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MARIANNE HEIMBACH-STEINS, JUDITH KÖNEMANN,
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THEOLOGY: BIOGRAPHICAL – CONTEXTUAL –
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Running in Order to Stand Still. A Personal Reflection on the Challenges Facing Feminism in Times of Radical Change

TINA BEATTIE

Abstract

Dieser Beitrag untersucht, wie die Biographie der Autorin ihre Forschung in feministischer Theologie, Gendertheorie und Intersektionalität beeinflusst hat. Sie zeichnet ihre theologische Entwicklung nach, ausgehend von ihrer Positionierung als postkoloniale katholische Frau, die ihr Studium in dem Jahr der Einschulung ihres jüngsten Kindes begann.

Beattie argumentiert, dass der Bezug auf ‚Erfahrung‘ in den liberal-feministischen Theologien der 1980er-Jahre die Interpretationsweise von Erfahrungen durch soziolinguistische Ansätze nicht ausreichend berücksichtigte. Der ‚linguistic turn‘ der frühen 1990er Jahre ermöglichte Erkenntnisse über die Weise, wie Geschlecht und Kultur psychosoziale Konventionen und Verhaltensweisen beeinflussen. Intersektionale Ansätze, die von psychoanalytischen und soziologischen Theorien geprägt sind, können daher zu einem tieferen feministischen Verständnis darüber beitragen, wie Geschlecht Frauen in ihrem persönlichen, häuslichen und sozialen Umfeld verortet.

Diese methodologische Verschiebung birgt jedoch die Gefahr, dass sich die Unterscheidung zwischen sex und gender in der postmodernen Theorie diskursiv auflöst, was die Konzentration auf feministische Gerechtigkeits- und Repräsentations-Fragen erschwert. Die Autorin wendet diese Kritik auch auf lehramtliche Entwicklungen im katholischen Verständnis der sexuellen Differenz an und argumentiert, dass eine Verschiebung von hierarchischen zu komplementären Ansätzen über sexuelle Differenz in der päpstlichen Sprache wenig dazu beigetragen hat, bestehende Hierarchien zu verändern. In der katholischen Ekklesiologie verwischt die Vorstellung von der Kirche als *Frau* die inkarnatorische Bedeutung des weiblichen Körpers.

Trotz des scheinbaren Konflikts zwischen der katholischen Ekklesiologie und der Gender-Theorie wird gezeigt, dass beide Konzepte von *Frau* den weiblichen Körper aus dem Haus der Sprache vertreiben, sodass er in einer Position stummer Animalität verbleibt. Dies lenkt die Aufmerksamkeit von den zahlreichen Misshandlungen und Kämpfen ab, denen Frauen und Mädchen aufgrund ihres Geschlechts immer noch ausgesetzt sind. Frauen müssen weiterlaufen, um stehen zu bleiben, damit nicht auch die kleinen Errungenschaften des Feminismus unter dem Deckmantel neuer theoretischer und theologischer Ansätze zum Thema Geschlecht wieder zunichte gemacht werden.

This chapter explores how the author's biography has influenced her research in feminist theology, gender theory, and intersectionality. She tracks her theological development through her positioning as a postcolonial Catholic woman who began academic studies the year her youngest child started school.

Beattie argues that the appeal to experience in liberal feminist theologies of the 1980s failed to take sufficient account of the ways in which experiences are interpreted through socio-linguistic lenses. The 'linguistic turn' of the early 1990s offered insights into how gender and culture influence psycho-social conventions and behaviours, so that intersectional approaches informed by psychoanalytic and sociological theories can contribute to a deeper feminist understanding of the ways in which gender positions women in their personal, domestic, and social environments.

However, this methodological shift risks the discursive dissolution of the sex/gender distinction in postmodern theory, making it difficult to focus on feminist questions of justice and representation. The author also applies this criticism to doctrinal developments in the Catholic understanding of sexual difference, arguing that a shift from hierarchical to complementary approaches to sexual difference in papal language has done little to change existing hierarchies. In Catholic ecclesiology, the idea of the Church as woman erases the incarnational significance of the female body.

Despite an apparent conflict between Catholic ecclesiology and gender theory, both are shown to embrace concepts of woman that evict the female body from the house of language, so that she remains in a position of mute animality. This deflects attention away from the many abuses and struggles still experienced by women and girls on account of their sex. Women must keep running in order to stand still, lest even the small gains of feminism are taken away under the guise of new theoretical and theological approaches to gender.

The social, ethical, religious, and linguistic significance of the female body is an elusive subject for scholars. It is like trying to pin down a bubble of mercury, for as soon as one reaches towards it, it slips away. Source of contempt and inspiration for western thinkers from the ancient Greeks to postmodern theorists, the idea of woman has been plundered for metaphors, colonised as man's sexual other, fantasised as the maternal feminine source of tenderness and nurture, demonised as the sexual temptress who brings death through seduction and desire, and is now designated a free-floating signifier for any body that wants to claim *woman* as an identity – but who is she?

Heidegger (1993: 217) famously described language as “the house of being”: “In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home.” Luce Irigaray argues that there is no house of language fit for habitation by the female body, because in the western canon the language of the maternal feminine is a house built by and for men, as a receptacle for the

projected fears, fantasies, and desires that are repressed in the formation of the masculine subject. According to Irigaray (1993: 14), language is severed from materiality through the denial of representation to the sexual female body and the maternal relationship, “that first body, that first home, that first love”. These are, she suggests, “sacrificed and provide matter for an empire of language that so privileges the male sex as to confuse it with the human race”.

In what follows, I reflect on these questions of gender, feminism, and language from the intersectional entanglements of my autobiography. I begin by briefly setting out the relevant aspects of my personal story, and I then explore my intellectual development as a Catholic theologian, feminist, and gender theorist, in light of the questions I bring from this autobiographical interweaving.

1. Who am I?

Intersectionality influences my feminism primarily through my experience as a white postcolonial diasporic African Scot. The eldest of three daughters, I was born in Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) to working class Scottish parents in 1955. They had both left school at fifteen and emigrated to the colonies in the early 1950s in search of a better life. This background means that I have no strong sense of national identity, nor any allegiance to a particular political entity.

Then there is the question of gender. My mother taught her three daughters to treat our father as head of the house, but her personality was far from submissive and theirs was a tempestuous marriage. She advised us always to be pleasing to men and attentive to their needs, but she herself rebelled against such ideas. As a result, I grew up in a turbulent domestic atmosphere with conflicting and confusing messages about what it means to be female.

My religious background is part of this intersectional autobiography. I was born into a Presbyterian family but lost interest in religion during my teenage years. When I had children I returned to my Christian roots, joining a white evangelical church in Harare, Zimbabwe, where we were living. I was increasingly drawn to Catholicism, partly because of the Catholic Church's work for justice and peace, and partly because I yearned for a more sacramental and liturgical approach to worship. I was finally received into the Catholic Church in 1986, and we moved to the UK two years later.

From the age of eleven to fifteen I attended the Dominican Convent School in Lusaka, where I was exposed to a community of independent, intellectual religious sisters who did not conform to any of the stereotypes I had grown up with. That experience left an enduring impression on me, and would eventually influence my decision to be received into the Catholic Church in my early thirties.

When I left school there were no opportunities for higher education in Zambia. I overheard my mother telling my father that she wanted a better education for her daughters than she had had, but she also used to say that if we had been boys, they would have had to leave Zambia for the sake of our education. In other words, only sons needed higher education. So again, there were mixed messages about what kind of aspirations and ambitions were appropriate for a girl. I left school at fifteen and became a secretary, and I finally went to university as a mature student in Theology and Religious Studies in 1991, the same year that the youngest of our four children started school and three years after moving to Bristol from Harare.

I owe my feminist initiation and much of my academic and personal development over the last thirty years to Professor Ursula King, who arrived in Bristol University's Department of Theology and Religious Studies during my first year of studies. She eventually became my PhD supervisor, and she remains a close personal friend.

I now track my intellectual development through various stages of theological research, making visible the ways in which this autobiographical hinterland has influenced my responses to feminist theology and intersectionality.

2. Catholicism, Feminism, and the Appeal to Experience

When I started my undergraduate studies, the most influential thinkers in feminist theology were US-based Catholic academics. These scholars challenged and inspired me, but as a recent convert and a newcomer to European culture, I was discovering much that was positive in Catholic sacramentality and in Marian theology, art, and devotion. I was torn between a deep appreciation of the Catholic intellectual tradition, its devotional and liturgical practices, and its cultural forms of expression, and a growing awareness that it was steeped in patriarchal and sometimes misogynistic attitudes towards women, and in institutional failings which we know today have been profoundly corrupt and abusive.

I struggled with the progressive liberal rhetoric of much feminist theology. The assumption that late modernity provides a panoptic standpoint from which to judge and correct the failings of the past elides too much that has been meaningful and positive in the many historical and cultural traditions of Christianity. My African background continues to make me sceptical about progressive ideologies that promote the globalisation of modern western values and politics, especially as the liberal democratic order slides into populism, nationalism, and cultural conflicts, which are often intensely combative around gender and identity politics. Confidence in the liberating progressive momentum of western society is implicit in many forms of liberal feminism, with the appeal to women's experi-

ence masking complex issues to do with socio-linguistic structures and psychological factors that make us unreliable interpreters of our own experiences. Let me substantiate this claim by giving an example.

According to Rosemary Radford Ruether's (1983: 13) widely quoted definition of feminist theology's methodological criteria: "The uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of women's experience" which, writes Ruether, "explodes as a critical force, exposing classical theology, including its codified traditions, as based on male experience rather than on universal human experience." She continues:

"Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption. This negative principle also implies the positive principle: what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the mission of redemptive community." (Ruether 1983: 18–19)

Expressions such as "full humanity", "authentic relation to the divine", "the authentic nature of things", "the true nature of things" are freighted with vast questions of meaning, truth, and subjectivity. They take insufficient account of the psychological, linguistic, and cultural influences that shape our experiences and often obscure the clarity of our thinking with turbulent undercurrents of desire and fear, yearning and sorrow.

I became preoccupied by questions such as these in my undergraduate studies. Feminist theology was becoming increasingly contextualized, as more and more perspectives came to the fore around issues such as race, sexual orientation, cultural diversity, ability and disability. Yet beneath this apparent diversity, the methods and premises remained unchanged. More and more experiential perspectives crowded into the space of liberalism, but there were few truly radical challenges to the progressive status quo. Women wanted equality, but as Irigaray (1989) asks, "equal to whom"? I began to shift my focus from Anglo-American versions of liberal feminism to continental philosophers and theorists of gender, and this would influence all my subsequent research.

3. Sin, Psychology, and the Human Condition

Despite my growing misgivings about many aspects of Catholic teaching and practice, I was becoming inspired by the psychological and spiritual insights of medieval theology, which eventually led to my Lacanian study of Thomas Aq-
ui-

nas (Beattie 2013). Those early feminist theologians had little to say about prayer (cf. Chopp 1997: 215–231), and they were dismissive of the idea of original sin. The elimination of faith practices, including prayer, troubled me by its capitulation to the criteria of secular feminism. While I agreed that the over-emphasis on sin in relation to sexuality and the demonization of the female sexual body were problematic, I wanted to refigure rather than reject the idea that there is a primal wound in human consciousness which distorts our desires and our relationships, making us vulnerable to various forms of violence, obsession, and addiction, including those fueled by neoliberal economics and consumerism. My growing interest in the psychology of desire and its theological and devotional significance in the context of the female body led me to embark upon a psycholinguistic study of Marian theology and devotion for my PhD, which was eventually published as “God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate” (Beattie 2002).

Some early feminist thinkers were addressing the questions I was grappling with. In a pioneering essay from the early 1960s, theologian Valerie Saiving (1960; cf. Douglas/Hinson-Hasty 2012) argues that Christian concepts of sin are masculine, and we need to rethink what feminine sin might look like. Saiving (1960: 108) writes that, rather than masculine sins of pride and overweening ambition, women are conditioned to self-denial and care to such an extent that “a woman can give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God”. She offers important insights into the ways in which women internalize destructive attitudes of self-abasement and shame, through generations of cultural conditioning and psychological grooming. My upbringing with its mixed messages about women’s roles and responsibilities led me to resonate deeply with what she was saying, and it also reinforced my scepticism about feminist appeals to women’s experience.

These insights were further deepened when I read Carol Gilligan’s work on the moral development of adolescent girls. Through a process of attentive listening and analysis, Gilligan concludes that, with the onset of adolescence, girls are conditioned to doubt the validity of their internal voices and their own experiences, and to conform instead to the values of selflessness, relationality, and care that are associated with women in patriarchal societies. She writes:

“Girls’ initiation or passage into adulthood in a world psychologically rooted and historically anchored in the experiences of powerful men marks the beginning of self-doubt and the dawning of the realization, no matter how fleeting, that womanhood will require a dissociative split between experience and what is generally taken to be reality.” (Gilligan 1982: xxi)

When I look at my own life and the lives of nearly all the women I know, these two theories of the gendering of sin and the psychological formation of girls are

persuasive. Freud's much-quoted claim, "anatomy is destiny" may no longer apply to those women who have liberated themselves from the shackles of patriarchy, but the vast majority of the world's women have yet to break free of the heavy but often invisible burden of both psychological and physical denigration, servitude, and self-abnegation that the female body is made to bear. Even in the case of educated western women, we carry within ourselves generations of psychological conditioning, and we cannot easily theorize away these deeply internalized attitudes.

All this means that women's experience alone is not a reliable yardstick against which to measure theological claims, for experience is always interpreted in relation to diverse social, cultural, linguistic, and psychological influences. An intersectional approach allows for a more complex and multi-faceted analysis of experience, which takes these factors into account.

An example of this intersectional method can be found in a study of women in the Catholic Syrian Church in Kerala by Indian theologian and social scientist, Kochurani Abraham (2020). Kerala is an affluent state with high levels of female literacy and achievement, but Abraham gives compelling evidence of the extent to which cultural and religious ideologies interact so that even highly educated women conform to patriarchal norms. However much they achieve in their professional lives, many accept roles of inferiority and servitude in the domestic environment, sustained by the belief that the husband is the head of the household and holds a superior position in the family. Abraham (2020: 15–16) writes:

"An intersectional approach helps to identify the interconnectedness of different systems of oppression at work in a particular experience of subjugation, and, so, this approach becomes imperative for comprehending the subtle operations of patriarchy. The goal of theories of intersectionality is to develop a single framework for analysing power that encompasses sexism, racism, class oppression, heterosexism and other axes of oppression in their complex interconnections. [...] [I]t is necessary to look into the interlinkages of forces at work and the definitions that emerge from such intersectionalities while analysing patriarchy. Intersectionality can then be termed as 'interlocking systems of oppression' as it describes how each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression."

An approach such as this respects the significance of women's experience, while acknowledging the extent to which such experience is culturally conditioned and linguistically mediated. It accommodates a weaving together of religious and cultural metanarratives with an attentive focus on the particular ways in which these impact upon women in different cultures and contexts.

With these observations in mind, I turn now to consider a paradigm shift that was occurring during the early years of my academic studies, as a result of the ‘linguistic turn’.

4. Researching Theology and Gender – the Linguistic Turn

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, feminist perspectives shaped by liberal/liberationist political goals and informed by appeals to women’s experience, began yielding to postmodern approaches to questions of power, language, and gender. These drew on diverse theoretical perspectives including Marxism, psychoanalysis, sociolinguistics, and deconstructive philosophies. Judith Butler is an influential pioneer of this approach, though its emphasis on the formative influences of culture on gendered identities was anticipated in Simone de Beauvoir’s (1997: 297) famous observation that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” I was attracted by these multi-faceted methods of analysis, and I began engaging with feminist theologians who offered the kind of critical perspective for which I was searching (cf. Beattie 2006).

Rebecca Chopp called for a shift from liberal pragmatic approaches to feminism rooted in American public theology towards a postmodern approach informed by questions of language and knowledge. This means recognizing that

“we cannot simply change metaphors or add new experiences to our dominant theological stew and stir, but [...] we must transform the very terms, patterns, and ordering of how language, culture, politics, and subjectivity work. We can criticize gender opposition and affirm theological practices of difference by opening up the realm of meaning and the rules of meaning-making” (Chopp 1993: 32)

In a Foucauldian critique of liberal feminist theology, Mary McClintock Fulkerson (1994: 114) argues that the latter fails to acknowledge the effects of discursive relationships of power and resistance, as a result of which it

“implicitly silences voices of other women of faith: texts’ meanings are fixed, power is monarchical. Those whose experience differs from the model of ‘women’s experience’ are not accounted for, or constitute a lobotomized casualty of patriarchy, one of Mary Daly’s ‘fembots.’”¹

1 Daly uses the word “fembots” to refer to women who unthinkingly and uncritically comply with patriarchal norms and values in ways that she condemns as robotic (cf. Daly 2001).

Fulkerson (1994: viii) writes of the need for feminist theology to recognize the complexity of issues of “gender, language, social location, and feminist theological resources for respecting difference”, but also to see that feminist theologies must focus on “meeting women whose struggles are for physical survival rather than on the feminist transformation of the academy”.

Ideas such as these led me to psychoanalytic theorists and continental philosophers, in trying to formulate my questions about language, gender, embodiment, desire, and violence. I continue to draw on these psycholinguistic and theoretical sources as I explore the Catholic sacramental tradition from within, as a practising Catholic seeking to maintain a creative tension between the demands of rigorous academic scholarship, and critical fidelity to the teachings of the Church and the Catholic community in all its diverse and often conflicted incarnations. This has led to condemnation from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and conservative Catholic activists on issues such as women’s ordination, same-sex marriage, and women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights (cf. Beattie 2014).

5. Symbolism and Sacramentality

I embraced the methods of gender theory and psycholinguistics, while exploring how a sacramental understanding of the relationship between language and materiality might avoid the radical nominalism of some postmodern linguistic theories, in which symbols and signifiers slide over the objects of signification with no necessary connection between them. Stripped of signifying presence, the material world, including our sexed bodies, becomes a nihilistic void that subtends the linguistic order, and it is hard to see how any feminist struggle can be played out on the shifting sands of such discursive strategies. In their incisive critique of this process of dematerialization and its impact on feminist struggles for justice, Alison Assiter and María J. Binetti (2020: 208) argue that

“sex-gender dualism is replaced by a version of nominalism beyond whose discursive practices there is nothing. Bodies, sexes, sexualities, libidinal economy, affects, desires, maternal attachment all turn out to be the historical and contingent outcomes of power-relationships. They are not materially formed, but rather they are socio-linguistically materialized in and by discursive practices. That means that physical materiality, bodies, desire, sexes and sexualities are language’s coagulations – purely the flatus of their discourses.”

In my own work, I continue to explore how sacramental theology can be read in a way that posits a dynamic relationship between the signifier and the signified, so that the lacuna between the two is understood not as a void but as a graced medium that shivers with an exchange of signification and meaning. The world offers

itself to our senses, and that offering is vibrant and communicative if only we pay attention and learn how to interpret it, including the relationship between gendered language and sexual embodiment. This quest for a theology of sexual difference that can accommodate the female body as subject and sacramental presence has entailed a critical engagement with the Catholic hierarchy in its attempts to respond to the challenge of feminism.

Catholic theological language has traditionally been gendered rather than sexed, referring primarily to gendered hierarchies of relationality between God and creation, and only secondarily to the physical sexes. Only with the rise of neuroalgalic concerns about feminism, women's rights, and campaigns for women's ordination has Catholic teaching resorted to an essentialist understanding of sexual difference rooted in a muddled combination of romanticism and pseudo-science (cf. Case 2016), and this has rendered much of its theological language incoherent.

Pope John Paul II constructed an innovative theology of complementarity – abandoning the traditional understanding of sexual difference as hierarchical, in favour of one that posited equality in difference. While this calls for a “new feminism” (cf. Beattie 2006), one does not have to dig very deeply to unearth the same old stereotypes. The concept of complementarity inspires the influential movement known as Theology of the Body, which remains rooted in heterosexual essentialisms and is antagonistic towards feminism, homosexuality, contraception, and any form of sexual expression outside of heterosexual marriage (cf. Beattie 2023).

Even so, there is no consistency in this theology, for the word *woman* remains a free-floating signifier, only arbitrarily associated with the sexed female body except when it comes to denying the validity of women's ordination to the sacramental priesthood.

On two occasions, when asked by journalists about why the Church does not ordain women, Pope Francis gave almost identical responses. Here is his response to Swedish journalist Kristina Kappellin, on the flight back to Rome from Lund after his visit in November 2016:

“In Catholic ecclesiology there are two dimensions to consider: the Petrine dimension, from the apostle Peter, and the apostolic college, which is the pastoral activity of the bishops; and the Marian dimension, which is the feminine dimension of the Church. [...] The Church is a woman. [...] It is a spousal mystery. And in light of this mystery you will understand the reason for these two dimensions. The Petrine dimension, which is the bishops, and the Marian dimension, which is the maternity of the Church. [...] A Church does not exist without this feminine dimension, because she herself is feminine.” (Holy See Press Office 2016)

No female body is necessary for this gendered ecclesiology. The Church is fully present in a Mass in which no women participate, for the male congregation con-

stitutes the Church as woman and Bride. But the absence of the male body renders Mass impossible, because it requires the physical presence of the male priest. Man is essential, woman is inessential.

With that in mind, I turn now to the final and most difficult part of this intellectual journey – the proliferation of gendered and sexed identities laying claim to recognition and rights, in ways that sometimes conflict with the hard-won and still contested rights that feminists have gained for women and girls. Whether in papal theology or in postmodern theory, *woman* constitutes a signifier that leaves the female body in mute animality, once again silencing emergent voices that were beginning to ask what it might mean to shape language around the morphological fluidity of the incarnate woman as subject.

6. Gender – a Trojan Horse?

When the language of gender began to displace that of feminism, it was clear that it continued to function as almost synonymous with *woman*. In 2004, Ursula King and I co-edited a book titled “Gender, Religion and Diversity”. Of the nineteen essays in that book, only three address questions of masculinity, and none addresses questions of trans or non-binary identities.

While feminists had for some time been exploring the relationship between the anatomical female body (sex) and the social expectations and roles imposed upon that body (gender), the linguistic turn acted as a solvent on the meanings attached to sex as well as gender, on the basis that both are socially constructed. For example, to quote Butler (2006 [1990]: 9–10):

“If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.”

The linguistic turn offers important insights into the extent to which white heterosexual normativity predicated upon the masculine subject and his feminised other constitutes the scaffolding for western culture’s hierarchies of race, gender, sexual orientation and other markers of exclusion and marginalization, but it has ushered in ideological conflicts around issues of sex and gender that risk evacuating feminist struggles for justice of any material content (cf. Alaimo/Hekman (eds.) 2008). As Martha Nussbaum (1999: 22, quoted in Assiter/Binetti 2020: 214) observes with regard to the work of gender theorists such as Butler: “It is the virtually complete turning from the material side of life, toward a type of verbal and symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest of connections with the real situation of real women”. To make *woman* a marker of symbolic identities and re-

lationships through the dissolution of the material significance of the female body is to silence the cries that go up from the body that suffers because it is female. It is to deny the fact that perpetrators of sexual violence are overwhelmingly male, and their victims are overwhelmingly female (cf. UN Women 2023). It is to refuse to attend to the realities of nearly 300,000 of the world's poorest women and girls dying every year through causes relating to pregnancy and childbirth (cf. World Health Organization 2023). It is to reinforce the misogynistic contempt for the female body that is manifest in the rapid rise in gender dysphoria among adolescent girls who, with the onset of puberty, find the realities of female sexual maturity unbearable (cf. Gentleman 2022; Nadrowski 2023).

The term *gender* has become a Trojan horse, giving rise to a host of competing and conflicting ideologies vying for the right to speak for and as *woman*, while misogyny flourishes within the muffled fears and obsessions of a culture in which material female bodies stand under the mark of erasure constituted by *woman* as a discursive concept.

Material feminists such as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman ((eds.) 2008: 3) argue that, while “[t]he turn to the linguistic and discursive has been enormously productive for feminism [...] [the] retreat from materiality has had serious consequences for feminist theory and practice”. They continue:

“Ironically, although there has been a tremendous outpouring of scholarship on ‘the body’ in the last twenty years, nearly all of the work in this area has been confined to the analysis of discourses *about* the body. [...] [W]e need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit. Focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance from consideration.” (Alaimo/Hekman (eds.) 2008: 3–4)

7. Conclusion

As the foregoing suggests, my intellectual journey has taken me down many tangled paths as I have sought to understand how sexual difference positions female bodies in the world, against the background of my personal story with its intersecting and sometimes conflicting narratives of gender, identity, and belonging. At every stage, I have tried to remain focused on theological questions that emerge at the confluence of female bodily life, sacramental theology, and language, in the context of psychoanalytic analyses of the turbulent undercurrents of desire and lack, love and violence, identity and alienation, that play upon us as we navigate our way through the labyrinths of time towards the elusive horizon of eternity.

Yet even as I pursue the ephemeral object of the incarnate and sacramentally significant female subject, she slips away and loses herself amidst the proliferating

discourses that evict her from the house of language and occupy the place she vacates in order to claim the position of *woman*, whether through nuptial ecclesiology or identity politics. It remains as difficult as it has ever been to ask what it means to find a language fit for female habitation. There is so much work to be done, and we have barely begun. It seems that we must keep running in order to stand still, lest we lose even the small piece of ground we might have gained.

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