

Gendered politics, embodied lives

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The 2016 United States presidential campaign of Hillary Clinton elicited comment from across the political spectrum and around the world about women as leaders. Clinton's presence in top political jobs once filled mainly if not only by men shows that many societies have made progress towards attaining political equality for women. In order to better understand how change

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happens towards greater equality and inclusion, mainstream feminist thought in media and scholarship deals with the undeniable gains women have made in political leadership and participation.

But how complete is this picture? To answer this question, I consider less mainstream, more critical and radical perspectives based on traditions of feminist thinking outside dominant cultural ideals and institutions. Throughout, gender remains defined as "the established psychological, social and representational differences between men and women, which are socially determined and culturally variable."¹ We must go further. I

conclude by discussing the idea of embodiment. Drawing on classical, critical, and radical feminism, my consideration of embodiment frames a wider scope of concerns about our identities. Embodied politics moves us from considering politically relevant differences between women and men to embracing a richer vision of human diversity and more complex challenges in seeking greater inclusion, nondiscrimination, and justice.

Politics of presence

Media coverage of gender and politics tends to focus on women in

politics: the proportion of female legislators and executives on all levels, from the municipal to the national. There is encouraging news. Progress in breaking through the glass ceiling has increased women's share of political leadership positions; women's participation in decision making has increased significantly in the past century, the past generation, and especially since the 1990s. To contextualize the prospect of Hillary Clinton becoming the next US President, award-winning *New Yorker* columnist Robin Wright noted that not only have nearly twenty-five percent of nations worldwide had female presidents or prime ministers, but in countries as different as Mexico and India, women constitute as much as a third of national-level parliamentary representatives.²

In Canada, the gender parity of the newest cabinet was widely celebrated, and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's "Because it's 2015" retort (when asked about his new half-female cabinet) garnered international attention.³ Political leadership roles once reserved for men are increasingly filled by women. As Anne Phillips insists in her seminal book, *The Politics of Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), female leaders worldwide have been crucial, not only in decision-making processes and in disrupting the symbolism of predominantly male political leadership, but also in establishing so-called women's issues as matters of wider public policy concern.

An ethics of care

Complementary to the politics of presence are observations that stem from an "ethics of care" tradition of moral philosophy, which is situated broadly within feminist ethics by works such as Virginia Held's *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). According to this view, meaningful personhood and active citizenship cannot be fully grasped with exclusive emphasis on men's experience, interpreted in turn as universally human. Care ethics rejects the idea that our moral relationships are to be modeled on those among independent competitors contracting together for mutually reinforcing self-interest. Instead, care ethics presents really existing, cooperative (if asymmetrical) interdependence as paradigmatic for understanding human beings in our shared lives in society. Adding to the political relevance of women's greater inclusion in public life,

care ethics foregrounds ostensibly private-sphere concerns of care for children, the sick, and elders. Care ethics also interrogates how and why culturally masculine or feminine traits tend to be over-rated or underrated as politically relevant and significant to being fully human.

Leading men

A fictionalized example of a certain interpretation of masculinity illustrates how gender traits can be represented as human traits. In Jason Reitman's 2009 film, *Up in the Air*, actor George Clooney plays the character Ryan Bingham. A handsome, highly successful professional, Bingham flies 300,000 miles a year, trades on his elite status, lives out of a suitcase, and fires people on behalf of their employers. In this image of masculine success in contemporary culture, according to Bingham, "Your relationships are the heaviest components in your life. . . . We weigh ourselves down until we can't even move. Make no mistake: moving is living."⁴ Capturing the links between highly valued professional competence in a global economy and certain constructions of masculinity, Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell coined the phrase "transnational business masculinity."⁵ Connell laments that such dominant models of successful masculinity not only reinforce inequalities between men and women but also enclose men in limited notions of what flourishing might look like, even as only a few might ever come close to living into this reality. Ultimately, the meaning of gender for politics must face really existing and multiple identities: the many ways to be a man or to be a woman.

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Gender and privilege

Thus, gender ceases to refer solely to women and men in relation to each other in public service and private sector leadership roles, and it encompasses also what are dominant or commonsense ideas of masculine and feminine traits and behaviours, and what might be livable alternatives. Necessary but not sufficient are perspectives largely concerned with "adding women in" to historically male-dominated political and economic institutions. Also fruitful

to consider is the political relevance of “masculine” and “feminine” in relation to other identity markers. In her 2016 book, *Politics and Sex: Exploring the Connections between Gender, Sexuality, and the State*, Canadian political scientist Edna Keeble points out that even as mainstream feminisms have gained in influence, they have nevertheless also “been implicated as reflecting the experiences of the privileged few, namely white, Western, heterosexual, middle-class women.”⁶

To the extent that feminist thought and activism have been aligned with the experiences of more privileged women, prevailing discourses have remained relatively comfortable with adding women in to existing political institutions and structures of power. These are precisely the gains sought and celebrated in a politics of

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presence. But present in *what* politics? Related and also at issue is what scope exists for innovation and change in the political leadership roles that women may fill. To what extent is conformity demanded by these roles? By agreeing to accept a given role, a woman acknowledges that she will be able and obligated to live into the role. As women increasingly fill once male-dominated roles, the politics of presence must contend with the scope of political possibilities in which female leaders have made places and names for themselves.

Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher is among the most discussed and controversial contemporary female leaders. Her death in April 2013 rekindled debate about her legacy as the “first woman to become prime minister of Britain and the first to lead a major Western power in modern times.”⁷ Given that “she rubbed many feminists the wrong way,” with declarations such as “The battle for women’s rights has largely been won,”⁸ it is unsurprising that, among the many observations of Thatcher by journalists, scholars, and activists is the comment that “one woman’s success does not mean a step forward for women.” Against decades of progress in smashing the glass ceiling, “Thatcher made it through and pulled the ladder up after her.”⁹ To note that “‘a woman who is success-

ful' is not synonymous with 'a feminist,'” goes towards dispelling the notion that women leaders are automatically or inherently “good for other women,” and further requires facing the fact that “the gender of a person matters a lot less than that person’s actual beliefs.”¹⁰

Intersecting identities: gender, race, and class

To grasp the significance of identity in political leadership, we must look past the politics of gender presence to see other dimensions of privilege that either enable barriers to be overcome or are part of intersecting systems of discrimination. Even as some categories of women are increasingly present in political leadership, other aspects of identity complicate the picture. “To reconcile the universal ideals of equality, freedom, and justice,” on the one hand, “and the actual material conditions of peoples, particularly racial or ethnic minorities,”¹¹ on the other, requires us to ask how and where gendered dynamics intersect with exploitation and discrimination according to racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences. Whether among Aboriginal women in Canada or Black women in the United States, “higher rates of being murdered or incarcerated, and the deterioration of their family and community structures can be directly attributable to a legacy of systemic racism.”¹² Views of such intersectionality emphasize where and how a wide spectrum of divergent gendered experiences meet other embodied experiences, “such as those based on disability, racialization, sexuality or class.”¹³

For feminists working from materialist historical and sociological analyses, inequality between men and women must also be seen in light of a gendered division of labour.¹⁴ Stereotypes of men’s and women’s work produce and reproduce inequalities in wages, job opportunities, and promotions. Without seeing gender and class as interwoven in market capitalist societies, women’s greater participation in top public and private sector roles will offer merely gender parity within a smaller and smaller elite enjoying an ongoing and increasing concentration of wealth. Through gender parity in politics, if its class dimensions are ignored, women leaders will inherit and inhabit the persistent and pervasive “common sense” of political and economic neo-liberalism. From this narrowed spectrum of political visions, since the

tenure of Thatcher (contemporaneous with US President Ronald Reagan and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney), political leaders (men and women) draw policy thinking and possibilities, and make these the basis of their appeals to their electorates.

Whether male or female, then, contemporary political leaders face limitations in the political possibilities they can entertain and propose in policy and public discourse. If, in turn, gender and politics is to be meaningful for deeper democratic stewardship of relatively unfettered private capital accumulation, then the issues of gendered justice and equality must be understood within the larger social context of a growing gap between rich and poor. Class-based analyses offer a necessary critique to merely adding women into socioeconomic structures that reinforce and extend inequality along lines that may include but are not simply those of gender. An expectation that female leaders will offer good news to women rests also on dominant notions of feminine or masculine traits in leadership, livelihoods, and lifestyles. As we come to recognize multiple gendered experiences and identities, we can see how the very idea of gender makes possible broader explorations of the construction of all sorts of social expectations.¹⁵

Beyond binaries?

As noted above, we tend to live and move within dominant ideas of gender binaries “masculine” and “feminine” as gender identities, and male and female as exclusive categories of bodies. The term *gender* can certainly refer narrowly to men in relation to women, a usage that is politically relevant to identity-based mobilization and leadership. But beyond quota-checking enumeration of political leaders identified as women, meanings of ostensibly masculine or feminine traits in leadership, lifestyle, or livelihood are diverse. Moreover, beyond a gender binary, thinking and practice related to gender *identity* and gender *expression* disrupt dualistic ways of thinking. Fluid and changeable identities along multiple spectrums are informed but never fully determined by assigned sex, and can include “all, none or a combination” of “man, male, masculine, woman, female, feminine, transgender, gender neutral, pan-gender, genderqueer, two-spirit, third gender.”¹⁶ My gender expression, as an outward performance in society, rests on gender identity, an inward, cognitive element

that reflects a my own sense of my assigned sex at birth, which relates to genetics/chromosomes, hormones, and anatomy or physical characteristics, as well as my attractions and relationships of attraction, desire, and orientation, with their own emotional and physical dimensions.

Improper anointing, embodied transgression

Taken together, the elements of this brief survey have sought to acknowledge different perspectives on women's experiences of powerfulness/powerlessness, (in)equality, and (in)justice, distinct from men's experiences of similar social phenomena. Further, sensitivity to the intersection of discrimination along the lines of gender, race, ability, and sexuality augments our appreciation of these embodied differences with relevance for democratic electoral politics and for debates and policy decisions. Looking through gender to embodiment serves also to enlarge the meaning of "politics" and "the political" as relevant to our bodily needs, desires, and sufferings. This recalls the fall 2008 issue of *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, on sexuality. Pertinent with reference to embodiment are its insights about struggles, ambig-

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uity, ambivalence, and disagreement. As Mary Schertz observed in that issue's editorial: "There are controversies aplenty in this delicate arena of our human being. In no other area of our lives are we more vulnerable, more exposed, with fewer defenses."¹⁷

As read by Schertz, Luke's account of Jesus, Simon, and the unnamed anointing woman (Luke 7:36–50) goes directly to the power relations among embodied persons: Simon who is established as behaving prop-

erly, and she who is not, the anointing woman. Multiply marginalized, the disheveled presumed sex worker epitomizes impropriety in her unfettered display. Moreover, the physical intimacy of washing Christ's feet with her tears and hair, and the costly waste of expensive perfume place the woman's actions firmly in the realm of embodiment: fraught with material needs, desires, and strong emotions. This intimate impropriety is key to our appreciation of Simon's objections and (as Schertz empha-

sizes) to Jesus’s insistence on acceptance. There is “another proper,” an extravagant and boundary-breaking challenge to status quo forms and relations.

Contemporary feminisms—whether mainstream or critical—would identify these power relations as a problematic status quo. Indeed, this resonates with Schertz’s own admission of multiple positions, if not identities, at play in the propriety of our relationships: “We are all the anointing woman, and we are all Simon, and often we are both in the same moment. Young or old, married

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or single, female or male, gay or straight, we all struggle with our messy, not-to-be-contained sexuality—and with a sense of propriety that can overrun its usefulness.”¹⁸ Moreover, where certain threads of feminism meet views of queer and transgendered embodiment, we could further challenge the relevant proprieties by multiplying alternatives to them—alternatives to be glimpsed and for which to make space, to extend peace more widely, deeply, and fully. In the same *Vision* issue, Sarah MacDonald’s article, “Opening Safe Space,” helpfully interprets the word *queer* and includes the encouragement

“to ask individuals [of sexual minorities] how we prefer to self-identify”;¹⁹ and Pauline Steinmann’s definition of sexuality in “Singleness and Sexuality,” is expansive and challenging.²⁰

Embodied, soulful politics

More than gender and politics as conventionally understood, an embodiment politics may embrace diverse identity expressions that need spaces for conversation about larger questions of our common humanity. A living, embodied faith must and will struggle to identify and pursue the politics fitted to it. More than simply persons *with* bodies, we are persons *and* bodies, or person-bodies. In English we translate the Old Testament Hebrew *nephesh* as “soul” rather than as “spirit,” the latter being how we tend to translate the Greek *psyche* or *pneuma*. The worldview nestled in ancient Hebrew language is helpfully evocative here, and distinct from the ancient Greek worldview that undergirds much of the

still influential mind-body dualism. In expressions such as “not a soul in the room sat still,” we hear this important feature of our personhood as “a soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, passion, appetite, emotion,” we that breathe the breath of God.²¹

The roles, behaviour, activities, and attributes considered appropriate for each of us, our whole personhood as biological, societal, and sexual persons, shape our understandings and practices of selecting and following political leaders, and of active citizenship. How the body is experienced and is foundational to our identity is itself political, and recognition of diverse embodied experiences presents a further political challenge. How might we affirm identity differences while mitigating identity divisions? Even as sexuality and gender expression are further understood as plural and fluid, neither fixed nor mutually exclusive, the grounds for seeking and pursuing identity-based justice proliferate. More than engendered, our diversity is embodied. Dynamic and sustainable political community calls forth both openness to a wide spectrum of embodied experiences and anchors for solidarity in the pursuit of effective collaboration for greater equality, justice, and nondiscrimination.

Notes

¹ Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society*, 2nd ed. (London: Gower), as characterized by Alexandra Howson in *The Body in Society: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 51; cited in Rainbow Resource Centre, Winnipeg, MB, “Definitions,” <http://www.rainbowresourcecentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Definitions-2010.doc>.

² Robin Wright, “Hillary Wouldn’t Be the First Female American President,” *New Yorker*, August 1, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/hillary-wouldnt-be-the-first-female-american-president>.

³ The Canadian Press, “Trudeau’s ‘Because it’s 2015’ Retort Draws International Attention,” *Globe and Mail*, November 5, 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/trudeaus-because-its-2015-retort-draws-international-cheers/article27119856/>.

⁴ “Up in the Air 2009 Quotes,” *Internet Movie Database* <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1193138/quotes>.

⁵ Raewyn Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2000), 226.

⁶ Edna Keeble, *Politics and Sex: Exploring the Connections between Gender, Sexuality, and the State* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2016), 13.

⁷ Joseph P. Gregory, “Margaret Thatcher, ‘Iron Lady’ Who Set Britain on New Course, Dies at 87,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/09/world/europe/former-prime-minister-margaret-thatcher-of-britain-has-died.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁸ Gregory, “Margaret Thatcher, ‘Iron Lady.’ ”

⁹ Hadley Freeman, “Margaret Thatcher Was No Feminist,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/09/margaret-thatcher-no-feminist>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Keeble, *Politics and Sex*, 12.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kath Woodward, “Gendered Bodies: Gendered Lives,” in *Introducing Gender and Women’s Studies* 3rd ed., ed. Diana Richardson and Victoria Robinson (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008), 88.

¹⁴ Sally Hines, “Feminist Theories,” in *Introducing Gender and Women’s Studies*, ed. Richardson and Robinson, 25.

¹⁵ Thanks to Canadian Mennonite University students for engaging this material with me. See also Canadian Mennonite University Student Council, *Doxa: the Rainbow Issue* 18, vol. 1 (September 2016).

¹⁶ Rainbow Resource Centre, “Definitions.” Thanks to Reece Malone, RRC Education Program Coordinator, for the ‘Genderbread Person’ image, as adapted from C. Gonzalez et al., *Gender and Sexuality Definitions—A Visual Map* (Santa Barbara, CA: Just Communities Central Coast, 2005).

¹⁷ Mary H. Schertz, “Editorial,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 4.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sarah MacDonald, “Opening Safe Space,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 81n1.

²⁰ Pauline Steinmann, “Singleness and Sexuality,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 68–69.

²¹ *Strong’s Concordance* 5315, BibleHub.com, <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/5315.htm>.

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