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Gender Bending and Bending Gender (Re)Creating Aesthetic Realities of Organization Practices

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Gender Bending and Bending Gender (Re)Creating Aesthetic Realities of Organization Practices

Michael E. Reardon
Nikki C. Townsley

Abstract

The following paper incorporates various writing genres including fiction, narrative, and scholarly discourse to demonstrate the potential importance of aesthetic theory for transforming gendered organizational practices. It starts off with Kelly's, a student of organizational communication, "final exam" essay, which explores the gendered politics of promotion. Her professor's response explores the gendered politics of "doing feminism." Taken individually, Kelly and Dr. McGuire (re)create an aesthetic reality of traditional, essentializing organizational practices. Taken together, they (re)create aesthetic meanings that pose formidable challenges and potential transformations for the way we "do gender" organizationally. In the end, this paper or "petite narrative" stands as an aesthetic challenge towards transforming the way we "do (feminist organization) scholarship" organizationally.

Introduction

To: Dr. K. J. McGuire, COMM 574, Organizational Communication
From: Kelly Ryan
Re: Final Exam Essay

Dr. McGuire,

I felt like I should write a little note about my paper—I feel that I completed the assignment you gave us, but I did so in somewhat of an alternative format. As you'll see, I wrote the paper in the form of a short story about a woman named Kathleen, who may or may not be loosely based on my own experiences. © Interestingly, in the story, Kathleen is finishing up a paper about the aesthetic perspective and structuration theory (sound familiar?), and in doing so brings together literature on the topics as well as her own personal experiences. I remember hearing once that if a movie has to have a voice-over, then the director didn't do her job. Well, I know this memo is sort of a voice-over, but I felt like the paper was a bit out there, so I thought I would give you a little heads-up as to what you were reading. I hope you like it. See you in class. KAR

Aesthetic Perspective and Structuration Theory: Teaming Up To Understand the Politics of Promotion

"Some days are harder than others," Kathleen told herself as she looked at the blank computer screen with the same blank stare she had three hours earlier. "This is a learning experience," she said, this time aloud to dozens of books and

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articles that were strewn across her small, dusty apartment. It was always this way at the end of the semester--it seemed that no matter what advanced planning had occurred, it was always this way--working late, working frantically, working under pressure. It was this way when she was an undergraduate, it was this way when she earned her master's degree, and it was this way now that she was working towards her Ph.D. Come to think of it, even in her "working" days before returning to school, it was this way. Kathleen had never been one to have her work done well before the deadline like many of her graduate school friends or even coworkers. She never felt as though she fit in (was she better than the others—or not as good?), and in her mind, this way of working was her own act of irreverence for the academic system in which she found herself. "I'll show them," she thought, "I'll show them that I can do the same work in my own way—not theirs. I'll write the paper—but not in the same cookie-cutter academic fashion like everybody else."

Still, she felt unfulfilled. She knew that ultimately she was doing it their way (she did say "same work")—going to class, taking notes, talking to professors, researching the literature, writing papers—this was all part of the reality of the organization. But she also felt that by doing her academic work on her schedule and in her way, even though she did it her way in the context of their system, was valuable (or did everyone feel this way? Was she part of the majority because she felt so alone?). She was confused. She was tired. And she was working under a deadline. So, partially out of habit, and partially out of the obligation of an assignment, she turned to the literature to try and make sense of the situation.

"Aesthetic theory," she read, "now that sounds more my speed." Kathleen had picked up Robin Clair's (1998) *Organizing Silence*, and as was her habit, scanned through the text to find something that caught her eye. Her scanning had brought her toward the back of the text in which Clair describes aesthetic theory and then goes on to propose an alternative way of viewing it/using it in an organizational sense. "What is this all about," she was thinking. She read on.

Kathleen found that the aesthetic perspective had been developing for centuries, and, according to Clair (1998), is still in the process of becoming. She found that one could trace aesthetic theory to classical Greece (although it probably existed even before then) and the division between Plato and Aristotle. Clair noted that "according to Plato, art fails to provide us with knowledge, and is, generally speaking, a poor substitute for reality" (p. 173). Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that aesthetics was not only a reflection of reality, but also commented upon what might become reality—it has potential to help us know. Kathleen thought about the way reading fiction or literature while reading academic texts helped her understand those scholars—helped her contextualize and feel what to her was so cold and methodical. She wanted to understand more about aesthetic theory. She read more of Clair.

Clair (1998) described how several different authors had taken traditional forms of expressing themselves and recreated them to offer a dual meaning or a self-contained opposite. Kathleen read about how Daly's work both represents resistance and is resistance, about how Robert Indiana's artwork both represents

a target and is a target, and about how Tillie Olsen's book on interruptions is an interruption in its own right. "This is interesting," she thought. Kathleen continued to read, now about Marx, and how he believed that "our every activity is a creative extension of our being" (Clair, 1998, p. 176). Or, as Strati (1996) put it, "aesthetics are a form of knowledge and they have their own truth" (p. 216). She read about Nietzsche, and how he believed that we are always in a state of Becoming—because Being is just an illusion. "I see," she thought, "in other words, Nietzsche would say that we are always participating in creating our own realities. That's a cool way to look at it." She read more, now about feminists and aesthetics—and learned about the masculine bias that has permeated the "historic concepts of creativity, excellence, and artistic purpose" (Korsemyer, 1993, p. viii). She was really interested now. She had read the book by Tillie Olsen, but had never thought about it in that way. As a woman who used to work in a male-dominated industry, Kathleen often wondered if she had really done anything to demonstrate her resistance to the status quo. She wondered if she could view some of her actions as creating a new reality for herself and others. Aesthetic theory was really sounding like something to learn more about. She pulled out her highlighter and continued to read on.

"It seems that the self-contained opposite is at the heart of the alternative aesthetic perspective that Clair argues for," she thought to herself. "I like that idea." She read how Clair (1998) stated that the aesthetic perspective can allow one to look at everyday occurrences and actions as "artful expressions" (p. 186)—not as an alternative to other existing theories, but rather as a companion to perspectives such as critical, feminist, or postmodern. The everyday occurrences can now be interpreted as illustrations of resistance, of framing, or of Becoming. The aesthetic perspective, according to Clair and Kunkle (1998), "provides a unique philosophy as it is grounded in paradox, defies closure, acts as resistance, and intensifies plurality and confusion" (p. 27). She was now hooked—but the book had prompted her to remember again her days as a customer service representative at O'Malley Medical Supply Company, about her promotion to outside sales representative, and how hard that decision was. She thought about the frustration of it all. She thought about her old friends and how they were doing. She thought, "I'm not concentrating. Time to take a break." She put down Clair's book and shuffled off to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

After a cup of coffee and a smoke out on the front porch (her roommate hated her smoking in the apartment), Kathleen curled up on the couch in the living room with her favorite blanket and picked up the book again. Her cat, Felix (it sounded cute when she named him at age eight), tiptoed across her knees, and wedged himself between her elbow and her chest. She looked down and knew what the cat was trying to tell her. "I know, Felix," she said, "time for bed. But this is good stuff and I've got that paper to write." She started to page through the text, remembering that she had read some of the earlier chapters when they were in journals, and how that she had loved Clair and Kunkle's (1998) piece on the stories of child abuse—but she had never quite caught on to

the fact that they were using an aesthetic perspective throughout that article (or maybe she did—"maybe that's why I loved it," she thought now). She started to think about what she was going to write for her paper, and remembered that she had told her friend Sheila that she would call her tonight. She was not quite ready to start working again, so she grabbed her smokes from off the television, went back to her room, lit a cigarette ("it is my room") and dialed the phone.

"Hey," Kathleen said, "How's it going over there?" Sheila needn't be told what she was talking about. She had the same assignment.

"Not bad," Sheila replied, "I'm doing my spell check now."

"That's excellent!" Kathleen said with as much conviction as she could, knowing she was behind once again.

Sheila asked about her paper, and Kathleen explained that she was really getting into the aesthetic perspective that Clair (1998) wrote about. Sheila was familiar with it ("surprise, surprise," Kathleen thought), and told her that it had always reminded her of structuration theory.

"What do you mean?" Kathleen asked.

"Well," Sheila explained, "you know how in Clair's (1998) book she explains aesthetics being about a paradox--and how traditional aesthetics incorporates some of Marx and Nietzsche, and she uses that quote from Strati (1996)—something about aesthetics being a form of knowledge and its own truth?"

"Yeah, sure, I just read that," she replied.

"Well, think of the idea of Being and Becoming—now think of structuration theory. Remember how Giddens (1979) talks about systems and structure? It is sort of like the same thing. Giddens explains how structures are the rules and resources people use in interaction. Rules are sort of like norms, and resources are things that people 'bring to the table' in an interaction—knowledge, wealth, power—that kind of stuff. He said that systems are "regularized relations of interdependence between individuals and groups" (Giddens, 1979, p. 66). Well, what Giddens says is that people use these rules and resources—these structures—to constantly create and recreate systems. See the connection?—both the aesthetic perspective and structuration theory talk about creating your own reality--Being and Becoming at the same time!"

"Sheila is a little too into this school thing," Kathleen thought, "but she does know what she is talking about."

"Sure, they are not the same thing," Sheila continued, "but they do have parallels. And I think that if you take the aesthetic perspective along with structuration theory, you could really start to see even some of those little structures that Giddens talks about in a different light. You could show how even silence could be an "artful expression" (Clair, 1998, p. 198) by someone. In fact, Poole (1996) used structuration theory and showed how even the smallest of interactions between people could change the reality in which they were situated. And then later, Scott, Corman, and Cheney (1998) used structuration to show how organizational identification can be both a process and a product at the same time. So I think that there are ways that the aesthetic perspective is similar to structuration—both ideas reinforce Being and Becoming, or process and product!"

Kathleen interrupted Sheila before she could really get going. “Listen, friend, I think you are reading way too much--you are starting to make too much sense! Now go to bed—I’ve got a paper to write.”

“Hold on,” Sheila said, and Kathleen could hear her shuffling through some papers. “Uhhh...got it! Listen to this--remember how Clair (1998) said that there was a paradox in the aesthetic perspective--well, Giddens (1976) also talked about the duality of structure. He said that “social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this construction” (p. 121). See what I mean? There are some similarities there!”

“All right, all right, you’ve given me enough to go on. Now go to bed!”

Sheila reluctantly agreed because now she was getting into this idea, said good luck, and told Kathleen she would see her in class tomorrow.

Now the wheels were spinning. “Structuration theory and the aesthetic perspective. I guess I do see the parallels.” Kathleen picked up Clair’s book again, this time determined to finish her reading so she could start writing. Still, she couldn’t quite focus. As she waited for the coffee and nicotine to kick in and give her the push she needed, she felt herself zoning out. As she struggled to keep her eyes open, she thought back again to her “working” days and when she was promoted from her customer service position to an outside sales representative. She thought of the oddness of the situation—how it had frightened her as well as excited her. How it had surprised her as well as made her feel accomplished.

The day after they had offered Kathleen the promotion, she found out why she got the offer instead of her coworker, Liam, who had worked in their department longer and even in her eyes was more prepared to move from the inside sales position to the outside one. O’Malley and his managers had promoted her because she was a woman.

“Nurses like to deal with women,” Cele had told her.

Cele was the both the matriarch and the gossip of the customer service department--she had been there since the company originated and personally knew every one of the employees that Mr. O’Malley hired. Often Cele’s information was helpful or insightful or just plain good gossip, but this information disturbed her.

“A woman!” she roared to herself. Immediately the excitement and feeling of self accomplishment that she had only the previous day was squeezed out of her like a camper deflating an air mattress. She felt like that deflated mattress too—empty inside, too shriveled to move, and easily carried away by someone else—in this case, Mr. O’Malley. “I’m going to quit—I’d rather quit than take a job that they gave me just because I’m a woman!”

Cele looked at Kathleen in her motherly way, put her arm around her shoulder, and told her, “Now, now. Don’t do anything rash. You are just as ready as Liam. You would do great. And think about the money—this is a great opportunity for a young woman.”

“A young woman who earned it,” Kathleen shot back, still fuming.

“At least think it over,” Cele said, and then added, “Oh, and don’t say that I told you anything.”

Kathleen remembered how she went back and forth about the decision. She remembered how she felt trapped—taking the job would only perpetuate the patriarchy of the organization—but not taking it meant that yet another man would get to be the outside sales rep. She remembered calling her friends to get their opinions, all the while knowing that she was simply looking for someone to tell her that it was all right to tell Mr. O’Malley to shove it. “None of them understand,” she thought. She knew she couldn’t talk to anyone at work—everyone wanted the job, so they would think she was an idiot for even thinking twice about it. Then it hit her. “I will take it,” she said aloud, “but on my terms, not O’Malley’s.” She knew that by taking the job it would afford her the chance to create new opportunities for other women like her. She knew that if she didn’t take it, she would probably perpetuate O’Malley’s thinking even more than if she did. “At least this way,” she thought, “I am controlling my own destiny.”

As Kathleen woke herself from this reverie, she realized that the clock was ticking on her paper. She was tired, but she felt that she could unite her thoughts and memories of the evening into an essay for her class. She thought about Clair, about Giddens, and about her life before she went back to school. She glanced down at her book, and saw that it was turned open to the final chapter, in which Clair (1998) argues that the alternative aesthetic perspective can offer additional insights to Conquergood’s (1994) piece: (1) expressing hidden ironies; (2) exposing the silence within the silenced; (3) looking for realities that are woven within realities; and (4) exploring the role of the scholar as artist, art, and audience (pp. 194-196). “I like the aesthetic perspective more and more,” she thought. “I could work all of this into my paper. First, the hidden irony of my situation is that by offering me the job, O’Malley was undercutting the very system he sought to reinforce. Second, I could talk about how the nurses are the silenced within the silenced. Cele had said that “nurses like to deal with women.” What does that say about our take on nurses and the position they are in? I could really offer them a chance to have their voices heard. Third, the reality within the reality is that my struggle with O’Malley’s ideology was woven into the capitalist, patriarchal society in which he was raised. My experience was a reality that was rooted within a larger reality. Fourth, I could demonstrate the scholar as artist through my work on this paper by perhaps writing it in a non-traditional fashion. I could write up the paper as a short story or something like that—it might be a stretch, but then again, it might work!”

As Kathleen sat down to her computer, she reflected upon these additional insights and all of the other things she had read that night. She thought about her conversation with Sheila. And she thought that she should have started earlier on her paper. But most of all she thought back to her job at O’Malley Medical, and how the events of the evening offered her a different way to understand her actions of five years ago. She remembered how she had once read that women’s view of the world was one that was constructed by men, and how that idea made so much more sense in terms of the promotion at O’Malley Medical. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) had argued that “conceptions of know-

ledge and truth that are accepted and articulated today have been shaped throughout history by male-dominated majority culture” (p. 5) and now Kathleen realized that O’Malley had been perpetuating that culture. Kathleen thought of some of the stories that Belenky and her colleagues had recounted, especially of those who had been silenced in different ways. They concluded that “the actions of these [silent] women are in the form of unquestioned submission to the immediate commands of authorities, not to the directives of their own inner voices” (p. 28). “Well, I guess in my own way, I did listen to my inner voice back then,” Kathleen thought.

Now all Kathleen had to do was put it down on paper. She thought more about writing her essay in an alternative fashion, and still wasn’t sure what to do. She knew she had read something about it before—she paged through her book again, and found that Clair (1998) had said “an aesthetic perspective relishes creativity and encourages escape from the very boundaries and limitations it self-imposed” (p 186). She remembered how Clair had also written about Daly (1973, 1984, as cited in Clair, 1998) twisting “dominant discourse into alternative ways of speaking or writing that grant us new ways of knowing and participating in our realities” (p. 171). She also thought of Laurel Richardson (1994), who urged scholars to write in experimental fashions. “I’ve always wanted to write a different kind of paper,” she said to herself, “and this seems like the perfect opportunity.” She decided she would write an essay that was part fiction, part narrative, and part scholarly work—it might be more work, but she knew it would certainly be more fun.

As she began typing, the merging of what she had read and what she had experienced started forming on the page. “What Mr. O’Malley didn’t understand,” Kathleen thought as she lit another cigarette (it was finals week!), “was that by promoting me instead of Liam, he was creating a new reality for the organization. Even though his intentions were horribly misguided, he had promoted me.” It reminded her of a passage that Clair (1998) wrote: “an alternative aesthetic perspective allows us to bring into relief the ironic relationships between...organizations and organizational communicative practices” (p. 202). “That was irony,” she thought, “O’Malley promoted me because I was a woman, which is prehistoric, crude, and insulting. But, on the other hand, O’Malley was too dense to realize that by promoting me, even with his misogynistic motives, he was creating and did create a new reality for that organization. The promotion, no matter how small in his eyes, changed the nature of promotions for O’Malley Medical. It was like Giddens’ (1979) structuration theory or Nietzsche’s take on aesthetics—both Being and Becoming in the same breath.” She typed as the thoughts poured into her head.

Kathleen had known even then that her taking the job was, on the surface level, condoning O’Malley’s behavior—but deeper, she knew that she could also use that opportunity (however misguided O’Malley’s reasons were for giving it to her) as a chance to change the organization. She took a drag of her cigarette and continued to type. She thought more about what she had read by Clair (1998): “when the subjugated group is unable to assert direct challenges to the

dominant and oppressive powerholders, they may instead consume the practices and products of the predominant group in ways that reappropriate the intended meanings” (p. 166, emphasis in original). “That’s it!” Kathleen thought, “Clair nailed what I did right on the head.” She glanced at her watch and typed more quickly.

Kathleen thought more about her journey, and about her reading of aesthetic and structuration theory. Then she remembered how Poole (1996) emphasized how communication creates and recreates the reality in which we live. She thought about how Clair (1996) wrote about how grand discourses (Lyotard, 1984) are reinforced through everyday talk. “How can I let people know that I am making a stand by accepting this job?” she remembered asking herself back when she was with O’Malley Medical. Kathleen realized now that the way she had talked to the other representatives at the sales meetings, how she had talked to her customers, and how she had talked about her job to Mr. O’Malley made a difference. A small one, perhaps, but one all the same. She knew now that both by talking about her situation to these people she was demonstrating her stance, and at the same time, her action was a stance in and of itself. Once she got the ball rolling, she knew now she made a difference. She remembered wondering how she could perpetuate the talk of why she took the job—and how she could start others talking about her somewhat quiet, but nevertheless significant, stand against Mr. O’Malley. It hit her as she was going around the corner of her office to tell Mr. O’Malley that she would accept the position. Actually, it didn’t hit her—Cele did. Kathleen ran into Cele—literally—and knew that a passing comment to her would be all that it would take to start the talk. People would recognize that her acceptance of the job was not a reinforcement of the gendered politics that got her the offer—it was a stand for resistance against it. As she had read in Clair (1998), she was “reappropriating” (p. 166) her own meaning through the structure and the reality that O’Malley had provided.

“Wow!” Kathleen thought as she typed up the last page, “this is an alternative paper--and a long one at that! But I think it does connect how Clair’s aesthetic perspective could be used with structuration theory to understand the organizational politics of promotions. It shows that although there are parallels between aesthetics and structuration, they are not substitutes for each other, but rather complements of each other. And, more than anything, this paper at least helped me sort out my feelings about the old O’Malley Medical days. I almost hate to say it, but this was a learning experience! I always say that, but now I believe it! Oh my God! I think I’m turning into Sheila!”

After calming herself down and performing the requisite spell check/quick read, Kathleen printed off her paper and got ready for bed. As she crawled into bed (Felix was already dead to the world), she rolled over to the nightstand to set her alarm. “8:00 a.m. ought to do it,” she said, and chuckled to herself as she glanced down to her clock. It was already 5:30. Well, she told herself, “Some days are better than others!”

...

(a week or so later. . .)

To: Kelly

From: Professor McGuire

Your irreverence for the knowledge factory rules has served you (and the factory) well, Kelly. You have painted a realistic, compelling aesthetic of the relationship between aesthetic and structuration theory through the all too familiar tale of end-of-the-semester pressures experienced by PhD students, and I might add, faculty members too. Someone must read the (often interminable) final exam essays after all. Your essay, however, was a joy to read, not only because I found myself saying, “Yes! Kelly has got it! She is demonstrating a higher-order understanding of aesthetic and organization theories—through aesthetics!” but also because your story generated yet another level of understanding. In the spirit of the aesthetic tradition of (re)creating realities in order to expand our potential for knowing and social change, I would like to contribute to your already richly layered account by sharing a personal tale of gendered organizational life.

But first, let me offer a few accolades regarding your aesthetic of the gendered organizational practice of promotion. I appreciate your reference early on in your essay to Nietzsche. I agree with his and others’ (e.g., Foucault, de Beauvoir, etc.) notion that identity is best conceived of as a dynamic and fluid process. Indeed, one is never a “finished” or “complete” self but rather an organizational member who continually creates, maintains and even transforms realities, aesthetically, in order to negotiate (contradictory) experiences, to make sense of the mundane and the extraordinary. As you deftly note by drawing from Clair (1998), the aesthetic perspective takes “artful expressions” of the everyday/ everynight world not as antagonisms but as companions to critical, feminist theories. Everything, act of resistance, frame, way-of-being, comportment, etc., is part of Becoming, at the same time, everything, act of resistance, frame, way-of-being, comportment, etc., is paradoxical, at times, contradictory.

Further, as you illustrate through your “case study” of female promotion in a male dominated industry, our irreverence to dominant ways-of-being (e.g., smoking, writing papers at the last minute, being a woman in a patriarchal work world, etc.) creates a paradox whereby one can simultaneously challenge and maintain power relationships. Kathleen’s credibility as an intelligent and capable salesperson is challenged when she learns, through the “gossip” of another woman, that she “earned” the job in large part because of her gender. After all, dominant organizational ethos suggests that nursing is women’s work and, some would say, that sales is men’s work. In an effort to regain composure, she attempted to assuage sexist promotional practices by redefining the promotion as a larger step for womankind, i.e. women entering the ranks of external sales. I would say that you are coming at this from a gender reform feminism perspective, as Lorber (2005) would put it. Wonderful! Here you provide another layer of interpretation that can come only with reflection of this “alternative” aesthetic. Kathleen begins to “see” the hidden ironies (O’Malley’s undercutting of his own work system), the deafening silence (of the nurses voices not heard), and the interwoven realities of promotion politics (gendering bases of capitalism) at

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the same time as she recognizes the promotion practices of O'Malley Medical were changed forever upon her promotion. Lorber would likely say that Kathleen is a liberal feminist—trying to shine the light on discriminatory hiring and rationale for promotions. This retrospective sense making goes beyond mere account making into artistry, the art of deconstructing false bifurcations of scholarly work, fiction, and narrative through the reappropriation of meanings not intended by dominant groups. That is, not only did Kathleen use Cele to reappropriate and spread new meanings of her promotion but, Kelly, your depiction of her experience reappropriates the role of narrative and fiction in organizational communication research. I couldn't have done it better myself (but more on this later. . .).

However, if I can offer one suggestion, it would be to explore in more depth the potential limits of aesthetic theory in so far as dismantling societal, economic, political, even cultural structures that shape the available sets of discourses that we draw from in order to create realities, identities, at least initially. I cannot help but wonder how many female outside sales representatives are currently working at O'Malley Medical (you did say this was five years ago). Moreover, are they selling in stereotypically women's industries such as nursing supplies? Was your supreme act of resistance successful in the long term? Or, are we kidding ourselves through the scholarly rhetoric of aesthetic theory that reappropriation equates change? I don't have all the answers to these questions but have been exploring possibilities myself—through alternative writing—much as you have.

Kathleen, if you would allow me, let me tell you a story that you may find interesting . . .

Untitled

It started off as an innocuous morning full of predictable rituals for Professor O'Neill. Sitting at his custom-built cherry desk drinking a hot cup of Starbucks coffee and checking e-mail, O'Neill began to drift beyond his university office window. The snow on the ground made him think of better weather, and vacations, and he thought, "I better check the rates on travelocity.com if I'm going to take Becky and the girls snorkeling in Mexico for spring break. Becky is going to be so surprised. She so hates the snow." He smiled at his sensitivity and ability to be able to anticipate his wife's needs, and makes a mental note to shovel the sidewalk when he got home that evening.

O'Neill's thoughts begin to wander back to the realities of academia as he sifted through endless CRT-Net messages, praying that there won't be another belabored dialogue on whether or not we live in a modern or postmodern age. Quickly deleting mass e-mails, he noticed a message from the university's Sexual Harassment Network. Double-click.

To: KJONeill@college.edu
From: YNT@college.edu
Professor O'Neill,

Based on your recent publication on sexual harassment and academic culture, we invite you to join the University Sexual Harassment Network as a faculty advisor. Your role would be to provide counsel, information, or direction for students seeking to file a complaint of sexual harassment. Please call . . .

“Oh my, someone actually read my article!” O’Neill smiled inwardly. He’d been despondent as of late, worrying that his critical organizational research wasn’t actually emancipating, but boring folks instead. “Becky will be proud to know that those endless nights at the office writing that article have paid off with public recognition,” he thought as he picked up the phone to call the Network director to schedule what the email referred to as an “unofficial” interview.

“Dr. O’Neill, what a pleasant surprise! What can I do for you?” asks the Director.

“I just finished reading your invitation to become part of the university Network, and am returning your call for an informal interview,” he offered wondering why the Director did not know his motivation for this call. She sent the letter after all!

“Well, of course. Dr. O’Neill. Um...this is a bit embarrassing, but since I sent you the invitation to join the Network I have received strong messages of concern from the Board . . .”

“What kind of concerns?” O’Neill wondered silently.

She continued, “. . . and, I actually thought you may have heard the news. . .

There was a long silence as he remembered the past week—one of the kids had been sick and he cancelled classes to stay home and play nursemaid. Becky had been attending a professional conference presenting her research on digital technology and medical surgery. “What, I leave for a week to play Dad and I am cut out of the loop?” he fretted silently.

“Well, the Board thought long and hard but despite your impeccable research, they feel that students might not feel comfortable bringing their concerns of sexual harassment to a male faculty member. They feel horrible about rescinding their invitation as student advisor, and in order to make up for any discomfort or embarrassment, they would like you to consider a new position on the Network, as an informational resource for faculty members.”

O’Neill’s thoughts started to wander outside his office window again, not to the sands of Mexico this time, but to his first research presentation on feminist theory. In front of several dozen “prolific” feminist (female) scholars in the field, O’Neill remembered describing the mundane and egregious forms of gender oppression that men experience, and how feminism must reconsider the perils of masculinity in order to truly change gender relations. The audience responded or, more accurately, reacted with hostility, “How dare he cry about wounds of gender oppression, when his wife is at home cooking dinner and caring for his kids? How dare a man ask for our empathy at the point in time when women’s voices are finally being heard? Are you suggesting, Dr. O’Neill, that you know how it feels to be a woman?” Yes, he painfully recalled, it was at that point in time when he began the arduous task of being a feminist in a man’s

body. The Board's decision only reminded him that despite his ideology, he was often essentialized because of his biology. "Don't they realize that I am on their side?" he mused for the zillionth time.

"Dr. O'Neill, are you there? . . . Dr. O'Neill? . . ."

"Yes, yes, I am sorry. I was just a little taken aback. No I had not heard about the Board's decision but I must say that I disagree. As you may know, I have served on several committees related to issues of gender and student concerns . . ."

"Yes, I am sorry, but the Board feels . . ."

"I need a little bit of time to think through my decision of whether, in good faith, I can serve the Network in that capacity. I'll give you a call . . ."

It seemed as if time stood still. O'Neill recollected so many of his conversations with Becky about his feminist research. She didn't seem to understand his need to investigate the effects of gender since he was a man. In fact, many of his colleagues felt similarly, accusing him of professionalizing feminist theory in the academy. "Why is that such a bad thing anyway!?" he fumed. "Isn't that what feminist scholars have wanted for years—to be accepted as a legitimate form of inquiry?" At the same time, however, he knew. He knew that because he was a man, his feminist scholarship was given more weight, more credence, and more accolades than many of the so-called "whiny female feminists." Did that mean that he shouldn't pursue feminist scholarship? Or, is Audre Lorde right when she says that the Master's house can never dismantle the Master's tools? Am I a Master simply because I am white and male? What do I need to do to prove my devotion to gender issues? Why am I to blame because I want a safe space for the women in my life—Becky and the girls?

O'Neill's eyes roamed around his office, a space Becky helped decorate and he filled to capacity with his scholarly books. He figured that he better close down his e-mail and get some fresh air to help clear his mind. While putting on his coat, the professor inadvertently knocked a pile of books off his cluttered chair that he used as a makeshift bookshelf. "Dammit..." he said exasperatingly as he stooped to clean up the mess. *bell hooks* (1984) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* was in the pile and it caught his attention. "God, how long has it been since I've read this. . .," O'Neill reflected as he thumbed through the worn, yellowed pages full of marginalia.

"There it is, the passage that first got me thinking that I could contribute to the conversation amongst feminists," O'Neill whispered to the stale air. He spoke it aloud, even though he was alone in the room: "Men are not exploited or oppressed by sexism but there are ways in which they suffer as a result of it. This suffering should not be ignored" (p. 72). A smile appeared on his face. "I never claimed to be oppressed and, in fact, I agree that saying man's suffering does not excuse women's oppression at the hands of men. However, how are we to know of male suffering if we men continue to be silent in shame?" O'Neill could feel his lost passion for feminism starting to boil over again, and then he remembered the last five minutes.

O'Neill was excited and upset at the same time, now pacing his office. "How can the Board dismiss my contributions based on my gender when bell

hooks says that men should be comrades with women in struggle to end sexist oppression? As a man, am I supposed to be a comrade on the side . . . or right in the line of fire with the female feminists?" Then it hit him like a bulldozer hits a brick wall. "And, wait a minute, what about intersectionality (Lorber, 2005)? Many feminists have already acknowledged that not all women experience woman's oppression the same. Lots of conflating variables such as race, class, sexual orientation, age, or ability play a role in the experience of oppression. So how come I am essentialized because of my body? Doesn't my different perspective add to the conversation, rather than take away from it? Aren't we all an 'other' in some regard?"

O'Neill was getting pretty revved up and wanted to call the Director to give her a piece of his mind. He quickly grabbed the phone and started to pull out the number, but then replaced the receiver and sat down in his chair. "But if I say no to the informational resource position, who is going to education the male faculty members about sexual harassment?" It says it right here in hooks, "men have a tremendous contribution to make to feminist struggle in the area of exposing, confronting, opposing, and transforming the sexism of their male peers" (p. 81).

O'Neill sat back in his leather recliner and wandered what Becky would advise. He so missed her presence when she was traveling to this and that conference. "Maybe they are right. I can't even make a decision without seeking the help of my wife. She who does the majority of the childcare, shopping, . . . oh shit, she even decorated my office. What kind of feminist am I?" As he reconsidered his paternalistic behavior toward his wife and daughters (after all, he presumed to know what "she wanted" for holiday break!), he reread hook's argument again. "She says that men can expose the sexism of their peers. How could I do this if I didn't take the job with the Network? They want me as an informational resource, well by God, I am an informational resource, at minimum. Not only do I know the policies and legal treatments, but can we honestly say I won't be called on at various points in time as a student advisor? Who is silencing whom? Men too are sexually harassed, and although I would never purport to speak for their experience . . ."

Just then the phone rang. "Honey, are you there?" Becky asked across the phone line 3,000 miles away.

"What a joy to here your voice. You'll never believe my . . ."

"Honey, I can't talk long. Several researchers from Lucent are waiting for me to join them. They really like my idea and want to fund some additional . . ." The rest of Becky's words drifted from O'Neill's consciousness as he sat back and smiled once again. He knew the solution to his dilemma already, and this point in time was for Becky's professional success. It might be read as paternalistic but he didn't know how to extend himself otherwise, and, left with few alternatives, action is better than stagnation. So he listened intently and made a mental note to log on to travelocity.com right after he speaks with the Network Director.

And so the innocuous morning full of predictable rituals was anything but. O'Neill felt as if he had passed some sort of test of why he was allowed to be a

feminist and a feminist scholar. He had taken a journey through his original inspiration for his work, to his frustrations of being a man in a woman's world, and, ultimately, to perhaps a new avenue for him to apply his scholarship. It was only 11:00 am, and he was already tired. Getting up to finally take his walk, O'Neill's coat, again, brushes a mess on the floor. "Oh, for the love of..." He stoops, again, to pick up the mess and, again, his eyes fall to a certain piece of the pile. No bell hooks this time. His eyes go right for the brochure for Mexico.

The end.

So you may have noticed, Kelly, some similarities between Professor O'Neill and me (And, if I may be so bold, I would think that those similarities are not unlike those between you and Kathleen . . .). Your essay got me thinking, Kelly. I have been tinkering with writing (my) O'Neill's story up for a journal submission. Like your essay, I wanted to include my (fictional) narrative to illustrate the complexities of gender in organizational practices. Perhaps we could combine the two stories under the umbrella of aesthetic theory in order to create a more nuanced, and leading-edge, piece that describes both you (Kathleen's) experience as a woman in a man's world and my (O'Neill's) experience as a man in a woman's world. To answer one of the questions I posed earlier, I do think that reappropriation can equal change—and the way you demonstrated the connection between aesthetic theory and structuration essentially demonstrates this point. Remember how when Poole used structuration theory in small groups he talked about the fact that it has a critical edge? What he meant was that because Being and Becoming happen simultaneously, things are never really stable—and that constant motion, if you will, offers us opportunities to effect change. So, by you (Kathleen) taking the job at O'Malley Medical, by me (O'Neill) taking the job here, or even if we put this paper together in an alternative format, we are effecting some kind of change, don't you think? Anyway, if we decide to do this paper, we could tentatively title the collaboration:

Predictable Essentializing & Unpredictable Aesthetics:
Recreating Meanings of a Woman in a Man's World
& a Man in a Woman's World

Why don't you get back to me with your thoughts on all of this. Again, I really enjoyed your essay—I hope I wasn't too long-winded in my comments, but I felt like we were on the same page. I'll look forward to hearing from you...

(the next day...)

TO: KJONeill@college.edu

FROM: KRyan@college.edu

I AM SO GLAD YOU LIKED MY PAPER!! I was really worried that I was too far out there—but after reading your comments, clearly I wasn't. Great minds! ;-) I really think that your idea is excellent—combining our stories into one paper and sending it off to a journal or something. Not to be too academic here, but it would be a great paper to get out there because aesthetic theory sug-

gests that our sharing these stories would present yet another hidden irony of gender bending in organizations. Just think about it. . . if we get to tell our stories, who knows how many other women and men will recreate or renarrativize their gender bending experiences so that more of us can engage aesthetics as a tool for social change...unearthing the layers of predictable essentializing toward more unpredictable organizing that breaks gender rules. So, as you can tell, I am excited about it. One thing, though. If I may be so bold, professor, may I suggest a different title? I liked yours (I swear!), but I was thinking that it should be a bit more alternative, you know? Sorta like the paper. What would you think about....

Gender Bending and Bending Gender:

(Re)Creating Aesthetic Realities of Organizational Practices

I'm not married to it, but I think it is more fun. I'll stop by your office tomorrow and we can talk about what we need to do. Thanks again for all the great comments and the invitation to work with you on this! See ya' tomorrow...

Kelly

PS--I was glad to read that you took that job . . .

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