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Embracing the Icon: The Feminist Potential of the Trans Bodhisattva, Kuan Yin

CATHRYN BAILEY

I explore how the Buddhist icon Kuan Yin is emerging as a point of identification for trans people and has the potential to resolve a tension within feminism. As a figure that slips past the male/female binary, Kuan Yin explodes the dichotomy between universal and particular in a way that captures the pragmatist and feminist emphasis on doing justice to concrete, particular lives without becoming stuck in an essentialist quagmire.

Graceful, tranquil, and composed, the figure of Kuan Yin looms in the shadows of Buddhist temples, museums, and countless Chinese restaurants. With a name that describes one “who hears the cries of the world,” Kuan Yin provides solace and inspiration, serving a function not unlike that of the Madonna or Guadalupe. However, the legends that give rise to Kuan Yin are, at least in some ways, more complex than those of her Christian counterparts. She/he is sometimes described as having once been a man, but is now a woman, and, other times, as a being with the ability to appear as a man or a woman. There is a fluidity to Kuan Yin’s shifting gender that startles, intrigues, and comforts, depending on one’s circumstances.

I explore the figure of Kuan Yin as a trans icon, an emerging point of identification for trans people that also has the potential to explode a tension within feminism. As a figure that transcends both maleness and femaleness, precisely by embodying both and neither, Kuan Yin demonstrates, in visual and imaginatively conceptual terms, how to rise above a falsely universalizing humanism without falling into the trap of gender essentialism. Consequently, she/he captures what feminist pragmatism demands, a shattering of the dichotomy

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between the universal and the particular that does justice to the raw fact of lives lived in all their contextual messiness, but without becoming mired in culturally and historically accidental facts. In short, as a trans image, Kuan Yin is uniquely situated to help us imagine how we might take sex/gender very seriously even as we are always already transcending it.

A BIOGRAPHY OF KUAN YIN

Kuan Yin is more properly regarded as a bodhisattva than as a goddess. The bodhisattva is often described as a kind of Buddha-to-be, one who postpones ultimate nirvana in order to work tirelessly to eliminate the suffering of all living beings. Especially prominent in the Mahayana tradition, the branch of Buddhism that began around the first century of the Common Era and spread to Tibet, China, and beyond, there are numerous bodhisattvas meant to inspire such virtues as wisdom, perseverance, and concentration. Kuan Yin, the most popular of all bodhisattvas, is regarded as the quintessence of compassion. In fact, her/his very name means "She Who Hears the Cries of the World," and countless devotees, especially women, continue to seek inspiration in her/his presence.

Although the stories of Kuan Yin's origins emerge from and diverge into various myths and legends, there seems to be agreement that her/his career began in India in the first centuries of the Common Era as the male figure Avalokitesvara.¹ With the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet the popular figure spread, and Avalokitesvara came to be regarded as a representative of the Buddha and protector of the Buddha's precious teachings, the dharma (Blofeld 1978, 39). The image reached China relatively quickly, as early as the first century, and continued to be depicted as male until some time later. According to many sources, by the twelfth century, female depictions were common in China and Japan. On the other hand, the internationally celebrated fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is regarded by Tibetan Buddhists as the latest in a long line of Avalokitesvara manifestations, all of which are male.

There are numerous and varied explanations for the gender transformation. One is that the image became associated very strongly with a legendary Chinese princess, Miao Shan, to the point that the two became indistinguishable (Blofeld 1978, 22–23). Another is that Avalokitesvara became integrated in the popular imagination with the Tibetan female bodhisattva, Tara (often referred to as the consort of Avalokitesvara) (23). Some claim that since compassion has been associated with women, it simply made sense for Avalokitesvara to become female, to become Kuan Yin (Reed 1992, 160). However, this is complicated by the fact that in China, wisdom has often been associated with the feminine and compassion with masculinity (Cabezón 1992, 183).

Kuan Yin's popularity grew with the translation and dissemination of the Lotus Sutra, a Sanskrit text central to the founding of Mahayana Buddhism in the first centuries of the Common Era. According to one scholar, "The promise of the Lotus Sutra, that she would appear to living beings in whatever form could best save them, engendered acceptance and enthusiasm for the diversity of images. She appeared in radically different forms, such as the Chinese princess Miao-shan, a common fisherwoman, a goddess springing from a clam, and thousand-armed and thousand-eyed deity whose multiple arms and eyes symbolize the infinite powers of her saving compassion" (Reed 1992, 161). Buddhist scholar Chün Fang Yü calls this process of change one of "domestication . . .," explaining, "as Kuan Yin came to be worshipped in China, she/he also became linked with specific places and developed local cults. The selective choices made by the host cultural traditions resulted in the bodhisattva's domestication" (Yü 2001, 6). Throughout it all, what is clear is that she/he was, and continues to be, most popular among women.

While the changeability of Kuan Yin's gender is no secret, it also seems not always to have been made much of by traditional Buddhists, even in contemporary settings. Blogger Stacie Ku describes, "Being Chinese, you might say I grew up with her. My parents and all their friends always had a statue or image of her around the house. She was just everywhere and was the main deity I prayed to. Today, I probably have at least a dozen or more images of her in my home. Funny thing is though, it was not until I developed a deepening interest in Buddhism and spiritualism that I discovered that Kwan Yin was also transgendered" (Ku 2008). Given the paucity of historical trans images, it should come as no surprise that Kuan Yin's popularity in contemporary U.S. society is generating great interest among members of the growing trans movement. In this context she not only fulfills some of her traditional functions as an icon, but also provides a deeply historical and spiritual sense of tradition and validation to a marginalized group.

KUAN YIN AS TRANS ICON

In light of the fact that Kuan Yin is generally presented as female, is there any justification in claiming that she is a trans figure? As Yü explains,

Since the Ming, or the fifteenth century, Kuan-yin has generally been perceived and represented as completely feminine. However, even when Kuan-yin was so presented in literature and art, the orthodox Buddhist clergy has refused to acknowledge Kuan-yin as feminine. Images of Kuan-yin enshrined in Buddhist monasteries even today continue to be made according to the iconographic conventions established during the T'ang. One

does not see the feminine White-robed Kuan-yin or the Fish-basket Kuan-yin, for instance, worshiped in the monastery as an icon. Iconic images in the temples continue to be masculine—or at most asexual—in appearance. Some individual artists of late imperial China also chose to paint Kuan-yin with moustaches For this reason, the inclusive she/he seems to be the best way of referring to Kuan-yin, for even after Kuan-yin became feminized, some people still regarded the bodhisattva as masculine. (Yü 2001, 6)

That members of the trans movement are beginning to discover Kuan Yin's gender transition is evidenced by recent Internet references to her. As Stacie Ku writes, "even if I didn't grow up worshiping her, once I found out she was transgendered, she would have made my list of favorite deities anyway" (Ku 2008). A blogger who is writing a novel whose main character is trans has designated Kuan Yin as one of the character's "role models" (Rachel 2008). Another website, "The Spirit of Transgender," contains an image of Kuan Yin alongside an apparently trans Native American image. The website's language demonstrates just how seriously this trans connection to spirituality is taken: "We are Spirit manifesting in human forms. Let us live that truth, and help everyone see the beauty and strength that lies beyond the constraints of gender. And let us give thanks for the unique opportunity to do so" (Boswell 2008).

Some of the descriptions suggest that Kuan Yin represents a transcendence of gender in a way that reinforces the view of physicality as a kind of burden from which spirituality promises release. For example, on one blog Michele writes, "I also find it fascinating that the Buddhist doctrine specifically puts divinity above the physical gender, as their deities can shape-shift into whichever form. It makes sense to me that God/Divinity would not be encumbered by any physical gender or form. God/dess certainly transcends gender as we know it" (Ku 2008). Here is an echo of a Western bias that harkens back at least to Plato, that the body is a hindrance, a sort of cage or tomb for the soul. Other interpretations of Kuan Yin, however, are more transgressive and challenge Western "somatophobia," the fear and loathing of the body and things associated with it (Spelman 1982, 120).

Kuan Yin is even starting to be utilized in explicitly activist contexts. For example, in "Testimony Submitted to the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders," Pauline Park appeals to the story of Kuan Yin to situate and provide foundation for the current trans movement. As she explains,

Mythological narratives involving sexual transformation appear throughout the oral storytelling tradition and written literature of Asian and Pacific Islander cultures, as for example, with the

Chinese story of the male deity Kuan-yin, who changed sex to become the goddess of mercy. There are many popular tales of Kuan-yin's adventures, and traditionally, she is the most popular deity in the Taoist pantheon. It is fitting that mercy should be the province of transgendered people, because the power of the transformation teaches compassion to the transformed. (Park 2008)

Clearly, at least part of what is powerful about Kuan Yin is her longevity and entrenched status in one of the world's most popular religions, especially for those who, like Park, identify as Asian-American.

This recent embracing of Kuan Yin by trans people echoes the experience of Leslie Feinberg, who was motivated to search for trans images because "I couldn't find myself in history. No one like me seemed ever to have existed" (Feinberg 1996, 11). Although Kuan Yin isn't addressed in Feinberg's own historical study, Feinberg's experience is similar to that expressed by recent trans discoverers of Kuan Yin. Upon reading a pamphlet that included historical "examples of acceptance of transgender in cooperative societies," Feinberg writes, "I cried with relief. I realized how important it was for me to know I had a place in history, that I was part of the human race" (39).

What, precisely, Kuan Yin might mean to trans people can vary depending on how sex and gender are conceptualized in the first place. A conservative reading that suggests that trans people differ from non-trans people only in that their biological sex and gender do not conform might accept traditional, normative notions of sex and gender and see no special role for the trans individual. Unfortunately, this view can also suggest that to be trans is a kind of disorder or oddity, one that may, with therapy and/or medical procedures, be more or less "corrected." From this point of view, Kuan Yin might have power as a figure of identification for a trans person, as Lance Armstrong might for cancer survivors, but will lack real transformative potential.

A more radical perspective suggests that the very existence of trans people reveals the simplistic and false nature of the traditional categories of sex and gender. If a so-called "anatomical male" can nonetheless quite sincerely identify as a female, then what has been revealed about the supposedly stable physical substratum of sex and its relation to gender? In the very language that must be used to speak of trans people, it becomes clear that this is not a reality that can be accommodated without disruption to an entire linguistic and conceptual economy. From this point of view, not surprisingly, a trans person might see her/his role as that of an activist, an activism that may be expressed simply by existing and surviving in a linguistic, social, and political milieu according to which she/he is logically and legally impossible. As Feinberg puts it, "I am a human being who unnerves some people. As they look at me, they see a

kaleidoscope of characteristics they associate with both males and females” (Feinberg 1998, 6). “I defend my right to be complex” (70), Feinberg insists.

Kuan Yin is especially appropriate for contemporary understandings of gender because, as I discuss more fully below, she expresses what is most thorny in debates surrounding it. The tensions between some feminist understandings of gender and that of many trans and queer people received early and extreme expression in academic circles by Janice Raymond in 1979. The subtitle of Raymond’s work, *The Making of the She-Male*, gives some indication of the author’s contemptuous attitude toward MTF trans people. According to Stephen Whittle, Raymond “discredited for a long time any academic voice they (trans people) might have, in particular with feminist theorists” (Whittle 2006, 199). Raymond accused MTF trans people of appropriating women’s sex and occupying it in an invasive way she compares to rape (Raymond 1979/1994, 104). The view of MTF people as somehow complicit with the patriarchy is an attitude some have found echoed in the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival’s longstanding and controversial insistence that only women born as biological females attend (International Foundation for Gender Education 2006).

The conservative perspective assumes a clear link between biological sex and the expression of gender that many trans and queer people find troubling. That this conservative attitude is still prevalent makes clear that the challenge with which trans people confront feminism is more than superficial; it may demand a reconsideration of the very basis of feminism. As Whittle puts it, “Can feminists learn anything from the experience of the trans community? The transsexual person faces the problem of interpretation, and feminists have to address that interpretation through their understanding of the objectivist fallacy they have underlined, yet by doing so they challenge the very basis of feminist thought—that there are 2 sexes and there are 2 genders” (Whittle 2006, 198). Trans people are not simply a “problem” for feminism to conceptualize and resolve, then, but a moral quandary for versions of feminism that continue to assume an essentialist account of identity.

Of course, other contemporary figures have served as a kind of icon for trans people. When it was revealed that professional tennis player Dr. Renee Richards was a transsexual, she became the focus of intense LGBT interest. It is interesting that Richards herself describes this experience in terms that give it a quasi-religious significance. “I heard from blacks, convicts, Chicanos, hippies, homosexuals, people with physical handicaps and, of course, transsexuals,” she writes. “My god, the whole world seemed to be looking for me to be their Joan of Arc” (glbtq 2002). Richards may have unwittingly captured the fact that there is something distinctive about the connection between religious icons within a trans context. For example, Feinberg argues that the perception of Joan of Arc as transgressing gender was not incidental but central to the reverence shown to her by peasants (Feinberg 1996, 36).

Because Kuan Yin's image is deeply entrenched in history, legitimized by millennia of association with one of the world's great religions, she/he has a meaning for trans people that is distinct from more contemporary and secular images. Since part of what it means for a people to construct an identity is to construct a history, some sort of cultural memory, figures like Kuan Yin are especially important. As the Feinberg quote expresses above, they can serve as a sort of mirror that attests to one's very existence. In light of many traditional Western religions' hostility to LGBT people in general, it can feel especially significant to adopt such an icon.

But how concerned should we be about the religious and cultural appropriation of this sacred Eastern image by contemporary Westerners? It is interesting that Buddhism does not tend to be as exclusive as some other religions or as proprietary about its sacred images. In fact, Kuan Yin is similar to Guadalupe in that the very pervasiveness of the image seems to connect to her felt power as a populist symbol (Sager 2007, 10). Certainly, there is a meaningful distinction between the trans adoption of Kuan Yin and the current proliferation of commodified Eastern sacred images as mere decoration. The latter seems objectionable in a way that the former does not. For a group of people as ignored and despised as trans people have been, there seems to be something especially appropriate about their embracing this symbol of boundless compassion. Still, I don't think this should be seen as putting all such concerns to rest. I remain uneasy about the Western appropriation of Kuan Yin even as I continue to explore what such an appropriation can mean.

BEYOND DICHOTOMIES: THE ICON'S POTENTIAL FOR FEMINISM

In addition to her potential as an icon to empower trans people, Kuan Yin also has the potential to help circumvent some pressing theoretical issues in feminism, both because she/he is an icon and because of the particular qualities she/he has. In short, Kuan Yin can help take us beyond some of the impasses that seem to arise as a result of dichotomous universal versus relativistic, and universal versus particular thinking. First, icons in general, as stylized visual images, can serve to bridge the apparent chasm between universalism and relativism that challenges feminism, and, second, Kuan Yin in particular, as a trans icon, is especially promising for reaching across some of the identity debates that have been especially challenging for feminists. I develop my argument by explaining the consistency of Buddhism and feminism with some of the key ideas of American Pragmatism² and then elaborate how, as a distinctively trans figure, Kuan Yin holds great promise for resolving feminist issues that reach well beyond the trans community.

As I have suggested, there is perhaps no image that better lends itself to wide-scale appropriation than Kuan Yin partly because she/he is her/himself

the result of a long and tumultuous process of appropriation and assimilation. As she/he made the long trek from India, across the Himalaya into Tibet, and then on to China, Japan, and beyond, she/he has been transformed in countless ways and for countless purposes. Moreover, as we have seen, even Kuan Yin's shifting gender also seems to have been, in part, a way to make this icon fit within the time and needs of the people. This is not a fact that should be glossed over, for it is one of the powerful features of Mahayana Buddhism that one use *upaya*, or "skillful means." That is, the dharma should be communicated according to individuals' own capacities for understanding and their particular situations. Damien Keown claims that bodhisattvas such as Kuan Yin are intimately connected to *upaya*. "Bodhisattvas, the new moral heroes of the Mahayana, could claim increased latitude and flexibility based on their recognition of the importance of compassion. A bodhisattva takes a vow to save all beings, and there is evidence in many texts of impatience with rules and regulations which seem to get in the way of a bodhisattva going about his salvific mission," he explains (Keown 2005, 19).

This emphasis on *upaya* not only helps to explain the impunity with which images like Kuan Yin have been rewritten and used, but also bears a striking resemblance to pragmatist notions that envision philosophical concepts and theories as useful tools that must reflect and relate to the specific circumstances of our lives. It is partly the pragmatic nature of Buddhism that helps make clear why Kuan Yin may be important for feminism. Charlene Seigfried describes the feminist appeal of pragmatism, claiming that it "appears far more feminine than masculine." "Among the various aspects contributing to this feeling are a penchant for indirect, metaphorical discourse rather than a reductive and deductive symbolic one and the concreteness of pragmatist methodology. Such concreteness stresses the experiential basis of theory and problematic situations over traditional textbook puzzles and abstract conceptual distinctions," Seigfried argues (Seigfried 1996, 32).

The general similarity between pragmatism and Buddhism is more than superficial. First, the Buddha, like the classical American pragmatists, de-emphasizes common-sense, or naïve, realism with its attendant correspondence theory of truth, emphasizing instead the usefulness of doctrines as a measure of their "truth." Even the dharma itself, the crystallization of the Buddha's originally expressed spiritual wisdom, is regarded instrumentally, to be used and then set aside. "The raft is used to cross the river," writes Buddhist teacher and poet Thich Nhat Hanh. "It isn't to be carried around on your shoulders. The finger which points at the moon isn't the moon itself" (Nhat Hanh 1987, 56). The Buddha is quite clear that he teaches only "the nature of suffering and how to overcome it" and is largely unconcerned with metaphysical speculation. This view extends to Buddhist ethics as well, especially as expressed by Mahayana Buddhism's emphasis that it is an action's contribution to the alleviation

of suffering that makes it right and not whether it adheres perfectly to a pre-determined, supposedly universal, moral principle. As already described, this practical emphasis is at least part of what has made the changing image of Kuan Yin possible, as she/he has shifted to accommodate the changing needs of people and their circumstances.

Buddhism, however, like most expressions of feminism, is not advocating a deep relativism, a wholesale denial of anything that might function like a principle, but a balance between ideas that function as principles and the practice that both informs such ideas and is informed by them. Indeed, it would be self-defeating for feminists or Buddhists to deny the need for some sort of foothold, since claims about the wrongness of sexism and racism, and the importance of compassion, require some sort of foundation, however temporary. On the other hand, neither the Buddha nor many feminists have the stomach for replicating the authoritarian rigidity of supposedly universal ethical systems or religions. In fact, both ideologies arose, in part, as reactions against such philosophical demagoguery. Pragmatism effectively addresses this need for a balance between universalism and relativism at issue for both Buddhist and feminist ethics. As Seigfried explains, "In pragmatism, values are categorized as relative to context but not relativistic, as applying to more situations than those in which they initially arose without falling into a false universalism, and as being objectively identifiable despite their origins in the uniqueness of every subject" (Seigfried 1996, 217).

In an interesting way, icons can be powerful in this pragmatist landscape as words, perhaps, cannot. One author describes icons as "a form of ecumenism without words or arguments" (Forest 2002, 40). They can function with a flexibility and immediacy that words seem to lack, to express something between universality and particularity. Icons are, by definition, stylized images, and to this extent they can be thought of as emphasizing the universal. According to historical practice, moreover, there have been rules for their reproduction, and even up to contemporary times great care is often taken to make sure that there is a resemblance among images of the same sacred figure. As such, "they are less a display of individual talent than the creation of a zone of prayer using artistic minimalism" (40). However, it is also true that multiple variations and nuances, idiosyncratic to the artist and the culture in which she/he lives, also shape the production of these images in overt and subtle ways. The traveler recognizes Kuan Yin or Guadalupe in faraway shrines but also notices the icon's distinctiveness. Icons can, then, be recognized both as quasi-universals and as existential instantiation, as type and token at once.

Consequently, one contemplating such an image might feel herself/himself to be both connected to and the same as others, but also in touch with her/his own uniqueness. In fact, this seems to be expressed in the accounts people give

of their experience with Kuan Yin, of experiencing the dissolution of individual identity along with the sense that one is being cared about, and in a deeply personal sense. Western feminist Buddhist Sandy Boucher describes the effect of contemplating Kuan Yin: "I am experiencing and cultivating an opening of my heart that allows for tenderness, for forgiveness, for a deep listening to others and myself. Kuan Yin has been part of this opening. Her spirit and her example help me to stay focused to home and enable me to be intimate with my true nature instead of backing away into rejection or criticism. While sometimes I feel extremely vulnerable, Kuan Yin lets me realize that my only safety lies in the emergence of the tenderest part of myself, to meet the needs of each moment" (Boucher 2000, 11).

If this description seems a bit too idiosyncratic, mystical, and psychological to be philosophically relevant, we should keep in mind that Boucher, like many who discover Kuan Yin, does not make it a habit of fraternizing with a pantheon of imaginary deities. She does not even have an especially mystical bent. As she explains, "I was a rational, politically active person who believed in the struggle for social change and avoided any religious contamination. The last thing I needed was a divine figure, of either gender, to show me the way" (Boucher 2000, 9). John Blofeld was similarly reluctant to acknowledge the power he felt from encounters with the icon, struggling with "the part of my mind that told me I was being absurd" (Blofeld 1978, 28). Moreover, while Boucher's encounters can be described as psychologically empowering, they are also ethically efficacious. In other words, she is describing transformations in her awareness of and dealings with other people that we would normally describe in ethical terms. In fact, Cesar Chavez apparently attributed the success of his movement to Guadalupe (Sager 2007, 10–11), and this need not be trivialized or explained away as a claim of mysticism. Rather, that an image might be practically and ethically efficacious as a point of group identification probably ought not to be any more mysterious to us than that words can sometimes function this way.

In light of the fact that Kuan Yin and stories about her/him are meant not just to inspire, but also to educate (Reed 1992, 166), that the icon can have ethical import should be even less mysterious. In the West, at least in the modern era, we are accustomed to thinking of ethics as a primarily linguistic and discursive undertaking; however, icons have historically served a pivotal role both aesthetically and instructionally. In the case of Kuan Yin, this has resulted in lessons about gender roles, both in teaching women to fulfill traditional roles of mother and wife, and also to transcend them. As Reed argues, "Buddhists 'see' the meaning of Buddhism at least as much in the visual symbols as in their written texts and spoken teachings. The Chinese since the Sung dynasty have 'seen' Buddhist compassion as female: female figures surrounded by female symbols. I would assume that the visual reinforcement of the femininity of this

bodhisattva has made her seem directly relevant to Chinese women, especially to the problems they have simply because they are women" (Reed 1992, 164).

This is not unlike the role of Christian icons such as "Our Lady of Perpetual Help" who functioned to reinforce conservative notions of femininity in the United States as late as the 1950s (Kelly and Kelly 1998, 11) or of Guadalupe, as I have already suggested. For better or worse, because icons function as part of the social and cultural milieu, they become psychologically and ethically relevant. This is not to say, however, that the icon must function only in the ways intended by its makers or even that the icon is made with a clear sense of the lessons it will impart. As I have already emphasized, if there is a universality to Kuan Yin's message, there is also a particularity. As Boucher explains, "We approach Kuan Yin as who we are. We welcome her into our real, everyday lives. We open ourselves to her as our individual minds and hearts can understand her. This is how it has always been with Kuan Yin" (Boucher 2000, 14). Moreover, this is also consistent with how trans people have been using iconography, most recently Kuan Yin, in a much more than ornamental sense. As Whittle explains, "The transsexual/transgender community through its own writings and theorizing has attempted to offer an 'insider's' exploration of the ways in which trans people view gender issues and the use of transsexual and transvestite iconography in particular" (Whittle 2006, 198).

BEYOND MALE, FEMALE, AND HUMAN

Feminists have been caught in the quandary of wanting both to acknowledge the importance and power of biological sex but also to overcome it. On the one hand, feminism itself appears to assume the existence of the category "woman," while on the other, it aims toward a place where gender no longer functions as a basis for discrimination. Establishing identity of many sorts seems to involve finding a balance between wanting to embrace and demand recognition of personally, socially, and political significant aspects of that identity without consenting to being wholly defined by any one of them. It is a tension well expressed by Pat Parker's advice to "the white person who wants to know how to be my friend." "The first thing you do is forget that I'm Black," she writes, "Second, you must never forget that I'm Black" (Parker 1990, 297).

What is now known of sex and gender demands that feminists avoid any theorizing that assumes, either implicitly or explicitly, a metaphysical or biological essentialism, that is, "the notion of an essential gender core tied in some irreversible way to anatomy and to a deterministic sense of biology" (Butler 2006, 186). While very few versions of feminism actually advocate such a simplistic view, weaker versions of essentialism are, nonetheless, often implied. As such, the trans challenge to feminism, as exemplified by Kuan Yin, can provide imaginative and conceptual inspiration for a consistently non-essentialist fem-

inism. What Whittle says about trans identity, I think, applies to Kuan Yin as well, that a consideration of her can produce “some very interesting answers which challenge the very binary structure of the complacent world in which gender was invented, and by which it has become obsessed” (Whittle 2006, 200). And, as Feinberg reminds us, “women’s oppression can’t be effectively fought without incorporating the battle against gender oppression. The two systems of oppression are intricately linked” (Feinberg 1998, 17).

In light of their flexible perspectives on metaphysical claims about identity, Buddhism and pragmatism can be useful in the search for ways to imagine ourselves that circumvent traditional binaries. Buddhist understandings of identity, for example, are decidedly non-essentialist, without thereby denying that there is a self in the ways that are socially, historically, and politically important. Buddhist scholar Christopher Gowans makes sense of this by detailing the Buddha’s distinction between a “substance self,” one with a “set of essential, unchanging properties that are necessary for its identity as a self” (Gowans 2003, 70), and a “process self.” He explains that “a process is not a thing, entity, or being, but an event, activity, or becoming” (71). According to Gowans, while the Buddha affirms the contingent or “dependent” reality of the latter, it is only the existence of the former that he denies altogether (72). Moreover, the dependent reality of the process self depends on our own beliefs about it (73). This, however, is not merely to deny essentialism—to replace one metaphysical claim with another—but to assert that there is another way to account for what it means to say that something is real.

This Buddhist move is consistent with pragmatic emphases that we can account for the ontology of some things without requiring a simplistic, objectivist metaphysics. Neither selves nor the qualities that are associated with them, such as sex/gender and race, need be reduced either to simplistically objective essences, on the one hand, or to socially constructed phantasms, on the other. In light of these two different levels of reality, sometimes also called “ultimate” and “relative,” it is hardly surprising that references to gender in the Lotus Sutra are “ambivalent” and “multivalent” and sometimes apparently contradictory (Peach 2002, 67–68). There, it is suggested that whether one is male or female both does and does not make all the difference, depending on the context.

For example, in the story of the “dragon girl” in the Lotus Sutra, an extraordinary eight-year-old is said to have such wisdom and skill that she can attain enlightenment despite her age and sex. In order to prove her ability to the Buddha, the girl first quickly assumes a male body and then achieves enlightenment. Because, in true sexist fashion, Buddhism often claims that females are subject to special obstacles, the girl’s sex change is a necessary step (Peach 2002, 67–68). It is a kind of gender transformation, but as Peach points out, “The gender shift, although signifying the insubstantiality and ephemerality of

sex, also reinforces the image that women are incapable of attaining Enlightenment in female form. The sex-change thus perpetuates a male-biased view" (68). Clearly, then, affirming the fluidity of gender is not intrinsically or simply liberatory. However, this loosening of sex/gender from its standard biological moorings to accommodate the wishes of an audacious little girl is revolutionary nonetheless.

Although Buddhists disagree about the significance and nature of gender and even about the extent to which it makes sense to talk about any kind of self, the Buddhist view sketched so far allows us to move beyond the simplistic demand to know if sex and gender are real or not, essentialist or not. The questions, instead, can become more nuanced ones about *how* they are real and what difference the answers make (and to whom). It is pragmatist because the emphasis is no longer on the so-called "ontological status" of an entity or quality but on how beliefs in such entities or qualities actually "cash out" in real life. It may be true that we cannot, and perhaps ought not, resist metaphysical speculation. However, we can accept subtle and temporary answers to those questions, recognizing that the impulse to "pin gender down" may be an expression not only of our philosophical and political passion, but also of our anxiety. Certainly, if the assumption is that we must ultimately conclude either that there is a real essence or there is not, then the project seems hopeless. Certainly, that battle has been played out, often in tedious detail, in the long-standing essentialism and anti-essentialism debate among feminists.

As most feminist theorists have abandoned the view that women *qua* women must share some particular quality, they have made various attempts to provide a basis for unity among members of oppressed groups without dissolving their differences. According to the "strategic essentialist," for example, one can make political use of the idea that members of an oppressed group have a shared essence without necessarily accepting that such an essence is metaphysically real. According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who originally coined the phrase, it is "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak 1995, 214). Various theorists, even Spivak herself, have critiqued the idea, as I discuss below. Some, such as Alison Stone, worry that "strategic essentialism" is inherently flawed and is doomed to merely reinscribe essentialism because it implicitly relies too uncritically on assumptions of similarity among individuals. Stone argues that the beliefs about women's nature that shape women's social construction are too varied to affirm any common basis of experience. Therefore, the assumption that there is a shared identity becomes a kind of echo of metaphysical essentialism (Stone 2004, 143).

I see Spivak's introduction of "strategic essentialism" as effectively pragmatist in its focus on the use of a concept rather than its metaphysical referent.

However, Spivak expresses concern that the “strategic” aspect of the concept—what I would call its pragmatic aspect—has often been forgotten, leading to an abuse of the concept. As she states, “my notion just simply became the union ticket for essentialism. As to what is meant by strategy, no one wondered about that. So, as a phrase, I have given up on it” (Danius et al. 1993, 35). Spivak’s worries might be eased, I think, by an authentically pragmatist, strategic essentialism. Such an account would resist interpreting claims about identity in descriptive, supposedly objective metaphysical or quasi-metaphysical terms, respecting instead that various accounts might be appropriate depending on the context. It is certainly plausible, for example, that some groups, especially marginalized ones, might wield “essentialist” language in a liberatory fashion while others might use it perniciously.

In any case, the pragmatist would not so much deny the existence of a metaphysical essence in order to replace it with something else, but rather would question how such metaphysical claims function in peoples’ lives in the first place. Metaphysical ideas, as well as anti-metaphysical ones, are, on this view, tools, and as such are recognized as having different effects depending on who is manipulating them and to what end. Certainly, it does not follow from the fact that some privileged theorists have used essentialist concepts in oppressive ways that it is the role of some other privileged theorist to impose yet some new, supposedly “better,” definition of identity. From a pragmatist point of view, it isn’t the proper role of theorists to decide whether it is more accurate for people to understand themselves in metaphysical or anti-metaphysical terms. It is their place to explore the value such philosophical concepts have for life as it is experienced, not as it is conceived.

Avoiding the Sisyphean task of coming up with a supposedly universal, metaphysically correct account of identity allows for the possibility that there are many situationally accurate and effective ways to model identity linguistically. Moreover, we might also see the possibilities as extending beyond language and consider images, too, as potentially useful and relatively accurate models of identity. Far from suggesting that theorists ought to surrender questions about identity to the artist, I note that philosophers, including some feminist ones, have attempted to move past language by invoking pictorial analogies. For example, Elizabeth Grosz suggests that the image of the Möbius strip can overcome the entrenched dichotomy between inside and outside. As she explains, “Tracing the outside of the strip leads one directly to its inside without at any point leaving its surface. The depth, or rather the effects of depth, are thus generated purely through the manipulation, rotation, and inscription of the flat plane—an apposite metaphor for the undoing of dualisms” (Grosz 1994, 116–17). When what one wants to do is to overcome a dualism, continuing to rely upon traditional, dichotomously based language may actually serve to reinscribe dualism.³ Images, then, and descriptions of them, need

not be regarded as merely ornamental add-ons to philosophy, but may actually do work that traditional discursive concepts cannot.

A desire to overcome dualisms also motivates Buddhist feminist philosopher Anne Carolyn Klein to draw upon the image of Yeshey Tsogyel, also known as "The Great Bliss Queen," a Tibetan deity. Described as "a Buddha who takes the form of an ordinary Tibetan woman" this deity is also regarded as a manifestation of the Indian Goddess Sarasvati and sometimes identified with the bodhisattva Tara (Klein 1995, 17). Like Kuan Yin, the Great Bliss Queen transgresses traditional understandings. Her only essence, explains Klein, is in her "potential to appear in various guises." However, "her female body and her ritual's explicit emphasis on womb and vulva as symbols of enlightenment welcome women into the divine circle ..." (17). As Klein argues, "dualisms require hard boundaries, clear contrast, whereas the Great Bliss Queen's symbolism and the ritual centered around her allow the practitioner to emulate her nonoppositional posture" (151). In appropriating the Great Bliss Queen as she does, Klein describes her own scholarly task as one of "synthesizing the iconographic and philosophical" (151).

Like the Great Bliss Queen, Kuan Yin may be able to express what metaphysically obsessed, essentialist, and anti-essentialist theorizing ultimately cannot, the possibility of being both and neither. With respect to gender, for example, she/he is not simply an androgynous character, but one who, never having determinately slipped from male to female, might also slip back, or linger tranquilly (or unnervingly) in between. It is an image that challenges the basis of the entire essentialism debate. Even fluid, genealogical accounts that emphasize gender identity as a kind of storyline, such as that endorsed by Stone (2004, 136), cannot do full justice to her, for the "story" of Kuan Yin breaks off at various points, not only in terms of gender, but with respect to nationality and social class as well; if the story of Kuan Yin can be told, it would, perhaps, be only in hypertext. In this sense Kuan Yin seems remarkably contemporary, capturing the idea that a trans identity need not be limited by the categories of male, female, or much else.

As I have suggested, Kuan Yin can help us move imaginatively beyond the either/or impasse about the "true" nature of sex and gender. First of all, we must recognize that Kuan Yin cannot be said to be a man or a woman in any of the usual senses. She was not "born" a woman, but rather was somehow transformed from the male bodhisattva Avalokitesvara over a period of centuries. However, as we have seen, it is not even quite correct to conclude simply that Kuan Yin was a male and is now a female, for she continues to be depicted as both. To further complicate the matter, it is not even exactly right to say that she is sometimes depicted as a male and sometimes as a female, for people often describe her as having an "asexual" appearance. In short, despite the fact that for many individuals Kuan Yin is experienced simply as female, we don't have

to know very much about her/his story to see that s/he defies and explodes our familiar sex/gender categories. In short, she is a quintessentially trans icon in the queerest sense. Although her interpretation of “trans” is not one with which all trans people would be comfortable, Cromwell expresses it well: “Transgender and transsexual are genders that exist outside the binary of two. That has become more evident since more and more individuals are retaining the labels, and subsequently the identities, of transpeople, however they may define themselves” (Cromwell 2006, 512).

This has implications that go far beyond any debate between feminists and trans people. It also helps to point the way to an image of identity that leads beyond the liberal humanism that so often makes “human” shorthand for white, heterosexual, able-bodied, Western male. As many feminists have also pointed out, this supposedly lofty ideal of humanism was suggested just about the time that women and other marginalized groups came to identify themselves and organize. Still, although many feminists have rejected humanism, it is not from a lack of sensitivity to the socially contingent nature of all sorts of categories—sexual, racial, and so on. It now strikes many feminists, too, as quaint at best, or dangerous at worst, to reductively insist that what *really* matters about a person is her or his genitalia or skin color. What is needed is a pragmatically based acceptance of the social reality and significance of such characteristics, of the myriad ways they impact our felt experience, without slipping into an arbitrary and rigid metaphysical essentialism.

Kuan Yin is both universal and particular, stable and ever-shifting, and we can learn lessons from this. We sometimes talk as if the goal were to rise above particularities such as sex/gender toward something more abstract and universal, especially in “spiritual contexts.” However, as Boswell reminds us, “To transgress the arbitrary boundaries of gender is to honor the potential of Spirit” (Boswell 2008). In a somatophobic culture, one that inflicts the further violence of insisting that we conform to some supposedly generic concept of “human,” surely there is nothing transgressive about denying our wonderful, messy, embodied particularity. Nor is there anything productively transgressive about swinging madly between metaphysical essentialism and a radically relativistic, politically inert version of social constructionism.

But perhaps the deepest lesson we can learn from Kuan Yin is that there is a sense in which we are all much more like her/him than most of us know. It may be no more ultimately correct to say that we are all trans people to one degree or another than to claim, as Adrienne Rich famously did, that all women are on a “lesbian continuum” (Rich 1980). Certainly, the realities of those who claim such socially marginalized identities are thereby transformed. However, in a world that continues to operate according to simplistic versions of sex and gender even as our philosophical theories challenge them, it may be useful to expand our notion of trans in the momentary company of Kuan Yin. Except for

a brave few, most of us clutch onto the privilege of received, normative sex/gender identities, as one terrified of drowning clings to a floating branch. Sitting on the ground in her pose of “royal ease,” one leg up, bent at the knee, eyes full of equanimity, with a deep, ethereal, knowing peace, Kuan Yin does not grasp or cling. She/he lives out the promise that our beliefs about who and what we are need not be reified into weapons we might use to beat one another up, but can instead serve as conceptual and imaginative tools with which we might help one another negotiate a lovely, difficult world.

NOTES

1. There is much disagreement about the precise date of Avalokitesvara’s origin, a “reflection of the ongoing debates about the origin and early history of Mahayana Buddhism” (Yü 2001, 7).
2. The pragmatism I am referring to is what is sometimes called “Classical American Philosophy,” founded by Charles S. Pierce and popularized by William James and John Dewey.
3. This is reflected, I think, in my struggle with which combination of gender pronouns to use in this paper. Using “she/he,” for example, as a supposedly gender-neutral locution, actually seems to reinscribe the dualism between masculine and feminine.

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