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Posted Date: 13 October 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202510.0830.v1

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Review

Thinking Ambiguity: An Anthropological Perspective

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abstract

This contribution examines the anthropological concept of ambiguity through the foundational work of Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner on liminality, originally applied to traditional societies and ritual contexts. Liminality, derived from the Latin *limes* meaning threshold, refers to a state of being betwixt and between social roles, spaces, and times, characterized by ambiguity and transformation. Van Gennep's tripartite model of rites of passage—separation, liminal phase, and incorporation—is illustrated with ethnographic examples, while Turner's contributions highlight the dynamic and transformative nature of the liminal phase as a condition of social possibility and change. Extending beyond the ritual sphere, Mary Douglas successfully relocated the concept of liminality into the everyday life of Western societies. She linked ambiguity to notions of purity and pollution, emphasizing how phenomena that defy clear categorization—represented metaphorically by the viscous, neither liquid nor solid—challenge social order and create discomfort. This contribution thus situates liminality not only as a key concept for understanding social transitions in traditional rituals but also as a powerful analytical tool for exploring ambiguity and social boundaries in contemporary life.

Keywords: ambiguity; liminality; transgression

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1. History

Any person familiar with the anthropological discipline who has wondered how anthropology has approached the concept of ambiguity would almost immediately relate it to the now-classic concept of liminality. The term derives from the Latin *limes*, meaning boundary or frontier. Liminality refers to the quality of being at the threshold, of being on the border, of existing in a state that is neither here nor there, neither one thing nor another—or, put differently, of being both things at once and yet neither of them. Liminality thus designates, by definition, that which is ambiguous. It was Arnold Van Gennep who coined the term in his celebrated work "The Rites of Passage", originally published in France in 1909. Both the notion of rites of passage and the concept of liminality itself gained wide currency in anthropology, especially after the English translation was published in 1960. Even today, few works and concepts in anthropology and the social sciences are cited as frequently or applied to such a wide variety of contexts. Curiously, Van Gennep himself is often regarded as an ambiguous and even mysterious figure, who developed his career at the margins of academia. Born in Germany to French and Dutch immigrant parents, he spent most of his life in France without ever securing a stable university post, despite being one of the most renowned anthropologists of his time in Europe. His precarious financial situation surprised many who came to meet the famous and reputed "academic," author of more than 15 books and 160 articles [1].

For Van Gennep, rites of passage were the ritually ordered means by which societies marked the most important transitions in human life: birth, initiation into the world of sexuality (which may or

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doi:10.20944/preprints202510.0830.v1

may not coincide with puberty), marriage, and death. All of these ceremonies, regardless of the society in which they occurred, shared a remarkably similar structure consisting of three distinct phases: separation from the previous social role or status (the pre-liminal phase), the intermediate liminal stage, and the incorporation of the individual into a new, socially established role (the post-liminal phase).

As an example, Van Gennep's descriptions of initiation in totemic societies clearly illustrate the structure and symbolism of the rites of passage. Drawing on other authors, he described initiation rites among several groups of Australian Aboriginal peoples as follows: they typically occurred between the ages of ten and thirty. The first act consisted of separation from the previous milieu, the world of women and children. Much like the seclusion of a pregnant woman, the novice was secluded in the bush, in a special location or hut, accompanied by a wide variety of taboos, particularly dietary ones. For some time, the novice remained attached to his mother, but a moment always came when he was definitively separated from her through a violent—or at least seemingly violent—procedure, often provoking the mother to burst into tears. As Howitt said of the Kurnai: "The intention of all the acts of this ceremony is to bring about a momentary change in the life of the novice; the past must be cut off by an interval that can never be bridged again. Kinship with his mother as a child is abruptly broken and, from that point onward, he is consigned to the men. He must abandon all the games and sports of his childhood, at the same time severing the old domestic ties between him and his mother or sisters. He now becomes a man, instructed and conscious of the duties incumbent upon him as a member of the Murring community."[**2**] (pp.112-113).

In some of these groups, novices were even considered symbolically dead for the duration of their initiation. During this period, the purpose, according to Van Gennep, was to weaken the boy both physically and mentally so as to erase the memory of his childhood life. After this initial "negative" period of separation from the previous state of being, the ritual entered a more "positive" phase of aggregation into the new social state. Here, the novice was taught the codes, customs, ceremonies, and myths of the adult clan members, to whom he would be ceremonially united at the conclusion of the rite of passage, often through some form of mutilation or bodily transformation that rendered him identifiable and, in this sense, identical to the rest of the adult members of his clan. "If among the Australians the child is separated from his mother, women, and children, among the Kwakiutl the previous world is personified by a 'spirit' that must be exorcised, a perspective identical to that of Christians who exorcise Satan during baptism."[**2**] (p. 115).

Van Gennep also noted that his schema of rites of passage could be applied beyond the life-cycle transitions of individuals. He applied the model, for instance, to rituals marking the passage of time, such as full-moon ceremonies, seasonal festivals, or New Year's celebrations, as well as to spatial transitions. The crossing of a boundary—whether between nations, between kinship territories, or simply between outside and inside the home—was often ritualized in ways similar to life-cycle transitions. It was also common for territories not to border one another directly, but instead to be separated by intermediary zones or margins, sometimes broad, sometimes narrow. These zones, understood as neutral by neighboring groups, were nonetheless considered sacred. Those who traversed them could be seen, in Van Gennep's words, as existing "between two worlds."[**2**] (p. 35).

The crossing of a frontier required—and still requires—certain formalities, which may be political, legal, and economic but also magical-religious. The ceremonial placement of objects marking the boundaries of a territory carried prohibitions against unauthorized entry, since such intrusion would desecrate a sacred domain. Divinities and sacred symbols dedicated to guarding borders and punishing transgressions—literally understood as acts of "going beyond the limit"—are recorded in countless contexts and historical periods across the world. Hermes in ancient Greece, Babylonian *kudurrus* (inscribed stones demarcating land ownership), earth deities in imperial China, or horseshoes placed on household thresholds—all of these, like locks and the act of closing doors, served to demonstrate both materially and symbolically that a transgression had occurred, regardless of their practical efficacy in preventing intrusion.

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Thus, the space between two territories—that is, between two socially and culturally differentiated domains—is endowed with a certain sacrality, which Van Gennep associated with the margin, with liminality.

It is precisely liminality, that threshold separating and connecting roles, times, and spaces, that frontier imbued with the sacrality of what cannot be defined or classified, where societies both fear and celebrate ambiguity. Liminality contains and constrains ambiguity, which simultaneously threatens social order while enabling transformation and change.

The figure of the foreigner, of the one who comes from outside, would, in a sense, embody for Van Gennep the characteristics of the liminal state; they are often considered ambiguous, both powerful and weak, and are usually endowed with a certain magical-religious potential, a supernatural power that can be either beneficial or malevolent. The rites of incorporation into the society receiving them or into which they arrive typically aim to strip them of this destabilizing power, to extract them from their liminal state, to exorcise their ambiguity, or, in other words, to "disenchant" them.[**2**] (p. 46).

It was precisely the idea of this phase or liminal state that inspired some of the most important works of classical anthropologists such as Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, and it continues to resonate today in the diverse perspectives and analyses attempting to understand the complex nature of human societies. This concept, along with that of rites of passage, has transcended the boundaries of anthropology itself, becoming commonly used outside the academic sphere and attracting interest from scholars in other disciplines, such as psychology or the performing arts, to name just a few examples. While certain Jungian psychologists believed they saw evidence of the archetypal structure of the human psyche in the transcultural recurrence of initiation rituals and their structure, prominent theorists of theatre and performance have employed the concept of liminality to equate theatrical experience with ritual experience. The indeterminacy and ambiguity inherent to the transitional space represented by the liminal state, the indistinguishability between what one was and what one is about to become, has proven particularly compelling for the analysis of aesthetic experience in the performing arts, especially in forms of theatre and performance that challenge traditional dichotomies such as spectator-actor, stage-audience, or reality-fiction.[**3**]

While Van Gennep conceived the liminal period as the intermediate phase in rites of passage or transition, it was Victor W. Turner who, decades later, explored in depth the sociocultural characteristics, richness, and complexity of this phase of ritual liminality in his seminal essay "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage" [**4**]. For Turner, the liminal period is the moment in which the transition itself occurs—a dynamic process of change between two states understood as socially relatively stable situations concerning, for example, legal status, profession, or rank. In initiation rites, for instance, the neophyte—the subject of the rite to be initiated, such as young Ndembu in Zambia about to undergo circumcision—is defined by Turner as a transitional being or liminal person, structurally invisibilized in the sense that they no longer fit into the social categories that previously defined them but have not yet assumed their new position within the community; "during the intermediate liminal period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous, as they traverse a cultural environment possessing few or none of the attributes of the past or forthcoming state."[**5**] (p.101). Before and after the liminal phase, the subject of the rite is classifiable and definable, as are the obligations and conventions applied to them within the community. Liminal persons, however, are invisible precisely because they cannot be classified or defined; in many ritual contexts, the symbolism associated with these individuals relates, not coincidentally, to death, decomposition, or dissolution. Often, their structural invisibility is represented ritually through the physical invisibility of the initiate, isolating them from the rest of the social group. The death of the social being that existed previously coexists with symbols representing the gestation and birth of a new, yet unidentifiable, being; what defines them is precisely their indefinition, the mixture and indeterminacy of the categories representing them, their ambiguity, and paradox. It is precisely this contradiction and indefinition—the confusion of all known categories—that might render the liminal state a condition of possibility for the emergence of new ideas, thoughts,

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and customs; in Turner's words, it is "the realm of pure possibility, from which emerges every possible configuration, idea, and relation." [5] (p.107). Neophytes, in a sense, are in contact with the divine, with the unlimited and infinite; they are akin to formless matter whose social existence has been suspended, dissolved. They may be attributed symbols of both sexes indiscriminately or represented as asexual beings, especially in societies where such distinctions are significant, to signify the indeterminate nature of the neophyte, the characteristic indefinition of the liminal. Initiates are also in a state Turner defines as sacred poverty, possessing nothing: "neither status, property, insignia, normal clothing, rank, nor kinship position" [5] (p.109) as they do not exist from the perspective of the community's political-legal structure. During the liminal period, equality prevails among the neophytes, since distinctions tied to previously held and future social positions have disappeared, and the only authority to which they are fully subject is that of the society's collective values, represented (or not) by the presence of instructors, typically elders. In the Omaha tradition, for instance, at the threshold between childhood and adulthood, young individuals would leave the community to enter, alone and fasting, into nature, awaiting a vision that would determine their future position in the community. This vision, derived from the divine, the infinite, and the superhuman, represents absolute authority. Should they receive in this vision a typical women's woven band, they would henceforth dress and act accordingly and be recognized in the community as "mixuga."

For Turner, the liminal period is not merely a kind of bridge that transfers an individual (or a collective) from one status, situation, or place to the next; rather, it constitutes a moment of ontological transformation for the ritual subject. Engagement with the divine, the infinite, and the secret alters the very nature of the individual, imbuing them with the attributes of their new state. The liminal state, as we have seen, entails a temporary separation from the social categories and positions that define individuals within the community's social structure. It also entails a detachment from habitual ways of feeling, thinking, and acting. Neophytes are, in a sense, offered the opportunity to reflect upon their world and culture without the usual constraints; they are invited to temporarily deconstruct the conventions through which they have been educated and enculturated, expanding their cognitive frameworks to ultimately reconfigure the elements of their culture in accordance with the characteristics and requirements of the new social status or position they are about to assume.

Turner notes that it is no accident that the masks, figures, and garments used in initiation rituals often include disproportionate elements, parts that are too small or too large, inappropriate colors, or combinations approaching the monstrous: masks blending traits of both sexes, human features with animal or natural elements, heads or limbs of unusual size or absence—all these invite the perceiver to consider their constituent elements as abstract entities. The juxtaposition of incongruous components—the strange, the uncomfortable, the monstrous—transforms the parts into objects of reflection that would scarcely have been conceived in more conventional combinations. In this sense, the liminal situation, in Turner's words, "breaks the force of custom and opens the way to speculation… It is the realm of primitive hypotheses, the domain in which one may playfully manipulate the factors of existence."[6] (p. 118).

This freedom of thought, feeling, and action—the invitation to dissolve familiar structures and meanings inherent in liminality—nonetheless has limits. Without such boundaries, rites of passage could hardly serve to manage, in socially defined ways, potential sources of destabilization and disorder, nor to contain and regulate ambiguity. On one hand, the newly initiated are expected to submit to the rules and obligations of their new social role after the rite; on the other, it is understood that through the ritual process they have come into contact with mystery, with the most sacred axiomatic principles of their culture, the foundations of nature and the universe, which are imprinted upon them as a form of mystical knowledge or power that is practically ineffable and beyond question.

Liminality, however, precisely because of its indeterminacy and ambiguity, possesses the power to transform, destroy, and generate new configurations, and thus can pose a threat to established order. Mary Douglas addressed liminality in terms of order and disorder, purity and pollution, in

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her seminal work Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (originally published in 1960, just a few years before Turner's study)[7]. Douglas argues that anything socially ambiguous or contradictory tends to be associated with dirt, which is understood as matter out of place; dirt, therefore, represents a transgression of established order. "Dirt is never a unique or isolated event. Wherever there is dirt, there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as order implies the rejection of inappropriate elements."[7](p. 34-35). Reflection on dirt—on anything uncomfortable due to ambiguity and indeterminacy—thus also becomes reflection on order and disorder, being and non-being, form and formlessness, life and death.

Beings in the liminal phase of a ritual are widely regarded as especially contaminating, as dangerous sources of (social) dirt, since they are neither here nor there, neither this nor that, occupying no recognizable or definable place within the classificatory system of their society. During the liminal phase, subjects are often separated, wholly or partially, from other community members, or disguised to conceal them, as the presence of something unrecognizable, unclassifiable, and incomprehensible would be paradoxical and potentially destabilizing. Every cultural system, as a classificatory framework, necessarily produces anomalies—ambiguous situations or elements that appear to challenge its assumptions—and must somehow incorporate them, regulating or limiting the impact of the resulting disturbance. Concealing the ritual subject during the liminal phase is one way to achieve this; imposing specific notions of dirt and pollution and managing them in both magical-religious and, notably, secular contexts is another, potentially far more pervasive and frequently overlooked.

While Van Gennep fundamentally confined his analysis to traditional societies, and Turner to the study of ritual, Mary Douglas successfully extended these insights to everyday life in Western societies. In the West today, it is difficult to conceive of dirt separate from concepts such as hygiene or aesthetics, especially since the discovery of disease transmission by pathogens revolutionized 19th-century medicine. In cleaning and organizing our homes, we feel—or believe, or both—that we are removing bacteria as a matter of health, science, or common sense. We would hardly identify with those performing rituals to protect their homes from malevolent forces; yet, in Douglas's analysis, both are managing, in accordance with the conventions of their respective cultural systems, dangerous sources of dirt, which is always social and symbolic, referring to the inappropriateness of what must be ordered, placed, and thus controlled.

Ambiguity, understood as that which does not appear with a single established meaning, was represented by Mary Douglas through the concept of viscosity—something that moves between the clear definitions represented by both solids and liquids. Douglas argued that such indeterminacy could be a source of social discomfort. The viscous is neither a liquid—it does not flow or behave in a clearly defined manner—nor is it a solid; its movement is irregular, clumpy, and turbid, and it is associated with stickiness and inconsistency. In this way, Douglas engaged with notions of purity and impurity, demonstrating how elements within a social group that do not conform clearly or fail to align with shared structures of meaning may be perceived as existing at the margins of one state or another. That is, outside the system of order that, in some way, represents social order itself. What falls between classificatory boundaries—ambiguity—is thus understood as dirty, blurred, or unpleasant, as a consequence of challenging the classificatory order each society imposes on reality. The example of dirt is particularly illustrative: dirt is not an inherent property of an object but depends on its position within a system of order. Food is not inherently dirty, but it becomes so when removed from a plate; shoes are not dirty on the floor, but they are on a bed. In this way, dirt, and the contamination it produces, arises from transgressing the classificatory system.

However, order is not divine. Every society establishes its own patterns and classifications of order, even when these are perceived as divinely given. Order is also not static but constantly changing, as human societies are living entities whose dynamism shapes their ways of creating meaning and, consequently, their systems of order. A society that insists on rigidly maintaining an established order positions itself against change, which is not only impossible but would reflect a

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vision of the group as anchored in a pristine state—a notion that, as we know, is nothing more than a mythical idea embraced by the most ideologically rigid adherents of a given order.

Thus, ambiguity in anthropology has been symbolically represented and studied as a fundamental aspect of social development, functioning as a mechanism for change through ritualized moments and spaces. Materially, ambiguity is also manifested through what are called boundary objects[8]—material elements that simultaneously belong to two fields of meaning (two knowledge domains, two practical spaces in daily life, etc.), thereby acting as small portals that facilitate communication across different ways of understanding the world, expanding and blurring the boundaries of these domains.

2. Applications

The combination of symbolic and material dimensions is especially useful for anthropological analysis, as it allows us to examine real-world examples. Here, we focus on a topic that has generated significant debate in recent years, approached from an anthropological perspective on ambiguity: the "trans" experience, or the crossing of liminal spaces. After brief definitions, we outline the foundations—the system of order—through which sex and gender identity are constructed in our society. We then compare these with examples from other cultures, showing how alternative classificatory systems organize the same phenomena. This approach highlights how spaces of ambiguity are produced, both symbolically and materially.

Concepts such as sex, sexuality, sexual differentiation, gender, gender identity, gender roles, transgender, cisgender, and related terms often generate confusion. We therefore clarify how these terms are used in this work, aiming to move beyond outdated perspectives and to emphasize conceptual developments that have become clearer over time.

Sexual differentiation refers to the body's biopsychophysiological traits. Sex, by contrast, is the assignment of a category—male or female—since in our society sex is mainly tied to reproductive roles. Every person is born with a set of physical characteristics—genital, chromosomal, phenotypic, and others—which vary widely, both individually and in combination. One might assume that chromosomal variation determines whether someone is male or female, i.e., their gender identity, but this is not the case. In our society, recognition as male or female requires phenotypic and genotypic alignment. A person may have XX or XY chromosomes, or variations such as XXY, 0X, or 00XX. To these possibilities, phenotypic differences must also be added—secondary sexual characteristics and physical traits linked to gender categories, such as breast development, hip shape, muscularity, or facial hair. Observation quickly reveals how variable phenotypes are compared to the binary model: not all women have breasts or wide hips, and some men do.

Beyond phenotype or genotype variations, mismatches often occur between the two. For example, individuals with XX chromosomes may develop facial hair or lack breasts. Sometimes the boundaries themselves are unclear, as with what the medical model calls "ambiguous genitalia," when newborns' genitalia do not allow a clear prediction of future sex development—about one in 1,500 births. In other cases, genitalia appear defined but later development contradicts them. These examples show that everyday life contains significant ambiguity and that what is considered "natural" requires social practices of classification and assignment within a normative system of order.

Sexual differentiation is therefore variable, continuous, and processual—a spectrum ranging from XX to XY, with many intermediate positions. Sex, in contrast, functions as a categorization system that allows only two positions: male or female. It operates as a primary system of order that excludes ambiguity, treating it as an anomaly to be eliminated[9]. A clear example is the surgical modification of ambiguous genitalia at birth. Such interventions are not to resolve health problems but to conform the body to social expectations. Put simply, the issue becomes whether to name the child Sara or Simon (for example, there are no gender-neutral names in Spanish), since our normative system demands gender assignment, which is determined by sex. From sex, we move directly to gender, which requires its own definition.

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Gender gained wide use first in the social sciences and later in everyday language in the 1980s, to distinguish physical aspects of the body from cultural constructions of "woman." Interestingly, the term originated in medicine. The English physician Bell [**10**], working with intersex patients, distinguished between genitalia (sex) and role (gender). A concept created to address medical ambiguity was later adapted by the social sciences to analyze ambiguity in defining "woman." Separating physiology from cultural beliefs was the first step in establishing women as a social category and social subjects, removing them from the realm of nature. This reinforced one of the most entrenched dichotomies of modern thought: nature/culture. From this arose the separation of sex and gender into two distinct but related dimensions of human life. Sex was understood as natural, fixed, and predetermined, while societies imposed gender—masculine for males, feminine for females—along with roles and expectations for each. This process is known as differential socialization: if you are named Sara, you live as a woman with corresponding roles and expectations; if Simon, as a man with a different set.

The sex/gender dichotomy thus mapped neatly onto the nature/culture dichotomy. Yet the presumption of automatic alignment proved untenable. Ethnographic evidence shows many societies recognizing more than two genders, assigning identity based on conduct rather than genitalia, or allowing fluid identities that shift over time.

Serena Nanda [**11**] conducted extensive fieldwork over five years with the *Hijra* community in a city in central India, publishing her findings in Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India. The *hijras* represent a third recognized gender identity in India, primarily composed of males who undergo ritual emasculation, in which their genitalia are removed.

The Navajo, in turn, recognize greater variation, conceptualizing three physical sexes: male, female, and hermaphroditic, referred to as *nadle*. In Santo Domingo, there are the *guevedoce*, and in Samoa, the *kwolu-aatmwol*—both hermaphroditic gender identities that presuppose a change in gender identity during puberty, reflecting a fluid conception of gender. Counterfactually, one could argue that among the Navajo, infants labeled as having "ambiguous genitalia" by the hegemonic medical model would not require surgical intervention, as this society accommodates a third sex category. These individuals occupy a liminal status just beneath the line separating male/female as accepted classifications.

Harriet Whitehead's [**12**]studies in the 1970s and 1980s on Native North Americans describe the "two-spirit" or *berdache* identity—considered half male, half female—present in 113 North American societies. This gender identity was often assigned early in life. Among the Pima, for instance, a young boy displaying interest in domestic tasks would undergo a test: placed in a hut with a bow and a basket, the hut was set on fire, and if the child rescued the basket rather than the bow, he was identified as a *wi-kovat*, a two-spirit.

The *mahu* of ancient Polynesia provide another example: males adopting certain socially feminine attributes, while the female counterparts were termed *fakatangata* among the Tongan (*fa'tama* among the Samoans). *Mahu* status was considered inherent at birth, though individuals could alter their attire and practices, effectively ceasing to occupy the role. Some scholars, such as Niko Besnier [**13**], viewed this not as a third gender, but as a liminal space for identity—a transitional status aligning with Turner's conceptualization.

Unni Wikan[**14**] describes a third-gender category among Omani xanith, linked more closely to sexual conduct and orientation (1977). Interestingly, in these last three cases, gender identities can be intermittent: an individual may assume the status temporarily, challenging Western notions of gender as an essential and permanent identity. Collectively, these examples not only challenge the concept of gender as a dualistic system (male/female) but also problematize the alignment with dualistic sex categories, undermining the binary male/female classification as the sole framework for understanding sexual identities.

These empirical cases, together with supporting feminist theorization, ultimately redefined the sex-gender relationship. Once sex was understood as a system of order rather than a natural fact, it became clear that the dichotomy of male/female gender categories was culturally constructed,

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serving as a framework for formulating sexual difference scientifically. As Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane F. Collier argued in their seminal 1987 text Gender and Kinship[15], this was not a natural reality onto which societies merely overlaid cultural meaning; rather, it was a socially constructed differentiation based on reproductive roles, with Western society responding through naturalization and subsequent scientific codification, such that the division of individuals into "men" and "women" was inseparable from kinship and reproduction. Sex, therefore, is a scientifically constructed—hence cultural—equivalent of gender difference.

Before returning to ambiguity, one further point requires clarification: if sex functions as the system of order regulating identity alignment, what, then, is gender? Gender is a differential. Like social class or ethnicity, it is a concept used to theorize how societies construct certain differences through the lived experiences of their members. Thus, genders per se do not exist; what exists are gender identities—complex sets of pre-defined roles or behavioral schemas associated with individuals to assign social function in relation to sexual differentiation as defined by sex. "Woman," "man," whether "cis" or "trans," "non-binary," or "gender-fluid" are gender identities—ways in which societies divide the spectrum of possibilities in relation to gender. They are solutions imposed on the male/female order system to resolve the ambiguity produced by challenges to pre-established sexual or gender identities.

This is what Judith Butler[16] termed the heterosexual matrix: a cultural ordering scheme aligning sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation according to the male-man-attracted-to-women/female-woman-attracted-to-men schema. In this discussion, we set aside sexual orientation to focus solely on the first pair. Here, the system of order comprises only four terms, necessarily paired two by two. The emergence and visibility of trans individuals has forced these liminal identities into recognition. By definition, the "trans" experience is processual—transiting, transcending—between stages; it concerns the liminal, belonging clearly to no specific domain of practice, occupying no settled place in society, caught between what was and what will be.

A child with male genitalia attempting to rescue a basket does not fit within this ordering scheme, representing a challenge to the established order, much like food outside a plate. Individuals with "ambiguous" genitalia, or those unwilling to commit to a fixed identity, pose a problem. Symbolically, their existence introduces viscosity, destabilizing the structure we assume governs reality, revealing the system of order as it truly is. This is uncomfortable: it forces one to move from observing the stage to examining the wooden scaffolding supporting the set. Understanding the backstage does not deny the reality of the stage; the classification of nature/culture and sex/gender is resilient. Instead, we modify, open, and expand the categories to accommodate these liminal bodies, without dismantling the entire system. Alternatively, one could deny ambiguity and treat it solely as an anomaly, but bodies inhabiting liminal spaces remain present materially, as physical entities that do not disappear.

Without seeking to homogenize experiences under a single gender identity, ambiguity is interesting precisely because these liminal bodies—whether temporarily or permanently—act as boundary objects, enabling transitions between different worlds of meaning. They allow individuals to inhabit existence as both "man" and "woman," two socially determined modes of being. Thus, ambiguous bodies open doors between these experiential realms.

Ambiguity not only necessitates the adaptation and expansion of the system to accommodate reality but also inherently questions the order itself. This dynamic underlies the emergence of new categories, developed to incorporate existing ambiguity without dismantling the classification system, which remains internalized in each society. Where previously only two gendered categories existed—man and woman—the appearance of men with female genitalia (or assigned female at birth) adopting the "man" identity necessitates distinction in our system of order: "trans men," who have transitioned from one sex or gender identity to another, and "cis men," whose gender identity corresponds with the traditional male assignment. In this way, not only do two new categories appear, but existing categories are modified with additional labels, thereby resolving ambiguity by providing a clear slot for each individual.

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4. Conclusions

In summary, ambiguity in anthropology offers a framework, in sociomaterial terms, for thinking about the ways in which we construct the reality we inhabit over time. Each society shapes its relationship with the environment through a complex network of interrelated schemes of order, enabling us to inhabit a world under the illusion of coherence and logical structure. Beneath this layer of assigned meanings lies ambiguity. Humans have an inherent need to create order, but each group does so differently. Within this order, we integrate and reintegrate the realities of the world we inhabit, thus accommodating change.

Through a brief overview of cross-cultural constructions of sex and gender, we have observed the particularities of each system of order, understanding that our own is merely one among many possible systems—neither more nor less "real." Examining our dualistic classificatory system and the complexity that ambiguity introduces has allowed us to comprehend the challenges arising from categorizing identities with the emergence of new subjectivities that do not conform to established parameters, remaining at the boundaries of definitions, in liminal spaces. This has resulted in a rearticulation of the system of order, resolving ambiguity through the redefinition of preexisting categories. Ambiguity, then, constitutes one of the mechanisms through which social change occurs.

The experience of ambiguity can thus be understood as a crossroads within the inevitable process of social transformation that we constantly encounter—a confrontation with the unstable and arbitrary nature of all the categories through which we construct and interpret our worlds. At the same time, it represents a potentially exciting and revelatory experience. If we pause to reflect on it, we are likely to move it from its indefinable liminality and make room for it—more or less comfortably—within our system of values, labels, and classifications. Perhaps the most interesting thing we can do with it is to plunge our hands into the honey jar, like the child in Sartre's essay [**7**,**17**] who, in his first encounter with stickiness, feels the boundaries of his being—of his very matter—threatened, blurred, and who, precisely through that unpleasant encounter, learns something—surely very difficult to explain—about himself.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, I.G. and S.F.; methodology, I.G. and S.F.; software, (not applicable).; validation, I.G..; formal analysis, I.G.; investigation, I.G. and S.F.; resources, (not applicable).; data curation, S.F.; writing—original draft preparation, I.G. and S.F.; writing—review and editing, I.G. and S.F.; visualization, (not applicable);.; supervision, I.G.; project administration, I.G.; funding acquisition, (not applicable); All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: During the preparation of this manuscript/study, the author(s) used Chat GPT for the purposes of translation. The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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