

Candice Schutter: [00:00:00] So in these spaces, the gender binary is a laundered spiritualized version of these conventional norms. There's a lot of language around *the divine feminine* and *the divine masculine*. And there's this internalized idea that we are honoring our divine femininity by dressing this way. That, that it's a choice. That, that it's something that we want to do.

We can tell ourselves a really compelling story that we want to conform with these gender norms.

So the first kind of power that we think of when we think of dysfunctional toxic power is the power that *makes us do things we don't wanna do*. But there's another kind of power, which is really the colonization of the psyche that teaches us *to want to do things that we have to do anyway*. And when an individual shows up and their nature is such that they just are unable to comply. They can't conform to gender norms for the sake of their sense of integrity.

[00:01:00] They are made wrong.

Hey, welcome back to The Deeper Pulse. It's good to be here with you on the main feed.

It is still Pride month. And so my focus today is going to be in that vein. But not specifically on the LGBTQ+ movement.

More so on how the social norms that basically make the whole movement itself a necessity, how we're all encaged by this thing that some call gender essentialism.

This is a topic that I've been wanting to touch upon for quite some time on the podcast. And I decided to sit down and talk a bit about it in early May, and I released an episode on Patreon for subscribers to the podcast. And I decided to share that with you here today and add to it a bit. So in this introduction to that content, [00:02:00] I am going to share again personally and contextualize why I think this topic and conversations around it are relevant to every one of us.

So we're gonna travel back in time to my 10th grade class photo.

Some of you might remember school pictures. Is that a thing that still happens? I'm not a parent, so I do not know about such things. But every year, we would have our portrait taken for our yearbooks and our friends and loved ones would carry photos of us in their wallet. And yeah, that's how old I am. So.

I'm bringing up this specific photo because in it my hair is notable. Not in the way it had been in the years just prior, which would've been the mid to late eighties when my bangs quite literally defied gravity, thanks to a half a can of aquanet and a teasing comb.

No, this was 1991 when the marketers at [00:03:00] Pantene, which was a hair product line, had shifted away from their previous tagline, which was, *don't hate me because I'm beautiful* to a more understated and yet still impossible: *hair so healthy it shines* message. And flowing long-locked effortlessness was the new beauty bullseye that we all had to hit.

But as it turns out, effortlessness was not an easy look to pull off, especially when your hair was like mine, kinky and curly. And it didn't help that I had hair all the way down to almost my ass, because my stepdad, Gary, loved it. My hair was only to be trimmed and never cut.

And If you happen to be a long time listener of the podcast, you may remember way back in episode 12, I was reading from my memoir. And I shared about a time when I was maybe nine or 10 years old, and it was the summer in Southern California. And my mom decided to cut her hair into a pixie cut. Really, actually, pretty similar to how mine is now. At [00:04:00] which point, my stepfather, Gary, proceeded to ignore both her and I for two solid days. The silent treatment. You know, to teach us a lesson. And apparently the lesson registered, because by the time I was a sophomore in high school, it didn't even occur to me to do anything other than make my long locks work for me.

Which brings me back to that sophomore year photo and the morning that I had spent in front of the mirror, you know, perfecting my natural look. And so in this school photo, my hair is really hard to miss. It's over the top, draped picture-perfect-casual over one of my shoulders. My head tilted, flirtatiously, to the right.

And I gotta be honest, it's one of the best photos I ever took as a child from a photogenic standpoint. But every time I look at it, my heart aches. Because it's so apparent to me just how hard I was trying. [00:05:00] Every day, hours. I would spend hours grooming. Hair, makeup, shaved legs and armpits. So much of my attention, intelligence, and thoughtfulness was spent curating my picture perfect self, catering to the male gaze.

On a very related note, I have a question for all the screenwriters, directors, and producers out there who are women who are stepping into positions of power. I'm not exactly sure who makes the final decisions when it comes to how women in films are depicted. And I'm not just talking about storylines here.

And I apologize in advance if this is something you hadn't noticed before, because it's gonna be hard for you to not notice it moving forward. But I'll be watching a movie or a series. And I'm fairly selective, so oftentimes it's damn good writing. Like I'm feeling the character. It's a woman who's speaking her mind. She's expressing wisdom and humanity at the same time. And she's showing up, you know, like a real person might.

And then a few minutes into the [00:06:00] narrative, I wanna throw my shoe at the screen.

Because she looks so... well... effortless.

She wakes up in the morning, and her pillow's barely dented by her light as a feather head. Every single hair is in place. Let's just say she has the opposite of bedhead. And her eyes are lined with a fresh coat of paint.

Or if you need a more specific and recent example. Just the other evening I was watching a young Gen Z woman fighting mushroom zombies in an apocalyptic hellscape, her hair looking like she just got a blowout. Her eyebrows, freshly combed and tweezed.

I mean, this shit is the norm, y'all. Even when it's a narrative that's being produced and directed by a woman, the standards are communicated. Look beautiful at all times no matter what, even if, and especially when, the shit is hitting the fan.

And I notice it the most when the female characters are delivering smash the patriarchy monologues and talking [00:07:00] as if they're emblematic of freedom that they haven't yet physically embodied.

And to be clear, this isn't a rebuke of fem affirming grooming rituals. I'm not saying people shouldn't attempt to look their best. If it brings you joy, I'm not here to, to rob you of that. What I am saying is that, even if that is your jam, I can fucking guarantee you that you don't look perfect at all times. And this depiction of women in visual narratives is so misleading. Especially when their male counterparts aren't always held to the same standards.

And this isn't really about the film industry, that's not my, that's not the battlefield I wanna die on. But it's about the fact that we don't even notice how insidious these messages are. That these grooming rituals are so embedded in our culture that we don't even see the absurdity of its imposition in moments when it's absolutely [00:08:00] absurd that a woman would look her best.

And the thing that's really interesting about it is that all of it is gender affirming care. So many people who oppose gender fluidity think gender affirming care always has to do with that particular region of the body, when in fact, it is about all the many things we do to affirm a particular gender positionality. And that's the real irony is that so many people get pissed off when it's actually an accepted norm every damn where, so much so that we can't watch a movie or a TV show without it being shoved down our throat.

In other words, gender affirming care is celebrated as long as you're affirming what patriarchal norms are. It's when they're defied that people lose their shit.

Which really brings me back to my original point. When we see one culturally curated model for so-called femininity, it begs the question like, what is this in service to, really?

Second wave [00:09:00] feminism, it has had a pretty good run. But even that is getting pretty tired, y'all.

I'm gonna give you one more media example. I still watch episodes of Friends when I need to just completely zone out and pretend that the world is very one dimensional. So as much as I get why like a new generation might watch episodes of Friends and feel like, oh my God, this is so outdated. I think there's something about having seen every episode 300 times that I can predict the storyline, I know exactly where it's going, and there's something comforting about that.

And Jennifer Aniston is a long time darling in Hollywood, especially for those of us who are Gen X. And in one of her most recent roles in the series, The Morning Show, she plays a character who is permitted by writers of the series to excel in her career. She unapologetically leaves her husband. And in one episode, she even tells her own child to fuck off.

But heaven forbid she forget to apply [00:10:00] foundation.

Despite all of that feminist empowerment, that more subtle message is still being received.

My mom and I left my stepdad Gary when I was 16. And within a week, I had cut my hair above my shoulders. By the time I was in college, I was experimenting with boxed color, reds, purples, very often a mixture of the two. And on holiday visits back home, my grandpa, who was, and I shit you not folks, the kindest man you'll ever meet. Even he would put his arm around my shoulder, shake his head, and looking somewhat distressed he'd say, "you know, I don't like your hair."

"Yes, grandpa. I know." I'd always laugh and hug him right back.

I didn't change a thing, but the message once again was, my preferences, and here I'm not just talking about my hair, they were a problem, especially when it came to the men in my life. And if I wanted freedom, it would come at a cost.

[00:11:00] Five years later, I was living in Boulder, Colorado when I shaved my head. Or actually, my partner at the time did it for me. After she took the first pass with the clippers, I sobbed like somebody was dying.

T sat patiently and waited for me to catch my breath. And looking back now, I'm so struck by the irony of the moment. Because I was a pretty privileged young thing. White, thin, conventionally attractive. A bald head was hardly the end of the world for me. This small act of courage felt massive to me. And T made room for it.

Gender non-conforming was T's lane. She had long been defying gender expectations, unable to exist any other way than free. I was 25, and I would spend two years in relationship with T. But this was the very beginning. And I was barely scratching the surface of just how [00:12:00] caged I'd always been.

She finished the job, and the next morning I woke up at 7:04 AM, the exact time of my birth. As soon as my eyes opened, my stomach lurched, remembering what I had done. Standing in front of the mirror, I didn't even recognize myself, wondering, who is this stranger? This underneath-it-all self staring back at me in the mirror. I didn't know so I rushed to the toilet thinking I might throw up.

It would take a few days, but I eventually embraced my new look, thanks to earrings, lipstick, and mascara. Without them, I felt ugly, unworthy, and unlovable. I didn't know how to love me without hair and accessories. Some days I still don't.

Which brings me back to the real rub when it comes to the far right's rabid insistence that gender affirming care be outlawed. It's especially rich coming from women who [00:13:00] are, just as I was, spending countless hours and years of their lives curating an image, investing money in their fem presentation, insisting that the rest of the world surrender to what is *natural*.

And the men on the right, they, of course, like my stepdad, who I pray to God would not have been a Trump supporter, they want their cis women to quote unquote look like women.

But this thing we call woman, it's shaped by social norms. We like to pretend as if biology dictates gender. And then we labor to sort our children by pink and blue categories, holding them to girl versus boy standards, or even tokenizing them when they stray. Saying things like, he's just so sensitive, or she's such a tomboy.

Sorting, sorting, sorting into one of two categories. Which of course starts with biological arguments of essentialism that center around an obsession with genitals. [00:14:00] It's the place every argument around gender "naturally" goes. Because gender and biological sex are very often conflated, treated as one and the same. When it is a little known fact that the one of two binary labels that all people are assigned at birth are insufficient a significant portion of the time.

Did you know that 1.7% of people are intersex? In other words, their bio sex characteristics just don't fit into the binary. And if 1.7% doesn't sound like a lot, that is roughly the same percentage of folks who have red hair. That's right. Gingers. When we impose these categories and force them upon everyone, it's as if we're arguing that gingers shouldn't exist.

But that argument aside, the fact that the binary just doesn't cut it when it comes to biological sex, some people would argue, well, I'm not in that 1.7%, so therefore my gender is fixed.[00:15:00]

Again, not the same thing. Gender is not biology.

And I get it. I used to be one of the people who couldn't conceive of the difference between bio sex assignment and gender, but they are not the same thing.

One of my parents once told me that they had picked out a name for me in case I had been born as a boy. Ian. My name would've been Ian.

Now I'm pretty happy with the skin that I'm in, but I have, at times, wondered what would life have been like as Ian? What might *he* have done? Would he have been able to wear his hair short? Would he have spoken up more often? Would he have suffered from crippling self-doubt?

Not only is this a fun thought experiment, but it also begs the question, was I destined to be Candice? This creature who spent the vast majority of her life obsessing over her [00:16:00] appearance, feigning heteronormativity, fawning for certain kinds of attention? Did my so-called lady parts make this journey that I've had essential to me? Or is it possible that in another world, Candice could have had a journey like Ian's?

But even as I ask this question, the binary is present, right? Like one of the reasons that arguments around gender fluidity didn't penetrate for me for so long was because I thought that if I didn't identify with one end of the binary, then by default I was required to identify with the other.

For me, I never wanted to be Ian or identify as a boy or a man. But nor did I wanna be crammed inside the box we know as womanhood. So when I thought to myself, I really wanna speak up here. Or I prefer the musky scent of the men's deodorant. Or, I'd really rather just rock my [00:17:00] blonde eyelashes without mascara. I was always afraid that the rejection of femininity forced me to identify with its opposite.

And that sounds sort of silly and reductive on the surface, but it's the way of the world, y'all. Like this math, this gendering math, is happening all around us all the time. We're being sorted, like it or not.

For example, a couple of years ago when I was working as a CASA, I was advocating for a child who had just recently come out to their foster mother, a diehard fundamentalist Christian. And as I attempted to make a case for this child's right to their gender fluidity, I thought it might be helpful to reveal that my own sexual orientation was in fact fluid.

And I'll never forget the look on this woman's face as she said to me, nodding with enthusiasm. "Ah, I knew you were one."

I knew you were one.

She had her suspicions [00:18:00] about my queerness, and I affirmed them. And therefore she was able to tuck me into a neat little category of *those* people.

Man, woman. Gay, straight. Femme, butch. My team, your team.

If we wanna get to a place where all this extra math isn't necessary, we've gotta walk through an understanding of what gender essentialism is, where it came from, and most importantly, what it's in service to.

Which brings me to the episode that I recorded six weeks ago. I am dropping it here because, like I said, Pride month. And because these conversations are more important now than ever. We need as much language as possible. And I am certainly not an expert on any of this. But I have lived experience to pull from, and I am doing my best to learn and be a part of this ever evolving new narrative that we are [00:19:00] co-creating together.

So on to the meat of today's episode.

Hey y'all. Today I'm back with another solo episode of The Deeper Pulse on Patreon.

And I am, kind of, in the feels right now. I had planned to sit down and record this episode this morning and was pulling together some notes and just kind of getting my thoughts together. And I made the mistake of going on to Facebook. It wasn't a mistake, because I had posed a question on Facebook regarding today's topic in The Deeper Pulse Facebook group. If you're not a part of that, hit me up and I'll add you to the group on Facebook. And I had posted a question about today's topic. And so I just popped on to see [00:20:00] if anyone had commented on it.

And just as I logged on, a comment popped up on one of my recent posts. It was a post where I shared a bunch of images from the May Day protest that I attended in Phoenix this past Thursday, on May 1st. And it was from a woman who is a former Zumba student of mine in Oregon. And I haven't seen her in many years. And she leans very far right, and I would describe as a MAGA enthusiast. And she's commented on my posts, mm, I don't know, less than a half a dozen times over the years. And we had one exchange shortly before the election, through messaging, I think it was Instagram, I can't remember, about kind of her perspective. And she's was very pro-Trump and I was kind of, doing my best to practice diplomacy and to have a [00:21:00] dialogue with her around it. And it was fine, but it went absolutely nowhere. And since then, she hasn't really shown up.

Well, she decided to post this comment on my post about the protest. And it was something along the lines of what you're doing isn't patriotic and what about the people who sacrifice for our country? I mean, it was like kind of Fox News soundbite type things. And I read it, and I felt my body become flooded with anger. And the anger that I felt, it wasn't just about her and her post, of course, it was about everything that's going on and the fact that there is about 30% of the population of the US who is still in support of the Trump regime, even as it has become full-blown fascism. Masks are off, right?

And so I just felt this surge of energy and anger. And this little voice inside of me said, Candice, don't reply when you're feeling this way. But I just was [00:22:00] like, I, I can't stop my fingers. And I started to type a response. And then a thing popped up that said, this comment has been deleted. I guess she had second thoughts about engaging on my comment feed. And I felt very self-righteous when she deleted her comment, to be honest. I was like, yeah, don't fuck with me. I'm ready to have this conversation.

But in reality, that's not how I wanna spend my energy, debating with MAGA cult members about the fact that they are under the influence of this ideology. So in the end, I'm very glad that she deleted her comment. And I had typed no more than like four or five words when this thing popped up, so it saved me the time and energy engaging.

So why am I sharing this with you right now?

Because immediately, because I felt so flooded, I thought, well, I can't go on to Patreon and record an episode when I'm in the state of like, all riled up. And I thought, no, [00:23:00] I, I actually need to do something constructive right now. It's really something that I've found to be true. I've talked about before on previous episodes, specifically the one where I talked about hope being a verb, that for me, taking constructive action is the antidote to despair. Is the thing that keeps my head above water, keeps me from being overtaken by the anxiety, the outrage, the all the things.

And so I'm here, even as my heart is still beating rapidly, even as I still feel the flood of anxiety. And hormonal changes are part of that. And current events are part of that.

So I guess I just wanted to open up here just to say, there is a lot to be pissed off about. There's a lot to feel frustration and outrage and a sense of powerlessness around.

I know that a lot of what I [00:24:00] share here is not news to you necessarily. But one of the things that I know that I am good at is wrapping language around things that are hard to articulate. I can own that that is a skill that I have. And so, this is me doing that. And I'm doing it for me as much as I'm doing it for you because this is how I make sense of the world, is by trying to wrap language around the inexplainable.

But also I realized that the interaction that I almost had on Facebook with this particular individual really kind of plays into what I wanna talk about today and the way in which she was performing a role that has been given to her. It's her role to step forward and to advocate for the worldview that she is steeped in. To, um, to fight other women, holding tight to the patriarchal norms that she herself is embedded in [00:25:00] and that she is benefiting from in certain ways. That that's the role that she's playing.

And part of what makes me so angry is that I see that role. And then I, I take the bait and feel disgust and anger toward her, when in reality we both need to be turning and looking toward the systems that have put us in a situation where we appear to be at odds with one another. Because it's not about her and I. It's so much bigger than that. And that's really what I wanna keep our finger on the pulse of, like that's the deeper pulse of all these episodes.

And in the last release I talked about critical leadership theory. But I wanna just keep picking up on this thread of critical theory, and I wanna turn toward critical gender theory. Because it's another example of how we can apply critical theory. And because *gender essentialism* is something I've had earmarked for over a year on my short list of things I wanna [00:26:00] talk about, and I just haven't gotten to it. And it feels like the right moment to pick up this thread and to talk about the way in which gender is a social construction.

And this is really a follow up on the last episode, because there's really no untangling, the hierarchical power dynamics that happen within quote unquote leadership from gender and the gender norms that help to define leadership and systematically marginalize certain populations. Not just women or people who identify as women, but people of certain racial demographics, people with certain abilities or lack thereof, socioeconomic realities, all those things that all plays into that. So we're just taking another piece of that and pulling it apart.

And this gender essentialism piece, we talked about it in the Cult of Gender episode where I did the panel with Troy, Maxx, and [00:27:00] Lainie. We pointed to some of this. But this is us taking it to another place.

And I wanna speak as a white woman who was in the wellness world around gender essentialism and how I, yeah, really bought into a lot of that. So I'm gonna go into that in a minute.

But before I had this interaction this morning on social media, there were two other reasons that it felt really important that I speak to this right now.

The first, is the elephant in my room, or in my womb, if you will. Um, which is that right now I am a bit preoccupied by the perimenopausal experience that I'm having. My body is going through so many changes right now. My psyche is impacted. My physical energy. My ability to think clearly. My relationships. So many things are impacted by the changes that

are happening in my body right now. And one of the things that's [00:28:00] really up for me is I have this experience lately where I don't recognize myself when I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Not every time, but more and more often, I'll walk past the mirror. I'll catch a glimpse of myself. I will see a photo of myself, and I'll think, *huh, who is that? Who, who is that?* Like, I don't recognize my own reflection, because my body is changing at a rapid pace that I've never experienced.

And simultaneously, when I'm out in the world socially, I'm having new experiences that I haven't had before. Like I had like an intellectual understanding of certain privileges that I possessed, but I didn't fully grok the depth [00:29:00] of how those privileges play out in terms of the way I walk through the world and what it feels like to be me. And I guess I'm being a little vague. But what, what I'm trying to say is that I don't look the same and therefore I'm being treated differently. And I can feel it happening in real time the sense of invisibility that emerges as a woman ages in this culture.

And there's actually an episode on the main feed from, gosh, a while back. Must have be episode 20-something with Katherine Howells, where she talks about the invisibility of being an elderly woman. And, I'm gonna link to that episode here. Because I think it's something worth revisiting, 'cause it's completely connected to what I'm talking about.

So this, this sense of, I am being treated differently in the world, because the privileges of youth and thinness as my body is continually changing. And I am being treated differently.

And also, I have lost a [00:30:00] taste for the performance of femininity. Like I just, I don't have it in me to present myself a certain way, whether it's through the clothes that I'm wearing or if I wear makeup or not, or what my hair looks like, or if I perform the expected pleasantries of femininity, all of those things. I've become disinterested in much of that. And because I show up differently, and I am more direct and less soft around the edges, I'm being treated differently.

So it's all kinda happening simultaneously. And so I've really been thinking a lot about gender and gender norms and what it means to defy those norms and the results that it gets you. So that's one piece of why I wanted to have this conversation now.

The second reason is because fascism is catching fire and fast in this country. [00:31:00] And the patriarchy is a primary feature of fascism. And the gender binary is a primary feature of fascism. Because traditional hierarchies and gender roles are built in, it's what keeps the pyramid structure functioning.

And thanks to Project 2025 and the Trump regime, the Republican administration is saying yes to all kinds of patriarchal shit. I mean, we're talking Handmaid's Tale stuff, y'all. Like the SAVE Act, for example, that requires proof of citizenship to vote. Which sounds very reasonable on the surface, but of course as you look closer, it would require that a woman's birth certificate and her current form of identification, that the names match. Well, of course, many women who get married take the last name of their husband. So it is by design and no accident that many married women would not be able to vote because their names don't match, right? So they'd have to go jump through a [00:32:00] bunch of hoops to try to get these two documents to match.

Um, and, the number of women that this impacts is off the charts, y'all. Many women who aren't even in traditional marriages. So like, for example, my mother-in-law, who is about to turn 89 in two weeks. She was married over 50 years ago and divorced over 40 years ago, but she still has the last name of her former husband, who passed away like 30 years ago. Us trying to get a birth certificate for her and then change her name. And it, it's absurd. It's absolute fucking absurdity the amount of women that would be disenfranchised by this law. And of course, that's the whole point, right?

So this is completely connected to gender essentialism and the idea that this is how it should be according to these Republican men. And women, mind you who go along in order to get along, to maintain their proximity to power.

And I just gave you one example. There are many [00:33:00] others, the ways that Project 2025 is infiltrating and imposing their misogynistic bullshit on Americans.

And then you have the ways in which mainstream culture is capitulating to that. So this is the last example I'll give.

Just last week, Chris was about to go to work. He works at a really fancy resort in Sedona. He's a massage therapist. And he was getting ready to go to work the other morning. He pulls up his email. And he gets an email from his supervisors saying that they are asking that the massage therapists, so when they go out into the main lounge area to pick up their clients, if you've ever had a massage, the massage therapist comes and they call you by name and they say, "hey, Candice, are you ready for your deep tissue? I'm Chris, please come with me." So when he goes out into that common area to find the individual, it's no longer okay to ask for the person by first name. They have to actually say, [00:34:00] Mr. Ms. or Mrs. So-and-so, whatever their last name is.

There are so many things wrong with this. I mean, of course they're introducing themselves by first name, but because these people are of a higher social class, supposedly, they need to be referred to by their last names. So that's enough of a ick factor, if you ask me. But on top of that, you have to call them by Mr. Miss or Mrs. And in doing so, you're assuming a gender identity, which is one more layer of ick. And then on top of that, you have to guess if the woman is married or not. Which is all kinds of fucked up. Why is that relevant? Why is that necessary? Why is any of that necessary?

So the culture of his business is capitulating to these ideas. Whether they mean to be sort of following the lead of the Trump administration or not, that's what they're doing. They're reinforcing gender essentialism. I [00:35:00] want to define gender essentialism.

It says that there are inherent and innate differences between men and women, that these differences are built into us, that they are part of our basic nature, and that our behaviors and the social differences that exist between men and women are a function of these essential differences within us. That gender is fixed. That it is an underlying essence that we all possess based on our quote unquote "biological sex," which is a whole other rabbit hole, and that it is immutable.

The alternative perspective on this, the one that I take, is a social constructivist perspective, which is basically gender is a social construct and a set of behaviors that we have learned to perform. One of the most respected scholars on this topic is Judith Butler, [00:36:00] and she wrote a book called *Gender Trouble*. And one of the things that she really focuses on is questioning this essentialism. And she talks about how the normative nature of heterosexuality has created the performance of gendered behaviors and that gender is a performance.

So these two arguments are ultimately, of course, at odds with each other. And it places us in this awkward place that critical theorists often end up in where they're arguing that a thing that is a thing isn't a thing. Okay.

So in other words, like race. Let's just talk about race for a second. Race isn't actually a real thing. It is a social construct that people were racialized and put into certain categories. So race isn't real, but it is real in the sense that it is a reality that has been created socially that we have to respond to and somehow constructively deconstruct in order to abandon it. So we have to turn [00:37:00] and face it directly and use the language of racial divides in order to talk about race, so that we can move toward a reality where race is no longer the thing that it's presented as.

And so the parallel I'm drawing here is that gender is very similar. And that one of the struggles is, differences between men and women exist. And to pretend that they don't exist is to deny the social construct. But to say that they exist because they are essential and meant to be and innate is in my mind, a fallacy.

Now, of course, if you do sampling of populations, you're gonna find differences. If you do a big study, you can find all kinds of correlations to say brown-eyed people are like this, blue-eyed people are like this. But in reality it's much more complicated than that. And so results that oversimplify and lack intersectionality, that don't look at all the variables that are at play, and they just hone in on one variable and then conclude that A equals Z, forgetting that there [00:38:00] are 24 other letters in between.

So when we look at gender essentialism, I think it's also important to acknowledge the work of a French philosopher, Foucault, who argues that knowledge is really created by whoever has the power. And so knowledge itself should always be questioned. So when you hear people making gender essentialist claims, it's always important to look at the context within which they're making them.

So I'm gonna give you an example, 'cause this is super heady, so I'm just gonna pop in an example here before I go any further.

So a number of years ago, I was involved in a spiritual community I spoke about here on the pod. It was the last community that I left. And I was attending a temascal led by a white woman and her [00:39:00] Mexican husband.

A few days prior to this sweat lodge that we were doing, we were told that as women who are attending this sweat lodge, we couldn't wear pants, we had to wear a skirt. And it needed to be, it needed to cover our knees. So a skirt long enough to cover our knees. And then our top

needed to be cap sleeved, so our shoulders couldn't be showing. So again, we're meant to go into the sweat lodge wearing all white, long flowing skirts that cover our knees, and cap sleeve shirts.

And when I was told that we had to do this, I pushed back a little bit. Because this was a new age feminist ritual, right? We had come together as a group to express our agency and it just felt like this really random, archaic imposition. And so I pushed back. And I was told like, this is tradition and we need to honor a tradition. It would be disrespectful to do otherwise. [00:40:00]

I reluctantly agreed and um, when we went into the sweat lodge, we all climbed in first. And then the husband came in last and proceeded to sit in a pair of shorts and to take his shirt off.

So the one man in the group is sitting comfortably topless, while I have so much fabric clinging to my body that it's suffocating. And I am supposed to just accept that this is natural and that it makes sense and that it's disrespectful to question.

So in these spaces, in these new age wellness spaces, the gender binary is a laundered spiritualized version of these conventional norms. There's a lot of language around *the divine feminine* and *the divine masculine*. And there's this internalized idea that we are honoring our divine femininity by dressing this way. That, that it's a [00:41:00] choice. That, that it's something that we want to do. We can tell ourselves a really compelling story that we want to conform with these gender norms.

And this is something I'm gonna talk about when I get into the deconstruction of leadership, specifically transformational leadership style. And transformational leadership style, one of the ways in which it functions is rather than forcing people to do things, really overt coercion, is that it does something more subtle.

So the first kind of power that we think of when we think of dysfunctional toxic power is the power that *makes us do things we don't wanna do*. But there's another kind of power, which is really the colonization of the psyche that teaches us *to want to do things that we have to do anyway*. And that's what these gender ideas are in service to. And when, um, an individual shows up in this world and their nature is such that they just are unable to comply. They can't conform to gender norms for the sake [00:42:00] of their sense of integrity. They are made wrong.

And why this conversation, the point I really should have led with, is the most important is because gender essentialism denies the existence of people who do not fit the gender binary. People who exist anywhere else along that spectrum, particularly people who want to *move* along that spectrum in some way, which we know as trans individuals. And we absolutely have to push back and fight against the gender binary. And gender essentialism specifically that says they are born to be a certain way, according to some standard that somebody outside of them sets. Their agency and their right to move along that spectrum is being attacked. And all of our rights to have freedom and choice and agency is being attacked. It's not just about a certain group of individuals.

Trans individuals are the freedom fighters of our day. They are the people who are [00:43:00] willing to tread a path that says, I do not have to conform to gender essentialism. And they're saying to us, neither do you. And when we fight for the thing that keeps us oppressed, we're not helping ourselves, let alone anyone else.

Gender essentialism has been the norm for centuries. And then in the late sixties to the eighties when white women started to get involved in feminism. There was a threat to the system, the patriarchal system, the hierarchies that existed. And so, gender essentialism had to be cloaked in new language because it was up against feminism. And it didn't wanna *seem* like it was being misogynistic. So maybe if we just frame it a little bit differently, it will be palatable to the mainstream again. And we can get people to remain punch drunk on this idea.

And a pivotal book that helped to achieve that end was the book, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. It was published in 1992. [00:44:00] And the author, John Gray, is like a *grifter*, y'all. This book did not age well, but it's one of the most bestselling books of all time. And I'm gonna link to a podcast called *If Books Could Kill*, and an episode where they talk about this book and John Gray and the problematic things that were shared in that book. And how they reinforced not only gender stereotypes, but also normalized emotional immaturity in men and the idea that women should do more emotional labor to sort of offset it in heteronormative relationships.

So that book was massively popular. And it basically argued, men are rational. Women are emotional. And these differences are essential. They're just the way that we're built. And here are some strategies to negotiate that. And the strategies aren't even good, by the way, I should add. Ignoring the fact that women are rational, also. That men are emotional beings also. That, that these tidy little categories [00:45:00] don't actually exist. And really the purpose of a book like this is to keep women in their lane doing the relational and emotional work. Saying like, you don't really belong over there in those spaces where reason and assertiveness and all of that functions, we need you here in these emotional spaces. And men need to be over there. And these things are natural and essential. Don't question it. And PS, sign up for my workshops and I'll teach you how to perform these gender norms the way that they should be performed and make loads of money doing it. So not a fan of John Gray, as you can tell.

Anywho, three years later, a book came out that I devoured. I mean, this book, I had every other page earmarked. I had highlighted. I had things written in the margin. I was all about this book. And it was a book called *Intimate Communion* by David Deida.

David Deida, we could spend in an episode talking about all the different work he's done. I'm just gonna focus on this [00:46:00] specific book and like the message there in. And it was kind of the new age spin on gender essentialism, taking a more high-minded approach to the whole thing. Making the masculine and the feminine these spiritual essences that we can embody. And how it was described was that like sexual attraction is a function of the polarity between masculine and feminine. And so in order to create a sexual union, and sort of this spiritual communion, you have to have both of those energies operating in there ideal expression.

So yeah, it seemed like there was room for like, yes, a gay couple or a lesbian couple could come to this book and find some value in it.

However, the premise is no different. It's like, the essence of masculine is a thing, is the assumption, [00:47:00] the essence of feminine is a thing. I mean, the book gives you all sorts of tools in terms of embodying that.

So why was I attracted to it? I was single. I was in my early twenties when I first started reading the book. I was actively seeking a partnership with a man, because due to internalized homophobia, I was afraid to express my queerness. And I was financially really vulnerable. The truth of the matter is, it's that at that point in my life, my chance at security through partnership was more likely to come from a partnership with a man who was older than me who had access to privilege and resources. I mean, it's a big reason why so many women who, potentially would be queer minded or open to a relationship with a woman, especially in that day and age, things have shifted a little bit in terms of, well, quite a lot actually in terms of, of who has the power and resources. But back then the power and resources came from being close with a man. [00:48:00] And I considered myself a feminist, but I still thought, mm, I am tired of working so hard at this capitalist grind. Yeah, I would like to be able to relax a little bit, and I would like for a man to take the lead and direct.

And so when Deida talked about the masculine, it was like the masculine was all about directness and integrity and focusing on what he wants. And it was like this description of ambition, success, and clarity of direction, all what it is to be successful in a capitalist economy.

And when he described the feminine, it was about radiance, receptivity, openness, attracting the man, like the, the part of me that was extremely insecure, wanted the validation of the male gaze. And so Deida's depiction of the feminine was all about becoming sort of a beacon, like a lighthouse that calls the masculine. And this idea that if the feminine is in [00:49:00] its, its ideal essence and the masculine is in its ideal essence, then you're gonna have this incredible magnetism, attraction, and like crazy, wonderful sex and all the things, right? That was the promise.

And so I studied this book to figure out how to embody my divine femininity. Even as some part of me resented the parts I would read, that sort of implied a subjugation to the direction of the masculine. It was subtle, but it was there. And looking back on it now with new eyes, it wasn't as subtle as I thought it was.

Um, so these ideals of the divine masculine and the divine feminine and the way that we perform what it means to be a man or what it means to be a woman, it's just been twisted and morphed in all these different ways. And I guess I just wanna underscore the fact that I had come out of this traditional patriarchal family and I thought that I was so feminist [00:50:00] and progressive. And in reality I was still reifying the same shit, I was just doing it under a new umbrella using different language.

And a few years later, not long after Chris and I got together, we've been together for almost 13 years, I stumbled across another author by the name of Alison Armstrong. Some of my friends were exploring her work, and there was a book called *The Queen's Code*. And I got all pulled into it. Again, it was all about how men and women can communicate better if they understand their essence. And, in all of these instances, I do want to say there's always a modicum of truth or elements that are super helpful in terms of communication and self-

awareness and things to pay attention to. And so it's not to say, all of this is garbage. It is to say that there is a problematic undercurrent running through all of it.

And that even Alison Armstrong's work, she talked about genetics and women being gatherers and men being hunters, and how that shaped us epigenetically in the way that we relate to each other. And of course, there's some truth there. [00:51:00] But again, the emphasis is never on the social construction of the thing and how do we maybe construct something differently? It's about, this is what the social construct has been, so how do we reify it? How do we continue to perform it in a way that gets us better results?

And what these next generations are here teaching us is like, Hey, y'all, we are not interested in the performance of gender. We want to be creatures, beings, human beings who have the ability to express however we wanna express. And the idea that *this* behavior is masculine and *this* behavior is feminine. It's socially constructed bullshit, and they're calling us on it. They're saying that's not a thing. Just because somebody identifies as a man doesn't mean that nurturing is like a feminine behavior that that man is doing. Or just because a woman [00:52:00] is expressing herself assertively and is taking charge and directing things and leading that doesn't mean she's behaving masculine.

And this is the construct that I've had to spend the most time undoing in my mind. It's taken me years, and I still fall into it sometimes, labeling things masculine, feminine. And I've had to actively stop using that language.

And you know, Lainie talked about this in the episode, The Cult of Gender. She really named this overtly, and how she was pushing back on it at the Org in a big way, and nobody wanted to have that conversation, because she's threatening the system. That's how we come to understand the power of gender essentialism because if you challenge it, you threaten the whole house of cards.

But the thing is, is that we don't have to live inside that house of cards. Right now that house of cards is being imposed on [00:53:00] us. And we have to very consciously, defiantly, and constructively create new places to reside. Like community, small community spaces where we can come together and challenge these notions. Because you know, I can't take on the US government and neither can you solely, but we can create communities where we're challenging these norms and creating alternatives and readying ourselves to move into positions of influence where we can collectively, not through some elected savior leader person, but collectively challenge these dynamics. Challenge leadership and say, leadership is not an individual or an identity, it's an event. Challenge gender norms and say gender is something that exists along a spectrum and that it is largely performative. And we can perform and express any gender expression we want to express. And we can actively make room for that. And the [00:54:00] reason why the fascists are coming down so hard on this issue of trans rights is because they know it is a threat to the whole order that they want to impose. And we have to push back.

And there's different entry points when it comes to this. So I also wanna underscore the fact that, you know, the *Men Are From Mars* book, arguably, although I have misgivings about even saying that, but *Intimate Communion* and Alison Armstrong's work and everything, like these are all inching us away from the conventional towards something different. And so

they're not exact replicas, they're evolved replicas that are slowly bit by bit, shedding a little bit of the indoctrination at a time, right? A little bit's coming off. But the essence of the essentialism remains.

And so, it doesn't make sense in every space, to like take somebody who's a trad wife, like a traditional Christian wife, and ask her to buy into gender on a spectrum. That's maybe too big of a leap for her. So there are a lot [00:55:00] of ways in which we can slowly deprogram our thinking and the thinking of the other people around us, to just question one assumption at a time that kind of moves people toward understanding what gender even means.

Because there was definitely a time in my life where gender and biological sex, they were not separate in my mind. And it's only through exposure to LGBTQ+ folks and my own experiences moving along the gender spectrum in terms of my own expressions that I've come to understand, like, wait a second, gender is just a social construct. It has nothing to do with anything tangible. It is something that we can play with and explore and express.

And so point being, that we have to meet people where they are and that we can keep in mind though, that arguments around essentialism are designed to uphold the status quo. And that the real work is to challenge the idea that gender is [00:56:00] fixed and to help people to understand the ways in which their own gender expression and the gender expression of people around them can mutate and evolve. And, that it can be something to celebrate and not two separate cages that we have to lock ourselves into, that there's all this space in the middle.

And then from there, where I ultimately feel like I'm landing, and I'm sure there's a space after this that I haven't even touched yet, is why does the expression of humanity have to be gendered at all? Like why is that important? In what way does it serve us really to speak about masculine and feminine? Is that necessary?

And I, and I know I have some friends who would argue like, yes, that's important to me and my marriage. And that's something that I really prescribe to 'cause it helps them in their dynamic. So I'm not trying to take it away [00:57:00] from anybody. What I am saying is don't impose it on me or other people, specifically people who are just trying to live their lives and express their gender in a way that feels authentic to them. That's the problem with using those labels and reifying the idea that they are essentialist and that they exist for a purpose.

So if this is rubbing you the wrong way, if you feel like this as a bridge too far, Candice. I can't go here, because I believe in masculine and feminine. I respect you and you're right to have that belief. Just be mindful of if you are projecting it onto other people, because not all of us prescribed to those ideas. And I did it one time. I get it.

But it doesn't fit. Especially now that I'm perimenopausal. I'm arguably more "masculine" in my expression now. And that was something that always was present in me that was continually shut down. [00:58:00] Like she's being a bit too much. It was pretty much always the things that were too much about me were the things that would've fit really well in a masculine category. If I had been a boy or a man, they were things that would've been celebrated. But because I was a woman, and I was very much performing the femme norms in

terms of the way I presented myself, every other way, it was a real like problem that needed to be solved.

And a lot of the problems that need to be solved in people are because we're trying to fit them into neat and tidy little categories. Like there's no tolerance for complexity, and we need to shut it down. Because we, it scares us, you know?

And I think Alok Vaid Menon is one of the best teachers when it comes to all of this. If you don't follow Alok, check them out. Because the way that they articulate gender fluidity and also the way in which the attacks that they experience from people who are disturbed by their [00:59:00] expressions of gender freedom, the love with which they respond. The anger and the vitriol that comes their way, like what that's really about, the freedom that's being denied.

Gender essentialism keeps us all caged. And stepping outside of it is scary, especially right now. We need to protect people who are doing it. And it's also freedom. And once you've tasted freedom, it's really hard to go back into the cage.

There's a multitude of ways to express humanity. And the most beautiful thing is to be able to have access to any option that we so choose. It doesn't mean that we have to choose every option, but to know that we have the agency and we're at liberty to express ourselves however we please.

And I just wanna say that the social constructionist approach, part of understanding [01:00:00] feminism from that perspective. Because there are many branches of feminism. And some of them actually reinforce the oppression they say they're against.

You've heard the word TERF, uh, trans exclusionary radical feminists, who basically say that trans people are a threat to women's rights. They completely misunderstand feminism and what it's actually about. They reinforce patriarchal norms through sort of a twisted and perverted, distorted version of it. Where in the hierarchy, trans women are considered less than. And they are punching down, essentially reinforcing the same patterns of oppression. Again, it's like polishing the turd. It's the laundered version of it.

So there's that kind of feminism, and a lot of white feminists are guilty of this, and I have certainly been guilty of this myopic view of what feminism is.

But in reality, feminism is a project that protects all people and their rights. It is a project that [01:01:00] says the patriarchy doesn't get to have its thumb over any of us, regardless of how we identify. And a feminism that excludes trans people is not feminism. It's again, a perversion. It's something else.

So if your feminism is not advocating for the political, the economic, the social equality of all the sexes and all the genders and all the presentations of humanity, then it's not feminism, it's something else. Again, potentially a stepping stone to actual liberation, but it's not liberation because liberation includes all of us.

And even as I say that, I hear the manipulation of the right sweeping in, which is really common now. Where they'll say, not in these words, but essentially they're saying my right to be transphobic is my free expression. My right to exclude and to disappear people because they do [01:02:00] not fit my idea of what makes an ideal American, is somehow protected under the same umbrella. When we argue for the oppression of other people or for our hierarchical significance over other people, that is oppression. That is not an expression of freedom. That is an expression of one's right to be an oppressor.

And most of you, I'm preaching to the choir here. You know what I'm saying. And I just want to remind us all to keep our eyes open to when, especially the laundered versions of gender essentialism pops up and it shows itself, or when in our own thinking and speech, we're reinforcing binary notions without being consciously aware of it. Just pay attention to those things and consider widening your aperture to look through a different lens.

And let's see if we can shift away from gender essentialism and talk about gender, which [01:03:00] is a very real challenge in our culture, as a social construct, which gives us so much more room to disrupt and to unlearn and to change the way that we talk about biological sex, gender, and a sense of belonging.

In their comedy special, if you tune into it, there's a moment where Alok says, *"In LA they self-care so much that all they care about is themselves."*

And that's the last point I want to really underscore is circling back to Foucault and how we have to really be conscientious about the relationship between knowledge and power and the things that we accept as self-evident.

In these communities that we were in where it was all about healing and self-inquiry. That tendency to do so much naval gazing that we're no longer looking around and noticing the ways that [01:04:00] we are complacently ignoring the social structures that are creating the pain from which we seek to run.

It's both and. I'm not telling you to stop your healing journey. I'm just saying that the idea that it's an inside job and that we just need to return to our *essence*, that shortsightedness is by design, and I'm inviting you to challenge it.

And yeah, we're getting political, because the body politic lives inside of us. We're reenacting it moment to moment. So we've got to do the work outside of us and in our communities to change the narrative that is playing itself out in our bodies in real time.

So I hope you'll stick around and we're just gonna keep doing that.

Thank you for tuning in today. If you'd like to [01:05:00] hear more content like this, consider supporting the podcast at patreon.com/thedeeperpulse.