Symposium: How (If at All) is Gender Relevant to Comparative Philosophy?

The symposium, "How (if at all) is gender relevant to comparative philosophy," focuses on relevance of gender as an analytic and critical tool in comparative philosophical understanding and debate. Nkiru Nzegwu argues that gender as conceived by contemporary Euro-American feminism did not exist in pre-colonial Yorùbá as well as many Native American societies, and that therefore employing gender as a conceptual category in understanding the philosophies of pre-colonial Yorùbá and other non-gendered societies constitutes a profound mistake. What's more, doing so amounts to a totalizing Euro-American colonial imposition that does violence to nongendered societies that reject gender as an ontological category. Hence, gender is ill-suited as a universal comparative philosophical tool. Nzegwu's three co-symposiasts, Mary I. Bockover, Maitrayee Chaudhuri, and María Luisa Femenías enrich and complicate this question by bringing to bear both conceptual, ethical and empirical considerations drawn from the United States, India, and Latin America respectively.

How (If at All) is Gender Relevant to Comparative Philosophy?

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At a very basic level, the question, "How (if at all) is gender relevant to comparative philosophy?" suggests agreement on the viability, or should I say, the utility of the category of gender. The suggestion may rest on the idea that gender is now uncontroversial given its political project of accounting for women's subordination and oppression. The underlying message seems to be that, as progressive people, we should focus on how gender is or is not useful in philosophy. But that presumption misses a much deeper question: Did the category occur in all societies at all times? If not, how would the comparison work methodologically? If a society or people did not have the category of gender, say, before European colonization, why foist one on them? What justification is there for deploying gender as if it were an ontological category that warrants insertion into all societies across time and space? Must these societies' experiences and epistemologies be expunged as if they did not matter? The mistake in uncritically deploying gender in comparative philosophy is that we ignore its role in transforming societies that were nongendered into gendered ones, and in justifying the dispossession of women in these societies to bring them in line with the European colonial project. Proceeding cautiously would enable us to attend to the experiences of nongendered societies for the important lessons they offer to modern societies. Those nongendered experiences and the conceptual lens that shaped them could be utilized in reforming modern gender societies. In other words, we should be wary about applying gender in comparative philosophical analysis, given that interpretively, it structurally reorganizes societies on the basis of its own logic.

Notwithstanding feminist claims about the benefits of the political project of gender, the aforementioned preliminary questions are necessary, because they recall the colonial history and role of gender in creating male-privileging sociopolitical environments in numerous African and Native American societies that now call for the deployment of gender's political project; and second, because they go to three central assumptions of feminist theory that must be queried. These assumptions are: the supposition that the category 'gender' is universal; the supposition that it defines the categories 'man' and 'woman,' their identities, and their relations in all societies; and the presumption that women all over the world as a group are subordinated to men and similarly oppressed in the same way. If, indeed, these three pivotal assumptions are true as is now globally assumed, then 'gender' is really not the social category it should be but an ontological category. The danger then in making gender an analytic category for comparative philosophy is that we risk inserting it into the conceptual schemes of cultures that were nongendered. The risk is extremely high because of the hegemonic power and dominance of the modern Western colonial ideology that prevails globally; and because that ideology continues to overwhelm the philosophical traditions, ideational forms, and cultural consciousnesses of less influential societies and less powerful cultures.

The knowledge that gender is an arm of colonialism as well as of modernization, and that it erodes cultural specificity, cultural historicity, and the epistemologies of nongendered societies means that we should be careful about its accounts of women's subjugation and oppression, and the kinds of proposals it offers. While its role with colonialism has been invidious, it did not fully obliterate all of Africa's cultural institutions, practices, traditions, languages, and conceptual systems, but we should avoid entrapment by its metaphysics. Doing so involves avoiding immanent critiques of gender that surreptitiously commit us to accepting the validity of its universality claims, and that compel theorists to endlessly splice and dice theoretical issues that in the end leave the central problems in place. In First World countries, for instance, feminist critiques have yielded impressive legislative, legal, and social victories, but as activists are increasingly discovering, the anticipated payoff of the reforms are relatively negligible. This is because immanent critiques and the gender reforms they initiate are mostly reconfiguring and recycling old oppressions, not eliminating them. The crucial problem is that the promised reforms embody the same set of presuppositions and assumptions about reality, the same rules, criteria, and methodology, and the same ideas about social structures, social dynamics of power, social relationships, and moral values of a conceptual system that binarily ranks bodies; that privileges males; and that produces gender oppression of women in the first place. In short, the reforms are striving to eradicate problems that are foundational to the system which they embody.

Thus, a serious response to the symposium necessitates raising extrinsic challenges to the category 'gender' to propel us out of its gravitational force and social conditions that intrinsically shortchange women. We begin by problematizing the social logic of the still colonial, still racist, and still sexist modern Western culture that gave birth to, and dispersed gender worldwide in the last two centuries. The pseudo-universal ideas that gender embedded into the thought systems and categories of Western philosophy are: that gender identities are fixed and static; that women are inherently inferior and subordinate to men; that marriage is only between a man and a woman; that marriage is strictly conjugal and sexual; that a female marrying a wife or wives is inconceivable; that female bodies and sexuality are owned by husbands, in particular, and men, in general; that only males can be husbands, female cannot, and that males cannot be wives, only females; that motherhood and mothering is a minor task; that parenting is a singularly female task; and that females lack objectivity, rationality, and cannot be leaders. All of these pseudo-universal ideas rest on the fundamental idea that there are just two human biological categories – "man" and "woman." Though gender differentiated, these categories are nonetheless represented as simultaneously universal (given that male and female are inherent in nature) and culturally constructed (given that all societies are presumed to have similar views about male and female).

Thus, to embark on an extrinsic critique of the social reality presented by the category of gender, it is

necessary to identify the foundational organizing assumption or principle that rarely makes it into gender discourses, but which deeply constructs the social world and the social conditions in which gender operates. This foundational principle is the sex/body principle that takes the body (or sex) as given in nature and as the primary basis of social organization. The principle is woven into conceptual structures at a most fundamental level that it functions as the presuppositional touchstone for thought patterns, cognitive categories, classificatory schemes, concepts, and social consciousness. Most significantly, it operates at a depth where it is hardly visible from within the social world where it is taken as a "natural" fact of life. It becomes evident only when one stands outside in a different cognitive and social system.

1   An African Challenge to "Gender"

In two major texts, *Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Discourses on Gender* (1997) and "Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies" (2002), Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí makes the prescient point that historically the dominant organizing category of Yorùbá culture was "seniority," not sex/body or gender. The insight was ignored as many feminists, including African gender theorists, missed its epistemological significance (Manuh 2007; Bakare-Yusuf 2004; Salo and Mama 2001). Feminist and gender theorists mostly proceeded as though conceptually and methodologically nothing could challenge the cognitive and universal validity of gender. The stance ignored that even within its own intellectual history, feminist scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s had launched devastating critiques of the category (Mackinnon 1989, 1987; Pateman 2001, 1988; Butler 1990; Hawkensworth 1997; Scott 1999; Fox-Genovese 1991; Gatens 1991; Fudge 1988; Lerner 1986). But if Oyěwùmí's insight is accorded the theoretical attention it deserves and, as philosophers, we all agree that gender is a social not an ontological category, then at the very least we have to acknowledge that societies do indeed have different organizational principles. This step is critical as it would begin to move us out of the conceptual and metaphysical world of gender into an extrinsic position necessary for apprehending and evaluating the category.

So, what does it really mean that Yorùbá society utilized "seniority" rather than "sex/gender" as its organizational principle? The question is important because it sheds light as well on the nature of gendered cognition, particularly its processes of reasoning. Oyěwùmí's insight, supported by a community of scholars (Abiodun 2014; Washington 2005; Hallen 2000; Badejo 1996; Sudakarsa 1996, 1981) reveals what it means that seniority, which is based on chronological time rather than sex/body/gender, defined the Yorùbá society. Cognitively, on this model, human beings were conceptualized primarily and solely as *ènìyàn* (human). Chronological time cannot distinguish between bodies/sex as it lacks the necessary information to do so. Epistemologically, it establishes temporal precedence and simply marks birth and age, not whether a child is male or female. The society is understandably preoccupied with time, because it utilizes experiential knowledge, that is, knowledge which is acquired empirically, to build its structure of knowledge. This structure utilizes the principle of temporal precedence in establishing its criterion of knowledge that philosopher Barry Hallen explains demands firsthand experience: to "mò" (to "know") or to have "ìmò" ("knowledge") applies only to experiences that one witnessed firsthand or personally (2000: 15). While the Yorùbá knowledge system has complex structures of beliefs, rigorous criteria of certainty, and methodical processes of reasoning, empirical knowledge remains the basis of what one knows. When linked to the knowledge system, seniority implies having greater experiential knowledge than one's junior. It is a useful measure for demarcating the scope of what one knows in a context where seniors are deemed to know more than juniors.

Still it makes sense to consider why the Yorùbá did not utilize gender as an organizational principle,

given the dependence on empirical knowledge and the visibility of bodies. Why did they not find it useful to organize their social relationships on gender? The question is necessary for discerning the social rationale of focusing on chronological time and not moving on to focus on the sex or body. It seems that the criterion of time became optimally important because, like most African societies that possessed fluid social categories and did not develop a gendered universe, the Yorùbá invested supremely in family growth and expansion. This emphasis on the production of new members led to the development of a family system with diffused power centers and nongendered relations that directed attention to the vital reproductive role of mothers, whose principal concern was the well being of their child, not the sex.

Procreation by multiple mothers in this consanguinally-based family system created a family and community-wide need for keeping track of everyone born at the same period. In such large multi-generational families, comprising of core groups of siblings referred to as *ọkọ*, and an in-marrying group known as *ìyàwó*, chronological time or temporal precedence became an effective mechanism for identifying positionality and ranking members. The criterion of relative age and seniority became important for managing people's expectations, ascertaining people's capabilities, allocating duties fairly since duties are tied to capacities, establishing what one knows, and constructing identities that are reflections of people's multiple social roles and positions. Indeed, the benefit of chronological time and the model of social organization that go with it is the situational fluidity of positionality, authority, power, and autonomy that it creates. No one or group is ever locked into a permanent position of advantage or disadvantage. There is always someone or some group in a superior and subordinate position in every social interaction.

Furthermore, this principle of seniority finds deep expression in the language. Yorùbá language meticulously codes the prioritization of chronological time. In conversations, speakers automatically switch back and forth as they make their point from the language code of formal respectful speech reserved for seniors to the informal familiar speech reserved for age mates and juniors. Reasoning and social interaction proceeds along similar lines, taking into account a range of factors such as family, age, community, profession, and so on. Owing to the conceptual dominance of time, the Yorùbá language unlike that of the social world of gender, is devoid of pronouns and speech patterns that meticulously and automatically signals sex. The depth at which temporal precedence organizes thought is comparable to the depth at which gender operates. From that depth the seniority principle structures thought, molds ideas, influences actions, and shapes a range of human activity that characterize the Yorùbá universe. In line with the principle's nongendered markings, concepts such as power, agency, leadership, and others apply to all *ènìyàn*. There is nothing like male power or female power, constitutively power is power; and there are no masculine or feminine traits, there are only human traits. This deep organizational logic is also evident in behavioral gestures, in family logic, and family relationships. For instance, the head of a family is the firstborn regardless of sex, and the rest of the family, a fundamentally multi-generational social group, take their place in order of temporal ranking.

2   Gender-Reasoning versus Seniority-Reasoning

Western philosophy is the most dominant philosophical tradition in the world today, and philosophers habituated to its gendered conceptual scheme have a difficult time grasping the logic of societies that do not "see" nor represent the social world as gendered. But exactly what does this mean? A society that utilizes sex or gender focuses primarily on the anatomy and all visible features of the body such as race. It hardly focuses on the non-visual elements of culture, age, family, and profession. It simply treats all males as men and as sharing the same behavioral traits and sexual powers, while females at the opposite end of the spectrum are viewed as women and treated as sharing the same traits, features, and experiences. The gendered society shapes

women's identity in terms of marriage and in relation to the dominant men in their lives, either a father or a husband. Consequently, men permanently occupy the dominant position of power, while women permanently occupy the subordinate, inferior position. The seniority principle focuses on the social matrix in the building of social relationships, while the sex/gender principle begins with physical bodies and treats them as distinct, autonomous beings whose identity is shaped by anatomy and race. Individual identity is then tied to biological traits that purportedly specify sexual norms, which are represented as inherent in nature. On this biologized framework, marriage is gendered. It entrenches women's identity as subordinate beings and becomes an institution for men to permanently satisfy their sexual needs and fulfill their procreative objectives. Marriage in the gendered moral universe rested on a theory of sexuality that imposed chastity vows on wives and stripped them of any control of their sexual and procreative powers. Such a universe nullified the idea that a female could control her sexuality.

With a gendered, male-privileging ethos permeating words and meanings, knowledge criteria, social relationships, and concepts, the lens that philosophers of the Western tradition bring to research adheres to the logic of body reasoning. Carole Pateman's seminal text, *Sexual Contract* (1988), is useful in illustrating why any comparative philosophy between Yorùbá and Western or feminist philosophy is riddled with tensions and misunderstandings. Historically the gender ideology defines "woman" (read: European/white Caucasian) as a wife, whose autonomy, rights and sexuality were controlled by a husband who is always male. A centuries-old political doctrine solidified this ideology and legitimized the myths of heterosexuality that constructed men as the dominant sexual force, white women as passive beings, and women of color as hypersexual. On this sexuality template, white men were dominant and superior beings, while women in general were portrayed as inferior and totally dependent on men (Pateman 2001). Providing metaphysical and religious justification for this gendered viewpoint, a male creator God warranted men's sexual dominion over women by transferring women's agency, self-hood, and procreative powers to men. This divinely-ordained thesis of female exploitation and sexual subordination incorporated wives into the identity of husbands. The thesis found modern jurisprudential and legal expression in the English common law, the 1689 English Bill of Rights, and the American Constitution. This use of the Bible and State legal machinery to uphold men's dominion over women in Christian Europe, colonial Americas, colonized Asia and Africa was politically and philosophically justified by philosophers. Many like John Locke (1967) theorized women's subordination by denying them autonomy, rationality and the capacity to make decisions about morality and governance.

The importance of Pateman's sociopolitical analysis is that it clarifies how a gendered state is synonymous with a male dominant society. It reminds us too that the sexist sociopolitical conditions that women encounter in postcolonial African countries are a legacy of European colonization and the political system that was left behind. It also reveals how motherhood became reviled by Caucasian feminists, who first saw it as an instrument of their mothers' domination by their fathers, and later of their own subjugation. They then exported that revulsion globally to construct motherhood in any cultural context as synonymous with women's subjugation. However, in contrast to the gender world that inferiorizes women, the centuries-old Yorùbá intellectual tradition based on Odù Ifá, a sacred compendium of Yorùbá philosophy, offers a different reading. Where Western philosophy presents a moral universe that warrants women's subjugation, Yorùbá philosophy presents a moral universe that endows mothers with formidable power and autonomy. The ontology and cosmogony of Ifá enshrines the power of mothers, of which all females partake.

According to the Òṣẹ Túrá verse of Odù Ifá, Olódùmarè, the Prime Mover, sent seventeen Odù (and orisa) to the earth at the time of creation. Of the seventeen only one was a female principle, the rest were male principles. The lone female Odù known as Òṣun, whose name means "the source" (Abiodun 2014, 2001; Washington 2005; Ogungbile 2001; Abimbola 2001; Badejo 1996) possessed "unfathomable knowledge" (Abiodun 2014: 101) and "concealed power" (Washington 2005; Abiodun 2001; Ogungbile 2001; Abimbola

2001). So when the Odù arrived on earth "all the male Odù collaborated and made provisions for themselves, but they made no provision for Òṣun" (Abiodun 2014: 98). So Òṣun patiently waited to see how their mission will succeed. Because they did not include her in their tasks, nothing they did worked (*ibid.*). In panic, the male Odù hastened back to Olódùmarè who then revealed to them the reason for their failure. Unbeknownst to them, Òṣun was, in fact, the Prime Catalyst, and without her cooperation "no healing can take place, no rain can fall, no plant can bear fruit, and no children can come into the world" (*ibid.*: 100-101). Olódùmarè "the Creator-God [had] placed all the good things on earth in Òṣun's charge making her 'the vital source' of life (Abiodun 2001: 18; Abimbola 2001). She was the "conduit through which all life flows" (Badejo 2001: 129). To their dismay, the male Odù learned that their mission was doomed unless they recognize and obey her, because not only was she their keeper, they all derived from her (Abiodun 2014: 99).

The Òṣẹ Túrá goes on to state that all "women" are *àjé*, meaning they possess the same unfathomable knowledge and concealed power of Òṣun (*ibid.*: 98). Àjé, unlike ordinary è*nìyàn*, have two selves (èmí), their power "are rated as roughly twice those of the ordinary person […] such 'powers' are clearly linked to superior intelligence and ability" (Hallen 2000: 92). The Yorùbá cosmogony provides deep metaphysical and epistemological justification for the importance of the maternal principle and the role of mothers in society. Òṣun, the source from which all beings derive, embodies temporal preeminence and the knowledge that goes with it. She possesses autonomy, agency, power, and fortitude. The value of the Òṣẹ Túrá lies not only in stressing the importance of collaboration as the appropriate course for human action, but that Òṣun, the mother principle from which everything including the male Odù derive, is not subordinate to, or opposed to any male. A critical reading of the Òṣẹ Túrá underscores that male-ness is not synonymous with power; nor is numerical advantage synonymous with dominance where the mother principle is concerned. In fact, the attempt to construct a parity is a fallacy of false equivalence.

Reading Odù Ifá critically, we see that being a mother is not about being a female. It is about being the foundation of the family and society. Mothers' reproductive work surpasses any task because of its centripetal gravitational force. It is irreplaceable if any society or nation is to exist. It cannot be replicated, given that it is fundamental to human continuity and existence. The *àjé* power is innate, not given; nor is it transferable (Hallen 2000). Mothers are not in a binary relationship to fathers, by virtue of the nature of their membership and role in consanguinally-based family system. In patrilineal societies, "fathers" primarily establish the family to which a child is a member, and in matrilineal ones, "fathers" signal the families that provided the gift of life. But when Western philosophy attempts to understand societies, such as the Yorùbá, by using the body as a basis of understanding, it invariably disrupts the Yorùbá time-based logic and replaces it with a sex-based logic. The mother is transformed into a symbol of subjugation whereas in Yorùbá culture she had evolved into a most potent symbol of life and power. Due to the hegemonic power and dominance of the West's conceptual scheme, the Yorùbá social logic is swept out of consideration and replaced by the West's erroneous gendered interpretations.

3   Where To, From Here

Some have assumed that all identified conceptual and epistemological problems of gender can be avoided by peeling apart the interlinked ideas of masculine dominance and female subjugation, and promoting a social arrangement based on gender equality, meaning a framework that treats men and women as socially equal. The supposition here is that the category 'gender' can be recouped and put to use by identifying and eliminating the negative aspects of biological binarism. But, can there be a category of gender without binarism and body-reasoning?

In *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion & Culture* (1997), Ifi Amadiume, the first African women to theoretically engage gender, addressed this issue of gender's relevance in comparative analytical work. She did so by articulating a matriarchal ideology at the basis of society upon which she built a patriarchal consciousness (*ibid.*: 83-86). Believing that European theorists are often mislead by their ethnocentrism, she tried to rid gender of its cognitive weaknesses, first by deploying it in diverse ways—identifying ideologies of gender in social institutions, examining gendered philosophies of power, studying the gendered nature of the state, and demonstrating the primacy of gender in the construction and contestation of religious claims (*ibid.*: ix-x). And secondly, by striving to inject fluidity into the category that was evidently inflexible and static. However, a close reading of Amadiume's works show that she did not examine the epistemological character of gender to determine its theoretical shortcoming, which is probably why she did not apprehend its constitutive nature.

It is important to acknowledge that at that time period, the general tendency of scholars was to utilize 'gender' as a shorthand for 'woman' once the project accords visibility to women. (I, too, have used 'gender' this way in the past [1994].) But that usage is mistaken because it presupposes the validity and the legitimacy of the category. It did not grasp that 'gender' is not a shorthand for 'women,' nor can it be cognitively stripped of its historically-specific and culturally-specific traits. 'Gender' is constitutively structured by implicit assumptions and presupposition about biological binarism, and by unwarranted presuppositions and assumptions about women and women's subordination to men. It is the deeply embedded nature of these ideas that created the inflexible and static nature of women's identities that theorists observed and tried to correct. But the concept and category is not like an empty container into which one can pour out and pour in ideas, like the proverbial wine. The concept and category are like a lens that is implicitly structured by the ideas making up gender. For this reason, all the ideas that Amadiume distilled from Igbo reality that are contrary to gender cannot constitutively reshape the category to become a part of it.

Gender or sex differentiation, that is, differentiation on the basis of biological sex, as well as sex discrimination is built into the very nature of the category gender. In *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*, I argued that a social ontology and metaphysics that reflects the sexual codes of patriarchy and its logic of body reasoning cannot be nongendered; hence, the category 'gender' cannot approximate nor capture the logic of Igbo society. Like the Yorùbá society, the Igbo society accords preeminence to the reproductive unit and the power of mothers. But, unlike the Yorùbá society, it underwrites a social principle of complementarity in which a society-wide group of adult female political actors collaboratively interweave with adult male political actors to administer society. Although this political ideology gave rise to two governing councils, a dual-symmetrical administrative system that appears to be gendered, but that system is not based on, and does not presuppose, gender-based assumptions. Rather, the system reflects a political ethos that comes from consanguinally-based family relationship, in which the nongendered conception of power and authority of the two groups of political actors derive from their roles, duties, and responsibilities as daughters/mothers and sons/brothers. This specific ethos is politically deployed in tasks in which their administrative powers, duties and responsibilities do not overlap. Politically functioning as members of one cohesive, enduring family, this model of political administration and the model of collaboration it establishes is at odds with the model of collaboration of distinct, autonomous individuals that serves the agenda of an artificial state.

To sum up, gender may seem to be a useful instrument for comparative philosophy, but it raises major problems of false understanding. The question of its use in comparative analysis must become a call for serious philosophical engagement with nongendered societies in Africa and the Americas. Such engagement is required to fully understand those societies' social systems and social relationships and what they offer to human kind. Contrary to its claims of universality, Western philosophy is geographically, culturally and socially determined and turns overwhelmingly on its white Caucasian system of values, systems of cognition, prejudices and power. Radical analytical work is required, not to establish the philosophical viability of other cultures conceptual

systems, but to deeply rethink the Western models of social organization that is presented as the unassailable pinnacle of human development. Latin American philosophers such as Maria Lugones (2008) have begun this task in the Americas, and there is reason to suppose that the epistemological work will reshape the future of feminist philosophy.

A Response to Nzegwu's "How (If At All) is Gender Relevant to Comparative Philosophy?"

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1   The Distinction Between Sex and Gender

I am a comparative philosopher interested in ancient Chinese philosophy, ethics, feminist philosophy and identity theory, who has been educated in, and has taught mainly in the USA for over thirty years. As I understand it, 'gender' is a social construct, based on how different groups conceive of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'—that is, conceive of the capacities, qualities, and behaviors attributed to male and female (identified) bodies, respectively. The concept of 'gender' arose out of a social need to make a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender,' in fact, where 'sex' is now more directly tied to the biological contribution one's body can make in the process of reproduction; namely, whether one has ova (female gametes) or sperm (male gametes). This is not to deny that some bodies are more or less sexually ambiguous, such as the kind we find with intersexual persons.[1] My point is only that as a concept, 'sex,' which is now defined by the sex cells and corresponding karyotype a human being possesses, tends to be more ontological in character than is the concept of gender.[2]

In contrast, 'gender' is more normative[3] than biological, defined by characteristics that a culture takes to be appropriate to assign to female—'as opposed to' male-bodied persons. Like the distinction between the sexes, which is further conceived in the West in terms of a binary of sexual opposition where being female is the 'opposite sex' of being male, social concepts of femininity and masculinity also often run along binary lines. However, ideas of masculinity and femininity vary greatly across cultures, and can change drastically over time even within the same culture.[4] Once we understand that gender is a social construct then we can see how it may play a role in identity construction.

Identity construction commonly involves people simply and uncritically adopting—or identifying with—a gender that is 'normal' or generally taken to be appropriate in their culture. At this level people are conditioned to present themselves in socially acceptable ways that typify being masculine or feminine. However, there are levels upon which gender construction can occur that are more intentional. For instance, one may consider whether her assumed gender identity is appropriate for herself. This would involve a more deliberate and evaluative process whereby one may come to reflectively affirm her assumed gender identity and maintain it as a part of her identity as a person.[5] She may also come to reject it in favor of a change; for example, where she starts presenting herself in a more, or in a less, feminine way, or even in an explicitly masculine way (all of which would be culturally recognizable).[6] It may even be that all the current 'gender bending' in much of the Western world anticipates a time when these cultures will 'go beyond' the idea of gender,[7] even though it is connected to the more ontological category of sex. But for now, gender is clearly and ubiquitously relevant as a social category. Recognizing this, for comparative philosophical purposes I find that the far more interesting aspect of identity formation, generally stated, concerns *how individuals themselves wish to be identified, including in ways that go against the current norms of their culture.*

Before I address this concern directly in the last section, first prefacing it with a clarification in the next, I observe in Nzegwu's (2016a) informative article a probable straw person argument in that she claims that Western feminists use gender as an ontological category. It is true that the initial masculine-feminine gender distinction has operated in a largely binary way in the West, somehow basing the significance of being 'male' or

'female' bodied on an even more basic binary ontology that distinguishes the sexes in biological, reproductive terms.[8] However, even if we think of the relation between males and females differently, say, in the more complementary manner that Nzegwu reminds us many cultures do—where males and females are taken to be *interdependent* with each other instead of existing in a binary of sexual opposition—we still should not equivocate 'sex' with 'gender' for the reasons I have already given. I think that most Western feminists do not think of gender as Nzegwu claims they do; for instance, in her explanation of the "pseudo-universal ideas" (*ibid.*) wherein she claims they have adopted 'gender' as an ontological category. As far as I am aware, most Western feminists treat sex and gender as related but distinct concepts, something along the lines that I have described. Some may use 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably, and as Nzegwu points out, that would be a problem, but neither feminism nor philosophers doing identity theory would get very far without distinguishing between the two, especially given that the gender attributes attached to male and female bodies are culture specific and much more fluid. The existence of transgender identities also makes clear the need to distinguish the concepts of sex and gender. To conclude, while gender may be misconceived by some as an ontological category that is "fixed and static" (*ibid.*), Nzegwu herself runs the risk of making the same kind of mistake in not acknowledging the philosophical work in the West that treats gender as a more fluid, socially constructed concept.

2   Sex, Gender, and Power: A Clarification

A related insight I might share is this: just because some cultures may not seem to inequitably distribute *power* based on sex or gender, that does not mean that the concept of gender is absent. For example, Nzegwu cites the work of Oyeronke Oyěwùmí (2002) to provide an example from African culture of the Yorùbá who do not assign greater power based on "sex/body or gender," but rather, according to seniority. Drawing from the Odù Ifá, which Nzegwu calls a sacred compendium of Yorùbá philosophy, she says that we find a "moral universe that endows mothers with formidable power and autonomy" (*ibid.*). My point is one of clarification only: the social role of motherhood for the Yorùbá is not "nongendered," since like many African cultures, they attach great value and power to the female sex/body and gender, especially in virtue of its capacity to bring new lives into the world. I take Nzegwu's main point here not to be about the lack of gender, but rather, to be about how the Yorùbá *empower* females in their role as mother. And as Nzegwu rightly points out, this view stands in stark contrast to the Caucasian feminist view that sees the role of mother as "an instrument of their mothers' domination by their fathers, and later of their own subjugation" (*ibid.*).

Regardless of its relationship to power, having a female body, often socially attached to the role of motherhood, makes a difference. The Yorùbá treat the female sex and social role of motherhood positively, while Caucasian feminists see them as instruments of subordination. Nzegwu says of the Yorùbá, "This emphasis on the production of new members led to the development of a family system with diffused power centers and nongendered relations that directed attention to the vital reproductive role of mothers, whose principal concern was the well being of their child, not the sex" (*ibid.*). My clarification can remind us that how a child's wellbeing will be conceived and pursued will depend on the reproductive capacities seen to inhere in the child. A culture may lift a group up in value or status instead of oppressing it because of its sex and/or gender attributes, but the distinction is still made between different bodies and the roles deemed appropriate to them. This leads to consideration of an aspect of identity formation stated above that will cast doubt on the claim that gender is irrelevant in cultures that do not seem to attend to it. This consideration concerns *how people themselves wish to be identified, including in ways that go against the current norms of their culture*. I will now argue below that this consideration presents another problem for Nzegwu's analysis of how gender is, or is not relevant to comparative philosophy.

3   Gender, Justice, and the Future of Comparative Philosophy

As for the social roles of mother, father, or more generally of parent, the sex of the person need not make a substantial difference when it comes to taking care of children. Surely both males and females can take on the role of primary caregiver of children, even though some bodies are able to do things that others cannot. For instance, bodies that have functioning mammary glands can nurse the young, but that should not keep people without them from feeding their young expressed milk or formula from a bottle. Stated another way, bodies do make a difference, but the gender roles we attach to them are not fixed and static but rather are *interpretive*; different cultures and individuals within a culture attach significance and value to roles, including whether they should be considered appropriate or not. For example, some men have raised children on their own in many cultures, even in those for which such a practice is not usual or not considered the best situation for the child. The simple fact that the role is abnormal has frequently been taken to be enough of a reason for thinking that it is not good or is even unfortunate.[9] But what really is the significance of sex and/or gender when it comes to childrearing?

First, notice that females can fall down on the job of being a 'mother' or good parent, and also that males can excel at the task, including that of being primary caregiver for their children. But what if a father *chooses* to be the primary caregiver of his family while his wife and mother of his children *chooses* to earn the family income in a culture for which that is not normal? Even those cultures that link power with the female body or distribute it more diffusely may see such a course of action as problematic simply because it goes against the norm—whatever the norm may be.

My study of Confucianism has shown me that there is a deeper problem with gender roles in virtue of their normatively stipulating who should, and who should not, be able to embody a role. This is the case even when all the relevant roles are thought to have value. For example, many family- or tribe-based communities do not necessarily deem one role to be better than another, or of being worthy of wielding more power over another, but they typically lack an explicit mechanism for reflecting on, and evaluating and/or socially critiquing the normative structure of the roles themselves. Why? One answer is that the creation of such a mechanism grew out of decidedly Western principles of rational critique and moral agency: where in large measure persons are conceived as rationally and freely choosing their own destiny.[10]

For instance, in the 1950's in the USA a man who intentionally chose to be a stay-at-home dad while his wife chose to pursue a career and earn the income for the family would have found himself in a culture that put up resistance to his choice.[11] He would not have been thought of as just being different. Rather, his choice would have been thought by many to be *unjustified* in violating the norms of what a man was supposed to do. Correlatively, he would have been criticized for setting an unmanly example for his male children, or providing a poor example for what his female children should expect from their future husbands. Given the substantial changes that have taken place in gender roles, in the structure of the family, and in identity formation in the USA over the past 70 years or so, one can see how pivotal the notion of self-determination and free choice has become for us Americans. Pressures to conform have slowly given way to a more individualistic expression of the good life, which in principle has entailed consideration of *how we define the good life for ourselves*. Most of the civil rights movements in the USA have been based on the premise that, regardless of color, race, religion, sex, national origin, and now, sexual orientation, persons should be treated as autonomous beings.[12] We think of ourselves as having an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, because we take self-governance to be of supreme importance. However, having the right to pursue what we conceive the good life to be for ourselves is not absolute, but it is consistent with the autonomy principle; we can live as we see fit as

long as it doesn't violate the rights of others to do the same.

Comparatively then, my critical Western mind questions whether the African societies that Nzegwu writes about, would be indifferent to female members who reject the role of mother. What if they want nothing to do with having children and a family? The point is this: in many societies, including many family- and tribe-based societies one simply *adopts* the identities that her culture assigns. She is not expected, and may well not be allowed, to challenge those identities. To state the matter in Western terms, she may not be 'free' to be the person she wants to be if that identity is alien to her culture. Here is another example: in the USA there has been an LGBTQ movement in which people are asking to be identified in ways that are not socially accepted, and that are even very discriminated against. Choice generally plays little or no role in what family or tribe one is born into, but that does not make choice morally irrelevant when it comes to *identity formation*. As gender is socially constructed, personal identity—and more specifically, gender identity—can, at least more or less, be personally constructed.[13] If nothing else, one can reflect on and then reject the normative identities of her culture as being *inappropriate for her* (yes, this is an affirmation of Western individualism here!). I will support this further in light of claims that Nzegwu makes when she writes about how the Igbo society is different from the more collaborative Yorùbá:

> Like the Yorùbá society, the Igbo society accords preeminence to the reproductive unit and the power of mothers. But, unlike the Yorùbá society, it [the Igbo] underwrites a social principle of complementarity in which a society-wide group of adult female political actors collaboratively interweave with adult male political actors to administer society. Although this political ideology gave rise to two governing councils, a dual-symmetrical administrative system that appears to be gendered, but that system is not based on, and does not presuppose, gender-based assumptions. Rather, the system reflects a political ethos that comes from consanguinally-based family relationship, in which the nongendered conception of power and authority of the two groups of political actors derive from their roles, duties, and responsibilities as daughters/mothers and sons/brothers. This specific ethos is politically deployed in tasks in which their administrative powers, duties and responsibilities do not overlap. Politically functioning as members of one cohesive, enduring family, this model of political administration and the model of collaboration it establishes is at odds with the model of collaboration of distinct, autonomous individuals that serves the agenda of an artificial state (Nzegwu 2016a).

On my view the Igbo (and the Yorùbá) are gendered societies, gender being a social concept tied to biological reproduction that "accords preeminence to the reproductive unit and the power of mothers," (*ibid.*) The gender difference—that is, in what the society conceives feminine in contrast to masculine powers to be—may not be a binary construct of sexual opposition like it is in the patriarchal West. But it still is a difference that runs along sex (bodied) and gender (norm) lines, and is one that I will now show can make another *moral* difference: in *a priori* excluding people from roles deemed inappropriate for them.

Recall Nzegwu says this about the Yorùbá in light of a reading from Hallen (2000):

> being a mother is not about being a female. It is about being the foundation of the family and society. Mothers' reproductive work surpasses any task because of its centripetal gravitational force. It is irreplaceable if any society or nation is to exist. It cannot be replicated, given that it is fundamental to human continuity and existence. The àjé power is innate, not given; nor is it transferable (*ibid.*).

From this we see that being a mother is indeed a social/familial role, one that has a normative structure conceived as having an "innate" power that is "irreplaceable if any society or nation is to exist." In this context being a mother *is* about being female, but for comparative philosophical purposes the more important question I want to ask is moral and it is this. Since the role and power that females are uniquely conceived as embodying in their reproductive mode are also taken to be innate, then would it not be considered problematic *if a female*

does not identify with that role, power, or responsibility socially attached to it? What might the social consequences be for a female in such a culture who is actively critical of the role of mother or who wants the 'freedom' to do something only considered appropriate for males? Moreover, what might the social consequences be for females who prefer to couple with other females, and who also wish to raise a family? In the context of increasing diversity and cross-cultural interaction taking place around the world, these questions are no longer out of place and I would think are of great importance to comparative philosophy.

To end, tribal societies may not be governed by Western 'individualistic' values such as autonomy that "serves the agenda of an artificial state" (*ibid.*) but on what basis is such a state or society "artificial"? Is it in being governed by different values—ones that tend to promote self-governance and free choice instead of collectivist conformity? Such conformity may not be gendered in the standard way that Western patriarchy is, but that does not make it less conformist. Nor does it make the gender-based values and practices of family- or tribe-based communities immune from moral evaluation and social critique—if comparative philosophy is to truly flourish. As I understand it, in order to thrive, philosophy or the "love of wisdom" must be freely undertaken in the spirit of seeking the truth. Reason and critical analysis have been indispensable tools to this end. Now, we see how many different accounts of 'the truth' there have been and still are that can be cross-culturally compared. In the West, rational autonomy has been thought to be a defining feature of what it means to be a person, and even though it may not be sufficient to get at the whole truth, it certainly has been central to the pursuit of wisdom in the West. If nothing else, the Western notion of rational (hence, critical) autonomy is not generally taken to be artificial within its own borders; indeed it can be conceived as the very basis for constructing and affirming *our own identities*. So using (Western) individualist notions to comparatively evaluate collectivist cultures that see themselves as more genuinely human or as lacking artificiality, my complaint is that they do not have an explicit mechanism for challenging and redefining their own roles (gendered or not). People in such cultures may be able to embody their roles well, but they will not have an explicit social mechanism, hence, the social means, for addressing the value or limitations of those roles. As such, deeper questions of justice and parity may never have a chance to arise if not introduced by another culture.

Gender: The Limits and Possibilities of the Category

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1   Introduction

How (if at all) are western conceptual categories relevant to understanding nonwestern societies is a question familiar for those doing sociology and social anthropology in India. It is a question that feminist scholarship in India has had to engage with. This was raised in classrooms—sometimes in bewilderment by students, struck by the alienness of a concept; sometimes in deference to broader 'nationalist spirit.' I have argued earlier how the claim for an "indigenous feminism" is the flip side of our persisting legacy of an uneasy relationship with western "feminism'" (Chaudhuri 2004: xxiii). These are the disciplinary and institutional sites that I write from.

The reigning belief within the Indian academia in the early decades after independence was however that social science categories (like those of the natural sciences) were necessarily universal. I say, "reigning" because there were efforts like Radhakamal Mukerjee in sociology that questioned the Western social sciences' claim to analytic universalism, in particular the idea of individual. But he found few in the discipline that followed him (Thakur 2015). What was perhaps more easily conceded within the practice of sociology was that there might be small matters of adjustments and tweaking of theories to historical specificities. The unease was however tangible as sociologists debated the need for 'swaraj' (self-rule) in our analytical categories (Chaudhuri 2003).

Times have changed. And as they say in anthropology, 'natives' have started talking back; raising questions about claims of universality of social science categories that now appear to be historically embedded in western experiences. Nzegwu in her lead essay for this symposium draws on African experience to argue not just how the category of 'gender' reflects the provinciality of western categories but also conceals the cognitive and transformative possibilities that other societies may have to offer. And so gender may not just be an inadequate tool but a hegemonic and restrictive one.

Nzegwu's contention goes further. She questions the very "utility of the category of gender" (*ibid.*). This is not an easy task given the fact "that gender is now uncontroversial given its political project of accounting for women's subordination and oppression" (*ibid.*). But it is this very 'new' but 'powerful' taken for granted commonsense that she seeks to unsettle. If one were to take the task of critique and re-imaginings seriously one would have to engage with the questions she raises. I seek to do so from the vantage point of India to examine the limits and possibilities that this important essay offers. I attempt to do this by engaging with some of the questions she raises in different sections of the paper. The questions are linked. It is but inevitable therefore that the responses will spill over sections.

2   Is the Category of Gender Universal?

There is *no one* and *no simple* answer to the question whether the category existed in India. There are two grounds on which one makes this guarded statement. *One*, the many societies in India, though encompassed within a nation-state, are marked by diverse cultures and social systems: predominantly patrilineal but also matrilineal; competing great traditions and multiple little traditions. I use great traditions in the plural for even within great

traditions there were multiple versions. The epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* thus had not just many textual versions but many more local ones. On the one hand all the ills of the modern Indian woman have been traced to the idea of *pativrata* (devotion to the husband) eulogized in the epics; on the other the complex and rich depiction of central women figure such as Sita in *Ramayana* and Draupadi in *Mahabharata* have been lauded for their strength and determination. It would be difficult to speak about gender in the singular, therefore. Others have argued that despite occasions when central characters such Arjuna have taken on the role of a woman, sexual dimorphism was not alien to Indian tradition (Brodbeck and Black 2007). *Two*, even if one were to agree that sexual dimorphism was not unknown it would still be difficult to argue that there is a conceptual overlap. For gender as understood in the modern west rests on the category patriarchy understood as binary and hierarchical, and as an oppressive relation that rests on male supremacy and monogamous heterosexuality. The idea of an autonomous individual is woven into the western category of gender. In India gender is woven into kinship, marriage practices and in the making and remaking of different castes and communities, both internally and in the ways they are structured to each other. This is the reason why an inter-sectional analysis for Indian feminism was not an add-on but fundamental. This link between endogamy and community can often be severely oppressive, unlike perhaps the African experience.

What we can claim more readily is that a strong tradition within Indian philosophy, (Buddhist, Jain and Hindu), did question sexual binaries and Nzegwu's carefully argued essay prompts us to explore further. Critiques of sexual binaries are common to many legends of medieval India. The 12th century Kannada Virashaiva poet, Dasimayya, writes:

> Suppose you cut a tall bamboo in two;
> Make the bottom piece a woman, the headpiece a man;
> Rub them together till they kindle: tell me now
> The fire that's born,
> Is it male or female, O Ramanatha (Vanita 2004: 75).

> Likewise, the Marathi saint Janabi who throws away her clothes says:
> I am exulted, happy in all respects
> I am indifferent to distinctions
> Of sex or body
> (Shri Namdeva Gatha 1970: 963; quoted in Bhagwat 2004: 304).

3   What Makes Comparison Methodologically Problematic?

There are two points that need flagging off here: *first*, the point made already, that it would be difficult to claim the non-existence of gender in traditional India as there would be as many texts that use it in a hierarchical and binary sense as there would be arguing against it; and *second* retrieving tradition and claiming 'indigenous' categories is problematic for modern India.

With regard to the first point we could invoke a text that carried writings not just discriminatory but inhuman against both Dalits and women such as the *Manusmriti,* one of the most studied, ancient, legal texts. In the modern history of the Dalit movement, the *Manusmriti* has been severely critiqued[14].

With regard to the second point, given India's long history, presence of a large, diverse and rich textual tradition, and deep inequalities and diversities, attempts to resolve contemporary questions invoking ancient

pasts and texts have been messy, if not nasty. This has led to the cultivation of wariness and suspicion within Indian academia even to engage with any traditional literature.

This was the context which Vidyut Bhagwat, an Indian feminist activist and writer, refers to when she writes that: "for a long time feminists ignored their own tradition" (Bhagwat 2004: 299). And it took her time to return to Marathi literature and a long line of woman saints between 13th century and the end of 18th century in whom she saw emancipatory possibilities for they "asserted women's right to lead a life of their own" (*ibid*.). Gender therefore, one can assume, existed if it were to be transcended, for women to lead a life of their own.

What must not be glossed over is that the turn to the past is challenging in a contemporary India defined by many religions and multiple traditions, and, more immediately, challenged by a majoritarian government. It is in this context that Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's observations, are of great import.

Thus, the implication of the 'is' in the question: "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" would differ, from the universal present tense indicating a perpetual condition or an indication of abstract potentiality (as it were, can the Hindu goddess be feminist?) in the former instance, to a historical present tense, our contemporary context, local and global, within which the question would resonate with the deployment and role of a majority religion's idiom in a post-colonial 'secular democracy,' India, in the latter (Rajan 2004: 318).

4   Colonization and Gender: Foisting or Recasting?

Retrieving the past therefore is not easy in India. Nor is it easy to claim that 'gender' was foisted by colonialism alone. What can be argued strongly however was that the category 'gender' along with the category 'tradition' and 'culture' underwent dramatic reinvention through the long years of India's colonially mediated modernity. Some examples may help make the point clearer.

Both history and contemporary practices suggest that homosexuality was perhaps not stigmatized in the same way as it was in the west. The British criminalized homosexuality through the enactment of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code as "against the order of nature" in 1860. And through the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) first enacted in 1871 rendered mobile and nomadic groups like street entertainers, acrobats, stunt artists, mendicants, trading communities, prostitutes, and eunuchs, etc. as 'hereditary criminals' or in the official parlance as 'Criminal Tribes.' The colonial rulers likewise disapproved of matriliny and oversaw the virtual disintegration of Nayar[15] matriliny through the legal re-definition of the family (Arunima 2003).

Through the CTA the British also decreed *hijras* (transgender communities) as illegal. Unlike Western society, transgenders in traditional India have a visible lifestyle and an accepted role in life-cycle rituals, like birth, weddings and death. As a dramatic gendered/sexed body, the Hijra was pathologized and stigmatized through colonial laws. The stigma is not simply about misapprehending the body of the Hijras but indicative of a failure to conceive of sexual politics outside the grammar of Western epistemology. In Indian mythology the concept of *ardhnarishwar*, half-woman half-man, with its multiple renditions is not alien. One of the most interesting characters in the epic *Mahabharata*, is Sikhandi, was male, but a woman in an earlier avatar. This story too has multiple versions. Some highlight a wronged, avenging woman; some a selfhood that transcends bodies; but common to all is positive androgyny, a theme that Gandhi invoked to rewrite the colonial script of 'manly Englishman' and 'feminine Indian' (Nandy 1983: 54). Gandhi drew upon the ancient Hindu concepts of *Sakti* (positive androgyny), or dynamic womanhood. He harnessed this spiritual feminine power of "suffering love" and "nonviolent courage" into his *satyagrahas* and thus redefined the very concept of "manliness."

The question raised that if a society or people did not have the category of gender, say, before European colonization, why foist one on them? The matter is not one of choice. Even if some societies within India did

not have the category of gender prior to colonization, can we ignore the fact that these societies have since been radically transformed? Can we walk back to the past?

5   Retrieving Lost Experiences and Epistemologies

Nzegwu's poignant question asks whether non-western societies' "experiences and epistemologies" be allowed to be "expunged," as "if they did not matter?" (Nzegwu 2016a) is an extraordinarily productive way forward to rethink conceptual categories which has become an unquestioned toolkit of social science analysis.

The task however is not easy. We have been professionally trained and disciplined to think that, "the sex/body principle that takes the body (or sex) as given in nature" is "the primary basis of social organization" (*ibid.*). Western feminist thinkers (whose influence like other Western thinkers are global) such as Catherine McKinnon affirm this view when she writes, "Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away" (MacKinnon 1982: 515). Joan W. Scott, in her seminal work on the category 'gender,' contends that 'gender' refers to but "also establishes the meaning of the male/female opposition" (1991: 1070). Likewise, she draws from art histories to show that conceptual languages employ differentiation to establish meaning and that "sexual differentiation is a primary way of signifying differentiations" (*ibid.*). Such are the principles, which then "function as the pre-suppositional touchstones for thought patterns, cognitive categories, classificatory schemes, concepts, and social consciousness" (Nzegwu 2016a). Intellectual hegemony has rendered any other way of looking impossible.

Elaborating this point Nzegwu draws from Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí's study of Yoruba culture to point out that "historically the dominant organizing category of Yoruba culture was 'seniority,' not sex/body or gender" (*ibid.*). This insight was ignored as many feminists, including African gender theorists, who missed its epistemological significance.

Indeed, in India too seniority mattered. The deference to age, reflected in the deeply authoritarian dominant Indian family structures however have usually been seen as necessarily antithetical to ideas of equality, freedom, individual autonomy and gender justice. This is tricky terrain. And one would like to navigate carefully: between an unquestioned subservience to hierarchies (age-based or otherwise); and an unquestioned celebration of individual autonomy that conceals the crucial fact that in its abstracted category lie deep seated essentialized and normative ideas about individualized selves, bodies, age, relationships and desires. Ageism is not an add-on to such societies. It is fundamental to societies where the aged are dispensable, such as we are witnessing in a rapidly transforming India. This matter of seniority is intimately linked to the ways selves are constituted. Principles of hierarchy, seniority, age and (yes) gender (as a social not a cognitive category) have defined society in India. Obedience rather than independence, readiness to sacrifice own personal interests for others and elders is still seen as a desirable. There is a sense of "mutuality" and a "philosophy of self-denial" that made "accommodation" not necessarily negative (Chitnis 2004: 11-24). This could be seen as a failing in the west and a virtue in the non-west. Not surprisingly therefore it is these very categories of personhood, individuality and community that have been questioned in Indian sociology (Thakur 2015).

I attempt to develop this point of seniority further with Nzegwu's important point that what we miss out is the fact that seniority is based on chronological time rather than sex/body/gender in Yoruba society. Further chronological time cannot distinguish between bodies/sex as it lacks the necessary information to do so. There could be societies in India that would be comparable to the Yoruba but the dominant principle of privileging seniority *has not* been in a gender-neutral fashion. For many societies in India are governed by principles of patriliny, patri-locality and patriarchy which can lead to gruesome violence such as female feticide and honor killings. And where matrilineal descent exists, as among Khasis, daughters matter for they carry on

the line, even though the mother's brother wields authority. One would therefore be hesitant to claim in such a context, that: "epistemologically, it establishes temporal precedence and simply marks birth and age, not whether a child is male or female" (Nzegwu 2016a). Having stated this, I concur with Nzegwu's understanding that "when linked to the knowledge system, seniority implies having greater experiential knowledge than one's junior (*ibid.*). Recognition of this has in recent years led to renewed attention to intangible heritage and knowledge systems.

The final point that I would like to touch upon is the Yoruba focus on chronological time, not body nor sex despite the 'visibility of bodies.' And here Nzegwu makes the significant point that the Yoruba 'invested supremely in family growth and expansion.' Much like the many diverse Indian systems, it is the larger kin and community groups and the complex network of obligations that constitute 'desires' and 'selfhood.' The body here in that sense is not the body there. For it is "the criterion of relative age and seniority," which become important for "managing people's expectations" and "constructing identities that are reflections of people's multiple social roles and positions" (*ibid.*). The body does not have to be perpetually young and sexually desirable for there are multiple social roles and positions.

Nzegwu's discerning point that "a society that utilizes sex or gender focuses primarily on the anatomy and all visible features of the body such as race" and "hardly focuses on the non-visual elements of culture, age, family, and profession" opens up new cognitive possibilities (*ibid.*). For "the seniority principle focuses on the social matrix in the building of social relationships' (*ibid.*). In contrast the "sex/gender principle begins with physical bodies and treats them as distinct, autonomous beings whose identity is shaped by anatomy and race." Nzegwu critiques this biological framework, which specifies sexual norms, and represents them as inherent in nature. She sees this as responsible for "a theory of sexuality that imposed chastity vows on wives and stripped them of any control of their sexual and procreative powers."

One could argue that the assumptions of this "theory of sexuality" are transposed, unchanged by its feminist critique. For it is unable to move out of the very binary of the biological framework that it seeks to question. This framework has enormous impact globally on feminism and India is no exception. This takes us back partly to the hierarchies of global academia and partly to what circulates in global academia as cutting edge. It does not suffice to return to colonialism but equally important to explore how knowledge is produced and disseminated in the contemporary world where even as calls of provincializing the west become shriller, new western theories emerge to set yardsticks of professional academic practice and political certitudes.

It is this power of conceptual structures that Nzegwu seeks to overturn. In a fast-changing India with its hypervisibility of gender, sexualities, and yes, bodies and battlegrounds set between fundamentalists and feminists, it may be productive to return to some past traditions of defying the centrality of the body such as Muktabai who asks:

> Do the cow grazing in the
> Fields have any clothes!
> I too am like the cows.
> Why are you embarrassed at my sight? (Bhagwat 2004: 305)

"How (If At All) is Gender Relevant to Comparative Philosophy?" A Response to Nzegwu

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Seeing as philosophy is a rational venture, common and attainable to all human beings in all their extraordinary cultural varieties, it is invaluable to read someone else's critical reflections and accounts concerning problems that interrogate us. I am therefore thankful to have in front of me Nkiru Nzegwu's essay, whose reading is not only rewarding, but also challenging.[16] Firstly, because her text makes me rethink a set of concepts that, in an unfocused manner, I have already elaborated in other essays. And even more, because it leads me to systematizing issues that, due to several reasons, I have left aside, since they have not questioned me specifically.

Like some Latin American theorists, Nkiru Nzegwu poses again the question of the pertinence of applying conceptual networks originating in the Western academy to non-Western or (post)decolonial organizational models. Once granted the "imposture of the Universal," as Celia Amorós called it, the challenge is how to give an account of the different worldviews and what theoretical tools to employ in constructing such an account. In order to be clearer, I will divide this article in sections.

1

Before going on, and with a purely analytical interest, I need to carry out some epistemological precisions. I will first distinguish a level of either singular experiences or life lessons, taken as synonyms, whose sense is clearly linked to the cultural as well as to the socio-political and ethical structures of the society in which one lives (the descriptions of the societies and cultural experiences, Western and non-Western, are internal to this level). Next, I distinguish a theoretical level, i.e., a level of specific reflection and conceptualization (for example, the theory of Law, Sociology, Philosophy, etc.). Lastly, I distinguish a meta-theoretical level of critical review of, for instance, concepts, theories, categories and explanations that make visible, among other things, the implicit mechanisms of the "construction of data," "objectivity" and "interests." One aspect of this level consists of an examination of the sexisms, racisms or classism interwoven both in theoretical writings (including philosophical ones) and in the various aspects of everyday life. In other words, "gender" at this last level of analysis seems to highlight exclusions and sexist biases.

2

Within feminist discourse, since the 1980s, "gender" began to be a problematic framework (Nicholson 1998). Understood as a concept, "gender" is born out of the comparative collection of the ways people behave, in plural or binary social relations, and what is to be socially expected from them. If we consider "gender" an empty category, it refers to the factual need that all of us humans construct (binary or not) our general behavior. In the European feminist tradition, for instance, many woman theorists do not incorporate the term "gender," and even today, the more frequent analyses are still done as in terms of "sex" and based on the principle of equality. For example, French researcher Geneviève Fraisse maintains that terms like "gender" work as an "ecran" (a screen) that covers up problems without helping to think them over.

On a global level, "gender" in general fluctuates between its status as concept and as a category — taking into account that categories are not necessarily ontological, they may be linguistic—when not taken as synonyms as does Nzegwu—although they have different ontological commitments. For this reason, I disregard from the beginning the non-controversial, universal and neutral nature of the term 'gender.' What's more if, as from a non-foundationalist point of view, Judith Butler (1990, Chp. 1) has pointed out, sex and gender are interchangeable, one can then do without "gender" (replacing it by "sex") without affecting the analyses. For this reason, to say that "gender" is only "embedded into the thought systems and categories of Western philosophy" *in toto,* seems to grant "gender" a certain fixed, Western, and static identity that it has not always enjoyed.

3

To take "gender" acritically, but retaining hierarchical relationships among persons (men, women, *trans*), leads to Nzegwu's understanding that "women are inherently inferior and subordinated to men; that marriage is only between a man and a woman; that marriage is strictly conjugal and sexual; that a female marrying a wife or wives is inconceivable; that female bodies and their sexuality are owned by husbands, in particular, and men, in general; that only males can be husbands, female cannot, and that males cannot be wives, only females; that motherhood and mothering is a minor task; that parenting is a singularly female task; and that females lack objectivity, rationality, and cannot be leaders," and as well that "all of these pseudo-universal ideas rest on the fundamental idea that there are just two human biological categories—"man" and "woman" (Nzegwu 2016a: passim). For my part, although I insist on the necessity to distinguish "gender" as a category of analysis from gender's positioned historical and social modalities (I leave to the side the distinction between logic and factual necessity), I agree with Nkiru Nzegwu that in the West, with geographical and time qualifications, gender relations are *qua* social organizers as Nzegwu describes them. More interestingly, Nzegwu puts forward an example that works as a counter-factual to that description and lends support to her statement regarding the non-universalism of the concept/category (she treats these as synonymous) of gender and its normative definition. In the following section, I will compare Nzegwu examples to Latin American ones.

4

Nzegwu attributes a "non-gendered experience" to Yorùbá society and in so doing—closely following Nigerian sociologist Oyérónke Oyêwùmi—highlights how different societies do indeed have different organizational principles. In the case of the Yorùbá, society is organized around the axis "seniority," not sex/body or gender. Although this interpretation of Yorùbá society is far from being the only one,[17] I will not examine this issue further but will instead focus comparatively on the case of Latin America, which Nzegwu links to the Yorùbá society (as also found in Brazil) as embracing an organizational principle different from the Western one.

Several theorists (both men and women) have also highlighted the role that age plays in most of the indigenous societies in Latin America.[18] However, generally speaking, "gender" is also retained. That is, it is also recognized that such original, *a-modern* societies, as defined by Bruno Latour (1990), say, those societies that do not live inside a world built by science, take into account both age and gender, and consequently organize society according to sex-gender vectors (where these are not necessarily conceived in binary terms). The structure described above leaves conceptual room for the so-called "Theory of Complementarity."[19]

5

As it is well known, the Theory of Complementarity asserts that gendered spaces—as long as they are (hypothetically) complementary—favor the potential of "differentiation" which does not imply the underestimation of capacities, roles, and responsibilities of one sex-gender vis-à-vis the other/s.[20] In general, most theorists who accept decolonial theory also accept the Theory of Complementarity of sexes. Even though women decolonial theorists agree that such equivalence is in fact not *actually* the case due to several reasons; one of them being the fact of colonialization.[21] That is, even for societies hypothetically non-hierarchized by sex-gender and whose organizational principle is some other one, the category of gender can be still a useful tool of analysis. The category of gender nevertheless serves as a powerful hermeneutical tool to examine, not only issues linked to the relations between sexes, but also to the relations between classes, ethnic groups, and social *mestización*. Furthermore, how societies reorganize themselves in the face of patriarchal culture depends to a great extent on how their sex-gender relations are structured, interwoven as these are with relations of class and "ethnic purity" (borrowing from María Lugones), as the research of many female theorists demonstrates. That is to say, should we do without the theoretical tools that we have at hand in order to understand the web of organizational axes of a society? I believe that we should not, although implementing this understanding should be neither acritical nor naïve. As configurations and formations that happened in time, in diverse contexts and with diverse historical paths, it seems essential to bear in mind a critical state of alert regarding a society's web of organizational axes. Quoting Paul Ricoeur (1973), we must examine Philosophy as a "Philosophy of Suspicion." After all, while it is true that "gender is an arm of colonialism as well as of modernization" (Nzegwu 2016a), it is also true that the use we make of "gender" as a category, as a tool not as a substantive way of being helps to deny, reinforce or deconstruct colonialism. In the works of Ochy Curiel, Mara Viveros or Guacira Lópes Louro, "gender" becomes a tool of analysis for women of "color's" own history and a tool for fracturing constructed identities that are essentialized as well as spatially and temporally static.[22] Comparisons made between diverse cultural traditions make it possible to pose questions and examine historical answers without which we would have never been able to question critically our own traditions.[23] This is, in effect, the wealth of a polycentric dialogue.

6

Now then, I consider that any society as a whole organizes itself according to a complex web that does not exclusively respond to a binary logic, be it either sex-gender, or young/old or colonist/colonized. Intra- and inter- societal relations are much more complex. That is, although it is true that each society acknowledges different organizational principles, I do not believe they are unique or static in time. In fact, such habitually drawn distinctions have an analytical or academic nature, seeing as, in everyday life, no group, movement or research team answers precisely to only one axis, current, principle or distinctive feature (even not organizing themselves after binary principles). On the contrary, I claim that such organizational principles not only change in quality and intensity across culture, but that they also cannot be the same throughout the history of one given society. An example: clearly, the stronger organizational axis of the Nazi Germany was not sex-gender, but whether or not one belonged or not to the Jewish religion (or, alternatively one was or was not a Gypsy). To be a man or a woman was secondary to this new organizational principle, which does not mean that there had not been concentration camps for homosexuals, political dissidents and even common offenders. In Latin America this can clearly be seen regarding the organizing principle of colonist/colonized, which can also be

read in terms of white/Amerindian or white/*mestizo*. The importance of this principle or organizational axis modifies itself as geographically and historically the ethnic groups diversify; the indigenous, "black" or *mestizo* peoples increase or decrease; or else if there are internal or external surges of immigrants due to armed conflicts, economic issues, or others. For example, in Buenos Aires, in the Nineteen Nineties, Chinese and Korean migration had a strong impact upon the reorganization of a great part of the labor structures, and consequently the social ones, in terms of "new" migrants/"old" migrants, already integrated.

These phenomena, frequent in the present globalized world, lead us to propose non-essential identities and dynamic social organizational axes in networks of ethno-races, sex-genders and classes, more complex than the traditional societies, which are, generally speaking, more static.[24] Therefore, I propose that sometimes one of the multiple organizational axes (or principles) becomes visible and theoretically explicative in terms of having gone through a certain threshold of explicability. That is, given a complex plural social web, an organizing principle becomes explicatively relevant when it goes through a certain threshold that denaturalizes the given complexity and reorganizes around itself the social structure, either due to internal or external issues. For example, in the face of the European conquest, the opposition indigenous/colonist became the new organizational axis, erasing, removing or minimizing the differences that previously could have existed among the diverse indigenous peoples. Old indigenous tensions were subsequently subordinated to the new, emerging indigenous/colonist organizing axis. This leads to the urgency of the situation, usually solved in terms of survival. Most field studies show that, in an interesting relation with degrees of urbanization and racial integration, indigenous women would prefer to defend their own ethnic group, than to denounce the sexist violence they endure in their own ethnic group.[25] When they do so, they usually defend themselves from the general social racism: given this double bond and in relation to the empirical conditions of survival, as classical philosophers say, "they choose the lesser of two evils," which is an answer to the most urgent organizing axis.[26] There are other possible axes, ready to emerge and become visible, and detecting them depends on the social sensibility, levels and perspective of analysis, social-historical and personal situation, and social-cultural conditions (including economic ones among many others). Therefore, I do not close this scheme, as it can get more complex *ad nauseam*. I am simply interested in making people aware that such binary dichotomies tend to be reductionist.

7

Nkiru Nzegwu's text invites to numerous reflections, which imply issues of paramount importance for philosophy. I point out, as an example, the so-called universality of philosophical categories, the analytical value of certain concepts and their ontological commitment, the possibility that philosophy impacts on reality, or the open question of what Reality is or, even, what Philosophy is, among many others. I share Nkiru Nzegwu's interest to contribute to a more inclusive comprehension of Philosophy, that critically integrates traditions and contexts, to analyze, understand and resignify one's own traditions, for the sake of not reducing culture to a static and acritical set of beliefs of the past and above all, of the present. So doing, I believe "gender" is relevant to Comparative Philosophy as other human cultural worlds came to provide the basis for a critique of all that is the case in the Western world (and not only), as much as this polycentric dialogue tends to be a contribution to the point.

Nzegwu's Response to the Commentators

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I would like to thank the respondents—María Luisa Femenías of Universidad Nacional de La Plata, La Plata, Argentina; Maitrayee Chaudhuri of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India; and Mary I. Bockover of Humboldt State University, California, USA—for agreeing to participate in this symposium. I also thank them for taking valuable time out of their busy schedule to dialogue on this philosophical take on the concept and category of gender. Similarly too, I thank the coordinators of the symposium, *Journal of World Philosophies* co-editors James Maffie and Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach, for choosing the topic, for the stellar work they did finding the participants, for keeping the momentum going, nudging everyone to adhere to the time-lines, and finally bringing the issue to a successful completion. I appreciate the collegiality and professionalism that everyone demonstrated in this endeavor.

It is always illuminating to read others' views of one's ideas. Indisputably, such intellectual engagements enable us not only to determine whether we successfully conveyed our thoughts, but also to ascertain if aspects of our ideas require further development. 'Gender' is a bone I have worried over for a very long time. Although theoretical challenges to the concept appear to have been settled after Judith Butler's powerful intervention with *Gender Trouble* (1990), my concerns were not allayed. It was clear that there was a problem that still had to be settled. However, the unease always disappeared once I shifted philosophical position and unquestioningly accepted the legitimacy of the gender worldview. But, serious questions remained at the foundational level once opposing or parallel worldviews or world-orders are considered. At this foundational level, each paradigm's organizational principles and categories dynamically and interactively produce conceptual and existential differences. For instance, the conceptual paradigm that rests on the logic of sexual dimorphism together with its web of supporting and reinforcing ideas functions differently from one with, say, chronological time. Within the boundaries of each paradigm, both logics sustain the illusion that theirs is the natural order of life.

Opposing and parallel cultures that are different from the presently globalized, colonial Western one did not focus on the sex/body principle, hence did not have the concept of gender. Their internal social dynamics were oriented differently. It would *not* mean that there were no females and males within such societies, it simply means that their social ontology, logical grammar and metaphysics prioritize a relational order that trumps (no pun intended) the kind of issues the concept of gender is concerned about. In effect, it means that relational (gender) questions about females and males would lack meaning in much the same way relational (seniority) questions about peoples and roles would lack intelligibility in a society prioritizing gender. The degree of difference quite rightly calls for understanding each society on its own terms. We cannot simply dismiss such differences as irrelevant, because that would produce inverted epistemologies.

So, when theorists uphold gender as a vital tool for comparative philosophy, they are making tacit ideological statements about societies in general. Specifically, they are prioritizing the sex/body principle over all others as well as examining how it organizes the status of women and men. When a theorist contends that 'gender' is simply considering how men and women conceive of their capacities, qualities, and behaviors, that contention is being economical with the truth. It does not disclose that implicit within that consideration, a specific social ontology is mirrored. It is such deep mirrorings that make the utilization of gender as a comparative analysis tool highly problematic. Once the concept is theoretically deployed, gender transposes its core traits and values onto a society being studied and obfuscates the dynamic and interactive way that society's foundational concepts function in relation to the organizing principle of its paradigm. By distorting the logic of

other societies, the transposition offers a mechanistic model of societal interaction instead of a dynamic one. All these errors are effaced, because the gendered Westernized paradigm of global academia props up the concept of gender such that theorists draw exclusively from its philosophical canon, theories, ideas, and assumptions.

In tackling the symposium topic, the magnitude of the problem became clearer. Thinking outside the theoretical boundaries of today's globalized gendered paradigm is difficult for most people. One cannot "see" the lens through which one sees "reality." For this reason, the responses of Femenías, Chaudhuri, and Bockover are important because they highlight the levels of difficulty involved in stepping outside the gravitational and ideological force of gender to engage a different one. Their responses reveal ideological commitments, the sorts of issues that arise when grasping a different social ontology, and the stereotypes that shape their structures of knowledge. In the following, I will respond sequentially to just some vital issues in the comments of Femenías, Chaudhuri, and Bockover.

First, Femenías weighs in on the meaning and purported epistemological implication of the term 'embedded.' She asserts that to say 'gender' is embedded in the thought-system and categories of Western philosophy is to grant the concept "a certain fixed, Western, and static identity that it has not always enjoyed." The move seeks to invalidate aspects of my argument, without addressing the substantive issues being raised, which is, can gender be used to grasp the logic of another differently structured paradigm that is the subject of comparison? For purposes of clarification, I should state that my use of 'embedded' does not imply that any concept is—"rigid, inactive, unchanging, and undynamic." Rather, it highlights the deep structural level at which organizational concepts operate in any thought-systems, animating ideas, promoting understanding, facilitating the formation of research questions, and organizing social life. Because human life and thought are evolving and dynamic, the definitional traits of any concepts responds to that changing process while highlighting the stable features of its meaning without implying immobility. Gender emerged out of the West's conceptual paradigm, so it is Western.

Second, on the point that I am taking gender 'acritically.' No, I'm not. The problem is that Femenías assumes that distinguishing between 'gender' as a category of analysis and gender's historical and social modes marks a real separation. It does not. Although she thinks that a genuine separation is made, the historical and social modes of gender are still tied to, and fundamentally inform the concept, and gives meaning and intelligibility to it. From her theoretical standpoint, Femenías cannot see her overarching framework of analysis, hence believes that a clear and distinct separation exists between the concept and its sociohistorical modes. But the vaunted separation is illusory. Theoretical separations are not real, they are ephemeral. Insofar as the sex/body principle is the regulatory principle of the paradigm and its social ontology, the meaning of the concept of gender is predicated dynamically on its historical and social modes.

Thirdly, on the Yorùbá society of Brazil. Although Yorùbá society was utilized as an illustration in the lead essay, it is a stretch to suggest that the "Yorùbá" society in Brazil wholly approximates the Yorùbá society of West Africa. As students of the African diaspora, we are aware that the Brazilian iteration is constituted by peoples and the cultural values of the Kongo and Ovimbundu of Congo, the Luango and Benguela of Angola, the Fon (or Jeje) of Dahomey (now modern Benin), the Hausa and Fula of West Africa, and the Yorùbá (or Nagô). Add to this mix the Amerindians of South America, and the Portuguese colonial overlords. Thus, this "Yorùbá" society of Brazil, although partially constituted by some Yorùbá, the terms of enslavement and colonial rule means that its conceptual and social categories, are mediated by colonial Portuguese culture.

Failure to acknowledge this historical point and the implication it holds for philosophical investigation produces misreadings, including the erroneous substitution of the Portuguese origin of some concepts for Yorùbá roots. Before hypothesizing about "amodern" societies, Femenias must first consider the biases of her standpoint, and then whether the aforementioned historical point explains why Latin American theorists see

age and *gender* in Brazil's "Yorùbá" culture. Another compelling explanation for the apprehension of gender is that the philosophical canon and processes in Latin America are constituted by the logic, ideas and theories of Western philosophy. As such Latin American theorists must necessarily consider the extent to which the philosophical ideas, theories and canonical structures of their Western/European intellectual heritages are driving their analyses. Insofar as their philosophical canon is framed exclusively by the thoughts of white (including Latin) men, and increasingly of white (including Latin) women, they have to recognize that Latin American philosophy does not include nor speak about the philosophies of the region's non-European peoples. Because philosophical assumptions, ideas, theories, and lines of reasoning remain racially and culturally exclusionary, the canon is seriously handicapped by racial and cultural blinders. Theorists must therefore confront the implication of all this for their understanding and interpretation of Amerindian, *Quilombo* and *Palenque* societies

Lastly, this brings us to the "Theory of Complementarity." As a consequence of the deep racial and cultural exclusions that mark philosophy (see Mills 2008), I approach with suspicion any "theory" that excludes an understanding of African cultures and their models. A "theory of complementarity" such as Femenías adumbrated that casts social spaces as "gendered spaces" begs the question as well as reveals her conceptual location. Physical or social spaces lack inherent meaning outside of a specific paradigm. This is why the deployment of gender as a philosophical comparison tool is problematic. Such problems are created, not by theoretical or methodological errors, but by a limiting unicentric worldview.

Next, we turn to Chaudhuri's informative culturally-nuanced response that pivots on the complexity and vast cultural diversity of India. Similar to postcolonial countries in Africa, India experienced colonization but unlike African countries, it endured a long 200-year British rule. During that 200-year rule, India experienced the sex/body principle that underpinned British social ontology, laws and colonial rule, which I argued produced the concept of gender. Chaudhuri's point that gender is not Western-derived but endemic in Indian society is well taken. Though she offers convincing evidence for her position, her clarification raises questions that I suspect would lead elsewhere. In my view, there are pertinent trajectories and questions to consider that bear on the matter. Notable among them are: the dominance and pervasiveness of the *Manusmriti* prior to and during British rule; the nature and history of the sexual grammar that accommodates *hijras* (intersex people); the concept of *sakti* (positive androgyny); the presence of matriliny; and the emergence of Sikhism, whose rejection of the caste system constrained, if not eliminated women's oppression. Seriously pursued these lines of investigation would uncover issues would problematize the idea that gender is endemic to India. In any case, that investigation is outside the scope of this symposium. I will now turn to two issues that require clarification.

The first is on the point that the lead essay is advocating a return to the past. It is not. It is advocating a re-engagement with the past of the sort Vidyut Bhagwat (1995) advocated and that routinely occurs within Western philosophy. The goal of such re-engagements is to find and explicate as many models as possible from different cultures and different historical periods to facilitate a rethinking and more rigorous analysis of social ideologies, including gender ideology.

The second point concerns the possibility that social hierarchies such as age, seniority, and patriliny could produce oppressive condition and gruesome family violence. There is no question that the worry is legitimate, however, the point must be made that based on studies of some African communities, seniority, patriliny and patrilocality do not necessarily produce patriarchy (Iyam 2013; Nzegwu 2006, 2004; Ekejiuba 1995). Because other factors are involved, a comparative study of the social logic of the two societies would reveal those factors to which we must attend.

This brings us to Bockover's views. Within the halls of the United States (US) academe and among Caucasian philosophers and theorists in general, challenges to the canon by philosophers of color or theorists are immediately met either with silences, dismissals, or fictionalizing (Mills 2008; Lawrence III 2001; Delgado

1992, 1984). These tone-deaf strategies then trigger a re-articulation and re-assertion of the main points of pet theories as if these theoretical challenges were never made, or as if they are illegitimate. Whatever the rationale for these strategies, two of them appear in Bockover's response. In the first maneuver: she ignored the core issue of the debate as the lead essay framed it, which is, "Is gender relevant to comparative philosophy where a society is dissimilar and the evaluator does not understand the society being compared?" In other words, "How legitimate is it to utilize the concept of gender for philosophical comparison since it transposes Western cultural norms onto dissimilar cultures particularly when an evaluator does not understand the other culture on its own terms?" The second is the dismissal maneuver that basically states: gender is relevant because all societies are gendered and, in a breathtaking display of a colonial mind-set, represents the societies discussed in the lead essay as "family- and tribal-based societies"!

Bockover's maneuvers are essentially a disingenuous attempt to shift the ground of discussion back to a racialized, gendered center from where the so-called "family- and tribal-based societies" will be evaluated. She then puts forth a coterie of contemporarily privileged concepts to which they must be measured—'choice,' 'individualism,' 'self-determination,' 'freedom,' and others—and a topical sexual politics issue in the US. But illegitimately shifting the ground of argument would not work. Bockover must explain how transposing without modification key contemporary concerns of America's racialized, gendered society onto her "family- and tribal-based" societies addresses the issues laid out in the lead essay. She cannot evade this process and then rule that they are gendered, all without any evidence and after cursorily dismissing whatever anyone has to say.

Finally, I take seriously the objective of the symposium, which is, to consider the serious methodological question of how philosophers can make comparative moral evaluations and responsibly engage in social critique without massively and willfully misunderstanding a society that is the subject of study. With that in mind, I pondered Bockover's sanitized and benign illustration of US society in the 1950s, particularly, her deployment of the word 'unjustified' to illustrate an abstract example of a white couple's violations of social etiquette. The use of that word is striking given that it belies the harsh and brutal reality of racial injustice, lynchings, segregation, lack of employment opportunities, residential redlining, state-sanctioned surveillance, and state-sanctioned violence that millions of people of color endured during that era (Davis 2007; A. Harris 2000; Matsuda 2000; C. Harris 1993). The point this raises? If one can be so wrong about one's own society, if one cannot see that all Americans did not possess inalienable rights to life and liberty in the 1950s, what are the chances he or she would understand another culture. Genuine philosophical comparison cannot begin in a context where methodological issues plague analysis and conceptual and racial blinders vitiate the information produced. Bockover still needs to address the substantive point of the symposium. I eagerly await that response.

Counter Responses:
Bockover's Response to Nzegwu's Response: How (If At All) is Gender Relevant to Comparative Philosophy?

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I also want to thank the people who made this symposium possible: co-coordinators Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach and James Maffie, Nkiru Nzegwu who contributed the lead article, and co-respondents María Luisa Femenías and Maitrayee Chaudhuri. The core question of this symposium was: How if at all is gender relevant to comparative philosophy? My response to Nzegwu's lead article aimed to show how the concept of gender is both relevant and important for comparative philosophical purposes. From her response I see that Nzegwu misunderstood my argument—although I do not think willfully—and will give my reasoning below in light of her two main criticisms.

Nzegwu claims that in my first "maneuver" I "ignored" the core issue of the debate "as the lead essay framed it." In her response to our commentaries she tells us how she interprets the significance of this core issue by posing two related questions, the later supposedly being a clarification of the former. I will address each in turn, the first being "Is gender relevant to comparative philosophy where a society is dissimilar and the evaluator does not understand the society being compared?" (Nzegwu 2016b).

I see two basic but related mistakes in how Nzegwu has reframed the main question of this debate, which is simply *whether the concept of gender is relevant to comparative philosophy*. The first is that Nzegwu begs the question about how this core issue is to be interpreted, and the second is that she assumes that we, as respondents, should interpret it in the same way.

As to the first mistake, in a strong phenomenological sense it goes without saying that one who does not "understand" a society cannot legitimately evaluate that society. But this is not how cross-cultural understanding is approached in a comparative philosophical context. We do not have to be able to know another culture as if it were our own, in order to be able make judgments about how a concept such as gender may (or may not) be relevant to it. Our task as philosophers is to look at the relevant information and arguments, in this case that the lead author directly and indirectly supplied about the Igbo and Yorùbá cultures, in order for us to offer *our own reasons* about how the concept of gender can be comparatively applied. In sum, comparative philosophy does not demand that we can assume an identity that does not fully and authentically belong to us, but it does demand that we look at the relevant information and arguments in order to avoid fallacious reasoning.

In a global context, comparative philosophy often compares worldviews that we can only more or less "understand," much of the time learning about them from others who have a more informed and pervasive experience of them. Of course if we have to assume that the task of our debate is as Nzegwu stipulates, then we would have no option but to conclude that gender is irrelevant to comparative philosophy—exactly because we have to assume that we cannot understand the other view enough to judge one way or the other. I do not interpret the core question of this debate in this way. The second mistaken assumption that Nzegwu makes is in assuming that her respondents had to interpret the core question as she does just because this is the view laid out in the lead essay. The lead essay may set the tone for the debate, but we do not have to assent to or agree to that tone. Critiquing Nzegwu's argument on rational (as opposed to phenomenological) grounds does not make me "tone deaf." Nor am I ignoring the key issue; I am disagreeing with how she frames and argues for it. Nzegwu then tries to further clarify the main question by asking, "How legitimate is it to utilize the

concept of gender for philosophical comparison since it transposes Western cultural norms onto dissimilar cultures particularly when an evaluator does not understand the other culture on its own terms?" (*ibid.*). The matter of cross-culturally transposing norms is substantive and at the heart of this debate, and will be discussed in connection with Nzegwu's second criticism of my response below. But adding that the one transposing the concept does not understand the culture upon which it is transposed "on its own terms" does not clarify anything, since it carries the same phenomenological weight just discussed. We can legitimately critique one's argument even about one's own culture, if the argument is bad and regardless of whether we have direct experience with that culture. The philosophical method for such an evaluation is *rational analysis*, not the presumption of first-hand experience.

In Nzegwu's second criticism of my response to her view of whether the concept of gender is relevant to comparative philosophy, she says that my response is a "dismissal maneuver that basically states: gender is relevant because all societies are gendered and, in a breathtaking display of a colonial mind-set, represents the societies discussed in the lead essay as 'family- and tribal-based societies'!"[27] (*ibid.*). Nzegwu has misconstrued my argument here, but rather than just name-calling, I will turn to the arguments that show this.

I explained my understanding of the concept of gender by saying that it "is a social construct, based on how different groups conceive of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'—that is, conceive of the capacities, qualities, and behaviors attributed to male and female (identified) bodies, respectively (*ibid.*). As a construct, 'gender' is Western insofar as it was originally named and defined in the West. It is also modern and "arose out of a social need to make a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'" (*ibid.*), which occurred in the West because self-creation and self-identification are so important. The idea of gender is gaining more traction, however, even in cultures whose social and moral paradigm did not in any way previously include it. Anecdotally, in my travels and work in China I have observed a general cultural shift from there not seeming to be mainstream words or concepts such as lesbian, gay, or transgender, to there being exposure to and rejection of those identities, to a somewhat greater public acceptance of them.[28] This is not infrequently how intercultural exchange works in such cases. It begins by people identifying in a way that is not normal in their culture—regardless of whether that identity is imported—to having that identity forbidden or punished.

This is the kind of context I have in mind when saying that I take the most interesting aspect of identity formation to concern "*how individuals themselves wish to be identified, including in ways that go against the norms of their culture*" (*ibid.*). I see it as largely a Western problem that the concept of gender exemplifies so well. Moreover, in this context I suggest that the concept may have a limited shelf-life: "It may even be that all the current 'gender bending' in much of the Western world anticipates a time when these cultures will 'go beyond' the idea of gender, even though it is connected to the more ontological category of sex" (*ibid.*). So the concept may have arisen in the West, fast making its way into the discourse of Western feminism, but gender is now a 'globally' or cross-culturally relevant social category and is becoming more so every day. One tragic example arises as a backlash, e.g., from Daesh (*aka* ISIS)[29] and their vicious, systematic attacks on the autonomy and wellbeing of females, as well as on people who now identify with the LGBTQ community. Where these identities originated or where they were first explicitly named is irrelevant to the question at hand. It seems that few of us now live in isolation and the forces of cultural exchange are at play in an unprecedented way. This is the reality. I never said, as Nzegwu suggests I did, that "gender is relevant because all societies are gendered" (*ibid.*). I argued for the relevance of the concept of gender, in a context where it has been thoroughly put on the map.

The fact that there now is cross-cultural exposure to the concept of gender provides only some support for its relevance, however, since a group may be exposed to an idea without it affecting their way of life. The deeper support for my view is *philosophical* and it is as follows. In light of my definition, 'gender' is relevant since different groups conceive of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'—"that is, conceive of the capacities, qualities, and behaviors attributed to male and female (identified) bodies"—differently. The notion was originally and

explicitly identified in the modern West, but 'gender' is cross-culturally relevant since we can apply the concept to cultures that do not explicitly name and define it. 'Gender' simply refers to culture-specific ideas about human beings in their 'sexed' (i.e., female or male) mode. I cannot think of a culture that does not have ideas about, and normative practices based on the capacities, qualities, and behaviors attributed to males and females (whether or not they have explicitly named and defined them under the concept of 'gender'). But here, I will cite in this reply an example of sex/gender-relevant ideas already used in my commentary (italics added):

> Nzegwu says of the Yorùbá, "This emphasis on the production of new members led to the development of a family system with diffused power centers and nongendered relations that directed attention to the vital reproductive role of mothers, whose principal concern was the well being of their child, not the sex." *My clarification can remind us that how a child's wellbeing will be conceived and pursued will depend on the reproductive capacities seen to inhere in the child.* (Bockover 2016a; emphasis added).

Nzegwu explains that the Yorùbá live in a "moral universe that endows mothers with formidable power and autonomy" (Nzegwu 2016a). To this I responded that I take Nzegwu's main point "not to be about the lack of gender, but rather, to be about how the Yorùbá *empower* females in their role as mother." In fact, Nzegwu is basically making my point, for clearly the Yorùbá conceive of the capacities, qualities, and behaviors of males and females differently—and systematically in accord with their reproductive capacities. The Yorùbá conceive of females as mothers, but they do not explicitly identify the role of motherhood *as socially constructed* or as their culture's way of understanding femininity. Instead, and in light of the account in Nzegwu's lead essay, motherhood is a natural role endowed by the universe that morally empowers females with autonomy. In comparison, the concept of gender entails that roles deemed appropriate to males and females are socially constructed and fluid instead of being a function of reproduction and nature.

The Yorùbá do not have the concept of gender precisely in thinking of motherhood as natural for females, instead of socially prescribed. Perhaps the concept of gender was created in the West, and employed by Western feminists as a way of exposing and rectifying the oppression that comes with thinking of females *essentially* as mothers. In any case my main point for the purpose of this debate is this: the fact that there are clear cultural differences in how females and males are conceived shows *the relevance of the concept of gender*. Its relevance does not depend on the concept being identified, but only on there being culture-specific ideas about what it means to be male and female. That is why I argued in my commentary that Nzegwu seemed to be making a straw person argument—in claiming that Western feminists use gender as an ontological category. To the contrary, Western feminists typically treat sex and gender as related but distinct concepts, where "the gender attributes attached to male and female bodies are culture specific and much more fluid" (Bockover 2016a).

I also argued that this has important moral consequences. We may be familiar with some of these problems in the West before the concept of gender was created or identified and widely put to use. If a group believes that nature endows female and male bodies with a specific set of capacities that generate a specific sex-based set of roles, then it is much harder to see them as worthy of social criticism and change. The moral problem results from our conceiving of our roles—indeed the very wellbeing of males and females themselves—as inhering in our bodies instead of as being conferred upon us from our cultures. That was the insight at the heart of my initial response, which I restate below:

> My study of Confucianism has shown me that there is a deeper problem with gender roles in virtue of their normatively stipulating who should, and who should not, be able to embody a role. This is the case even when all the relevant roles are thought to have value. For example, many family- or tribe-based communities do not necessarily deem one role to be better than another, or of being worthy of wielding more power over another, but they typically lack an explicit mechanism for reflecting on, and evaluating and/or socially critiquing the normative structure of the roles themselves. Why? One answer is that the creation of such a mechanism grew out of decidedly

Western principles of rational critique and moral agency: where in large measure persons are conceived as rationally and freely choosing their own destiny (*ibid.*).

The concept of gender is now on the scene and is gaining traction even in cultures that did not explicitly identify their ideas of being male and female—of masculinity and femininity—as constructed or *as being ideas*. About the Yorùbá, recall that Nzegwu cited Hallen (2000) in saying that "The àjé power is innate, not given; nor is it transferable" (Nzegwu 2016a). How then would a male in that culture fare in identifying as the primary caregiver of his children? How would a female fare, who identified as lesbian, or who did not want to identify as a mother, or who both wanted children and also to take on a role only deemed appropriate for males? Are we really to suppose that such a culture has no concept of what it is to be a female or a male, or does not view the wellbeing of persons as being tied to their sex and what is considered appropriate to it? While there may be no absolute answers to these questions, understanding the philosophical aim of my view only requires that the initially Western concept of gender can now be used *comparatively* to ask them. Showing this was also the more particular aim of my example of the Caucasian couple in the USA in 1950's. It showed how rigid gender roles were before the concept of gender was well known; that is, when these roles were generally still thought to be a sex-specific function of nature or biology. In other words, the example is relevant because the couple's chosen role reversal clearly violated the gender norms of their (and later my) culture. I will explain my choice of example further in order to more fully show the comparative philosophical relevance of the concept of gender.

Another reason I used that example is because I am so familiar with it. In the USA pervasive 'sexist' stereotypes related to being 'male as opposed to female' extended well into the 1960's, 70's, and 80's. Also during these decades, expectations and practices of what was natural and appropriate for women and men began to shift. Why? The answer is because the second wave of feminists began their fight to 'liberate women' from their roles as 'second-class citizens'; roles that exclusively and essentially defined females as wives and mothers. Because of their efforts and the more race-inclusive feminist work that has followed, adopting gender roles that were previously more entrenched now meets with less resistance than encountered in the 20th century.[30] Then, couples reversing gender roles 'without good reason'—or because they wanted to for their own personal reasons—largely would have been seen as *unjustified* precisely because they were violating entrenched norms of their Western, Caucasian culture.

Nzegwu says the following about my "deploying" this example:

> […] I take seriously the objective of the symposium, which is, to consider the serious methodological question of how philosophers can make comparative moral evaluations and responsibly engage in social critique without massively and willfully misunderstanding a society that is the subject of study. With that in mind, I pondered Bockover's sanitized and benign illustration of US society in the 1950s, particularly, her deployment of the word 'unjustified' to illustrate an abstract example of a white couple's violations of social etiquette. The use of that word is striking given that it belies the harsh and brutal reality of racial injustice, lynchings, segregation, lack of employment opportunities, residential redlining, state-sanctioned surveillance, and state-sanctioned violence that millions of people of color endured during that era […]. The point this raises? If one can be so wrong about one's own society, if one cannot see that all Americans did not possess inalienable rights to life and liberty in the 1950s, what are the chances he or she would understand another culture (Nzegwu 2016b).

This response, like so many others that Nzegwu offers with no substantial evidence or good argument, is nothing but unmitigated ad hominem abuse. I was born in 1958 in Washington, DC and raised in Maryland just blocks from the DC border. During that time, the vast majority of residents in DC were African American. The later part of the 20th century in the USA was pivotal for civil rights movements, especially for people of color and for women. Personally, one of my clearest memories was of how differently—and unjustly—African

Americans were treated compared to Caucasians. This pervasive childhood experience led to a lifetime commitment of learning and practice: about the philosophies and ways of other cultures by doing comparative ethics and pursuing social justice.

So the point this raises? Nzegwu should be careful not to have such fallacies put in print. My using the example of a Caucasian couple does not imply that I am unaware of, or "willfully" ignore or misunderstand the subject of study or horrendous history and plight that millions of people of color endured in the USA (and still do). I used the example because it exposes the clear, entrenched gender norm for Caucasians at the time, one not as typical for families of color since females of color more often worked 'outside of the home' to economically support their families than their Caucasian counterparts did, and often in jobs of domestic servitude to Caucasian families. In addition to committing the ad hominem fallacy here, Nzegwu also makes yet another straw person fallacy by ignoring my actual view. She does this by focusing attention away from it and the purpose of my example to the "harsh and brutal reality of racial injustice" that is true and critically important, but is not relevant to the argument I was making at the time. More, nowhere in my commentary did I say that "all Americans" were treated as having inalienable rights to life and liberty in the 1950s. But because the general paradigm expressly commits to the values of individual life and self-determination, civil rights continue to be written into laws that in principle protect the interests of all. The effect of naming and in principle protecting such values is that social injustices continue to be exposed, and more opportunities become available for people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, and other minority groups.[31]

Overall, Nzegwu does not seem to understand the method for doing comparative philosophy. She says that: "Physical or social spaces lack inherent meaning outside of a specific paradigm" (Nzegwu 2016b). It does not follow that such "spaces" cannot provide a context for introducing and understanding a new idea, even one taken from a different paradigm. Comparative philosophy otherwise would not be possible. She goes on to say, "This is why the deployment of gender as a philosophical comparison tool is problematic. Such problems are created, not by theoretical or methodological errors, but by a limiting unicentric worldview." (*ibid.*). Again, we see a straw person fallacy here as nowhere in this debate is a "unicentric worldview" expressed. In a comparative philosophical context all we need to be able to do is reasonably share ideas, even those with which we are unfamiliar or have had no exposure to. When a concept such as gender is introduced, the aim is to increase understanding, not to oppress others with a new idea. While 'gender' arose out of a Western conceptual paradigm that does not mean it has to be oppressive or patriarchal. In light of the increased rights for women and LGBTQ people, there is evidence at least in the West that it has functioned to the contrary.[32]

To conclude, I do put forth "a coterie of contemporarily privileged concepts" such as choice, individualism, self-determination, freedom, justice, and others—concepts "privileged" in a paradigm for which the concept of gender is also clearly relevant. I do this to show how it is *comparatively* relevant or can be understood in the context of cultures that do not explicitly make use of the idea. Nzegwu says that I have illegitimately shifted ground and "must explain how transposing without modification key contemporary concerns of America's racialized, gendered society onto her 'family- and tribal-based' societies addresses the issues laid out in the lead essay" (*ibid.*). I am not shifting ground but am providing grounds for my own comparative analysis. To explain how a contemporary Western idea like gender can be "transposed without modification" onto cultures that do not include it as part of their paradigm, I remind the readers one last time that gender is defined as: "a social construct, based on how different groups conceive of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'—that is, conceive of the capacities, qualities, and behaviors attributed to male and female (identified) bodies, respectively." Once we have the *concept*, then we can ask how it may (or may not) be relevant to societies such as the Igbo and Yorùbá. Based on what the author herself says, they do have ideas about being female and male, even though they may not have named them or conceived of them as being constructed or as falling under the concept of 'gender.'

Nzegwu's lead article and response do leave us with a perennial question that has never in the history of philosophy been conclusively answered. Conceptual analysis is one thing, but my questions about how the fictional outliers of the Igbo and Yorùbá might fare in identifying in ways that go against the norms of their culture, invite a moral comparison. Raising such questions in no way suggests that there will be clear answers, however. Indeed, for a culture that truly has no concept—say, of being lesbian or gay or transgender—the 'problem' may not have a chance to arise. In our rapidly changing and unpredictable world, we will see how long this will remain the case.

A Short Comment on Nkiru Nzegwu's Response

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1

I would like to thank Dr. Nkiru Nzegwu´s response to my comments on her paper and to Drs. James Maffie and Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach—co-editors of the *Journal of World Philosophies*—for inviting me to write a new response to Dr. Nzegwu´s comments to my former reply.[33] Also, I would like to thank my colleges Maitrayee Chaudhuri of Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi, India), and Mary I. Bockover of Humboldt State University (California, USA) for agreeing to participate in this stimulating polycentric dialogue. It is always valuable to discuss schools and lines of philosophy especially on the status of the category of gender and its use for comparing between Western and non-Western societies.

To begin with, and for purposes of clarification, I would like to confirm my stance on the issue raised by Dr. Nzegwu: whether "gender" as a category is useful to grasp the logic and social organization of a society structured in different ways. Yes, I believe that "gender" as a category is indeed useful, as much as "race" (I prefer to say "ethno-race")[34] or "seniority," precisely because "the degree of difference quite rightly calls for understanding each society on its own terms"—as Dr. Nzegwu claims. This means that we need external terms or criteria to make comparisons possible. Actually, it would also be convenient to define notions precisely to make sure we know what to discuss and from what philosophical perspective or school we are doing so. That is why I find this dialogue very inspirational as, "We cannot simply dismiss such differences as irrelevant, because that would produce inverted epistemologies" as Nzegwu´s points at, and unwanted misunderstandings. Therefore, this polycentric dialogue shows, on the one hand, that there are different philosophical views all round the world and, on the other, that we are challenged to find a (metaphorical) path or bridge to make dialogue possible. In this belief, I will specify further the "theoretical tools" I chose when framing in my previous response.

2

In the first place, I will quote one of Dr. Nzegwu´s statements about my reply:

> From her theoretical standpoint, Femenías cannot see her overarching framework of analysis, hence believes that a clear and distinct separation exists between the concept and its socio-historical modes. But the vaunted separation is illusory. Theoretical separations are not real, they are ephemeral. Insofar as the sex/body principle is the regulatory principle of the paradigm and its social ontology, the meaning of the concept of gender is predicated dynamically on its historical and social modes.

To begin with, I will not go into the issue of the meaning of "real" in the various schools of philosophy because I understand that Dr. Nzegwu uses "real" in a colloquial sense. In my opinion, if we are to overcome the stage of "immediate evidence," the immediate visible,[35] to disentangle the structure or logic that organizes that evidence *qua* evidence, we must appeal to universal criteria or categories of analysis whose meaning is not "overarching."[36] In other words, to understand how and why that "real" appears as such, it is not necessary to admit a hidden truth or an essence behind the facts. Actually, it is necessary to admit the existence of an

organization, an inner logic that though in the very surface of facts is not immediately "visible." That is the level I aim at with the distinction between gender as a category and the descriptions we may offer of the gendered-sexed organization of a given society. Save in naïve realism or absolute idealism, "gender" is a theoretical tool as is the case with "ethno-race," "seniority" (and many others) that may play their role in the explanation and analysis of a society without replacing or canceling other categories. Needless to say, there is a necessary relationship between theory and reality, understood as the modes of concrete historical existence. Linda Martín Alcoff, for example, claims that the core idea of "realism" is that it is possible for human beings "to know the world as it is," and that we are not caught in the "prison house of language." This core idea of realism, however, is compatible with some very different metaphysical accounts of the world and of the character of human knowledge.[37] I believe this is where our differences are most conspicuous. In a pluri-dimensional analysis it would be important to acknowledge all of them as possible ways to access the world. Be that as it may, it is my opinion that specifically in the point I am making, the distinction between a "type" and what logicians call its "occurrences," may illuminate the hard core which I wish to implement.

Along this line, several classical and contemporary philosophers may be mentioned. Besides Enlightenment philosophers, (Immanuel Kant, for one), other schools and periods have witnessed similar distinctions. Post-structuralist Michel Foucault holds that the concept does not "describe" the real, does not merge with the real, it is not identical with the real: categories are "productive fictions" they produce the effect-of-knowledge, on the one hand, and of the real, on the other. In the same way it is necessary to distinguish fable from fiction. Or, turning to Maurice Blanchot, fiction is neither in things nor in men but in impossible verisimilitude. Fiction does not consist in turning the invisible visible but in showing *how the invisible of the visible is invisible* (my italics) (Foucault 1994: 509).

Along similar lines, much earlier, Karl Marx, from the perspective of materialistic realism, warns of the need to distinguish "production" in general, which is an abstraction, from the different phases of production given at a certain time in history, in a particular stage of the social development of society (Marx 1974: 35, 38).

I hope that I have contributed to the opening of a conceptual space for a pluri-centered dialogue.

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[1]   See, A. Fausto-Sterling (1993) to gain an understanding of why the male-female binary should be rejected. Based on empirical evidence from the Intersex community, Fausto-Sterling argues that the concept of 'sex' has been misrepresented—to express the range of sexuality to only consist of *either* males *or* females, where 'male' and 'female' are conceived as being mutually exclusive (ontological) categories. She proposes that instead, we come to understand that, "Sex is a vast, infinitely malleable continuum that defies the constraints of even the five categories" (1993: 21).

[2]   See, Dreger (1998), to see not only how intersexuality has been treated, both conceptually and in practice, but correlatively, to see the basis for identifying males and females throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. In her exploration of the topic of intersexuality, Dreger shows us that 'sex' is also an ambiguous concept, depending entirely on the criteria used to identify it. More importantly, the criteria are not as ontologically tied to clear markers that would allow us to identify an individual's 'sex' as we have been led to believe—particularly by the binary construction that sees maleness and femaleness as biological opposites. For example, Dreger says, "Anatomy is never going to tell us for sure what sex is all about or who is really an intersexual. As humans we decide that. We get to decide who counts as male, what you have to have or do to count as female, and what happens to you if you get labeled intersexed" (*ibid.*: 355).

[3]   Notice that what 'normative' means tends also to be vague. In one sense, it is a statistical concept related to a standard or norm, especially of behavior, that is shown to be typical or usual. A moral sense is often extrapolated from this; namely, where what is normal is taken to establish a standard or rule of conduct for a given culture.

[4]   For example, consider how standards of masculinity varied in the West in the 20th century. In the USA for instance, in the 1950s normal male etiquette was to wear hair short, have a clean-shaven face, and to have one's shirt tucked in even when dressing informally. In the 1960s, by contrast, it became common or 'normal' for male youth to wear long hair, beards, and to not have shirts tucked in. It also became a trend for younger males, particularly white males, to wear jewelry such as earrings and necklaces that would have been condemned as effeminate in the 1950s.

[5]   In an article called "Taking Responsibility for Sexuality" (2009), Joyce Trebilcot argues that taking responsibility for sexuality (and by extension one could say for anything) requires that one "chooses to make a commitment to a certain state of affairs" (*ibid.*: 338). She cites the coming out as a lesbian to be a paradigm case of this, saying that: "It is characteristic of first coming out, of coming out to oneself, that a woman does not know whether to say that she has *discovered* that she is a lesbian, or that she has *decided* to be a lesbian […] The experience is one of acknowledging, of realizing what is already there, and at the same time of creating something new, a new sense of oneself, a new identity" (*ibid.*). Trebilcot calls this more intentional process of identification one of *discovery/creation*, which clearly requires that one interprets the significance of her feelings and experiences to herself and then puts a name to what she wants to be called or to how she wants to be identified; and I stress: *how she identifies herself as well as how she wants others to identify her.*

6   This reinforces the idea that differences along the gender (identity) spectrum of femininity and masculinity tend to exist more fluidly, on a continuum, than sex differences do. I would like to remind the reader that sex differences do not always neatly or exclusively fall on one *or* the other side of the female-male sexual binary either; again see the articles I reference by Dreger and Fausto-Sterling.

7   In a section called 'Romantic Roles: Beyond Androgyny Too,' Robert Solomon argues that the overcoming of sexual stereotypes entails the overcoming of gender stereotypes too; see his article called "Beyond Sex and Gender (Love and Feminism)" (1981).

8   That 'sex' is conceived in terms of an oppositional binary is actually not a part of the fact that people possess certain sex-specific gametes. Nzegwu cites an example for us where the male–female relationship is taken to be complimentary or even necessary, instead of being one of sexual opposition. Even though this difference may seem slight, it brings to light the role that interpretation plays even in how we conceive of being 'sexed' that is not a function of the biological relationship itself. As such, we see that 'sex' is also a somewhat ambiguous and interpretive concept.

9   For example, some fathers have taken care of their children after the death of their wives. In the middle of the 20th century in the USA, this was not the norm. Many widowers remarried women who would fill the role of wife and mother, in their deceased wives' stead, during this time (often producing more children with the new wife). However, some chose not to do so. In such cases, fathers often fulfilled both roles of single parent and sole financial supporter of the family (also often paying for childcare of housekeeping services to ease the burden of having this dual role). Crucially, because it was not the widowers' *choice* for their wives to pass prematurely, such cases were seen as unfortunate rather than unjustified (even when the father *chose* not to remarry). It is surely safe to say that it would have been preferable for the mother to survive, if nothing else in order to provide vital emotional support to the family. This is not to claim that fathers did not provide emotional support; in the normal household in the USA at this time, both parents provided a wide range of support to their dependent children. However, a critical difference in this 'traditional' division of labor, at least found in Caucasian nuclear families (consisting of parents and offspring exclusively) in post WWII USA, was that fathers typically worked outside of the home to provide exclusive financial support for their families, while mothers typically provided unpaid domestic labor for a wider range of childcare and household responsibilities. Unfortunately, being dependent entirely on their husbands' income, wives/mothers who found themselves in neglectful or abusive situations often did not have the means to leave (even when it was needed to protect their children). Among other things, this gender inequity helped to fuel the second wave of feminism in the USA that really took off from the 1960s onward, and that aimed to *socially empower* women.

10   The understanding of personhood as consisting of rational free agency had been evolving since the time of ancient Greece, but has become particularly clarified in modern times with the work of philosophers like Kant and Locke—that we are self-governing and have a kind of sovereignty over ourselves and our lives in important respects. Now we see in the West how this has come to apply to having the freedom to choose one's own (e.g., gender) identity; at least insofar as we can decide which identities we ultimately claim as our own and that we may want others to identify us in terms of as well.

11   I hold that even in 'individualistic' societies like what is now found in the USA and much of the Western world, people are still *also* social in nature. To procreate and nurture our young, to survive, to create as well as recreate, we humans typically do so in groups (or at least with artifacts that have required group collaboration). In such individualistic societies (which is a kind of oxymoron), there arises a paradoxical relationship—and even an outright tension—between the values of individual freedom and social conformity. See Henry Rosemont's book *Against Individualism* (2015) to gain insight into some of the potential problems individualism may entail in cultures that embrace it.

12   However, one may also be thought of as having a 'civil right' without being autonomous. For example, some argue that human fetuses and humans in comas have a basic right to live, simply because human life carries such weighty value, and regardless of whether they will be capable of rational autonomy at some future time.

13   How much this is the case is open to debate. Many hold that there are some aspects of our identity (e.g., sexual orientation) that are more given than constructed.

14   Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the key maker of the Indian Constitution, who called for the annihilation of caste, was the person who gave the call to burn the *Manusmriti* on 25th December 1927. He thus became the figure par excellence for those whose tradition had been dehumanized and denigrated on the basis of this very document, for centuries.

15   The Nayar community is located in Kerala, in southern India. They traditionally practiced matriliny, had customary marriages and lived in women-run households. From the 17th century European travellers wrote about the scandalous lives of Nayar women. By the 19th century, Nayar men were asking for legal change and in 1933 a law was brought by the British that abolished the matrilineal joint family.

16   I'd like to thank James Maffie who kindly invited me to participate in this volume, and whose questions gave me the opportunity to confront my own stances in this kind of long-distance, polycentric conversation. As well, my acknowledgement to María Spadaro who read previous parts of this essay and whose valuable recommendations I tried to include. I'd also like to thank Alejandra Martín and Adriana Boria for the long conversations we held about identity issues. Lastly, I'd also like to thank Andrea Altare for her help with the English version.

17   See Bakare-Yusuf (2004); Moore (1994).

18   Rivera-Cusicanqui, R. Barragán (1997); Segato (2003); Femenías (2013a [2007]).

19   Palermo (2010); Sciortino (2016).

20   Palermo (2000). Also see, M. P. Mejicano Merck (2014).

21   Lugones (2010; 1999); Bidaseca (2011); Sciortino (*ibid.*).

22   Curiel (*ibid.*). López Louro (*ibid.*); also Ramos-Rosado (1999; 2011). Also see my article (Femenias 2008).

23   When I talk about "tradition," I bear in mind the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1993)*,* in particular, the "Introduction", pp. 1-14.

24   Femenías (*ibid.*); (2013a: 241); Sassen (2010).

25   Sciortino (*ibid.*).

26   Among others, Femenías (2013a); Sciortino (2012); Amorós (1998).

27   One of my main areas of interest is Confucianism, which is essentially family-based. In a comparative philosophical context, to say that a group is "family- and tribal-based" is to capture a *principle*—of a communal way of life that is vastly different and even antithetical to the mainstream Western way of life. Consider the Yurok and Wiyot, two Native American tribes in Northern California that I am familiar with and whose members' core identity rests on their *identification with the group* instead of with the 'self' and its corresponding self-interests so prevalent in the West. I am well aware that people want to be identified in a way that properly distinguishes them. Even when experiences are 'shared' there are meaningful differences. For example, the Yurok and Wiyot both share of history of oppressive and even brutal treatment by Caucasian settlers, but how these dehumanizing practices occurred was not the same and give rise to different histories. They also have different histories and practices for other reasons, but neither reject an identity *qua* tribe. Philosophically, calling a group a tribe refers to something more general than a unique history: it refers to a non-abstract and communal way of life through which identity is conferred upon members in virtue of their membership and role in that group, rather than some trait that persons are thought to contain individually or in and of themselves. Using language for philosophical rather than political purposes need not display a colonial mind-set.

28   This is only anecdotal and not intended to be taken as scientific fact. I have observed similar developments elsewhere—not unlike the emergence of the concepts of 'gender' and 'transgender' in the USA in the last quarter of the 20th century.

29   Daesh is also referred to as ISIS, which is an acronym for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (or the Levant for ISIL). I think there are good moral reasons for why we in the West should not confer statehood on this terrorist group by identifying it as such. I would go on to say that Daesh is dehumanizing and immoral regardless of where they practice their 'politics.'

30   Some second wave feminists are Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Brownmiller, Shulamith Firestone, Marilyn French, Betty Friedan, Marilyn Frye, Susan Moller Okin, and Gloria Steinem, and some feminists of color are Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Maxine Hong Kingston, Winona LaDuke, Cherríe Moraga, and Alice Walker.

31   The USA is far from ideal when it comes to fairly and justly treating minority groups. But headway is being made. We have had our first president of African descent, and may well have our first female president as a result of the next general election. That the injustices are becoming more transparent to us as a group shows how the constructs are working to more inclusively establish equal rights for our citizens.

32   A key example of this occurred on June 26, 2015, when on constitutional grounds same-sex marriage was made legal across the USA.

33   I thank my colleague Luisina Bolla (UNLP-Conicet) whose valuable suggestions I tried to include in this reply. I would also like to acknowledge Teresa La Valle (UBA-CIF) who read a previous version of this paper and also helped me with the English translation.

34   See Alcoff, "Latinos Beyond the Binary."

35   With Edmund Husserl´s valuable warnings or those of Phenomenology, in general, it is clear that theoretical terms are not real in the same sense as a table at which I am writing is real, but they are real within the framework of their own theories.

36   See Nzegwu´s quotation above. Seyla Benhabib has explored these lines in several works, e.g. *The Claims of Culture* (2002) which I read in its Spanish translation.

37   See Alcoff, "Who's Afraid of Identity Politics?"