

The path to *CauseWay*: Developing a feminist site-specific performance practice at the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum

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Abstract

This article analyses *CauseWay* (2014), a feminist site-specific performance work created for the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum and Cottage (RBBM) in Alloway, South Ayrshire. The performance, which explored the history of two suffragettes who attempted to blow up the cottage in 1914, challenged the dominant, androcentric heritage narrative of the RBBM by exploring the hidden female history of the space. Drawing on Doreen Massey's concept of gendered spaces, this article applies a feminist lens to the relationship between performance and space. Beginn–ing with an exploration of the gendered nature of heritage tourism, the narrative of the suffragette attack is discussed. The development of *CauseWay* is then analysed by employing a theoretical framework of performance studies, human geography and heritage studies. Practical discussions of intertwining feminist theory with site-specific performance are offered with a view to further exploring the relationship between heritage, site, gender and performance. The article concludes by considering the relationship between gender and heritage and proposing live performance as a potential tool for the development of a more representative heritage sector.

Introduction

Green grow the rashes, O,
Green grow the rashes, O,
The sweetest hours that e'er I spent,
Were spent among the lasses, O
(Robert Burns, 1783)

In early 2014 I was commissioned to write the script for a site-specific performance about Frances Parker and Ethel Moorhead, two suffragettes who attempted to blow up Burns Cottage in Alloway, South Ayrshire in 1914. The play, *CauseWay*, directed by David Overend, was presented at the RBBM almost exactly 100 years later in June 2014. This article reflects on this performance in order to discuss strategies that can be employed to develop performance practice that is both feminist and site-specific. Drawing on examples from the production of *CauseWay*, I reflect upon the creation of a performance within a specific place of heritage and explore the ways in which such work can be developed with explicitly feminist politics. I move towards offering a practical toolkit, informed by theoretical principles, which can be employed by those seeking to create work that is both feminist and sited.

The RBBM dominates the geo-cultural identity of Alloway, a small village in South Ayrshire. The aim of this article is not, however, to denigrate the choices made by the various regional and national organisations that have shaped the village. There is no question as to whether such a small area would choose to highlight that it produced Scotland's most famous poet. The concern, however, is for the stories that have been marginalised by the dominant focus on Robert Burns: specifically for the stories of women. Where women are represented

in the RBBM they are portrayed only in relation to men, generally as lovers or mothers and given at most a paragraph in the main display. The gendered nature of this space is, in turn, a microcosm of the wider heritage industry, where, as Laurajane Smith suggests, “masculine values and perceptions, particularly masculine values from the elite social classes ... have tended to dominate” (162). Through the focus on one famous man and the reduction of women to antiquated stereotypes, RBBM is, in quite an explicit sense, gendered. My experience of the site as a woman, on my first visit, was of something missing; a subtle reinforcement of a woman’s “place in Society” by the mention of so few women (Massey 186). It would be unfair, however, to suggest that those working at the RBBM are unaware of this. The lack of female representation was, in fact, one of the primary factors that led the museum’s education department to commission *CauseWay*.

Given his literary status, many who visit RBBM already know the name of Robert Burns, along with portions of his works and life story. How many, though, know the story of Parker and Moorhead? One might assume that the majority of those wandering around Alloway’s streets have no knowledge of an event which “roused in the locality the most intense indignation” (*Glasgow Herald*). Depending on one’s political leanings, this event may be viewed as either a radical protest or an attempted act of terrorism, but the facts are thus: in the early hours of the 9 July 1914 two women cycled - presumably from Glasgow - into Alloway armed with pipe bombs. They inserted these bombs into the gutter outside the back of the cottage and, presumably, would have ignited them had they not been interrupted by Robert Wyllie, a night watchman (*Glasgow Herald*). Whilst one woman was caught and eventually identified as

Frances Parker (despite initially giving a pseudonym), the other escaped and we can only presume her identity to be Parker's frequent accomplice Ethel Moorhead (WEA Lothian Women's Forum). Parker was imprisoned, although was eventually released to a nursing home due to weakness brought on from hunger strike. She escaped from the home and was given amnesty due to the outbreak of WWI (Leneman). Discussing these events with colleagues, friends, family members and even residents of Alloway often resulted in a surprised response - many had never heard this story, and couldn't seem to grasp why it had not become a popular anecdote from Scottish history. However, my work as a playwright and academic is situated within feminist discourse and aims to highlight the forgotten or sidelined stories and experiences of women. Therefore, my understanding of how undervalued women's experiences are on a worldwide and historical scale meant it was difficult to be surprised that such a story had been forgotten. Perhaps the marginalisation of female stories due to institutionalised patriarchy is to blame (Smith L 162). Or it may be that, given that the suffragettes' cause was eventually successful, such directly militant acts have been suppressed in order to give the impression of success through more peaceful means.

Whatever the reasons, when *CauseWay* was performed in the summer of 2014 it offered a new interpretation of Alloway's history for public consumption. The performance began outside the RBBM and started much like a guided tour. The performers then introduced each other as Parker and Moorhead and became the characters. They invited the audience to follow them out of the museum and picked up two bikes along the way. As the performers cycled ahead, the audience followed along Poet's Path (which connects the museum and cottage),

periodically stopping to hear about the characters' journey on bike from Glasgow to Alloway. This section was accompanied by music from the Ayrshire based performer Little Fire (Jamie McGeechan), whose male presence alluded to the presence of Burns in the work. The performance eventually arrived at Burns Cottage where the remainder of the action took place, including an exploration of the parallels between Burns' works and the suffragette cause, the attempted bombing, the chase by the night watchman, and Parker's speech in court. Rather than reading about these women in an old newspaper, audiences stood in the same place as the events that took place a century ago. It was my intention that the audience experiencing these stories, physically placed in the position of these women, would allow for a more profound understanding of their story and of the forgotten spatial ideologies hidden within the RBBM.



Figure 1: Frances and Ethel at Burns Cottage. Alloway, Ayrshire. Author's own (14 June 2014).

Heritage, gender and performance

CauseWay was performed four times over the course of two days at the RBBM. The play was produced by the National Trust for Scotland, supported by the University of the West of Scotland and South Ayrshire Arts Partnership, as one of a plethora of events taking place to mark the centenary of the start of WWI. Despite many of these events focusing specifically on the war itself, some of the creative team at the RBBM were keen to present an alternative story: that of the suffragette attack on Burns' Cottage. Christopher Waddell, the Learning Manager at the RBBM, had hoped to develop the story into an event or performance for some time. The piece was to be staged on site and as the playwright attached to the project the development of my work began by exploring the space. The relationship between heritage, gender and performance was the key theoretical underpinning of my practice.

Massey demonstrates how our experience of space is affected by our gender (2). In heritage sites this experience is frequently recognisable. As a woman, to enter a heritage site is generally to enter a space where female voices are absent. For the most part, heritage sites represent periods when women were almost universally oppressed, and the narratives promoted within these sites are largely male: "heritage is gendered, in that it is too often 'masculine', and tells a predominantly male-centered story, promoting a masculine, and in particular an elite-Anglo-masculine, vision of the past and present" (Smith L 159). This version of the past offered by the heritage industry reinforces the male viewpoint as dominant and arguably beyond reproach. Whilst Burns was not necessarily elite and was Scottish rather than English, his position as a white, cisgendered male doubtless helped him to become an influential literary figure.

The strong focus within the RBBM upon one male figure from Alloway's past and the aforementioned reinforcement of female stereotypes, inadvertently or not, promotes androcentrism within the space. The lack of female narratives has resulted in the gendering of such spaces by aligning them almost exclusively with men and maleness. This is, of course, a legacy left by patriarchy - the era during which Burns lived (1759-1796) was one in which women were viewed as naturally secondary to men. As highlighted in the museum, in rural Scotland women's roles were primarily domestic; independence and mobility was generally a privilege reserved only for men.

The question of what genders a site is, however, by no means concrete; the exclusion of female narratives works in conjunction with "gendered power relations" and "visitors' gendered identities and gendered performances" (Reading 402-403). It is important to understand that my reading of gendered aspects of the RBBM as problematic and exclusionary is coloured by my position as a feminist, a writer and an academic and that interpretations of gender and space are personal and fluid. However, one's personal position is an important component in forming the identity of space; each individual understanding of space contributes to its meaning (Soja). Furthermore, the influence of the heritage site within wider society should not be underestimated. Sites that proffer androcentric or misogynist narratives impact upon gender identities; to view one's gender as subjugated or unimportant, without question, can "reinforce the contemporary values and inequities given to women's identities, social roles and experiences" (Smith 163). To have inequality presented as something that has always existed may, therefore, lead to the sense that it is socially ingrained, unchallengeable and unchangeable. Therefore, efforts must be made to explore

and represent women's experiences within heritage.

The creation of *CauseWay* was situated at the intersection between heritage, feminism and performance. The relationship between feminism and performance is, of course, an area that has received much analysis within and outwith academic discourses². Although definitions vary as to what feminist performance is, exactly, my intentions in developing *CauseWay* were to create a performance that “manifests the conscious intention of remedying the effects and conditions of sexism in our culture” (Wark 4). The work would be a direct response to the reductive representation of women in the RBBM and to the androcentrism of the heritage industry in general by placing women's stories and politics directly into the site. Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd, two of the team members in Manchester University's Performance, Learning and Heritage project, state that performance practice “can be usefully ... employed in the interpretation, and indeed the interrogation, of ‘heritage’” (1). It should be noted here that although heritage performance is gaining currency within the academy, gender has not currently been foregrounded in any substantial studies.

In relation to Jackson and Kidd's work, I argue that the ephemeral nature of performance renders it particularly effective in challenging heritage narratives as the work need not go through lengthy approval processes and can, therefore, be provocative or radical. The ephemeral nature of performance practice raises issues of legacy. It is, as Gilli Bush-Bailey puts it, an “ephemeral experience that simply resists repetition or capture, even by modern technology” (92). An experience that cannot be documented or repeated will, arguably, have little effect on the permanent identity of a space. However, in writing *CauseWay I was* entirely aware that the work would not nec-

² See, for example, Case, 1988; Martin 2002; Aston & Harris, 2012.

essarily make concrete changes to the identity of the RBBM. Rather, the work proposed to reconceptualise space for the performers and audience members that chose to inhabit a moment. The limits of heritage performance must be accepted; it may not immediately restructure the offerings of a site, but it adds to an understanding of space. Furthermore, if programmed more regularly, performance practice can offer renewed, feminist perspectives to a larger cross-section of heritage visitors.

Site-specificity, mobility and feminism

CauseWay was intentionally site-specific, that is to say that the physicality and history of the RBBM site was an essential presence within the work. Given the variety of definitions of site-specificity, I employ Fiona Wilkie's understanding that such performance, "engages with site as symbol, site as story-teller, site as structure" to delineate my working concept of the term (Mapping the Terrain: a Survey of Site-Specific Performance in Britain 158). The essential characteristics of *CauseWay* as a site-specific performance are that it responded to the site, interacted with it and could not be performed in any other space. Beginning at the Birthplace Museum, the performance followed Poet's Path along to Burns Cottage (see figure 1), with the performers moving through Alloway on bicycles followed by the audience on foot (see figure 2).

The implementation of mobility places *CauseWay* within the sphere of what Wilkie has termed a "mobility turn" within site-specific performance (Site-specific performance and the mobility turn 203). Wilkie defines this turn as "site-specific artwork that only makes sense in relation to the contexts of mobility" (ibid). Wilkie has offered potential reasons behind this relationship between mobility and site-specificity as exploring "concep-

tions of place fundamentally tied up with questions of mobility” (ibid 212). Furthermore, David Overend suggests that “the journey form is frequently used by contemporary performances in order to respond to site as part of an increasingly mobile relational realm” (379). Wilkie and Overend both highlight site as a relational entity, arguing that sites exist in relation to other sites and that this can be explored through employing mobility in performance. While a consensus seems to have been reached that mobile, site-specific theatre responds to the relational nature of space, the question of gender has been underrepresented. The link between feminism and mobility is clear in Massey’s assertion that “one gender-disturbing message might be - in terms of both identity and space - keep moving!” (11). Juxtaposing this with the idea of women as home, Massey advocates that mobility is one method of opposing such gendered stereotyping. She discusses the classical notion of men wanting to ‘fix’ women in a space, as a ‘stabilising’ influence for their own mobility. In response to this, the text of *CauseWay* used mobility as a direct challenge to oppressive patriarchal structures:

FRANCES

My legs keep moving because they have to, because they are obliged to. They are obliged to keep the wheels turning, keep pushing forward for those who can’t ... those who don’t understand. The women and the men all over this great nation who base their lives around the belief that our two sexes are fundamentally, irretrievably different. My legs ache more and more as they push me forward, and I can feel a burning in them that matches the rage that burns in my chest. All

the while I think of those who believe that one half of civilisation is only good for matters of the home, matters of childcare, for needlepoint and piano playing. The people who think that we only fight for equal rights because we hate men, or we have nothing better to do with our time. I think of them as the miles roll by, and my legs keep moving.

CauseWay was developed to include mobility as a core element within the performance. The work used the suffragette narrative in order to bring discussions of mobility from spatial theory and performance studies together in practice. Furthermore, the use of bicycles evoked the freedom of movement offered by cycling, which Susan B. Anthony noted “has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world”. Employing the promenade form and selecting relevant forms of transport can, therefore, be viewed as a means of engaging with feminism and site-specificity. The form allows the performance to raise questions of gender issues within multiple spaces and also to contrast the static nature of historical women’s lives with the mobility of the characters.

The methods used and performances generated in site-specific work are, as one would imagine, hugely varied. Wilkie suggests that “in many cases, a thematic engagement is deemed less necessary (or, in one or two instances, less desirable) than a geometric or structural one in order for a piece to be termed site-specific” (*Mapping the Terrain: a Survey of Site-Specific Performance in Britain* 155). However, this conception of a hierarchy between the theme and physicality is not the case in the work of all artists and/or companies creating per-

formance in this area. Cathy Turner, in her discussion of Mike Pearson's work, states that "archaeology is posited as performative (an enactment of the past in the present) and site-specific performance is viewed as an archaeological investigation of place" (ibid 376). Note here that archaeology, which brings with it the narratives of human history, is viewed as integral to the creation of site-specific performance.

In developing *CauseWay*, the creative team and myself eschewed the hierarchy between the thematic and the physical that Wilkie has highlighted. By implementing a sense of equality between these features, the spatial considerations of the RBBM were interpreted within a feminist model, applying feminist understandings of gender relations, where "hierarchies have been eliminated", to spatial relations (Ianello xi). The implementation of a non-hierarchical and mobile engagement with space allowed a wider range of features of the RBBM to influence the performance text.

Within the RBBM textual and spoken language, often coded as male (Zerihan 2006), is the main form of communicating historical themes and narratives. My aim of creating site-specific *and* feminist theatre was to take into consideration the forms of communication (language) and thematic concerns (Burns) of the site, but also to offer an alternative viewpoint that foregrounded women's narratives. Furthermore, a non-hierarchical approach was taken with the characters of Ethel and Frances; they were featured equally throughout the work and although they may have had moments of conflict, it was clear that one did not hold power over the other. This was particularly evident towards the end of the work. In the final sections at Burns Cottage, the women fought over whether or not militarism was the right method for women's liberation. Once this

developed into a chase and Frances' arrest, both characters were given an opportunity to address the audience and reflect on how the events unfolded. In this way, no one view was given precedent over the other; the equality of the characters aspired to echo the aims of feminism.



Burns Birthplace Museum. Alloway, Ayrshire. Author's own (14 June 2014).

The performance began as a guided tour that evoked the traditional feeling of the RBBM. The piece then evolved into a feminist, polemic examination of history and of women's rights. Different spaces were used as a marker for new sections of narrative, in this way allowing the spatial and thematic elements of the story to evolve in tandem. Rather than placing more value

on one or the other, both the female history and the physicality of the site were employed to create a non-hierarchical, feminist understanding of the space. The mobility of the work aligned it with current trends in site-specific performance, but also with the feminist cause. Furthermore, the promenade style of the work can be viewed as an allegory of the progression of women's rights; symbolic of how far we have come and how we must still keep our 'legs moving'.

Performing gendered space

Throughout the process of creating *CauseWay*, it became clear that the performance should not be framed as an attack on Robert Burns or the RBBM. The aim is not to detract from what one person has achieved, but rather to highlight other narratives present. The importance of promoting site-based narratives can be understood through Lefebvre's perception of space as "political and ideological ... literally filled with ideologies" (31). Lefebvre here outlines that space cannot be viewed as a neutral, purely physical entity; multiple narratives inhabit every space that has been touched by human existence. It follows that our understanding of a space can never be complete until attempts are made to uncover, document and represent the individuals and/or groups that have contributed to its formation.

Presenting an alternative, feminist narrative of Parker and Moorhead would be an attempt to create a deeper, fuller understanding of the RBBM and of Alloway. As expressed by Parker and Moorhead in *CauseWay*:

ETHEL

So, you see, it's not about attacking his legacy or his works, it's about attacking the people who steal them and use them for oppression.

FRANCES

You know, I read once that he had a stoop in his back because of all the manual labour he did at this cottage. He probably hated the bloody place! Mind you, that obviously didn't affect his ability as a womaniser.

ETHEL

But it's not about that...it's not about how he treated women or anything like that - it's not about him at all. It's about them ... and what they've used him for.

FRANCES

It's about them, and it's about us.

The aim was to celebrate that there is more than one story that the space has to tell. Offering new interpretations of heritage sites is essential, as Laurajane Smith puts it:

Competing or alternative discourses about both 'gender' and 'heritage' will construct different ways of understanding the realities of social practices structured by gender relations, and will give different and competing values and meanings to the historical and contemporary validity of gender identities. (161)

Therefore, the act of challenging hegemonic representations of heritage has the potential to bring about a greater change within how we perceive not only the heritage site itself but also our (gendered) identity in relation to it. In order to promote an egal-

itarian understanding of heritage sites, the multiplicity of narratives present must be celebrated. In creating the *CauseWay* script I used songs and quotations from Burns. In one particular scene, audience members were encouraged to join with the performers in singing Burns songs whilst standing in the cottage. This section highlighted the similarities in the politics of Burns (a vocal socialist) and the women's suffrage movement and underlined the assertion that these stories can co-exist rather than compete.

Furthermore, the performance worked against a notion of the heritage site as a static, "sacred space" and offered possibilities of how such spaces can be constantly reconfigured (Marstine 9). Much performance work that takes place in heritage sites represents populist narratives. However, the potential for challenging hegemonic narratives in heritage sites through performance practice, whilst under-researched, is not without precedent³. In this vein, the primary aim of *CauseWay* was to reinterpret the site and to offer a renewed understanding of the space. The piece engaged the audience and the RBBM site directly in feminist politics by foregrounding the suffragette story. It encouraged the audience to question, as one spectator put it, "what can make a difference, what is legitimate protest, how to achieve social change" (Fremantle). As a playwright, it was important that the challenge to patriarchal social structures was present in the work in order to underline its feminist principles.

The formational nature of the relationship between space and gender leads to the necessity for challenge in spaces where women are underrepresented. As discussed in *CauseWay*, an example of "straightforward exclusion" is the institution of Burns Suppers that happen annually in Scotland and across the Scottish diaspora (Massey 179). Although, for the most part, these events are open to men and women, they are traditional-

ly (and many continue to be) exclusively male. This is a literal example of a gendered space and events where women are now permitted are affected by this legacy - for example, there is only one point in the evening set aside to be delivered by women ('the reply from the lassies'). In the aforementioned Burns cottage section of *CauseWay*, Ethel points out this exclusion.

That there has to be a specific point set aside for women at a Burns supper also emphasises the notion of woman as "Other" famously posited by Simone de Beauvoir. At these dinners, as in de Beauvoir's text, women exist to complement the existence of men, rather than as active agents in their own narrative (16). While developing *CauseWay*, I found that the notion of 'otherness', of sexual segregation, could be highlighted whilst also inviting collusion. Performers would travel on bicycles, accentuating their separation from the audience, yet they invited the audience on their journey. They would burst into song, alienating the audience, whilst once again asking them to join in and sing Burns songs that would be familiar to many in the audience. As the performers moved through the RBBM they continually drew attention to their 'otherness' as women and as historical figures, but they also managed to bring the audience with them. By integrating de Beauvoir's concept into the performance text, *CauseWay* called attention to difference while simultaneously offering the audience a way in. The message proffered was that an audience can join in with creating a new, feminist understanding of a heritage site by accepting the invitation.

In the creation of *CauseWay* I found that subtle hints at such cultural misogyny, like noting Burns Suppers, was more fitting within the somewhat gentle, bucolic nature of the space. In order for such audiences to be amenable to questioning the site and the gender issues within it, they should feel comfort-

able with what Jackson calls the “rules of the ‘game’” (14), rather than being continually tested and tricked as is the case with some more provocative and antagonistic contemporary performance (see, for example, recent works by Ann Liv Young and Ontroerend Goed). Therefore, the text of *CauseWay* developed in such a way that allowed the audience to feel safe in the first instance. The guided tour style of the beginning was used to engender a feeling of security; this was a form that most tourists would be familiar with. The performers addressed the audience directly and explained that they were going to tell them a story, before transforming into the characters. The ultimate aim of the work was to offer an alternative to traditional views of women in heritage and to unsettle the site through “the disruptive presence of performance” (Pearson 2). Therefore, while the opening sections of the work took the needs of the heritage audience into consideration, the performance moved towards a more radical, defiant tone in Moorhead and Parker’s final monologues, after building the audience’s trust. In this way, *CauseWay* began within the ‘rules’ of the RBBM before gradually building to an engagement with more polemic strands of feminist theory.

Parker’s courthouse speech, which was placed at the end of *CauseWay*, drew parallels between the oppression felt by women in 1914 and in 2014:

FRANCES

I know that, once the storm has settled, the people of this country will look back and laugh at the idea that women did not deserve the vote. They will mock the perception that women should not work and should simply stay at home minding the baby. They will be horrified that

victims of domestic violence and assault were blamed for their own misfortune, or simply disbelieved. The people of the future will be unable to comprehend that anyone in civilised society ever thought that a man could simply be naturally better than a woman at anything. Because they will live in a world of equality - where little boys and little girls won't be told from birth that they are to have different roles and different hobbies and like different colours. The people who live a hundred years from now will know that the only way to create oppression and hatred is to force it upon the next generation, and will know better than that. In everything that I do, I believe - no, I know with all my heart that we move towards a world where bigotry and hatred and misogyny will be a thing of the past. And that's why I stand before you today, pleading guilty of my acts in the fight for equality - because, if we do not fight for it, constantly and with every fibre of our being, then we will never achieve it.

Placing this polemic, feminist speech within a heritage site allowed for audience members to consider both the world of the performance and the real world simultaneously. The heritage site's position as a representation of the past existing within the present renders it a somewhat liminal space, defined by Phil Smith as "chora ... a notional, intermediary space between existence and becoming" (108). This liminality, in Smith's estimation, allows for a unique interplay between space and performance, where we have the ability to acknowledge and interact

with history, space and our present selves simultaneously. The juxtaposition of site, heritage and feminism within the performance text therefore allowed for reflection upon a multiplicity of gender-based issues.

Conclusion

As is the case throughout the heritage sector, the RBBM presents a gendered interpretation of history and particularly within the exhibitions, relegates the women in Burns' life to the virgin/mother/crone paradigm. While the site does offer talks and presentations that represent other female and male figures within the Burns arena, the use of performance practice with an explicitly political agenda is somewhat lacking. During the performances of *CauseWay* it became clear that heritage site-specific work could be created in a manner that respects the original intention of the space. However, the piece also highlighted the limits of the RBBM and offered an alternative, feminist narrative.

CauseWay was just one example of how creative interventions have the potential to contribute to a more egalitarian understanding of heritage sites by mobilising feminist theory into performance practice. The script and performances of *CauseWay* engaged with site and theory in order to create a work that was feminist and site-specific. The theoretical underpinnings of the work evolved into practice by employing mobility, eschewing various hierarchies and foregrounding women's stories. Furthermore, the liminality of the heritage site was employed to highlight the progress of women's rights over the centuries and the necessity for change to continue. Live performance is ephemeral by its very nature and thus has the "potential" to exist as a force for change, affecting audiences in a more radical and immediate manner, perhaps, than an authorised and carefully crafted row

of information panels (Kershaw 3). The issues surrounding the ephemerality of performance and potential lack of legacy are of course a concern for any practitioner. A potential solution, perhaps, is to integrate heritage performance with more tangible evidence of women's narratives within heritage sites. If creative practice can be scheduled into the quotidian programme of the heritage site, alongside more physical, concrete changes, then the sector can begin to move towards offering a more inclusive interpretation of gender and identity.

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