Reflection

My aim in this essay is not to tell you how to read my poem, but rather why I wrote it, and what ideas spawned the piece, and why I chose to use certain tactics and styles. I wanted to write an accompaniment to my poem, something to be read as an aside, to continue my thought process.

When I set out to write this poem, I had originally planned an epic, pages long narrative. But when I thought back to poetry I had written in the past, as well as poetry I had read, I remembered poets like Zachary Schomberg and his collection *Fjords vol. 1* (which I highly recommend). He wrote some of his poetry in chunky paragraphs like the one above. I found this form to be particularly appealing. I find that paragraphs like this force the reader to read straight through, without breaks—like taking a deep breath before jumping off the high dive. You rush through the air, torn between wanting it to stop and never wanting this thrill to end. When you finally hit the water, a gasp escapes you, and you feel your stomach bounce up into your throat.

I’ve attempted to create a poem that evokes such emotions and experiences. The box-like shape, without indents or broken edges, is reflective of the final fragments of the poem, in which I talk about the societal tendency to label and organize people on such arbitrary and convoluted ideas like gender and sexuality. The “perfect” edges and corners of the shape are meant to create this sense of being “boxed” in by the poem. I’ve used capital letters, some commas and other grammatical devices, but it is largely fragmented, like a burst of thoughts, images, and sounds that you would get on TV, or think as you flip through a fashion magazine. There are question marks in my poem to create a sense of dialogue, and to put a character into my poem. The character could be you, it could be me, it could be a group of people (here’s hoping).

The inspiration behind writing this poem was to explore and think critically on what it feels like to try and piece your own puzzle of yourself together when there are a multitude of influences in the form of media, magazines, books, pictures, music, toys, schools and other institutions, as well as
people themselves who always seem to want to have a say in what would make the best you. It’s a whirlwind, aggressive and unstoppable unless you chose to lock yourself in a dark room for the rest of your life. There will always be people who believe that they know what is best when it comes to the ideal “woman” and the ideal “man.”

The truth is that we are cultivating a people that thrives on uniformity and stereotypes, that despite years of protests, history-making declarations and laws, women are still not treated as equals to men. We see this injustice everyday, in the insulting, toxic expectations that society holds for women and femininity and men and masculinity. The ways and to the extent that we force these ideals of what it means to be a woman and a man borders on violent; images and music bombard our senses, infiltrate our subconscious. Those who are brave enough to be different and show it are bullied, slandered, shunned. The level of violence that we perpetrate against each other, whether physical, emotional, or mental, is depressing and alarming.

This violence is seen as expected and normal for men to prescribe to, to “man up” and keep their woman in check is seen as “macho,” even expected. Though it is certainly not explicitly encouraged for men to beat their wives (or girlfriends, or any significant other) it is encouraged in the sense that being controlling, being strong and not taking any backtalk from anyone, especially a woman, is considered masculine and desirable. Daniel G. Saunders wrote an article about violence by women against men, and delved into the claims that there is just as much violence perpetrated against men by women as the reverse. This article, and other studies of violence I did in this class and in my SOC339 Marriage and Intimacy class, are the reason I included lines like, “Beat me like a man Beat me down like a woman” in my poem. Violence has become normalized. Since the aim in this poem was to create a burst of thought and experience, I felt that violence needed to be addressed. It is on the news, in the papers, in magazines, in movies and songs, and it is ever present in the relationships we forge with those who mean the most to us. Although violence by women
against men exists, it is not to the degree that men perpetrate violence against women. As Saunders writes, “In conclusion, there is no consensus in the scientific community that violence against men by their intimate female partners constitutes a major social problem...violence against women by their intimate partners constitutes a major social problem. (1441).

Another major theme that I wanted to explore in my poem was this idea of “designer genes” and becoming the “perfect” specimen of woman or man. I drew on Anne Fausto-Sterling and Susan Bordo for this. Fausto-Sterling writes, “We live in a genocentric world,” (235) and also writes at length of the “indivisible” line between nature and nurture, as well as how much of an affect the environment that we live in changes us externally and internally. What I liked most about Fausto-Sterling is that she focused not so much on providing answers, but on never ceasing to question. The scientists, sociologists, and psychologists all have opinions and studies on gender and gender development; what would be most beneficial is to blend the ideas, incorporate and allow for fluidity of thought and organization--gender, after all, is not a solid, rational, indisputable thing. I wouldn’t say that I wrote any specific lines with Fausto-Sterling in mind; I reflected on what she had to say, thought about gender as fluid and undefinable. Then, in my poem, I created a persona that showed the confusion, frustration, fear and anger that one experiences in a world that tries to label and define them.

Susan Bordo was probably my favorite author to read; her writing was accessible, intelligent, and insightful without being dense and abstract. Although I do enjoy abstract writing (hence why I wrote a poem as my project) Bordo presents her reader with pictures, case studies, and many culture references and examples to explain the quandary society has tangled itself in. In her chapter entitled, “In the Empire of Images: Preface to the Tenth Anniversary Edition,” Bordo opens with a little girl looking in the mirror and seeing nothing but imperfection--fat, ugly, imperfect imperfection. I sympathize with this girl, a girl who thinks that her body is worthless in comparison to the bodies of
women like those in the “Lady Marmalade” music video (Bordo xiii). The envy and sense of worthlessness is so intense that the girl feels hatred and shame towards her body, because it will never look like the overly sexualized and painted bodies of the pop stars she loves and aspires to be. This feeling and experience was relatable on a painful level.

When Bordo quotes Alexandra Shulman, the editor of British Vogue, saying, “‘Not many people have actually said to me that they have looked at my magazine and decided to become anorexic,’” (xiv), I felt that Shulman was being sincere, but she was missing the point, a point Bordo illustrates with her words and the images she provides in her book. Girls look at pictures in high fashion magazines and see beautifully bronzed, scantily clad, lithe women, often with an equally gorgeous man, and see this as the ideal. The bar is set. There is hatred and self-loathing, as women (perhaps not all women, but the overwhelming majority of American women especially) struggle to fit themselves into a box that labels them the “perfect” woman, with the ideal body and demeanor.

In “Hunger as Ideology,” Bordo delves into this idea of “hunger,” and what the connotations are for men and women. I found this chapter particularly helpful when trying to recreate and imbue my poem with this urgent feeling of want, of this hunger to belong, to be molded into a “plastic product” (Bordo 104) that results in a sense of belonging to the club of the beautiful and the thin, invoking sexual desire in powerful men. It is morbidly ironic that women are so hungry they’re wasting away.

Finally, we have Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman’s article, “Doing Gender,” which talks about the roles that we play each day of our lives in order to function, to slip under the radar, in society. Uniformity is encouraged, with society providing us a potent cocktail of media consisting of all the ingredients needed to be the epitome of feminine grace or masculine strength. West and Zimmerman write that, “gender [is] a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment,” and that, “‘doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is
hostage to its production,” (126). West and Zimmerman look at gender as “role enactment” and differentiate between “gender role” and gender display” (126-127).

These implications were contrary to what I would consider gender to be, or perhaps, what I think gender should be. Gender, to me, always meant something innate, a certain inclination or tendency, a connection to behaviors, sexual desires and wants, a look or mannerism, a way of presenting oneself. Gender was personal. West and Zimmerman brought into light the fact that gender cannot be defined or determined by one way of thinking or studying. Gender is a mix of social and personal persuasions and interests, and the more we explore and the more we question, the closer we can become to understanding, or beginning to understand human nature. The moment that we stop questioning and think we have all the answers when it comes to human sexuality and gender roles, is the moment we limit the scope for progressive thought.

This, ultimately, is why I wrote a poem, and an essay. There are no absolutes when it comes to these topics, only new and different discussions to be had.
Works Cited


