

Gender is Killing Us, and When I Say Us, I Mean *Y'all*:
A Radical, Postgenderist Take on the Horrors of Masculinity

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Black Visuality, Black Performativity

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This topic is one that has been on my mind for quite some time. In regards to current topics, the news, Twitter, and the picture of a little Black boy playing with a kitchen set on Facebook, sexuality and gender have been on my mind. Few issues bring out more anger, more rage, than one that involves gender, queerness, sexuality and any sort of LGBTQIA related topics especially in various religious circles. What I found to be impressive about gender as a construct is the similar I find impressive about what James Baldwin refers to in one of his most infamous interviews as, “the necessity of the negro.” A great majority of us are deciding to *play the game*, for whatever reason, without ever questioning the necessity of or who created the game in the first place, or even questioning how this societal construct functions and most importantly, why the cycle always fails. These systems of gender-based oppression work to solidify and lift, socio political and economic white supremacy because for a long time now, specifically in Western societies and schools of thought, the idea of gender has been killing us— an when I say *us*, I mean *yall*... all of you that continue to insist that it is necessary without actually knowing what it means or where it comes from and why gender is most unnecessary. I, myself have found some layer of liberation in the rejection of gender . I hope yall, yes, you all do too. In “Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary”, authors George Dvorsky and James Hughes commence the article with a rich description of postgenderism:

Postgenderism is an extrapolation of ways that technology is eroding the biological, psychological and social role of gender, and an argument for why the erosion of binary gender will be liberatory. Postgenderists argue that gender is an arbitrary and unnecessary limitation on human potential, and foresee the elimination of involuntary biological and psychological gendering in the human species through the application of neurotechnology, biotechnology and reproductive technologies. Postgenderists contend that dyadic gender roles and sexual dimorphisms are generally to the detriment of individuals and society. Assisted reproduction will make it possible for individuals of any sex to reproduce in they choose, with or without "mothers" and "fathers," and artificial wombs will make biological wombs unnecessary for reproduction. Greater biological fluidity and psychological androgyny will allow future persons to explore both masculine and feminine aspects of personality. Postgenderists do not call for the end of *all* gender

traits, or universal androgyny, but rather that those traits become a matter of *choice*. Bodies and personalities in our postgender future will no longer be constrained and circumscribed by gendered traits, but enriched by their use in the palette of diverse self-expression. (Hughes and Dvorsky 2)

I offer this justification to lay the foundation from which I have taken a gaze from. Unlike these postgenderists, I *do* feel that gender, in a patriarchal society is toxic, traditional, oppressive and unnecessary. In the terms of this paper, I will investigate the uncanny horrors of masculinity in our modern and post-modern societies and relate it back to the A24's fantasy horror film, *The Green Knight*. Speaking more directly, I propose that masculinity and manhood are not only killing humanity, but killing every naturalistic essence of freedom unseen in communities since pre-colonized societies. Gender is not unequal to oppression and the gender and even sex binary that has lingered in our societies will always work against any notions of justice, equity, peace and freedom. Gender is not the only malignancy, for class, race, education and location also work to divide and conquer.

One of the vast issues surrounding gender and sex is the fact that an overwhelming majority of society up until this current time still has no idea about the multiple sex variations that should be considered outside of and break the binary, not to mention association gender with biology. For that, we must look at the ontology of the word. In "Gendered Institutions: From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions", Joan Acker explores this ontology stating, "Gender has become, in the last twenty years, part of the everyday language of social science. . . In the earlier usage, *gender* is the study of women, sex roles, or both. Gender, in this view, is an area or a field, but one that is peripheral to the central concerns of sociology... Sex signifies differences between female and male bodies, such as external genitalia, hormonal production, ovaries and sperm." (Acker 565) (original indication)

The issues surrounding gender are the issues of heterosexuality that is derived from the heteronormative system of our society, of media. It also exists in the body, flesh liquidity, and expectation hybridized with sexual attraction, which can and/or cannot be fetishized. It is the expectation that comes from someone with a *girly* name like Sarah or Jessica to be an “obvious” woman and therefore female, having breasts, menstruation and all. It is the assumption that fem/femme or feminine is on par for girls but *boys* may never show any amount of “sissy” traits, or worse, be called out for potentially being queer or gay, which is seen as “less manly”. Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt tease out the complications of gender in “Doing Gender, Determining Gender” reflecting that:

Sociologists of gender emphasize the social, rather than biological processes that produce a person’s gender. Focused on the interactional level, such theories illustrate how people sort each other into the category of “male” or “female” in social situations on the basis of visual information cues (such as facial hair) and implicit rules for assigning characteristics to particular genders (women wear skirts: men do not). Such visual cues act as proxies for biological criteria invisible in many interactions. This categorization process, termed “gender attribution” or “sex categorization” is theorized as an inescapable but typically unremarkable hallmark of everyday social interactions— except in instances of ambiguity, which can create an interactional breakdown, generating anxiety, concern, and even anger. (Westbrook and Schilt 35)

The roles in which gender weighs on the social complexes of children and young adults is ever more pressing, especially in terms of “fitting in”, or the ability to be easily understandable, readable, the ability to be put into a box to check. Now, none of these points I have brought up have been strong enough to explain why gender is killing us, but here is why, masculinity. The uncanny horror of manhood or manliness— integrity and honor and even chivalry is only dangerous in any patriarchal society where gender exists. David Lowery’s subtle masterpiece, based on the late 14th century poem entitled, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” tells the story of Sir Gawain who struggles in the coming-of-age journey from boyhood to manhood. This fantasy film does fascinating work of disfiguring honor and contorting manhood into a haze of

ambiguity for the audience to sit with through the film's entirety. It works hard to keep the viewer at a distance and almost even in the dark, only allowing them to imagine but never really truly know what is happening with certainty. The tale begins by introducing us to the world of the film, a low and creepy voice, "Look, see a world that holds more wonders than any since the Earth was born. And of all who reigned o'er none had renown like the boy who pulled sword from stone... But this is not that king, nor is this his song. . . ." We are warned early, this tale is *not* one of bravery. Uncanny is defined as strange or mysterious, especially in an unsettling way. Freud described the uncanny as, "a well the class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, very familiar." Freud relates the uncanny to feelings of oppression or fear of castration. The danger here with manhood is myth versus reality. (Horror)

Gawain is introduced as an unsure boy who hopes to become a knight. He knows he is supposed to change but he is unsure of how to get there or what he should do. There is a sense of urgency when we are introduced to Gawain, still a boy though the character is played by Dev Patel, who seems almost too old to play the part. He should *be* a man by the time we meet him in the story, he should *know* what he wants. But Gawain persists when asked if he's a knight yet, that he's not ready. The film is set during the reign of King Arthur, Gawain's uncle, *the most manliest man in Camelot and the most important man in the kingdom*— though in the film, we meet a much more frail and aged King Arthur, with his kingdom burning. All is not well. I will use two of the scenes from the film as examples—the first is upon the Green Knight's arrival. (Horror)

In many Arthurian tales, honor and manhood go hand-in-hand, which is why when Gawain's honor is tested when the Green Knight arrives he fails out of confusion, cruelty and helplessness. (Horror) When the Green Knight shows up on Christmas day to play a game,

Gawain stands to meet his opponent in the Christmas game. Upon the Green Knight's arrival, he hands a letter to the king which the queen takes from his hands, possessed, she read:

Oh, Greatest Of Kings, indulge me in this friendly Christmas game. Let whichever of your knights is boldest of blood and wildest of heart step forth, take up arms, and try with honor to land a blow against me. Whomsoever nicks me shall lay claim to this, my arm. It's glory and riches shall be thine. But...thy champ must bind himself to this: Should he land a blow, then one year and Yuletide hence, he must seek me out yonder, to the Green Chapel six nights to the North. He shall find me there and bend the knee and let me strike him in return. Be it a scratch on the cheek or a cut on the throat, I will return what was given to me, and then in trust and friendship we shall part. Who, then, who is willing to engage with me?

Sir Gawain jumps up to stand in for his old uncle and king to meet the knight on his terms. King Arthur asks him if he understands this challenge to that which he replies, *I do, I think I do.* Before Arthur walks away, he whispers to Gawain, *"Remember, it is only a game."*

Overwhelmed by the performance of his masculinity, Gawain provokes the Green Knight who stands in silence, stillness, with open arms. Gawain spins Excalibur (his uncle's legendary sword he lends him for the game) around and dances back and forth to show his manship for the roundtable of the knights of Camelot. The Green Knight takes his ax and puts it on the ground. Gawain responds immediately with anger, questioning if the move is a trick. He barks at the knight to *stand up and face me!* Gawain flinches, whispers, unsure and afraid of what to do—he didn't understand the challenge. But, in terms of performance, he must not show his weakness, his terror, his fear—the act persists. The Green Knight bends his head to Gawain's eyes dart back and forth from either side of the room, looking for a hint or sign of approval from the manliest

men in the kingdom, King Arthur's knights. Gawain's performance becomes large enough to the point where he speaks to his audience, "You laid down your challenge, I accepted it and accept it still. Never forget what happened here, on this Christmas day." Gawain aims the sword and beheads the Green Knight– the room is filled with silence. Gawain immediately looks to King Arthur for approval. Then, still muttering in confusion and terrified, the knight picks his head back up only to tell Gawain he has *one year hence* (to live).

Given the first fifteen minutes of the film alone, we could continue a discourse about how gender, as a socio-biological binary is killing us, and when I say us, I mean men who have way too much power, killing everyone and in this case, I do include the earth in this destruction. The character of the Green Knight has a mystique about him that works well within the genre of fantasy and horror, though *The Green Knight* almost promises to be an action film (see trailers) when in actuality, once you sit down and watch the film it is most certainly a fantasy horror flick.

The Green Knight's character represents nature and witchcraft, the opposite of the legacy in which King Arthur has built his name on. When the Green Knight refuses to fight, he is essentially asking if the knights are as chivalrous as they claim or is this a kingdom built on a foundation of violence or chivalry? When Gawain fails, he fails because he is trying to live up to manliness, the honor of King Arthur. Men are warriors and conquerors. On some level, Gawain in his dismay knows that he did something that was not honorable but the knights of the roundtable react with applause. So much of our own societies are centered around the domination of the other but I want to make it clear, Gawain didn't have to land a blow at all onto the Green Knight, he was simply trying to be something he is not, something that he *knows* he is not and because of that, potentially loses his life. We could list a number of men throughout history who have killed hundreds, thousands and millions of innocent people with the same frivolous notions of *manhood*

that are all too often solidified by religion that have turned fully functioning indigenous societies into scenes of subjugation, oppression, enslavement, starvation, pillaging and drought. Proscription whiteness that is necessary for white supremacy to reign, for white cis-men to be deemed superior, there has to be the binary of woman/man. But, in a patriarchal society that has a tendency to function more like a banana republic or fascist state than democracy, *why* is determining this category so necessary? Especially when sex is *not* a binary. Intersex people exist and take up a marginalized percentage of the population, do they not count at all to be considered beyond the female/male binary?

The issue of masculinity is the uncanniness of it, the fact that one could have everything and still want *more*. Some gender issues are ego issues. Phallogentric behaviors that are damaging and unrealistic that are given support by the Western societies that are phallogentric, only to find the measure of manhood in one's own phallos, or ego, or sword, or even gun. Man will scorch the earth to live richer, longer, faster lives—nature be damned. Man has killed off more than 65 different plant species in the United States and Canada alone since the Europeans settled here, not to mention the numerous animal species that were purposely killed to prevent Natives from prospering, like the American Bison. Widespread slaughter has come to those, in fantasy or reality, that stand in the way of the patriarchy that has been led by so many men—or boys rather, that were just performing manhood in order to seek approval from the society that has created this need, only to corrupt and conquer in the first place. In *White*, Richard Dyer investigates the white male body and its perceived differences, “The built body in colonial adventures is a formula that speaks to the need for an affirmation of the white male body without the loss of legitimacy that is always risked by its exposure, while also replaying the notion that

white men are distinguished above all by their spirit and enterprise.” (Dyer, 147) The issue of gender is that it is based within a system that functions only to see whiteness, maleness as the default, unable or/and unwilling to take the investigation further due to the threat of castration and domination. What a nightmare.

Earlier I mentioned Baldwin and that famous interview in which he prescribed, “I know and I have always known, that’s part of the agony, that I am not the nigger... I know that a person is more important than anything else, anything else... But you think, I gather, that the nigger is necessary. Well he’s unnecessary to me so he must be necessary to you. So I will back your issue. You’re the nigger, baby. It isn’t me.” (Baldwin, *Take This Hammer*) We, meaning all of us as a collective, for the sake of the collective should do as Baldwin has done— give this white society its problem back and undo the necessity of gender. It will be the death of us.

The final scene I would like to recall from “The Green Knight” is the finale of Gawain’s ambiguously suspicious journey to the Green Chapel, a year and a day after his foolish attempt at manhood failed. Gawain meets the Green Knight the night before he is expected, the knight moving steadily and deep, towering over Gawain as he picks up his ax. *Do you recall where you cut me?* I do, Gawain responds. *And have you come to see that blow returned?* I have. *Then kneel, and we shall complete our game.* The knight moves over Gawain. *Now, one strike, as good as you gave.* The knight raises his ax and Gawain flinches. *Sir, you flinch?* I know, Gawain responds. *Did I show signs of fear when oppositions were reversed?* Gawain responds, “I’m not so confident as thee.” To which the knight responds quickly, *you’ve had a year to find courage.* The knight raises his ax once more and Gawain runs away this time. In his haste, broken, he begs, “Wait! Wait! Is that, is this, really all there is?”. What else ought there be? After the third failed try when the knight swings his ax, Gawain runs away back into the forest when he finds

his horse. The ending sequence for the film is more of a dreamlike voyage we get to take through the 'if/then' part of the story. The paradox that Gawain finds himself in, the reality versus his fantasy of his own manhood in his head. He returns home broken and in need of the care of the women like his mother, Morgan le Fay who initially conjures the Green Knight in the beginning of the film and Essel, the peasant/prostitute women that he fell in love with. In one version of this twisted fate of falsehood, King Arthur falls sick and dies and Gawain takes reign—evil pursues. This version of his reality is a troubled one: King Gawain strips Essel's parenthood away after the birth of their child, leaving her with a sack of gold on the bloodied sheets before leaving; he marries an exotically pale bride, he is never without his protective belt that his mother made for him before his trip to the Green Palace; his kingdom and castle are crumbling, there is war, death and the death of his son in his youth due to Gawain's war—everything is cold, no one is smiling, men are shouting, rioting. In this sequence, Gawain is immortalized in anguish as the final shots of this fantasy version of one reality concludes with the last shot is Gawain's kingdom being overthrown, Gawain slowly peels the magical protection belt from his waist and his head falls clean off his shoulders. We snap back to a close-up of Gawain, back in the forest and on his knees... The knight steadies his ax once more before Gawain, similarly to the previous fantasy, snatches his protection belt off his waist. In the final moments, the Green Knight kneels down beside Gawain, swiping his woody finger across his cheek, "Well done, m brave knight... Now, off with your head" In this moment, the knight responds directly to the metaphor of his protection belt made by his mother. The irony of manhood being something that doesn't exist without the counter, the opposition, the binary of womanhood pokes back at the necessity for the gender binary, if it is not to gain or attract a mate, it is to establish dominance

while playing the same game that was designed to *kill you*. Judith Butler makes an excellent case for this in “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution” stating:

Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. That expectation, in turn, is based upon the perception of sex where sex is understood to be the discrete and factic datum of primary sexual characteristics. (Butler 527-528)

Butler's argument I would like to take further in terms of lack of necessity. Sex is often seen as a binary, vastly oversimplified as opposed to a more complex category. In *Designing and Conducting Gender, Sex, and Health Research*, John Oliffe, and Lorraine J. Greaves expose a deeper layer to the complexities of sex, defeating the binary:

Previous conceptions of sex assumed chromosomal arrangements XX and XY as the typical makeup for women and men, respectively, while we now understand that chromosomal configurations XXX, XXY, XYY, and XO exist, as well as XX males and XY females (de la Chapelle, 1981; McPhaul, 2002). The existence of these chromosomal arrangements has led to greater understanding of the genetic contributions of X and Y chromosomes to human phenotypic development and health (de la Chapelle, 1981) and indicates the need for research to expand narrow conceptualizations of sex to include this type of diversity. Within and across sex categories, variation also exists with respect to metabolic rate, bone size, brain function, stress response, and lung capacity. This variation cannot be captured by simple “male” and “female” designations, which is why it is important to think about sex in *more* than binary terms. Conceptualizing sex accurately is important because of the great influence it has on health. (Oliffe & Greaves 19)

What's most important beyond bringing clarity to the gender/sex discourse is to, at the very least, consider a marginalized community that has historically been left out of important medical studies and conversations and how much more work can be done if we, in terms of fleshliness, decide to think outside of the binary. Furthermore, it's imperative that the need to break the

binary is not new, intersex, middlesex and the idea around the third gender has been around for centuries. Dvorsky and Hughes enlighten us again in “Postgenderism: Beyond the Gender Binary” adding:

Androgynous, cross-dressing, castrated or homosexual people have had socially sanctioned roles in many cultures around the world, as far back as the beginnings of recorded history in Mesopotamia and Egypt, often as a "third sex" (Herdt, 1996; Wikipedia, 2008a; Wikipedia, 2008b). One example of this accommodation is the transvestite berdache or "two-spirit people" among the aboriginal cultures of Siberia and the Americas (Halifax, 1979), a role documented among more than 130 aboriginal tribes of North America (Roscoe, 1991; Lang, 1998). Both males and females became berdache by cross-dressing, and there was no necessary relationship of their status to their physiology or sexual preferences. Male-bodied berdache in these cultures served a variety of spiritual, medical and social roles, from burying the dead to telling the future to arranging marriages. Female-bodied berdache could be chiefs, warriors, healers and hunters. (Dvorsky & Hughes 4)

Regardless of the tired and recycled local or national media coverage, there is a reason that these topics aren't in deeper discussion and when they do, bring up shut viscous amounts of anger. Gender has been a means to oppress and control systems of white supremacy. In the late and great bell hook's book, *Ain't I a Woman?*, hooks captures the injustice of masculinity even during the time where all Black people were vastly subjected to, informing:

Despite all popular argument that claim black men were figuratively castrated, throughout the history of slavery in America black men were allowed to maintain some semblance of their societally defined masculine role. In colonial times as in contemporary times, masculinity denoted possessing the attributes of strength, virility, vigor, and physical prowess. It was precisely the “masculinity” of the African male that the white slaver sought to exploit. Young, strong, healthy African males were his prime target. For it was by the sale of virile African men “would-be workers” that the white slave trader expected to receive maximum profit return on his investment. That white people recognized the “masculinity” of the black male is evident by the tasks assigned the majority of black males slaves. No annals of history record that masses of black slave men forced to execute roles traditionally performed exclusively by women. Evidence to the contrary exists, documenting the fact that there were many tasks enslaved African men would **not** perform because they regarded them as “female” work. (hooks 21)

hooks exemplifies how gender assumptions have not only worked to divide and conquer but how our current society is stuck in a binary, but that is too unintellectual to be broken. Americans are

not known to be critical thinkers. I should know, I am one. But furthermore, we live in a society where people can't tell you why they choose the values that they have. Rather, we are living in an institution, a failed state that won't allow itself to progress for the well-being of everyone. We would rather perform the cookie cutter, falsehoods of barbie and ken dolls and ignore the wars, starvation, scorching of the earth. Sound familiar?

The Green Knight is a fantastic horror that begs us to think more. There are moments of complete quietness during the sequences of Gawain's journey where all we can hear is the nature, the naturalist elements that are surrounding this character in this epic. The final noise that is heard of the film is the dinging of a bell, as if somehow, a light is gone on your head and now we, the audience, have the right idea. Except, we aren't quite *certain* we are correct. Recalling the importance of Gawain's mother, Morgan le Fay in the film is something of a subtlety. I spoke earlier about the necessity of woman to man, feminine to masculine. I believe that Morgan le Fay, in conjuring the Green Knight while simultaneously enchanting her son with a protective belt as she travels to find his manhood is a huge metaphor for mothers who can be to blame for the recklessness of their sons. le Fay's intention in creating the Green Knight could be seen as perhaps to teach Gawain a lesson, to turn a boy into a man. But at what cost? Gawain only ever learns his lesson right before the Green Knight, assumingly so, returns the same blow that Gawain landed on him.

So, if we can understand how masculinity is uncanny, mysterious and horrific, the cause of war and other crimes against humanity, had been used to exploit and simultaneously oppress, my question comes back to, can we do without gender? Or is this another one of those cases where we haven't learned enough from our past to protect our future? The Green Knight, a representation of humility, light and nature teaches us that the true virtues of manhood come

from working *with* nature, not against it. It is about humility, giving into the vulnerability of reality versus a perceived fantasy and performance that weighs on us as humans from a very early age. It is bred within most of us who grew up within a gender construct. You don't know how to be, you are *told* how to be, how not to be, sometimes beat for it. And that trauma is not something that is easily washed away. However, I do believe that with the right education and the right socialization, anything is possible. I just hope it doesn't take as long for you as it did Gawain. There is so much life to live. And hindsight is always 20/20.

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