

## Gendered and gendering: dolls, makeup, and persons

Essay

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**Abstract** A dichotomy between the lifelessness of objects and the activity of personhood has long been a feature of western thought (Bauer 2019, 338). Objects, however, are active and constitutive in our social world. This essay explores the interconnections between objects and persons in social life through the framework of entanglement theory, analyzing the creation of gender in western social life, specifically the categories of western femininity and womanhood—these categories, though multiple, are greatly defined by a focus on physical appearance and norms of beauty (Cairns and Johnston 2015, 24). This essay will explore the central role of the material world in the creation of gendered categories. Refuting the idea of gender as a fixed and essentialized aspect of personhood, I will explain how one may become more (or less) a woman through relationships with objects.

**Résumé** Une dichotomie entre l'inertie des objets et l'activité de la personnalité a longtemps été une caractéristique de la pensée occidentale (Bauer 2019, 338). Cependant, les objets sont actifs et constitutifs de notre monde social. Cet essai explorera les interconnexions entre les objets et les personnes dans la vie sociale à travers le cadre de la théorie de l'enchevêtrement, examinant la création du genre dans la vie sociale occidentale, et en particulier, les catégories de la féminité et de la féminité occidentales. Il explorera le rôle central du monde matériel dans la création de catégories genrées. Rejetant l'idée du genre en tant qu'aspect fixe et essentialisé de la personnalité, j'expliquerai comment on peut devenir plus (ou moins) femme à travers les relations avec les objets.

**Keywords** perception; beauty; objects; gender

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A dichotomy between the lifelessness of objects and the activity of personhood has long been a feature of western thought (Bauer 2019, 338). Objects, however, are active and constitutive in our social world. This essay explores the interconnections between objects and persons in social life through the framework of entanglement theory, analyzing the creation of gender in western social life, specifically the categories of western femininity and womanhood—these categories, though multiple, are greatly defined by a focus on physical appearance and norms of beauty (Cairns and Johnston 2015, 24). This essay will explore the central role of the material world in the creation of gendered categories. Refuting the idea of gender as a fixed and essentialized aspect of personhood, I will explain how one may become more (or less) woman through relationships with objects.

I will begin by introducing entanglement theory, specifically Tim Ingold's spider-web metaphor (2008), providing the framework through which we will understand gender and its relation to objects. I will then explain gender as a socially created category before starting to explain the associated lives of people, gender creation, and objects. I will explore the examples of makeup and dolls as objects involved in the creation of womanness and girlness. Looking beyond social meanings as the sole agentic property of objects, I will reflect on the materiality and chemical components of objects and how these act to create judgments on one's womanness, returning to the example of makeup. I close by emphasizing both the relationality, temporality, and hybridity of objects. Objects shift in meaning both across temporal contexts, but also fluctuate depending on various present contexts—I offer the example of trousers over time and across social contexts as an example of this. Accordingly, we must refute feminine and masculine divisions of objects and understand their role in gender creation as an entangled and embodied process within the spider web of the social and material world.

## Entanglement Theory

Objects and people are entangled in social life—we as people are simultaneously created by and create objects (Bauer 2019, 20; Hodder 2012, 88-90). All material phenomena can be understood as embodied performative practices with agency distributed within networks of humans and objects. This enchanted materialism can be understood through what Ingold calls the spider-web approach (2008). Standing in opposition to actor-network theory, which delineates networks of relationships where objects hold agency through networked and symmetrical relations with humans, objects are in constant motion with shifting meanings and impacts (Ibid.). The anachronistic text *The Gift* (Mauss 1925) echoes similar principles—for Mauss, the entanglement between people and objects goes beyond the social meaning of the gift. Objects are not merely imbued with the personality of the owner; they are, rather, the “nexuses in which the attributes of personality and thingness are constituted and exchanged or constituted through exchange” (Pottage 2020, 188). Thus, agency is not a product of an object's interior intentionality. Rather, objects have lives and interactions which directly impact the lives of people. People make objects, but objects also make people—human existence is irreducibly tied with objects (Hodder 2012, 16; Olsen 2010, 140).

## Co-Creation of Gender and Objects

Strathern (1988) expands on Mauss's 1925 text to describe how Melanesian understandings frame gender as an attribute “that must be made known”; “not an intrinsic

property of persons, but a capacity which must be drawn out, or revealed, in interaction” (Degnen 2018, 9) with persons and objects. This understanding of gender has often been said to stand in opposition to western systems of gender and personhood as fixed and essentialized (Ibid., 9-10). By anchoring this argument back to western examples of gendered practices of femininity and the socially created view of woman and girl, I will demonstrate the ways this view is also applicable to western understandings. Gender is entirely entangled with the material world. In fact, gender could be so narrowly defined as the social interactions of a person with other people and objects, either abiding by or in contrast to the social stipulations assigned to their sex of birth.

Goodenough (as cited in Fowler 2010) distinguishes social identity from personal identity. While social identity is understood as a heuristic aspect of self, developed through interactions with the world, personal identity is related to one’s emotional orientation. The performance of gender and femininity is often understood as an aspect of personal identity, existing in a social vacuum outside the forces of the social world (Budgeon 2015, 303). I do not agree with this distinction—social identities and emotional orientations are fused, especially in terms of the policing of gender.

We may consider the case of makeup as an example of this. Though practically exclusively worn by women, it is not worn by all women. As such, it is often taken to be an object interacted with based on personal preference (Carbado et al 2007, 1). Makeup cannot be separated from the social world surrounding it, being a deeply gendered practice of feminine identity formation. By smoothing skin, defining eyes, and tinting lips, one becomes closer to ideals of beauty connected with femininity; one becomes more woman. Often, for a younger girl, it marks a shift from childhood to adolescence (McCabe et al 2017, 670). Wearing makeup “naturalizes the feminine body” (Ibid.). Further, many women note “[feeling] incomplete” or “insecure without makeup”; in this sense, makeup is not just an object of occasional interaction but an affirming ritual of femininity (Ibid.).

A gendered reading of the material world reveals how individuals are afforded or stripped of femininity through interactions with objects. Understanding these processes as part of the spider-web of social identity rather than independent aspects of personal identity reveals this. We thus must understand the enchanted materiality of objects. Gell (1998) offers the example of young girls and their play with dolls as a parallel to the treatment of idols by religious worshippers. Dolls, he states, exhibit “passive agency”; young girls make “a cult of [dolls], worship them” (134). Though knowing they are objects, the girl “[has] the liveliest sensation that the doll is a significant social other” (129). As such, dolls are given an inner world and agency, Gell argues, through the thoughts and imagination projected by the girl. Yet, I do not see this as their sole mode of agency. The doll is not only acting through play; in fact, the doll is co-creating the girl.

Julie Delalande's ethnography of nursery schools in France explored the categorisations of games as feminine, masculine, and neutral (Monjaret 2014, 142). Through play, children learn gender and the correct ways to express it; the figure of the girl is created through her mode of play with a doll. In fact, there are wrong ways to play with dolls. Young boys are often discouraged from playing with dolls, belittled, told off, or had the dolls taken away from them in favor of different toys (Ibid.); boys who continue to play with them are called "girly"—not girls but aligned with girliness in an unacceptable way (Holland & Harpin 2015, 295).

Girls can also play with dolls the wrong way—the 2023 Barbie film highlighted this idea through the character of "Weird Barbie," a doll with wild hair, clearly roughly cut off with a pair of child's scissors, colorful scribbles on her face, and limbs deformed, perpetually stuck in the splits (Kain 2023). This mode of play is rough and expressive rather than the gentle and maternal mode of care expected of girls with their dolls. Equally, a doll with hair cut off or face scribbled on is seen as damaged, no longer a proper toy for a proper girl. In the spider-web of relations, the doll contains an assumption of the acceptable way to interact with it, contributing to gendered identity formation. Those who fail to properly enact this play are understood as tomboys, girls who fail to reach the gendered performance of femininity. Though still girls, they are read as a modified version of girl, a girl who fails to enact feminine norms of care and sensitivity surrounding her modeling of maternalism.

### **Material Properties of Objects and Gender**

Thus far, I have focused on the social meanings of objects and how these anchored social meanings impact our understanding of gender. Ingold (2012) and Miller (2007) have criticized the lack of engagement with questions of materiality, or the physical and chemical dimensions of objects, in analyses of objects and social relations. While these dimensions are still embroiled in the realm of discourse and social meaning, they are worthy of specialized analysis.

I offer makeup and its chemical reactions with skin as an example of this. Foundation, for instance, is used to give the appearance of smoother skin and to conceal flaws. However, occasionally, due to the skin's pH level, reactions with the air, or other chemical factors, the foundation may oxidize, darkening on the face and becoming clearly present. Similarly, incorrect layering of the product may cause it to thicken on the skin, appearing heavy. In each of these chemical processes, the cosmetic enhancement used to affirm femininity is made conspicuous, correspondingly reducing one's womanness. The

ethnography of Eyre et al. (2014) explores the pertinent issues of performance, stylisation, and concealment in the policing of femininity amongst transgender women. In a discussion on beauty productions, one of their interlocutors, a transgender woman, stated that “caked on” makeup looks immoderate, its visibility marking a failure to enact femininity in an adequate way (162). Similarly, on a young cisgender girl, poorly applied may be read as childish, deemed an immature attempt to perform womanhood (Gentina et al. 2015). Brooks (2020) echoes these notions describing idealized western femininity as ‘natural’, not created or painted on but something innate. Despite makeup and body modification’s feminine associations, one’s tie to womanhood is socially scrutinized when it becomes known.

### **Relationality and Hybrid Nature of Objects and Gender**

As I have highlighted by this last example, the way one interacts with these objects is deeply relational—poorly applied makeup on a transgender woman does not necessarily carry the same set of social meanings as poorly applied makeup on a young cisgender girl. Objects do not only acquire different significance across contexts, but also call forth different relations—the association of makeup and the creation of womanhood is dependent not only on one’s interaction with it, but with their own set of individual characteristics (from their sex, skin type, or race) to environmental factors (as in the case of reactions of makeup with the air) to the chemical composition of the product. Equally, each impacts our conceptions of their womanhood; while they may not always be understood as being less female, they are understood as less properly woman.

Beyond relationality across individuals, I wish to highlight the shifting nature of objects. The meaning of each object is far from durable, objective, or fixed. The temporally shifting meaning of trousers from an entirely male article of clothing to universally worn is an example of this. Yet, even across contexts, this meaning is still slippery—in a black-tie setting, for example, a woman in trousers as opposed to a dress is thicker with gendered significance than a woman wearing trousers in day-to-day life. While trousers as an independent object may not be so easily pigeonholed into feminine or masculine, these associations are brought up depending on context. Beyond being temporally in flux, objects are hybrid, entangled in the spider-web of social, spatial, and material relations and shifting in their gendered meaning accordingly (Basu 2017, 8; Hodder 2012, 90). This is not to call objects androgynous, but rather to highlight that their gendered nature and the gendered characteristics they afford to individuals are dependent on several factors.

## Conclusion

When exploring the entanglement between the worlds of objects and persons, gender has proven to be a worthy category of analysis. As a characteristic based on social creation, objects—and the way people interact with and utilize them (and vice versa)—are essential to understanding femininity and womanhood. In an exploration of the regulatory norms surrounding dolls, the use of makeup (and makeup's interaction with skin), and clothing, this essay has shown how objects and gender are co-created. Understanding the social spider-web that objects and people occupy, we may unpick the deeply embedded processes of gender creation and policing.

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