “Native of the Americas” (that 4% Indian)?

acronym for 38 years.⁸ Wouldn't these in themselves "move me" from naïve—even just a little bit—enough to suspend some judgment and hear what I say? Or is it that "because my insights also stem from my experience" is now the necessary predicate to validate commentary on any multiheaded epistemology?

Carl Rhodes (2020), channeling Emmanuel Levinas (works from 1961–1998) comments on the "self of reflexivity" (in his chapter 3, 42–44). "Reflexivity has demanded ways of doing research which reflect back on themselves [i.e. the authors/researchers] . . . most especially through methodological elaboration and confession. Such forms of 'reflecting back' in their writing are a meta-commentary on their own worth, together with attestation to their own powers of self-awareness" (42). In many cases—per Rhodes—there is a clear acknowledgement of the author's role in the construction of meaning via the inclusion of the researcher in the subject matter he or she is trying to understand or elucidate (42). In so doing, "Each researcher is now not just out to research other people, but to supplement this with looking inwards, and 'studying himself or herself' to create a 'reflexive dialogue,' to attain some sense of authenticity through awareness of his or her own experiences or biases" (42).

I agree with Rhodes that there is a "deep irony" in this use of reflexivity: The irony stems from "questioning the authorial authority to know (i.e. to say what is said)," while at the same time proposing the self-authority of the researcher to self-present in their writing offers some self-revelation that un-conceals "what is the real goings on" behind the "artifice of the argument" (43).

Again, Rhodes (rather than me): "This problematization works against its own ethos when reflexivity is responded to from a position that researchers can and should 'reveal' themselves in their research, 'make their assumptions explicit,' 'expose their situated nature,' 'uncover [the] taken-for-granted . . .' (42–43, italics in the quote itself). All such appears to Rhodes—and I agree—as efforts at narrative construction based

on one's own discursive rules and conventions rather than following empirical rules of research and reporting. The assumption is that by exposing him or herself, the author is "visible through personal disclosure" (43). And this is supposed to add that authenticity which corroborates authorial authority. Paris rightly points to activist writings favoring this trend in their writings, and in narrating sex/gender epistemologies (p. 85).

We can't settle this debate here, but I can certainly underscore how problematized the situation of authorial voice has become, when one can be so easily dismissed, as Paris notes, if one does not self-refer, self-validate through self-revelation and fit the contemporary criteria for what is authorial and authoritative. "When reflexivity means that the researcher feels required to add their own meta-commentary about themselves in their work, there is a significant *danger* [rightly echoed in your response, Jenell!] of questioning rather than enhancing the authorial authority that spurred the turn to reflexivity in the first place" (Rhodes 2020, 44).

How is all this affecting anthropological research and writing? What ethical questions are raised when 'truth' is no longer equated with empirical production and representation? What ethical limits should there be between the still distinct notions of self and other on which much of anthropological research is founded, and which is so crucial for sex and gender research? I'm fearful that the type of reflexivity we are discussing will inevitably be codified into practice, displacing the "scientific" moniker we anthropologists of sundry sub-disciplines have worked so hard to establish. Researcher-educator Trifonas leaves us with this to ponder:

To expose our discourse to the questioning of the other, not by devolving it into a rhetoric of self-autonomy, but by welcoming its resistance to a dialogue of the Self to the *selfsame*, is to open oneself to the play of learning, through queries and objections that empty the subject and enrich its heteronomy. (Trifonas 1999, 185)

⁸ By way of information, as a trained clinical sexologist I don't "do" "reparative therapy"; nor do I presume to venture outside the person's own ideological/religious beliefs. In sum, I work with individuals and seek to help them achieve wholeness and stasis with their sexual self and in their sexual expressions. If they are Christians who struggle with the integration of their faith and sexuality, and want my assistance, I then become an *accompagnateur* in the road to spiritual and sexual wholeness in Christ. Ultimately, I work with clients collaboratively to achieve goals that are worthy of their person, their faith, and which bring no harm to self or others. Being a medical anthropologist and by postdoc training also a clinical epidemiologist of sexual diseases, I leverage my assistance internationally and mix in reaching others for Christ wherever I've been in the world, clinics, hospitals, or villages.

Situating the *Other* Double Trouble: Answering Paris' "One Question"

In asking me her "one question," Paris delineates those groups impacted by this 'gender moment' which are important in my position paper's discussion: those in LGBTQ+ safe spaces; those in conservative Christian churches; those in progressive churches and spaces. All are engaged in the assertion of their power as socializing agents; all experience the world of the other as different from theirs, if not oppositional. And all seem to relate to the Real (her capitalization) "hesitantly, with faltering trust." She thus asks me (again quoted here for reference), "How can people move toward a love for the real and a quest for the truth, in a social context that treasures neither?" (p. 91).

I won't turn to my personal experiences in this effort to respond. I turn instead to my recently published work (which is also reviewed in this edition of the *OKH Journal*), *A Christian's Guide through the Gender Revolution* (2021); and Miroslav Volf's opus, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (2019 [1996]). On the latter, no one has attempted a better answer to Paris' question (even before she asked it here) than Volf. And yes—there's a lot of anthropology in both tomes!

The Oppositional World

Let's start with "a social context that treasures neither." Paris is correct, the world remains today a hostile place. In his Foreword to my work, New Testament theologian Jerry Camery-Hoggatt notes,

Almost every moment of cultural and historical significance has had contentions underscored more than its agreements, but the present moment has seen unprecedented contentions, and comes at a moment in time where life is difficult on many fronts, with social changes increasing in both variety and complexity. How much more so today, when media floods us, and the biting and sniping feels often enough like vapid opinionating. The problem is that much of it only reinforces what we already

believe, in the process blinding us to any truths that may be articulated on the other side. (Camery-Hoggatt 2021, xiii)

Faith and culture theologian Miroslav Volf, writing two+ decades earlier about the complexities of life in a fractured world, demonstrated the multiple ways in which "exclusion of the other" perpetuates a desperate cycle of violence. This violence is expertly analyzed in anthropologist Robert B. Edgerton's work *Sick Societies* (1992). The disturbing cultural reality these works bring to the surface is that *otherness*—the simple fact of being different in some way—comes to be defined as an evil on its own.⁹ Volf, re-editing his volume for the contemporary situation in 2019, again underscores a 21st century of resurgent and clashing identities. Drawing on critiques and contrasts between Nietzsche and Foucault, he writes,

[Nietzsche and Foucault] . . . rightly draw attention to the fact that the "moral" and "civilized" self all too often rests on the exclusion of what it construes as the "immoral" and "barbarous" other. The other side of the history of inclusion is a history of exclusion. The very space in which inclusion celebrates its triumph echoes with the mocking laughter of victorious exclusion. (Volf 1996, 63)

In situating the problematic, another element to realize is the following: There is a "shadow narrative" at work which generates a deep longing for inclusion, what Volf labels a "radical kind of inclusion" (1996, 62). Such then creates "binary divisions," "coercive assignments," and a kind of power imbued in "normalization" (p. 62). And so, "A consistent drive toward inclusion seeks to level all the boundaries that divide and to neutralize all outside powers that form and shape the self" (p. 63). Political scientist and sociologist Alan Wolfe notes that,

. . . the essence of this approach is to question the presumed boundaries between groups: of signifiers, people, species, or texts. What appears at first glance to be a difference is discovered to be little more than a distinction rooted in power, or a move in a rhetorical game. (Wolfe 1992, 310)

⁹ Edgerton's argument reminds me of Nancy Scheper-Hughes' *Death Without Weeping* (1992), which also tackles the myths and juxtapositions between fabled beliefs about our societies, and the hard truths ethnography brings to the forefront *about our societies*. Both Volf and Edgerton suggest we've become adept at the promotion of maladaptive, hostile, and dysfunctional relationships. Has the church been caught up in such "tribulations"? It wouldn't be the first time (see 1 Corinthians for examples)!

Inclusion, by its very nature, tries to neutralize all boundaries outside that which is believed to be true; boundaries that divide, but also that form and shape the self.¹⁰ However, differentiation is an epistemological fact in all living things; and boundaries, albeit many human-labeled and culture-specified ones, serve presumed purpose in noting distinctions. Volf cites as example: God, separating light from darkness, dry land from the wet; and from humans, “Adam’s naming of animals,” lineages/descendants, tribes. Volf again argues,

Intelligent struggle against exclusion also demands categories and normative criteria that enable us to distinguish between repressive identities and practices that should be subverted, and non-repressive ones that should be affirmed. “No boundaries” means not only “no intelligent agency,” but in the end, “no life itself.” . . . The absence of boundaries creates non-order, and non-order is not the end of exclusion, but the end of life. (Volf 1996, 174)

Gender Divisions

Volf, speaking about gender identities, also states,

If the content of gender identity has no transcendent grounding, no divine blueprint, on what is it rooted? The similarity with animals gives us a clue. For what human beings share with animals is the sexual body—a body that carries indelible marks of belonging to either male or female sex. Sometimes the marks are mixed (Fausto-Sterling 1995). But bodily ambiguities are arguably the exception that prove the rule. Men’s and women’s gender identities [and I must interrupt and add, “and intersex ones”] are rooted in the specificity of their distinct sexed bodies. Note that I speak of the sexed body as the root rather than the content of gender identity. This is because by stressing the importance of the sexed body, I do not intend simply to discard the distinction between “sex” as a biological category (genes, hormones,

external and internal genitalia, etc.) and “gender” as a social one (learned characteristics, personality traits, behavioral patterns, etc.) that has become so prominent in recent decades. (Volf 1996, 174)¹¹ [Bracketed comment mine.]

Moreover,

There is no way to simply read off the content of gender identity from the sexed body. All such readings are specific cultural interpretations. The sexed body is the root of gender differences that are themselves always socially interpreted, negotiated, and re-negotiated. (Volf 1996, 175)

Volf’s comments deeply resonate with what I’ve written in the position paper. My arguments against gender activists’ interpretations of the lexical and experiential outweighing if not *denormalizing, putting out of play* physical/biological contributions to body and identity (e.g., Judith Butler’s work, which I so often refute), is exactly the point of Volf’s last quote above. Butler’s “reinscription” of gender to the detriment of the sexed body as a lived experience—good, bad, wanted, disowned—is, as I’ve stated in the paper, oxymoronic word play. (Again, don’t confuse the terms *gender* and *sex*. Please re-read my position if the difference is still not clear.)

To sum the “situating the situation” here, let’s underscore that the world remains a hostile place for human differences to survive without contestations. When these do, they seek to monologically construct and affirm selves; in the West, tendered by a very Western postcolonial habitus and the cultural ease of individuation. Today also, sans reference to biological facts (or “categories”), and more readily based on constituted personal experiences. As well, culturally trending now is to proffer the exclusion of those who don’t side with one’s/or/one’s group identifier(s). Seeking to erase bounded conceptions, that is “reinscribe” the imaginary to be free of boundaries, we end up generating power struggles and rhetorical games, exclusions vs. generating inclusion and

¹⁰ Take for example the expanding term *transgender*, or *trans*, now seen as “inclusive.” Originally and just a few years ago, the term *transgender* indicated a particular and rather exclusive category—those that were hormonally and/or surgically reassigned to the (binary) other sex. Like adding more initials to the LGBT acronym to insure “neutralization of all boundaries,” contemporary lexical categories continue to attempt expansive inclusion while becoming a rhetorical game of catch-up for users and included alike. It only confounds meanings, and widens divisions between the “us” and the “them.”

¹¹ Regarding gender, all Volf quotes are references to his 1996 (original) edition. Unfortunately, in revising and updating the edition (2019), Volf felt Chapter 4, on gender identity, needed more time to be edited/commented on than he had available, to examine the explosion of work now in the field. This chapter was thus *omitted* from the 2019 edition of his work.

freedoms—all with more labels. All of this seems especially relevant to gender and gender identity in contemporary Western society, producing not only the ‘gender moment’, but the “gender revolution.”

The Big Question Isn’t How, but *Who*

Jenell Paris states of my position piece,

There is a childlike quality to Gil’s very sophisticated essay, a wonder and love of ‘what is’ that many on both liberal and conservative ends of sex/gender struggles would find naïve, warning that to seek the real and the true, in the world such as it is, will not lead to our good. (p. 91)

“In the world such as it is” I learned to look beyond the present, discovered means and ways, and found hope and resurrection. Will I really be read as the naïve outlier—unless I unwrap the personal to legitimate that the ‘what is’ can become the ‘what can be?’¹² (Don’t answer yet!)

In my position paper, I obviously do not follow what Paris proposes in her response as a possibly “safer strategy” than speaking as I do, ways that in her view may cause *trouble*.¹³ She proposes my “Using power to define reality in a manner best suited to our group, and to extend our understanding to other social groups and institutions as possible” (p. 91). (I gather she recommends this strategy because it seems to Paris that empirical and truthful language has eminently failed to challenge the positions of groups she mentions: those in LGBTQ+ safe spaces; those in

conservative Christian churches; and those in progressive churches and spaces.)

Let’s leave aside and undefined what is meant by “power” and “reality” . . . as well as the “as possible” in her suggestion . . . and get to the meat of the proposal.

Trouble: Isn’t that which Paris proposes what the Christian church has been doing for centuries, with miserable failures? Using *power* (particularistic biblical interpretations, “theological authority”) to define *their reality* (socially constructed in ways that nearly guarantee sexual/gender exclusions), in a manner best suited to *their group*? (On all this, several good critiques come to mind. See the footnote.¹⁴) To my point, Teri Merrick sums it up beautifully:

Is there reason for thinking that the [authorial] sources my Christian communities use promulgate hermeneutic injustice? The answer is yes. Space does not permit me to adduce all the evidence showing that women and others . . . have been victims of structural identity prejudice throughout church history. . . . Evidence of structural prejudice against women and those who fail to conform to the hierarchically ordered sex and gender binary is so strong that it forces the question, “Why does biblical religion that sees every person as created in God’s image so easily become a sponsor of human rights violations in the area of sex and gender?” (Merrick 2020, 99.)

Trouble: Isn’t “hermeneutic injustice” also what gender activists are now doing with *their reality*, and getting whiplash for it? Consult the work of Ryan T. Anderson (2017).

¹² A truly humbling moment was receiving Mike Rynkiewicz’s pre-publication comments of my piece for this journal issue, and his statement, “Let me say first off that the paper is a tour de force on the issue of how gender and sex (biological) relate in today’s debates. I appreciate the science and clarification.” (Personal correspondence, December 17, 2021.) Mike has known nothing personal or historical about me (till this piece). He validates an authorial voice from the “science and clarifications” I provide—not from my “lived experience of non-dominant identity,” or “because my insights also come from my [personal] experiences.”

¹³ Both in my recent book (2021), and certainly in the position paper in this issue of *OKH Journal*, I propose a forward discussion of what is inherently a problem in contemporary gender renditions, and how such have concretized. I try to bring biology back into discussions and theories of body and self without disowning sociocultural variables. I openly acknowledge and support intersex born individuals, gender dysphoric persons, and the need to hear their voices. I plead for the Church to stop ignoring its Judaic heritage and their acceptance of varied gendered identities; the need to change out its paradigmatic binary-only schema for humans; and its necessity to correct binaristic theologies. Paris propose a “safer strategy” since all this may seem naïve (read ‘impossible to achieve’) to some on either side of the arguments.

¹⁴ Let’s start with Megan K. DeFranza’s meticulous scholarship in *Sex Differences in Christian Theology* (2015); Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (2010); Terri Merrick’s “Non-Deference to Religious Authority: Epistemic Arrogance or Injustice” (2020); Pope Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio), *The Name of God is Mercy* (2016); Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (2014); Branson Parler, “How Should Christians Navigate the Gender Revolution?” *Think Christian* (February 2017); and for fun, Nate Pyle, *Man Enough: How Jesus Redefines Manhood* (2015); M.D. Thompson, “A Theology of Gender and Gender Identity: A Report from the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission” (2017); and Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978).

No-one can untie this Gordian knot of a rightful question Paris proposes in three to four paragraphs.¹⁵ So I ask more pointed ‘Who’ questions to the groups involved, to try and jump-start an answer: Who among you can be moved most readily by God’s spirit to venture into the compassion and care which Scriptures demand of those who follow Jesus Christ? Who in pastoral leadership can lead by example and embrace the struggle against falsehood, injustice, and violence involved in the “gender wars”? Who can use their distance from “the other” best, to gain perspective? And for Christian anthropologists reading this: Who among us can join the small chorus researching issues of contemporary sex/gender expressions, not only to enable anthropological-missional ends, but to garner insights the Church desperately needs today?

Certainly, I don’t wait for “people” in general to embrace change (we know better as anthropologists—remember Homer Barnett [1953]), or to be “moved” by the Holy Spirit. I also don’t wait for those outside Christian circles to want to change what has become a cultural movement, full of self-identifiers, and which provides adopters (especially Gen Z) with what feels as their ultimate liberation. Nor do I wait for the church to wake up, ‘all of a sudden’ to acknowledge the truth of intersex, gender dysphoria, variously recognized gender expressions in Judaism—even though questions these prompt are at our doorstep, and gender variance is in our pews.

But I do believe that “a conscientious religionist [anthropologist, here]” can and should display a selective distrust toward ecclesial authority, as Merrick suggests in the quoted work, but work to effect change. What I argue in my position paper relative to the church, Volf is all the more emphatic by quoting Nietzsche: “The judgment must begin, however, with the household of God. (1 Peter 4:17)—with the [religious] self and its own culture. Nietzsche pointed out that those who wish to make a new departure have ‘first of all to subdue tradition and the gods themselves’” (Volf 1996, 52). (Bracket mine for clarity.)

My aim here is to point the Christian finger at our idols, our false gods, turn our eyes toward an evangelical personality which demonstrates alterity, which can then listen to the great Second Commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39 NIV).

And who is my neighbor? Luke 10: The ones whom we need to understand. The ones to whom we owe our attention, our time, our engagement without hesitations or judgment. Ultimately, the ones we need to embrace. Can we live it out? Or, is it hopelessly naïve to ask this?

Rather than listening to me, hear what Camery-Hoggatt says:

Vince reminds us again and again that conversations about gender and identity need not be set in opposition; indeed, they can become cooperative projects in which we seek a third path. To do that, he insists that we begin by listening to the personal stories of the people who are directly impacted by these issues—those that are biologically intersex, who are troubled by sexual dysphoria, who may be at the crossroads of gender variance; or whose family lives are directly affected by these questions. To understand the issues, we first must encounter and genuinely try to understand the people concerned. This book is filled with cases, some of them deeply anguishing, many enmeshed in physical biology or the workings of the psyche, others involving issues of spirituality and the impact of these questions on their journey of faith. While it’s entirely possible to parse the issues theoretically and abstractly, we mustn’t stop there. As followers of Jesus, we’re asked by Vince to listen directly and carefully to the people who are directly impacted. It is the attention to the person that makes this book so useful for Christians. Here, Vince provides us a way that we, as Christians, can bridge this particular divide. Doing so requires us to be open to new knowledge. To paraphrase Eric Hoffer, “In times of radical change, it is the learners that inherit the earth.” (Camery-Hoggatt, “Foreword” in Gil 2021, xiv)

The central question mark is whether the church of Jesus Christ can once again look to itself in truth and humility, acknowledge and repair its biologically wrong views, uninformed theologies, and refrain from judgments. We should aright wrongs against people who are distinct so we don’t repeat history and respond incorrectly. If this sounds as if only directed to those in conservative Christian churches, let me be quick to add that those in progressive ones need to also eat some humble pie: Acts 10:34 ESV should be kept on every

¹⁵ I *do* ask a similar question, and devote three chapters (7, 8, and 9) in my recent 2021 publication to working out mutual conversations and understandings between gender groups and the church. In chapters 8 and 9, I detail recommendations for pastoral and church leadership on how to engage the ‘gender moment’; and in chapter 9, I extend that conversation to all those in the Christian faith.

Christian's sightline, "I now truly understand that God does not show favoritism."

To engage that kind of altruism, we must:

- Walk with our 'neighbor'—offer up a conversation with those of varied genders.
- Earnestly listen
- Show compassion (Prov 31:8-9)
- Be humble enough to correct our own misunderstandings
- Speak 'truth' only when we are well informed—information opens the mind of the humble (1 Peter 5:5-6)
- We can agree to disagree and still receive our 'neighbor'
- We can stand in opposition to bullying (and in this, include *negative persuasion*) (Gil 2021, 203-205)

To gender activists we should respond directly, and our response should sound something like this: 'I understand. We were once myopic. While I may not agree with you totally, I can agree to hear you and understand you, and not judge you. And I hope you can hear me and understand me, and not judge me either' (Gil 2021, 214). If we are to emulate Jesus, then we must find a compassionate middle where we can all stand. The Christian culture of humility and obedience, its death of self requisite demand it. Is it naïve to believe that we Christians should be the first to make the move?

How Can Christian Anthropologists Contribute to Answering "The Paris Question"?

Christian anthropologists can help encourage our religious communities to do better by serving a catalytic function. Our research and collaborations on sex and gender with scientists, theologians and philosophers can open greater dialogues. Researching objectively, scientifically, ethnographically, ethnologically, Christian church cultures and positions can reveal those "sick" trends that can then be addressed by applied anthropological means; by theologians willing to do this work (DeFranza again comes to mind); and by Christian philosophers in their arguments (Teri Merrick comes to mind here). Let's not forget anthropologists-missilogists who have already, like Robert Priest, Michael Rynkiewicz, Kersten Priest, Jenell Paris, Adam Kiš, Sherwood Lingenfelter, et al., begun tackling prickly questions of sexuality, gender;

even abuse and victimizations—Phillip Jenkins. These have not towed the "safe" line to get research done and confront "multiheaded epistemologies." I count many in this group as those Merrick labels "conscientious religionists," who also "display a selective mistrust towards ecclesial authority"—but do work to correct it. We need a legion, not a cadre willing to learn about, then embrace the work of sex and gender as it is rendered today. I know of no frontier in the human phenom more worthy to engage at present, especially given the turbulence we now live in and our need for clarity.

Is it naïve to ask Christian anthropologists to consider joining this work? I refuse to be safe by not asking: *If not us, then who? If not now, then when?*—Rep. John R. Lewis.

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