

“I EXIST TO RESIST”: NAVIGATING THE GENDER NON-CONFORMING  
IDENTITY AT HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

### “I EXIST TO RESIST”: NAVIGATING THE GENDER NON-CONFORMING IDENTITY AT HUMBOLDT STATE UNIVERSITY

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While transgender research is educating and reforming schools, politics and wider society, there is little work on a gender spectrum that disrupts the gender binary of (trans) men/women. This research is an attempt to fill in the gaps of people, significantly students who do not fit under the “transgender umbrella,” as this term has tended to clump an array of gender and sexual identities together. This qualitative research explores students who go beyond the gender binary and how they navigate non-binary, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming identities within Humboldt State University (HSU). With this present qualitative study, I examined the lived experiences of 11 self-identified gender non-conforming students at HSU. Much of what they discussed parallels research on transgender students in regards to faculty/staff training, bathrooms, and improvement for resources. These reasons prompted me to go a different direction and present the ways of how students operate their identity in a “progressive” university like HSU. I identified four themes from the in-person interviews; these include forming an identity as they found themselves at HSU, gender salience and disruptions through encounters at HSU, safe zones/safe people, and the degrees of “being out.” I argue that society is largely heteronormative and gender normative, and this is reflected in

institutions like schools. Findings can provide insight into the realities of students who are misunderstood and underrepresented within a school that is largely gender and heteronormative. By listening to these experiences, colleges and universities can implement better policies to support students who live outside the gender binary.

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*La lucha sigue.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education are becoming more racially diverse as U.S college enrollment has risen within the last decade. Between 2004 and 2014, college attendance has increased 17 percent from 17.3 to 20.2 million, with the number of female students rising 15 percent and male students 19 percent (Department of Education 2015). At the same time, states such as California have populations that have become majority non-White (Ochoa, Gomez, and Ortiz, 2010), and many other states are experiencing similar projections. Due to these demographic shifts, college and universities have had an increase of students of color enrolling. The Department of Education (2016) shows that between 1976 and the fall of 2014 the percentages for people of color in higher education has increased. Hispanic students rose from 4 percent to 17 percent of student population. For Asian/Pacific Islanders the percentage rose from 2 percent to 7percent, and Black student enrollment has risen from 10 percent to 14 percent of students.

Historically many of these institutions have been filled with white students, which prompted students of color during the Civil Rights Movement to demand accommodation, support, and accountability from their institutions and have continued in today's university settings (McCammon et al. 2017). Gay and lesbian activists during the gay liberation movement in the 1960's also fought for recognition and support within colleges and universities, because of the negative views of homosexuality (McCammon et al. 2017). According to Herek (2002), the earliest opinion poll in the U.S that measured attitudes toward gays and lesbians occurred in 1965. The poll reported that 70 percent of

respondents held a negative view of homosexuality and believed gays and lesbians were more “harmful than helpful to American life” (Herek 2002:41). This quote captures the way U.S mainstream culture felt about queer individuals. Although this view of the LGBTQ communities was prominent perhaps 50 years ago, today this negative view has slowly descended downward (Teal and Conover-Williams 2016). The amount of scholarly work on the LGBTQ community reflects the continual transformation in the way these communities have been talked about and studied.

In recent years, scholarship on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students has erupted, as this population has grown and gained more scholarly attention. There has been scholarly work in attempts to explore the experiences and various identities that LGBTQ students encompass (Renn 2007). In contemporary times, scholars have also questioned the implications of intersecting social identities like race, class, height, and age (Dozier 2005; Koyama 2006; Schilt 2006), for further analysis of LGBTQ individuals. While there is a lot of research on LGB students in higher education, and to a lesser extent the experiences of transgender students, there are no studies to date that explore the experiences of gender non-conforming students in college and universities. Although there are studies that have explored transgender student experiences in college and universities (Beemyn et al. 2005, Dugan 2012, Johnson 2014, Erber 2015), trans and gender non-conforming identities are often lumped together. Most non-binary identities have been coupled under the “transgender umbrella,” which is insufficient to explain all the nuances within gender identity and sexuality. With this study I aim to fill that gap on student identities that go beyond the gender binary:

genderless, agender, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming. While transgender and non-binary students undergo similar discrimination, in regards to access to bathrooms, high rates in alcohol abuse (Tupler et al 2017), and victimization and marginalization (Seelman 2016), this research is an attempt to tell a different story: the way gender non-conforming students navigate their identity on a “progressive” campus like Humboldt State University. I contribute to the study of higher education by exploring and bringing forth narratives of individuals who attend institutions of higher learning, but remain largely invisible. I contribute to the scholarship on diversity in higher education by making visible the voices of students of color and queer students. I do this while also expanding the literature and the research on the lives of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. I also contribute innovative methodology, using counter-hegemonic research methods as a means of more robustly understanding the identities and experiences of gender non-conforming individuals. My methods allowed gender non-conforming students the opportunity to self-identify, centering their own experiences as legitimate truth, and giving them the freedom to tell their stories and experiences.

Because of the underrepresentation of non-binary student identities in sociological literature, I sought research that explained identity formation of queer individuals such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. In addition, I also was interested in the intersections of race and gender identity. Research on racial identity formation has also been prominent in sociology and psychology, but the exploration of intersecting identities has been inadequate to explain diverse student populations with multiple marginalized identities. Much of the scholarly work on LGBTQ communities has focused

on the process of “coming out” in what has been labeled LGBT stage models of identity development. These models project a trajectory of a sexual orientation identity development. However, these models fail to recognize or explain gender non-conforming identities, and so neglect the uniqueness and multiplicity that occurs within groups of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals (Renn 2007). The models attempt to fundamentally explain the process of “coming out,” but coming out is not always linear, or chronological with set stages and milestones. For example, some students in the present research were not out to everyone, but were out to certain people. Forming a queer identity, or LGB identity, is commonly more fluid, with stops, starts, and backtracking (Cass 1984; Savin-Williams 1990). There has also been a rise in racial identity models to explain the process of how students of color come into their racial identity, since many identity models were based on White students. Racial identity formation models argue that people of color think about their racial identity often, but the process of racial salience transpires at different times in ones’ life – for some later, for others early (Hurtado 2015). For student of color, recognizing one’s race while learning about racial inequalities can lead them to investigate their own racial or ethnic identity, while contributing to healthy self-concept (Cross 1995; Helms 1990; Kim 2001). This relates to the current study, since students’ process(es) of forming gender, sexual and racial identities were under investigation. This growing body of literature can provide us with further examinations of how students come to self-identity with their queerness and/or racial identity.

## CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Queer individuals and people of color have to endure complex processes. To analytically study these marginalized communities, this study was grounded in queer theory, critical race theory, and feminist intersectional theories. These theories offer an explanatory analysis into the lives of people who do not fit into the man or woman binary, and hold intersecting identities. Theories are discussed below.

### *Queer Theory*

Queer theory entails challenging normative assumptions of gender and sexuality. It seeks to answer a series of questions about what constitutes as *normal*, how *normal* occurs, and who is excluded or oppressed by those notions of what is average and natural. Queer theory celebrates the figure of the queer individual. Brown (2011) outlines the importance of considering the geographies of sexuality, as it denotes connecting sexualities with other axes of social identity with equal attention, specifically intersections of race, class, ability, ethnicity and age. Through these identities, individuals can find ways to queer them, not only through their sexuality but through race, ability, nationality, etc. Not being constrained to societal expectations of each category, allowed the freedom to push boundaries on the definition of normalness, continuously redefining assumed definitions. Queer theory allows individuals to identify with multiple identities, each with equal importance and ability to queer that identity to the individuals liking. Queer theory is a procedure of observing and exposing underlying meanings, and

variations. Sedgwick (1990) reveals that language is a relevant force behind sexuality, and labeled speech acts are ultimately the proof of the nature of one's sexuality. As Corber and Valocchi (2003) proclaim, there is not a "critical consensus on the definitional limits of queer" and the term, queer, is primarily alluring because of its "indeterminacy" or uncertainty (P.2). There are no agreements on what queer is, it cannot be bounded, for this reason it is appealing to individuals because it essentially cannot be defined. It is anything but the ordinary. Hence, for this reason there are arguments on terminology, as Sedwick (1990) explains the use of language and labeling as critical. Terminology, labels and language a vital part of the queer community, but there are often disagreements on terms and who they include or exclude. For instance, "homosexual" has been replaced by the umbrella term *queer*. Even then, some individuals do not identify with the term queer, but hold on to terms of gay or lesbian. The dichotomous terms of gay and lesbian have evolved to include other identities.

Queer theory supports people choices to identify, perform and express themselves in a variety of ways, based on the autonomy of the individual and the fluidity of gender versus the dichotomous gender groupings. Using this framework allows participants in this research to play with their gender expressions and terminology since the standard binary limits freedom under the prominence of gender and heteronormativity. The ability for individuals – specifically students in regards to this research to feel they can perform and play with gender can be liberating and empowering as they oppose heteronormative ideals, moving away from engaging in traditional identity politics.

*Critical Race Theory in Institutions of Higher Learning*

Critical Race theorists Omi and Winant (2015) establish the way in which race is a master category and thus has historically shaped and continues to shape history, politics, economics and culture within the United States. Race shapes our identity, defines rights and privileges, forms ideologies, allows access to resources, and formulates discrimination and oppression. Like other fields of research, white men have dominated sociology; the canon has excluded the voices of Black folks, women, queer peoples, and other people of color. For these reasons, it is critical to analyze race, because of the historical erasure of people of color's experiences, stories, and contributions within higher education and overall society. Omi and Winant (2015) theorize the "racial state;" through legislation, and struggles over power and autonomy, we can see race and racism being re-created both structurally and experientially. Racial state theory links the state as an institution to race, particularly because of the racial history of the United States. Policies have resulted in negative racial consequences, such as racial segregation, housing discrimination, forced immigration and relocation.

These policies have also led to the ideology of *colorblindness*. The notion that people do not "see color," or race and see only a human race. Establishing the idea that we live in a post-racial society where everyone has equal access to resources to get be successful. The belief that individuals have access to be successful if they pull themselves up by their bootstraps. If individuals are unsuccessful this is due to poor choices, judgment and values. There is acceptance of a system that works for everyone and does

not discriminate on the basis of race or ethnicity. Legislation, policies, and procedures are intricately part of the state, with substantial repercussions for poor people, communities of color, LGBTQ folks, and other marginalized communities.

Critical race theory (CRT) of the state furthers Omi and Winant's (2015) racial state theory to extend race scholarship, by indicating and examining racist assumptions and frameworks within legal structures and written law that normalize white supremacy. Thus, CRT of the state demonstrates a heightened critique of the procedures of law, which exhibit racial inequality (Bracey II 2015). Using critical race theories can help to further sociological research when examining institutions of higher learning, since policies have long excluded racial and gender minorities. Many state institutions, including universities, continue to be spaces that exclude diverse communities. In those spaces, communities like LGBTQ individuals, and underrepresented people of color persevere to carve out their own spaces.

CRT theorists are also a proponent of counter-storytelling, which incorporates an alternative notion as to what holds legitimacy in terms of knowledge. It states ones' experiences and own expertise can be forms of legitimate knowledge as opposed to objective knowledge that is often defined as authentic, since it is fact-based and measurable. Counter-storytelling can be used as "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race and further the struggle of racial reform" (Soloranzo and Yosso 2002:32). By critically analyzing and listening to narratives of people's experiences with racism, a voice is given to those who have often



been voiceless. CRT, and the ideas of counter-storytelling, are core to our research methods, as described later in Chapter 3.

### *Feminist Intersectional Theories*

Feminist theory argues for a shift away from the male perspective, placing those at the margins into the center. Feminist framework deviates from a patriarchal hegemonic system, while also raising awareness of that system. Feminist theory is critical of other dominant institutions like white supremacy, capitalism, heterosexism, and sexism. bell hooks (1984) illustrates the contributions that the feminist movement has made, particularly as it has put forth unheard marginalized voices at the forefront. Radical thinkers and women of color have examined gender from the perspective of race, class, and sex while also critiquing systems of domination and exploitation. These assessments have changed the face of feminist theory and practice (hooks 1984). Feminist frameworks have contributed to academia by studying and bringing forth voices of individuals who have been left out of the academy. Research has been dominated by white heterosexual men, and studies have also only focused on this population. These frameworks have assisted in bringing diverse experiences and communities into academia. Feminist intersectional framework has been used to describe and explain people of color's experiences, as people of color navigate a race or ethnicity, a gender, and come from a different class, ability, documentation, and so forth at the same time (Ngan-Ling Chow 1987; Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1990; Smith 2006; Nader 2006). All these identities are multidimensional; they exist and interact with each other in different spaces, shaping

experiences with group membership, administering both oppression and privilege. For instance, racial identity is experienced by other dimensions of one-self: gender identity, young or old, poor, middle-class or wealthy, heterosexual or gay, lesbian, bisexual transgender, able-bodies or with disabilities, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, or atheist and with each of these there can be privileges granted by belonging to that group, however while also experiencing oppressions (Tatum 2000). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) used the term, “the matrix of domination” to describe the interlocking systems of oppression due to race, class, and gender, which are part of an overarching structure of domination. Domination by economic, political and ideological systems that oppress not only Black women, but also other marginalized people. Intersectionality is a useful framework for this particular research as it emphasizes overlapping identities, specifically students as they come from an array of diverse backgrounds with multidimensional identities.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To understand the experiences of gender non-conforming students in higher education, the following literature review establishes a foundation on the intersections of student identities and their formation. One must account for the origins of sexuality, gender and race as concepts that are fundamental in the daily lives of people, and students in particular. The subject investigated in this study pertained to the ways gender non-conforming students navigate their identity within a predominantly white, gender-normative, and heteronormative institution like Humboldt State University. The main goal of the study was to offer insight and informative analysis on this non-binary student identity. The body of literature reviewed spans from the 1970s to present day research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identity formation, queer theory, critical race theory, and racial identity formation. In this chapter, I provide brief historical accounts on the developments of sexuality and gender as concepts over time, within the context of the U.S. Then, I outline identity formation models developed to explain the process of how individuals come into their lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity. In addition, I account for the role that race has played in the development of people of color, and students of color as they form their identity.

### *Sexual Identity Formation*

Sexual and gender identities are perceived to be “biological,” which is often coupled with “unchangeable,” leading to notions of gender that are centered in a gender

binary—system that attributes social characteristics to sex anatomy (Hausman 2001). This can be seen with masculine and feminine characteristics that are attributed to genitalia; people assigned male at birth should have masculine traits and people assigned female at birth should have feminine traits. Gender also interacts with sexuality; when it comes to what is perceived to be normative heterosexuality, men should be attracted to women, and women to men, as both men and women fall into place with their gender roles and expectations. As a system, gender assigns behaviors to bodies; those actions and characteristics are conjoined to be feminine or masculine (Green 2004). In other words, gender is used to describe specific behaviors and characteristics; those behaviors and characteristics then become attached to men and women. This system constrains individuals who do not conform to normative ideas of men and women.

The word sex is frequently described as either a biological category or the physical act of intercourse; sex is a system of organizing body types based on alleged reproductive capabilities, as already determined by visual inspection of the external genitalia (Green 2004). Sexual identity or orientation has to do with sexual attractions, self-labeling and sexual contact (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000). Gender is the term used to refer to an individual's inner sense of self as being male, female, or an identity outside or in-between the categories (Wilchins 2002). Those who live outside of gender and sexual norms may struggle with their sense of self, including their identity and how it is developed, maintained, and lived out. Individuals who chose not conform to societal pressures of gender roles and expressions, or reject essentialist views of sex and gender are subject to homophobia and heterosexism. Examples of this are revealed through

national issues like the military service, legislation, and acts of violence (Rhoads 1994). Those who exist outside of masculine and feminine gender norms are subject to transphobia. Transphobia exposes transgender and gender non-conforming people to discrimination, hatred, and violence due to expressing non-normative gender norms. These actions can be interpersonal to state driven. For example, the trans panic defense that partially excused crimes such as a physical attack or murder on the basis that the victim's gender identity is to blame for the defendant's violent reaction (Lee 2014). This is in addition to current state battles that restrict transgender and non-binary individuals access to bathrooms according to the gender on their birth certificates.

Identity development involves taking on roles, cultural expectations, and imaginative views of oneself, which are improvised and negotiated (Goffman 1959; Strauss 1978). Identities are performed, as a balancing act, involving a multitude of identities being carried out at the same time. Snow and Anderson (1987) explain these numerous identities as “social identities”—what others assign to individuals to locate them in a specific category—and “personal identities”—a person's self-image. Social identities can include gender and sexual identities, being a student, a mother, professor, and other identities that help categorize people we meet into groups. People also have their own personal identities, and definitions of who they are. This is in contrast to social identities that are sometimes already given to us by strangers who assume our gender identity, sexual orientation, class, and/or race. Identity is also a negotiation process (Altheide 2000), since individuals may or may not self-identify with an imposed social identity. Individuals will learn to manage (Goffman 1959) this identity or negotiate it

(Strauss 1978). Individuals can choose to accept, reject, or learn to balance an identity, as they weave in and out of an identity that may not be socially acceptable. For instance, people who hold marginalized identities, like LGBTQ folks. Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people, and queer folks negotiate their identity by deciding their level of commitment to the larger queer community, as well as the degree to which they are “out” about their gender and sexual identity, and to whom.

In the U.S., college can serve as a place to explore identity, and for many it can be a time of self-reflection and self-actualization. Students are exposed to a variety of experiences including: solitude, individualism, building relationships, friendships, interacting with people from diverse backgrounds, intellectual growth, and many other components of college life (Moffatt 1989). College life represents freedom from parental figures for both queer and non-queer students. The autonomy to finally express themselves in a way that they are comfortable. However, for queer students seeing other LGBTQ students on campus induces them to reveal their disclosed queer identity (Rhoads 1994). This recognition of identity can be difficult for many students to acknowledge, since homophobia is rampant within U.S society. For students who do not conform to gender norms, it can be difficult negotiating their identity due to essentialist views on gender expression and identity, in addition to social retribution.

### *Queer Theory and the Study of Sexuality*

Historians document that homosexuality and heterosexuality were not considered a basis for one’s identity until the early twentieth century (Seidman 2013). The

developments of theories to explain sexuality, its characteristics, and how it relates to identity have grown since the 1970s. The development of queer theory has been essential to understanding sexual and gender identities, as well as deconstructing normative gender structures.

Historically, the term “queer” was a synonym for odd or unusual (Brontsema 2004). “Queer” co-existed with *fairy* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to refer to homosexuals, as well as feminine men (Brontsema 2004). “Queer” has been used at times abusively, and other times endearingly, as a colloquial term for homosexuality (Sullivan 2003). Queer was reclaimed by gay and lesbian activists during the 1980s, and has become a rapidly growing academic discipline. Queer theory literature and theorization seeks to answer a series of questions about what constitutes normative ideas. It asks why heterosexuality is assumed to be “normal,” whereas anything beyond that is questioned. The theory asks how this idea of *normal* comes to exist, and who is excluded or oppressed by notions of what is average and/or natural. Queer theory celebrates the figure of the queer individual, particularly the act of *queering*. Queering refers to the process of deconstructing something in order to make it abnormal, thereby reflecting on assumptions of normality. Individuals can queer the self, queer spaces, and queer identities. Queer identities can include drag queens, two-spirit peoples<sup>1</sup>, transgender folks, and those who live outside the gender binary as well as those who do not live up to gender expectations based on

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<sup>1</sup> Two-Spirit refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Indigenous Americans. This term is drawn from a traditional worldview that upholds the unity of their culture and community with the experience of their sexuality (Wilson 1996).

their sex assigned at birth. Queer theory explains that we are performing narratives and structures of what we think is maleness, femaleness, straightness, “normalness”, and so forth. These are acts, and we consistently perform them in daily situations (Butler 1990). These performance narratives are perpetuated into mainstream culture, as appropriate sexual and gender norms. *Normal* becomes heterosexual – heteronormativity, and cisgender becomes gender-normative. Any deviations are abnormal and thus punishable by law or through acts of harassment and violence. Queer theory is primarily about challenging gender normativity as a heteronormative institution, and breaking down its norms and values.

Queer theory is a procedure of observing and exposing underlying meanings, differentiations, and relations of power in larger culture that others oversimplify. It is focused upon deconstructing the modern practice of binaries. Sedgwick (1990) argues that standard binary oppositions limit freedom and understanding, especially as related to sexuality. These binaries; binary oppositions (man/woman, gay/straight) limit sexuality to homosexual or heterosexuality, as well as to two genders; male and female. Queer theory argues that gender is a social construct and is not fixed, it is fluid, and has the opportunity to be changed. This is replicated in the evolution of terms that describe sexual orientation and gender identity. The term “homosexual” is an outdated clinical term considered derogatory and offensive by many gay and lesbian people. The Associated Press, New York Times and Washington Post restrict usage of the term. The terms “gay” and “lesbian” accurately describe those who are attracted to people of the same sex (GLAAD 2015), and more recently the term “queer” has evolved to be the umbrella terms for the



LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual) community. Terminology and language are constantly evolving. Often it evolved so quickly that it does not give time for others to fully grasp and understand the concepts. It has gone from LGB, to include the “T” (trans\*). Trans\* refers to anyone who is not a traditional cisgender man or woman, they go beyond the gender binary; transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, and genderless. However, all these identities are lumped under the metaphorical “transgender umbrella,” which is insufficient in explaining all the nuances within gender identity and sexuality. In addition to having no consensus on whom is included (Davidson 2007). The recent abbreviation for the queer community includes many different identities lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA), this shows the growth that sexuality and gender have reached. Various identities are beginning to be studied and acknowledged by queer theorists this will allow past concepts to be re-examined. The beauty of queer theory is that it is constantly being re-invented for the better. The persistent body of literature keeps growing because the challenging of norms and values by people who refuse the dichotomous gender and heterosexual norms. Therefore, there will be a constant changing of queer theory and its own identity.

### *Queer Identity Developments: An Overview*

For many queer individuals, the process of developing a sexual identity, or orientation can be a lifelong process (D’Augelli 1994); this is also true for gender identity (Sedgwick 1990; Weeks 1991). There are a variety of stage models for the development

of gay, lesbian, bisexual identities (Cass 1979; Savin-Williams 1990; Fassinger 1996).

This development has come to be known as the “coming out process” and has grown into a wide range of theoretical and empirical literature (Rosario et al. 2011). These models project a trajectory of a sexual orientation identity development, but they do not portray the uniqueness and multiplicity that occurs within the groups of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Renn 2007). Older identity development models discuss the LGB trajectory as a chronological process with an end-state. Simon and Gagnon (1986) state that these early linear descriptions of life cycles try to specify behavior within a cycle of one’s life that is uncertain, meaning that is difficult to predict an individual's life cycle and behavior when life itself can be unpredictable. Essentially, humans are not linear. There are special circumstances, cultural backgrounds, and familial backgrounds encompassing one's multiple identities, thus these linear models do not fully explain the richness of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and their lives. This is especially the case when one has intersecting identities like race, class, ethnicity, ability, etc.

Early works of Cass (1979) explained the formation of a homosexual identity. Cass’ (1979) work focused primarily on gay men, as they assumed a perception of self from heterosexual to homosexual. Similarly, Fassinger (1996) provided another model to describe the sexual identity formation of lesbians. Unlike Cass’ (1979) model, Fassinger’s (1996) model employed phases instead of stages to describe how the process of development is continuous and flexible. The model consisted of multifaceted phases that reflected dual aspect of development—individual sexual identity and group membership identity. Sexual identity was (1) how lesbians come to be aware of their

sexual orientation, often with feelings of nonheterosexuality; (2) exploring the feelings through building relationships or having feelings for other women; (3) deepening self-awareness and commitment to identifying as a sexual being; (4) fully accepting themselves as a lesbian. Group identity was the way that lesbians become members of the overall group. Savin-Williams (1990, 1995, 1998) developed a trajectory of identity development from his earlier work with gays and lesbians. In this model, he wanted to demonstrate how a turning point in one's life could alter and change the course of their life. For example, Savin-Williams (1995, 1998) considered the reaction that family members (specifically parents) might have when they come to find out that their child is gay. This could be neglect, victimization, or cutting them off financially, providing a turning point.

These identity formation models did not incorporate a bisexual identity formation; bisexual was often lumped together with lesbian and gay. Researchers have since established that bisexual identity formation occurs differently from lesbian and gay (Fox 1995; Klein 1990, 1993). A bisexual identity may develop at different stages in life; for some the identity forms in childhood, and for others after identifying as gay or lesbian, or during a heterosexual marriage. Bleiberg et al. (2005) developed "The Layer Cake Model of Bisexual Identity Development" after working with college students. Within their model they conceptualized five layers, where each equal layer built on the one prior. Knous (2005) proposed steps bisexuals might undertake towards accepting their sexual identity. Knous (2005) described that bisexuals also experience stigma like gay and lesbian individuals, and respond in similar ways usually in attempting to "pass" as gay or

straight, conceal their bisexual identity, or seek support groups. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) have theorized the use of models for understanding complex psychological processes is difficult, since there are stark differences between many of them.

Conversely, the models discussed suggest an awareness of how individuals understand their identity formation. First, a private sense of self as being nonheterosexual, then being recognized, engaged and integrated within a lesbian, gay or bisexual community as this identity becomes part of the individual's larger sense of self.

Sexual orientation identities can follow an array of pathways, as outlined above. Compared to early models that assumed a singular path, later models acknowledge there may be barriers and challenges to forming an identity. Many models begin with an individual's awareness of a nonheterosexual identity; however, the individual may use multiple strategies to try to block this recognition in order to diminish these same-gender feelings. Often because of the stigma associated with being gay, individuals may fear violence, discrimination and harassment. There may also be a period of denial, in which individuals use much of their energy to deny and minimize these feelings (Cass 1979; Rhoads 1994; Dilley 2002; Bilodeau and Renn 2005).

Much of the research on sexual identity formation has focused on adults and students in college, with few models analyzing the development of LGB adolescents. Newer models and theories continue to be more inclusive; for example D'Augelli (1994) presented a life-span model for gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. While avoiding sequenced stages, D'Augelli (1994) outlined six processes that occur within cultural and sociopolitical contexts, theorizing how each process is negotiated and reconciled by the

individual. The six processes included: (1) exiting a heterosexual identity; (2) developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status; (3) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity; (4) becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring; (5) developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status; and (6) entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community. Similar to the other models it began with the individual having an awareness or recognition that their sexual orientation is not heterosexual, then entering the stage of telling other people their private identity, becoming public.

As already discussed, gender and sexual identities are complex, it is difficult to have one model to explain the variety of different identities within the LGBT community. Transgender and other gender non-conformist identities that have had little research or attention in the scholarship. These models provide insight to the ways in which sexual identity formation happens for LGB individuals, but may be inadequate for explaining the experiences of non-binary individuals, who are grappling with lesser-known and acknowledged identities, with a complex relationship between gender and sexuality. While there are not theorizations of a gender non-conforming gender identity, specifically, there have been developments models to explain transgender identity formation.

### *Trans Identity Formation*

As explored above, many LGB identity formation theories assume narrow notions of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identities. Lesbian gay and bisexual describe sexual orientations; there has been very little research conducted on transgender

identities, as gender identities. Within the last decade there has been an increase in students coming out as transgender in institutions of higher learning (Rankin et al. 2010), which has also led to more research being done, as well as the adaptation of policies to create trans-inclusive campuses. The word transgender is centered on individuals whose gender identity disagrees with biological sex assignment or societal expectations for gender expression within the binary of male or female (Bornstein 1994; Elkins and King 1996; Wilchins 1997, 2002). The term continues to evolve and is conceptualized as an umbrella term for a range of different identities including non-normative gender expressions, performances and identities. These include transsexuals, transvestites, drag queens and kings, female-to-male (FTM) male-to-females (MTF), gender-benders, genderqueers, cross-dressers, and gender nonconforming persons. However, the squeezing of all these identities into the term transgender has left many activists, transgender, and non-binary folks critiquing the sex and gender binary analysis, offered by transgender theorists and authors. Many within the community have called for a greater fluidity, multiplicity, ambiguity and queering of the boundaries between male and female and masculine and feminine (Davidson 2007). Although the term transgender has been a beneficial for political organizing, there is no clear consensus on whom this term involves (Davidson 2007).

It is important to consider the impact that Western psychiatric and medical treatment has influenced the lives of transgender people. Historically, “transgenderism” has been considered a disorder by the American Psychiatric Association. Much of the psychiatric literature continues to focus primarily on binary constructions of transgender

identity, especially as male or female categories are associated with normalcy (Bilodeau and Renn 2005). Some scholars have theorized models of transgender identity development. Gagne, Tewksbury and McGaughey (1997) developed a four-step process, studying participants with various gender identities and expression. In their model, (1) participants who were forced to conform to expected gender roles expressed secret activities and thoughts; (2) individuals self-identified as transgender, which was often characterized by shame or fear of how others will react to their gender identity; (3) individuals “came out” publically as transgender; (4) participants felt they could be free to express themselves. Bockting and Coleman (2007) also developed a five-stage transgender identity development: pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, intimacy, and identity integration. Like other researchers Bockman and Coleman (2007) argued that this model may not occur in a linear order; some stages can be skipped, individuals may jump back and forth, and some stages will be achieved or not achieved. A study done by Bilodeau (2005) built on D’Augelli’s (1994) model in order to develop a transgender identity model, though it had a small sample of two. Like other models, individuals (1) felt a conflict within their identities; (2) identified with a transgender identity and sought support, through networks, mentors, or organizations; (3) individuals came out to family members. In his study however, Bilodeau’s (2005) participants did not discuss the intimacy process as in D’Augelli (1994).

Coming-out is usually associated with lesbians, gays, and bisexuals as they inform others about their sexual identities, but for those who live outside the gender binary they also have to come out, and reveal their non-normative gender identity. LGB

identity formation models and Trans identity models have similarities in the way that individuals come to realize that they are not heterosexual, or cisgender. As they also refuse to conform to normative sexual and gender expectations, roles, and expressions. The many stage models of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities do not explain all the nuances in gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans lives. They also are unsuccessful in depicting the uniqueness and multiplicity that occurs within the groups of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Renn 2007). Feminist scholars have charged that these models are imposing dominant white male development (Savin-Williams 2005). Brown (1995), examined that the attempt to establish a homogenous model was abhorrent, as women live “creative” and “chaotic” lives. In regards to race and ethnicity, all models fail to recognize the intersections of sexual identity formation and race, as models are based in ethnocentrism. As Savin-Williams (2005) has explained, the models measure “progress in terms of moving along a white, majority continuum” (P.77). People of color experience their own culture, class and historical contexts differently than white individuals. Having a one-size-fits-all model negates the cultural differences between different races and ethnicities. Dube and Savin-Williams (1999) studied ethnic group differences among gay men and their process of a gay identity. They found, just to list a few: Latino men were early and Asian American men were late in their awareness of same-sex attractions, Black men but few Asian American men had sex before self-labeling as gay, and Black and Asian American men were least likely to be out to others, specifically family (Dube and Savin-Williams 1999). Asian American men like Japanese and Korean men seldom reached the level of identity integration described in the LGB models, since their culture



infrequently provides avenues for individuals to establish a sense of identity. Based in cultural context, coming out and being involved in political activism is not possible for members of some ethnic groups (Savin-Williams 2005). Race, class, gender, sexuality, religion and other aspects of one's identity add complexity to the way individuals will develop a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans identity.

*Racial Identity Formation within Predominantly White Institutions*

For many decades, there have been studies on the process of how individuals come to develop a racial identity, with older models consisting of linear projections similar to the LGB models already described. In order to fill in the gaps in this area of research, recent developments explain identity development among students who are Black, Latinx<sup>2</sup> and members of other underrepresented groups (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). Racial identity salience is key to identity development, it is important to study the ways in which it is fostered or diminished during college, more significantly within institutions that are predominantly white. Cameron (2004) describes the "salience" of a social identity, as the occurrence in which individuals think about their membership to particular group such as race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. This process includes two components, the level of prominence of that social identity which contributes to an individual's self-concept, and the cognitive centrality of that identity. When discussing racial identity, racial centrality has to do with having a high level of salience that is "cross-situationally stable" and thus important to the definition of self. As individuals

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<sup>2</sup> Latinx is the gender-neutral term for Latino/a.

navigate their daily life, they are aware of their racial identity and the racial differences between interactions but behave as they normally would, as this contributes to their own self-concept. Hurtado et al. (2015) illustrate that racial identity salience as a component of centrality specifies that race perhaps takes precedence in people of colors minds, as they are more acutely aware of racial differences and intergroup relations.

Individuals can reach racial salience at different points in their lives, for some it is brought to their attention at an early age, and others at a later age. Hurtado et al (2015) explains that salience of racial identity is typically a decisive point in the process of development transition, but not the end point. This varies on individual's environments, education, where they are raised, live, work, or where they have traveled. Once they reach this point they continue to develop their identity as opposed to this being the end of their racial growth. It was also reported that people of color encounter unconscious or internalized racism during their racial identity formation (Cross 1995; Helms 1990; Kim 2001). Individuals can remain in this phase for long periods of time, as various social factors can contribute to feelings of self-hate. Family, media, friends, cultural norms and even school can be responsible for individuals' feelings of internalized racism and oppression, as they then exude these feelings towards other members of their racial or ethnic group. As individuals become more aware of their race and its significance, while tied to socio-political history, they will continue to think about race, which will then lead them to a phase of confusion. They will begin to question the dominant racial paradigm of U.S society that continues to perpetuate racial inequalities, and influence them to perhaps investigate their own racial and ethnic identity (Cross 1995; Helms 1990; Kim

2001). These models' last stage often incorporates individuals' reaching a healthy self-concept of their racial identity as they are interested in learning more about other diverse identities. Using aspects of these models can assist in the analysis of students who are racially underrepresented at institutions of higher learning, but also hold marginal gender and sexual identities.

Much of the research on racial identity formation has excluded Black and other non-White student populations, producing identity development theories generated from and for white male students which then are applied to all students regardless of race, gender ethnicity, class, ability, etc. This becomes an issue for universities because they lack the services to better serve students who come from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Contemporary models began with understanding Black individuals identity development and biracial identities, and they have continued to expand to other racial categories. These include White, Latinx, Asian and American Indian (see Helm's Model of White Identity Development 1990; Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson's White Racial Consciousness Model 1994; Ferdman and Gallego's Model of Latino Identity Development 2001; Kim's Asian American Identify Development Model 1981, 2001; Horse's Perspective on American Indian Identity Development 2001).

Critical race scholars, feminist scholars, queer scholars and other critical social theorists have dedicated their work to using counter story narratives to tell the stories of those on the margins, and much research has been committed to telling the stories of students within predominantly white universities. As colleges and universities have grown to be more ethnically diverse (Rendon et al. 2000), students with varied

backgrounds often have to navigate these outsider identities within institutions that have been predominantly white, and have limited inclusivity of varied student identities. Students who come from different cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and varying immigration profiles have raised important questions as to the ways they are being educated, what they are being taught and who is doing the educating (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 1995). Rendon et al. (2000) studied the retention of students of color within higher education and postulates that in order for these institutions to be more inclusive, it is essential for them to transform. They argue that this transformation towards inclusiveness validates and reflects those communities of color which the students come from and mirrors an understanding of the cultural endured by the students who attend white universities. Additionally, it is debated that many students who enroll in white institutions undergo a bicultural socialization where they negotiate their “subordinate” identity (Darder 1991), and non-White culture, while learning to understand the “dominant” culture pervasive in life within higher education. There are many important factors in regards to students of color and their identity development process, including ways that they can be hindered or encouraged. Regarding students, identity is a result of college student development and an entry that aids the growth of other crucial outcomes in one’s life (Maramba and Velasquez 2012). Students of color develop their racial and ethnic identity early on, and going into college or university greatly impacts this developmental process. Maramba and Velasquez (2012) proclaim questions derived from the ways that students of color interpret the world, (a) how much information do students know about their racial/ethnic history, culture and current socio-economic-political

conditions? And (b) how important is students racial/ethnic community? While in college, students are exposed to new and challenging material that can influence their perspectives on their racial and ethnic identity. Maramba and Velasquez's (2012) study described the majority of participants spending more time and effort in wanting to learn about their ethnic identity while in college, compared to their precollege experience where they did not know much about their history or culture. The authors go on to state that this strong connection to ethnic identity can greatly impact student's interpersonal relationships and academic outcomes in developing analytical and critical thinking skills. While in college students learn to navigate their many roles and identities, for some their racial identity formation has just been realized while for others it began at an early age.

Recent research demonstrates that students of color often have negative opinions of campus environments compared to their white peers (Guillermo-Wann 2013; Hurtado 1992; Locks et al. 2008; Museus, Nichols and Lambert 2008; Rankin and Reason 2005). This is due to many institutions of higher learning not catering to the needs to diverse student populations and upholding colorblind ideologies. Students in universities perhaps have an added level of difficulty as they are in the process of having revelations about their racial identity and/or gender identity, while also navigating this identity in a white space. Attending white institutions makes students of color more aware of their racial identity as they do not see themselves reflected within the institution, thus have negative opinions about the campus. The university has to implement inclusivity, not just claim it. This transformation will evade student's feelings of subordination student's making them feel validated.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study's purpose was to provide an exploratory study of the experiences of gender nonconforming students on the HSU campus. To understand these experiences, I used interviews with self-identified gender non-conforming or non-binary students at Humboldt State University. To begin this exploration, I collected data as part of a course called Community Action Research and Grant Writing, in a research team with four other students. For the class we employed three different methods: a survey, semi-structured interviews, and oral histories (IRB # 15-198). The interview questions were originally formulated to try to understand the general experiences of gender non-conforming students at HSU, in order to access the needs and better serve this student population. For this paper I am only using the data from the semi-structured interviews; the limitations of the questions are discussed later in the paper. The research setting that describes HSU and its surrounding area are described in this chapter, in addition to recruitment, data collection research design and rationale, and the data analysis.

### *Research Setting*

The population for this study included gender non-conforming students living in the rural town of Arcata, where Humboldt State University is located. HSU is part of the 23-campus California State University system, and is located in Northern California. The school is situated in the small rural town of Arcata, 95 miles south of the Oregon border, and 270 miles north of San Francisco. The university is surrounded by redwood forests,

ocean beaches and elevated mountain ranges. Humboldt State University's Office of Institutional Effectiveness (2016) reported the most current student demographics. They reported the latest enrollment for the fall of 2016 was 8,503, with 8,020 students enrolled full time. White students make up 43.7% of the student population, a total of 3,715 self-identified white students. Black students make up 3.2% of the student population with a total of 217 self-identified black students. American Indian students are 1.0% of the student population, with 89 self-identified American Indian students. Asian students make up 3.3% of the student population, with 279 students self-identified Asian students. Hispanic/Latinx students make up the second largest student population next to white students at 33.7% of the student population, with a total of 2,869 self-identified Hispanic/Latinx students. Together students of color make up 48.1% of the student population, this includes students who marked two or more ethnicities (6.7%) and Pacific Islander (0.2%). The percentage of students who did not select an ethnicity was 6.5%, this was labeled as "Unknown." The majority of Humboldt State University students hail from out of the area, with 32.1% coming from Los Angeles, 12.2% coming from the San Francisco Bay Area, 7.5% from San Diego, with 13.9% of students deriving from the local area. More than half of the undergraduate student population identify as first generation students (56.4%), and low income (53.1%). In 2016, the total number of tenured/tenure track and lecturers was 578. From the 241 tenured/tenure track 185 are White, 4 are American Indian/Alaska Native, 17 are Asian, 4 are Black, 11 are Hispanic/Latinx, and 17 are unidentified or "Unknown." The county that Arcata resides in is Humboldt County, the latest 2016 census information estimates a population of

136,646 for the Humboldt County. The 2015 Census reports Humboldt County as 83.6% White, 1.4% Black or African American, 6.2% American Indian/Alaska Native, 2.9% Asian, and 11.1% Hispanic or Latinx. The small town of Arcata's population in 2015 was 17,843. In 2010 the Census reports that Arcata's population as 81.8% White, 2.0% Black or African American, 2.3% American Indian/Alaska Native, 2.6% Asian, and 11.6% Hispanic/Latinx.

### *Recruitment*

This research relied on the experiences of gender non-conforming students at the HSU campus. In order to participate respondents had to: (a) be 18 years of age or older, (b) be previously or currently enrolled at HSU, and (c) self-identify as gender non-conforming or non-binary.

To understand the experiences of gender non-conforming students, I recruited 11 participants through flyers posted throughout the HSU campus. The flyers were posted in buildings close to the exits and entrances, bulletin boards, and in the cultural centers on campus such as the Multicultural Center, as well as the Latinx and African American centers for Academic Excellence. The poster for recruitment included a brightly colored rainbow with two smiling clouds, asking "Do you identify outside the gender binary, or as gender nonconforming? Interested in being interviewed for a study regarding YOUR experiences as a HSU student? Please contact Liza O." My email address was included at the bottom of the flyer (APPENDIX A). Along with the flyers, I sent an invitation to departments within the Social Sciences, academic centers and clubs via email, to be



forwarded to their listserv, to recruit people who may not always be on campus. Many university staff members passed along information about the study to individual students they believed fit the criteria. The email itself included brief information about the study, and included a picture of the flyer attached as a PDF (APPENDIX A). If people wanted to participate in the study, they would contact me, via email. After potential participants contacted me, I responded with an email. I answered any questions they had about the study, explained the study to them and the reasons behind it. I also asked where would be a good time and place to meet in order to do the interview. I would schedule interviews accordingly to my team's availability.

#### *Data Collection*

Before the interview began, participants were given the choice to select a pseudonym for themselves. For confidentiality reasons I did not want to use their real names in the research. By giving them the ability to choose a name aligns with giving them the ability to self-name. Some participants did not want to choose, so a pseudonym was given to them by me or the research team.

The primary source of data for this research was the semi-standardized interviews. Interviews were conducted using two member of the research team; all interviews were completed during the Spring 2016 semester. Berg and Lune (2004) describes semi-standardized interviews as a technique, which involves pre-determined topic or questions. They goes on to state that the questions are asked to the participant in a consistent systematic order, but the interviewers are "allowed the freedom to digress" and the

interviewers are allowed to “probe far beyond their prepared standardized questions” (Berg and Lune 2004:71). During the interviews, participants would discuss subjects not related to the questions being asked. I did not attempt to interrupt them and allowed them to freely discuss their experiences, this also allowed for them to feel comfortable and open up. I would also probe them when I wanted clarity on subjects being discussed, which also added to them feeling at ease during the interview. Charmaz (2006) outlines the *constructivist approach*, as a method that accentuates participants’ “definitions of terms, situations, and events and try to tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules” (P.32). As opposed to the *objectivist approach*, where the focus is on “obtaining information about chronology, events, settings, and behaviors” (Charmaz 2006:32). This research aimed to explore the ways gender non-conforming students navigate their identity in an institution of higher learning. We aimed to ask questions and attempt to understand terminology used by participants, the ways they construct and describe their identity, how they negotiate situations with faculty/staff/peers, and how they manage misgendering and discrimination. Charmaz (2006) illustrates that the constructivist approach “places priority on the phenomena of the study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (P.130). The shared experience between the interviewer and the interviewee grounded for emerging themes that assisted during coding and analysis. This process will be discussed later.

As already stated semi-standardized interviews, was the initial method for this investigation. Interviews would sometimes be conducted using two member of the

research team. I conducted six one-on-one face-to-face interviews, with one of them done via email. The team with which I was working did five interviews, either alone, or with someone else from the group. All participants signed the IRB-approved consent form before starting (APPENDIX B), and also agreed to be recorded on audio devices.

Interviews took place at the location chosen by the respondents, with one through the internet via email. Interviews ranged from 20 to 120 minutes.

Lofland et al. (2006) method of “intensive interviewing” where the interviews would take a conversational form was a method was also used during the interviews, as it relaxed the participants and encouraged them to open about their experiences. Using the framework of a critical feminist of color, I really wanted to come to these interviews with an approach of not *othering* the participants. I did this by honoring with them when they spoke about certain issues, specifically valuing and recognizing their experience. I also made it known that I too had experienced that same issues, this also helped to build rapport. The research team and I discussed the importance of coming to these interviews with this angle, and did so to the best of our abilities. We framed the interview schedule (APPENDIX B), with warm up questions, for the purpose of getting the conversation going and establishing rapport (tell me a little about yourself, “where is your hometown?” “what brought you to HSU? This was to begin “a pattern to the conversation, establishing the subject’s ability to answer, and putting the respondent at ease” (Dilley 2000: 133). The next questions were transitional, following the essential questions. In this portion of the interview, the research team and I designed questions to get a sense of the way participants identify. We wanted to know what terms participants use to describe

themselves, pronouns, how they navigate their identity on campus, whether they changed their identity after enrolling at HSU, participation on campus, and challenges they faced being gender non-conforming students at HSU. The last questions were demographic questions regarding the participant's age and race/ethnicity.

Interviews were documented using recording devices borrowed from the sociology department. The audio files were then downloaded onto a single laptop, then deleted from the recording devices. All recordings were then uploaded to a shared Google folder, between the group, and our Professor Dr. Meredith Williams. The audio files would be downloaded in order to be transcribed. NCH Express Scribe Transcription into the shared Google folder.

### *Research Design and Rationale*

Due to the complexities intrinsic in identity research, combined with a population that is relatively understudied, qualitative research appeared to be the best fit for exploring the lived experiences of gender non-conforming students. Working with understudied populations, qualitative research risks *othering* the participants. Krumer-Nevo (2002) describes *othering* as “a sphere of power relationships in which each participant defines both herself and the Other” (P.1). Specifically, othering comes from the researcher making assumptions, and stereotyping the participant. “In this arena two reciprocal social images interact, one is perceived in social terms as more powerful, the other as inferior” (Krumer-Nevo 2002: 2). To avoid further marginalization or othering of gender non-conforming students, we chose to be critically aware of these power relations,

and formulated questions that told the story of the participants, rather than rely on our own assumptions.

Similarly, bell hooks (1989) explained in society there are the oppressor and oppressed; those who come to exploit and the ones who are exploited. Hooks asserts, “there are those who dominate and are seen as subjects and those who are dominated and are seen as objects” (1989: 42). In research, as scholars we risk the potential of dominating their participants and *othering* them more than they already experience with their marginalized status. The researcher enters a research field to study marginalized communities with their own concerns, cultural agendas and interests (Bishop 2008). This replicates the dominant narrative, and reproduces the oppression marginalized communities as objects. Additionally, hooks (1989) discusses white supremacy not as a group but as a system. This system has crossed into social research, since many researchers going into study different communities unknowingly carry with them white supremacist ideologies. The researchers are the “authority” who therefore get to establish and define their own realities, identities and history for the communities they study, taking away those communities' self-determination. Often it is those studied: people of color, poor people, and societies “undesirables,” who are unable to self-define, and self-name. For this reason, I used feminist theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, including standpoint theory, queer theory, and critical race theory’s notion of counter-story narratives to guide this research, as explored in Chapter 2. The goal of the research team, and me with this paper, was to use counter-hegemonic approaches to exploring the experiences of gender non-conforming students. Counter-hegemonic approaches in

qualitative research include such things as oral histories of working class people, using feminist methodologies and the development of critical approaches (Smith 2008). It is the combination of non-hegemonic methods, and giving self-determination to marginalized communities that counters the hegemony. Stories and narratives of people who hold peripheral positions in society because of their race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. can help research, policy, and empower those voices who have been voiceless within society.

An important aspect of this research involved the role of my personal experiences as a student at Humboldt State and as gender non-conforming person. Lofland et al. (2006) discuss the influences a researcher's personal experiences can have on selecting a research topic, in addition to assisting the researcher gain access to the population they desire to study. This research was heavily influenced by my personal experiences as a genderqueer person of color at a predominantly white university. Much of what was discussed during the interviews reflected my personal experiences of forming and navigating a queer identity as a person of color, along with other issues of constant misgendering, finding safe spaces on campus, and managing interactions with staff/faculty. It was often revealed during the interviews that I too identify as a non-binary person. I believe that issues discussed during the interviews, and my subject position, helped participants feel more open and willing to discuss their experiences they may have not discussed with a person who is cisgender.

This research was also guided by *grounded theory*, as a method of qualitative inquiry. Charmaz (2006) explains the purpose of grounded theory: "grounded theorists collect data to develop theoretical analyses from the beginning of a project. We try to

learn what occurs in the research settings we join and what our research participants' lives are like" (P.2). Grounded theorists "study our early data and begin to separate, sort, and synthesize these data through qualitative coding" (2006:3). As soon as the project began, the team and I discussed how to go about asking questions that would give us some insights on what participants' lives might be like. The group consisted of three people, including myself, who identify as gender non-conforming. With this "insider" knowledge, we discussed our personal experiences and similarities arose. Due to these similarities, we noticed parallel themes. These themes helped to draft some initial questions for the interview.

#### *Data Analysis*

All interviews were analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. During this analysis I employed "open-coding." This interpretive process is the procedure in which data are fragmented analytically (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This is a method for breaking down phenomena such as events, actions, and interactions. The found phenomena are then compared to other occurrences to find comparisons and discrepancies. Once identified, the events, actions and/or interactions are given conceptual labels. Conceptually similar phenomena are then grouped together to arrange groups and subgroups. With respects to the grounded theory approach to data analysis, I began to conceptualize the data after a general open coding session. I analyzed every transcript using line-by-line coding, coding and naming each line (Charmaz 2006). This helped me to discover several major themes in the data. After gathering an array of coded

topics and themes, I began to group together related experiences expressed during the interviews by the gender non-conforming students. The collection of groupings became the source for the themes presented in the findings portion of this research.



## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS/FINDINGS/NAVIGATING “GENDERWHATEVER” IN COLLEGE

The objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of gender non-conforming students at HSU. What students discussed parallels the research done on transgender students and issues surrounding student housing, faculty/staff trainings, safe spaces, bathrooms, misgendering, and improvement for resources. In an attempt to tell the stories and experiences of gender non-conforming students, different themes emerged from the data. The themes however included some similarities to research on transgender students. For this research, I identified four major themes that were described by participants. The first theme that arose from the data was how participants “found themselves” at Humboldt State University, a predominantly white and heteronormative institution. For students of color, they explained having not only a gender realization, but also a racial consciousness, as they were able to learn more about themselves and their ethnic identity. The second theme explored the commonalities among the participants’ lived experiences with special attention to ways participants encounter spaces of gender salience and disruption in various physical and social spaces at HSU. These included misgendering, encounters with faculty/staff/peers, and bathrooms. In conjunction to how students navigate their identity, the third theme involves issues of safe zones/safe people. Moreover, who are the people they feel safe to be themselves around, where are those different spaces where around campus that they can feel physically and/or emotionally safe. Lastly, participant’s experiences could be largely impacted by them being “out” or

their “the degrees of outness.” The degree to which the respondents were out heavily influenced their experiences, either positively or negatively. Each of the themes will be explored in more detail below, after a brief overview of participant demographics and descriptions of student’s racial-ethnic and gender identities.

*Naming as Making Space: “It’s Complicated”*

All participants were students at Humboldt State University, with ten currently enrolled, and one participant already graduated. Seven students self-identified as White or Caucasian, and four students identified as people of color. Students of color had diverse ways when talking about their racial-ethnic identity, which will be discussed later. The race or ethnicity of the students of color were Asian-American Filipinx, Black or “it’s complicated, Latinx/Brown, and Black or African American. The median age was 24 for all participants and ages ranged from 19 to 33 years-old. Students’ majors ranged from the natural sciences to the social sciences; a number of students already had changed majors or were in the process of changing majors. All participants were students at Humboldt State University, with one participant already graduated, the rest were currently enrolled students. There were eleven total interviews, with the exception of one done via email.

The respondents discussed their gender identity in diverse ways. When asked, “How do you identify your gender?” (APPENDIX C) students responded with a particular label sometimes identifying with a “personal identity” (Snow and Anderson 1987), which is a reflection of their self-image. Allowing participants to use their own

language to describe themselves and self-label in order to maintain self-determination connects to the literature discussed in Chapter 3. One out of the eleven participants identified as trans; specifically as a trans male. The rest of the participants identified with and used the following specific terms to describe their gender identity: non-binary, queer, genderless, agender, gender-nonconforming, genderqueer, and gender fluid. Two respondents labeled their non-binary identity differently from the rest; one white student self-reported their identity as “genderweird.” The respondent who self-identified as Black or “it’s complicated” also described their gender identity as “it’s complicated,” but then settled for the label “genderwhatever.” There were no specific questions in regards to sexual orientation, but some students would talk about this identity along with describing their gender identity. Respondents who did talk about sexual orientation assigned a range of labels to describe it, including queer, pansexual, pan-romantic and demi-sexual. Pronoun usage was also very diverse. All students identified with the gender-neutral pronouns they/them, but some would accept she/hers and him/his. Others also described their pronouns as ze/hir.

Participants explained and labeled themselves in an array of different ways, seemingly all under the larger label of gender non-conforming or non-binary. Although, non-binary was the most consistent term used by all participants, there were other labels used to describe their gender identity. All used labels used by participants are non-normative, as they do not align with gender normative identity labels. Their usage of self-identifying labels go beyond the gender binary. These labels are essentially a rejection of the dichotomous him/her, male/female categories. This establishes the notion that there

no agreements on the limits of queer (Corber and Valocchi 2003). Since queer cannot be bounded, it gave participants the freedom to label themselves in a diverse range of ways. Some even coming up with their own labels and definitions to express their identity like “genderweird” and “genderwhatever.” Participants intertwined the various gender non-conforming labels during the interview when describing themselves and their experiences. Sedgwick (1990) reveals that language is a relevant force behind sexuality, she also indicates to the importance of language and labeling. Participants self-labeled in accordance to their gender identities, and in some cases expressed a label for their sexuality. Furthermore, this demonstrates the fluidity of gender identity, as language plays a significant role in how individuals self-identify.

#### *Finding Myself at HSU*

Participants discussed the process of “finding themselves” while being at Humboldt State University. This type of identity formation was common amongst participants, but the process of “finding themselves” included a variety of developments. Participants discussed having a comprehension of their identity through taking courses, reading new material, being exposed to different people, attending events on campus, and learning about the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexuality, etc. They essentially had a self-realization about their identity, specifically their gender identity. This process denotes ways in which they were able to form and express their gender identity. I found it particularly interesting that although Humboldt State University is historically a predominantly white and heteronormative institution, all four students of color explained,

“finding themselves” at HSU. Overall, nine of the eleven students described a process of finding themselves at Humboldt State.

As outlined in Chapter 1, there are a variety of stage models for the development of a gay, lesbian, bisexual identities (Cass 1979; Savin-Williams 1990; Fassinger 1998). These models project a trajectory of a sexual orientation identity development. However, these models fail to recognize or explain gender non-conforming identities, while so neglecting the uniqueness and multiplicity that occurs within the groups of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals (Renn 2007). The models attempt to fundamentally explain the process of “coming out,” but coming out is not always linear, or chronological with set stages and milestones. Some students in the research were not out to everyone, but are out to certain people. Forming a queer identity or LGB identity is commonly more fluid, with stops, starts, and backtracking (Cass 1984; Savin-Williams, 1990). Specifically, the theme of “finding myself” encompasses some level of students realizing their gender identity. For many, this process started while they were students at HSU. It was generated usually by taking courses, reading new material, being exposed to different people, attending events on campus, and learning about the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexuality, etc.

During the interviews, some of the participants expressed a form of gender identity formation. Celeste, a White, 25-year-old self-identified non-binary, agender, genderless, pansexual student, describes their realization occurring after they had taken some time off from HSU, and got involved in some activism with the Occupy movement.

*“I took a year off and did activism that was kind of like when I discovered my... cus I always kind of thought of myself as not like...I don’t identify as a woman, you know. Like that’s not how I’ve ever thought of myself. But like I didn’t really know how to put that into words until I was an activist. Then you know, learning how to like describe my gender was just one of the many things that I gained from that. Meeting people who were actually not just non-binary, but people who have gone through transitions and people who have gone through [being] born in a man’s body.”*

Not many participants explained their gender identity formation, due to the nature of the questions (APPENDIX C) in the original project. Celeste however brought up the process of realizing their identity. Celeste describes not feeling, or identifying with the label of woman; they<sup>3</sup> expressed they have “always” felt that they did not. Being around people who were non-binary allowed Celeste to be able to learn about gender expression and identity, thus giving them access to terminology, and language to describe their own gender non-conforming identity. As explored in many of the LGBT identity formation models described the importance of being part of a community on identity development. Tewbuksy and McGaughery’s (1997) transgender identity model described the stages of exploration and intimacy in which individuals experiment and meet other members of the community, building relationships either sexual or platonic. Although the exploration and

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<sup>3</sup> The use of “they/them/their” rather than he/him/his or she/her/hers in to respect the chosen pronouns of the respondents.

intimacy stage comes after the stage of individuals “coming out” in Tewksbury and McGaughery’s (1997) model, what is important in Celeste’s experience is the ability to be able to connect with others that eventually assisted them in “finding themselves.” The fact that Celeste came out after being involved in a community with other non-binary people shows a possible fluidity of gender identity formation.

Another participant, Hugo, a 26-year-old Latinx who self-identified as non-binary and queer also briefly described a gender identity formation process. *“I identify as non-binary because for the longest time I felt as if people were...when I was younger I would conflate sexuality with gender. I didn't have the words or I didn't have my women's studies background when I was younger and I couldn't really explain how I felt.”* Hugo, like Celeste, described their process of somehow realizing their identity while at HSU. Hugo would confuse the terms sexuality and gender when they were younger, so did not fully understand what they meant. It was not until they reached HSU and took courses in women’s studies that they found the vocabulary to describe how they felt, which eventually led to Hugo self-identifying as non-binary.

Many students described HSU as a place where they could truly be themselves, in addition to helping them realize something about their identity. Ariel St. Clair, a 26-year-old white, self-identified agender and non-binary student specified: *“this place is wonderful. I feel like it's one of those places where I am meant to be. This is definitely one of them for me for me, I resonate with this place...”* Ariel St. Clair also described just how being at HSU has changed their identity.

*“My identity has just changed. How I’ve looked at myself, how I navigate in the world. Allowing myself to be who I am, authentically rather than feeling like I’m supposed to be in some sort of box and act a certain way. Which I did for so many years. I was trying really hard to be cis. It was so uncomfortable. I got to a point where I was like I can’t do this anymore I’m getting really depressed and just like I hate everything about my body.”*

Like Celeste and Hugo, Ariel St. Clair felt indifferent about their identity, dating back many years. Ariel St. Clair was trying hard to fit into the gender binary, and be a cisgender woman, which they describe as a “box.” This “box” constrained them and distressed them to the point that they became depressed about their own body and had to do something about it. They decided to start therapy, which allowed them to be compassionate towards themselves. Being at HSU allowed Ariel St. Clair to look at themselves in a critical way, letting go of normative gender expectations. This allowed Ariel St. Clair the ability to be their “authentic” selves as opposed to being in a box that restricted actions and expressions. This connects to how Dilley (2005) described that by reading the research on identity formation, readers may speculate that there is a singular “healthy” or “positive” gay identity, which is achieved progressively, specifically through coming out publicly. This may demonstrate for some gender non-conforming students, there is not one model to follow, as identity formation comes at different times for different individuals.



*Students of color: finding myself at HSU – a predominantly white institution*

All four students of color in this study discussed how they “found themselves” in regards to gender/sexual identity while also developing a sense of intersectional consciousness with their racial identity. This racial intersectional consciousness arose while being at HSU, which students of color did not necessarily have before coming to college. Particularly, this racial/intersectional consciousness was often in combination with having an intersectional lens, which was a lens they gained while attending HSU. This lens allowed the students to become aware of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, immigrant documentation, etc. as these various categories interlock with systems of oppression and discrimination. Students of color described “finding themselves” at Humboldt State, a predominantly white, heteronormative institution, but also remained critical of HSU as a progressive school that is not doing enough to better serve its students, as it claims to be. Students expressed that HSU was not providing resources and spaces to adequately meet their needs as non-binary students of color. Due to the original interview questions (APPENDIX C) that were formulated to try to understand the general experiences of gender non-conforming students at HSU, there were not many questions in regards to racial identity or formation. However, when students did talk about race and other issues, I did my best to probe them, and allowed them to talk without interruption.

All four students of color expressed how they were able to find themselves in a way that was enriching, and accepting of both their gender and racial identities. Nadir, a self-identified gender nonconforming, genderqueer, Asian American Filipinx student, describes their journey at Humboldt State:

*“My experience of just being here at Humboldt has reflected my journey as more of a realization. So self-actualization of like my needs, my concerns, my politics... I have really enjoyed myself. In the sense that I have learned more about my thought processes often now critiquing the systems in place and the people I associate myself with. I think I’ve enjoyed my time because I’ve been able to reflect not only myself, but with other people and have these dialogues and discussions regarding race, gender, sex and other identities that play crucial factors of how we go about our daily live. I would say this year--I would say this past year has been, self-defining.”*

Nadir’s experience at Humboldt State has been influential to how they perceive themselves, and others around them. Finding themselves to Nadir means self-realization, knowing oneself, taking care of oneself, while also having an intersectional lens with how they interact with other people, and larger systems like Humboldt State. On the topic of finding themselves, students of color discussed their positionality as students of color, within a white dominated space. All participants were racially conscious and seemed critical of Humboldt State as a white institutional space; they critiqued the school for not doing enough for students of color, and queer students. Critical Race Theory of State claims that the United States is and will always be white supremacist, and the state is a tool that is structured and orientated towards dominance of whites over blacks, and other people of color (Bracey II 2015). Students’ concerns echoed this, as historically white

institutions reproduce white privilege, normalize whiteness, and justify white dominance (Bracey II 2015).

Echoing the ways other students felt about HSU, Chuck, a 22-year-old Black or “it’s complicated” self-identified “genderwhatever” and genderqueer student explains how HSU has contributed to his own understandings of their identity.

*“It’s complicated being in a University and learning about this kinda stuff [gender identity], and being like oh okay, that makes sense to me. It’s weird to me to be given that from a university. To have a school tell me ‘oh yeah by the way you can totally identify this way’ ... I don’t know how I would have described myself if I hasn’t been at HSU.”*

For Chuck, coming to HSU and essentially learning about gender identities has been a strange experience. State institutions, for instance colleges and universities, are often theorized as oppressive to marginalized populations; for Chuck this university allowed them to freely describe themselves. Chuck had the strange experience of being given the ability to define who they are, but described it as “weird to me,” since these opportunities were given to them by an institution that can be described oppressive. Chuck stated that HSU gave them the ability to identify the way they want to, and in a way that they understand the complicated nature of gender identity. This would have not happened otherwise if Chuck had not attended HSU. Chuck goes on to state,

*“Yeah and the idea that gender is a thing that we can name for ourselves. That’s really hard for me to wrap my head around in the first place, and then to even start that process. Like how to I determine that I can name myself... I think after I arrived to campus was really when I started – like to nobody ever took the time to tell me about like this while gender binary thing. And it exists, and it affects you and you’re supposed to not even really think about it. Like no one ever told me that. It wasn’t until I got to campus and started learning, and all that stuff. There was something there that wasn’t really working for me and now I kinda have words now to describe it, or at least I know that other people have used these words to describe it, and that is really helpful.”*

In this quote, Chuck outlined the importance of having the ability to name gender for oneself. Once they were here at HSU, they began this process of thinking of their gender identity in reference to the gender binary. As they learned more about the construct of gender, they began to understand it more in how it relates to their own identity. Like other participants, Chuck learned the vocabulary and terminology to be able to name gender for themselves, as opposed to life before HSU, when they did not have the terminology or words that reflected their sense of self. With respects to queer theory, Sedgwick’s (1990) notion of the importance of language and labeling is reiterated through the process of how students come to label their identities.

Being at a predominantly white school, Chuck discussed the intersections of being black and genderqueer in a particular way.

*“I think being Black and being nonbinary or genderqueer or whatever makes it really really hard... People don’t check, for people like me. Like when you’re making a list of what to look for when you are looking for someone who is gender nonbinary, like me. For no other reason the fact that my skin is black—but also the fact that like externally there aren’t a lot of things about me that people like read as being other than man. That’s really hard.”*

Hurtado et al. (2015) illustrate that racial identity salience specifies race takes precedence in students’ minds since they are more acutely aware of racial differences. In this quote, Chuck is aware that their black skin signifies to others that perhaps they are not gender non-conforming. Their black skin is equated to gender normativity. Unfortunately, the process of racial identity salience has shaped Chuck’s intergroup relations to the overall queer community. Chuck feels excluded that other queer folks will not recognize them as being part of the non-binary community simply due to their black skin, but also the fact that Chuck presents in a “masculine” way, which can be perceived as them being a “man.” Chuck described the feeling as “hard;” this can be interpreted as race intersecting with gender, which can be difficult to negotiate in a school where there are mostly white students, and even fewer gender non-conforming students of color.

*Encountering Spaces – Gender Saliency and Disruption*

With my second theme, I explored the commonalities among the participants' lived experiences on the HSU campus. This theme illuminated the ways participants encounter spaces of gender saliency and disruption. In Chapter 1, Cameron (2004) described the saliency of social identity, the process in which individuals think about their membership to a specific group. In regards to gender identity membership, Howard and Hollander (1997) explain that granted everyone has a gender identity, but the saliency of that identity varies between people and situations. Gender normative and cisgender individuals do not think about their gender identity as often as non-binary individuals. As already stated Hurtado (2015), explains that racial identity takes precedence in students of color, I add that gender saliency also takes precedence in students who are non-binary as they too become aware of gendered differences which shapes intergroup relations, a sort of gender identity *disruption*. Gender normative individuals can see themselves reflected in various physical spaces and social spaces like the bathroom or locker room, inclusive gendered language, and other gendered symbols, whereas gender non-conforming individuals do not. As non-binary students think about their gender, this identity is often disrupted – interrupted by the normalcy of having to conform to gender norms and rules. Gender non-conforming students are reminded about their assumed gender identity, this then prompts them to have to think about their gender identity more often as they navigate their interactions, physical spaces, and social spaces. Not seeing

themselves reflected in bathrooms, language and other interactions adds to feelings of being excluded, or underrepresented.

All participants discussed encountering social and physical spaces in different ways, with many positive stories discussed as well as negative. Many students talked about the ways they are repeatedly misgendered, and how they cope with it on a daily basis. All students experienced misgendering on a daily basis, misgendering is part of student's gender saliency being disrupted in a negative form. For most participants it had become a non-issue, due to the exhaustiveness of constantly having to correct people—they had simply given up. Many participants explained that they would like others to intervene when they are misgendered, while others were hesitant, since they are not open or “out” about their non-binary identity. Students also discussed positive and negative encounters with classmates, staff/faculty, and campus organizations that either hindered their gender saliency or made a constructive impact on their identity.

Tee, a 19-year-old, self-identified non-binary Black student described gender saliency in regards to cisgender people:

*“Cisgender people don't think about it [gender identity]and I think that I have to be more assertive in certain ways and really talk to them. I definitely already told both of my roommates but I sometimes overhear them, talking about house chores and they may refer to me as “she.”*

Tee described that cisgender individuals do not have to think about their gender identity, and because of this, Tee has to be more insistent when talking to cisgender people about their non-binary identity. Specifically, their roommates, since Tee wants to be addressed with “they” pronouns, but can hear their roommates refer to them with “she” pronouns.

Other students also discussed this process of being more assertive with certain individuals about their gender identity. Their gender salience is being disrupted by their gender identity not being acknowledged, they then resort to talking to that person to try and change the assumed gender identity. Prompting students to have to think about their gender identity further, when encountering people who may or may not be receptive.

Rawr, a 21-year-old White self-identified non-binary or “genderweird” student talked about a positive encounter where their gender saliency was encouraged through an interaction they had with faculty about their pronouns. This experience varied, as some students would reach out to faculty in order to establish their correct pronoun, and/or if they have had a name change. This also depended on the degree to which the respondent was “out” about their gender identity, as some students were not out, and did not feel comfortable expressing it to their professors or bosses. Rawr explained the encounter they had with faculty:

*“There are [professors] I have told [and] have been really receptive. When they’ve had questions they’ve asked me. When they’ve noticed that they’ve slipped up, used the wrong name, or used a different pronoun that I usually prefer, they*



*correct themselves and we can have pretty good conversations about it for the most part.”*

These positive encounters contributed to Rawr’s overall sense of self, which is important when thinking of the salience of gender identity. Confidence in one’s own knowledge about themselves can relate to many positive outcomes (Pelham 1991) at school, and in their personal lives. Rawr’s identity was recognized and acknowledged by professors who made an effort to be respectful of Rawr’s identity. Cisgender or gender normative students do not think about their gender as often as non-binary students, to the level that they have to reach out to professors to acknowledge them in particular ways – chosen name or pronouns. It takes a lot of courage to be able to tell professors about their gender identity, and some students did not feel comfortable doing so. It is another issue to tell them and for the professor to not be receptive. The ability to have open conversation with professors who understand, or attempt to understand, is highly impactful to non-binary students. Not all participants had experienced a positive outcome with a faculty member.

On another note, Rawr explains a negative experience they had while living on campus:

*“In the dorms everybody knew I was non-binary and some people would intentionally [misgender] or intentionally approach me in an aggressive way to try to get me to explain myself, or to go back on my identity or something; it was so uncomfortable. I didn’t like living there.”*

It is unclear as to why other students behaved so aggressively towards Rawr when they were living in the dorms. Rawr explained that everyone knew about their non-binary identity, which can put non-binary folks in vulnerable positions. Often those who exist outside of heterosexual and gender norms and definitions are subject to homophobia and heterosexism, as well as transphobia. Perhaps for gender normative people gender salience *disruption* occurs when there is a gender non-conforming person is present as they are breaking gender norms or rules. This then enables a gender normative person to behave in homophobic, heterosexist and transphobic ways. In Rawr's case, it did not escalate to physical harm, but they were approached in a way can be psychologically damaging, specifically to gender identity. This encounter disrupted Rawr's sense of self for the moment, but they then able to leave the dorms. Rawr did not mention any assistance from RA's (resident assistants) while they were being harassed in the dorms.

The major physical space and social spaces where gender saliency is prominent is the bathroom. For non-binary students encountering the bathroom is a direct disruption to their gender salience. The symbols and the signage on the door are explicit on who is supposed to use them, thus a reflection of who non-binary people are not. This clear gender difference encouraged most students to think about bathrooms in an interesting way. Reasoning about gender, encouraged gender non-conforming students to think about ways in which not only facilities but HSU as a whole could be gender-neutral. Chuck explains:

*"We should look at how gender structures our entire university, and try to make the whole school a gender neutral place. Like bathrooms are great, and it's really*

*important. But what are the other spaces on campus that are not gender neutral and couldn't be gender neutral?. And how do we make them gender neutral? How can we make them gender neutral?"*

Perhaps by making more social spaces gender neutral will disrupt the gender saliency of gender and heteronormative individuals. This can demonstrate to cisgender and gender normative students the importance of acknowledging non-binary identities since many spaces like bathrooms can be a scary place gender non-conforming folks. As they risk being harassment due to their existence outside of heterosexual and gender norms.

#### *Safe Zones/Safe People*

This theme connects closely to the other themes. Feeling “safe” and having those “safe” people was discussed by respondents in a variety of ways. In the previous theme, students described how they think about gender and how their notions of their own gender identity can be disrupted. This process sometimes included students thinking about physical and social spaces where their gender salience can be encouraged – safe spaces to talk their identity. Feeling safe also connects to the next theme, of degrees of outness, as safeness around identity is associated with the level of “outness.” This theme of safe zones/safe people explained who the participants felt safe to be themselves around (Who can I be safe around? Who has my back? Where are my spaces?). Many talked about the barriers to find sufficient spaces, where race and gender could be discussed and

not left at the door, or having to choose one. It also examined those different spaces around campus where they could feel physically and/or emotionally safe.

Nadir, explained going to spaces where they are “welcomed” and feel “comfortable.” A space where...

*“I am being included in the conversation and if I there aren’t spaces for me on campus I oftentimes hold I hold it in until I can find a space. And which shouldn’t be the case. If we are claiming ourselves as progressive or you know if we really want to be for diversity inclusion... there should be spaces where everyone’s welcome you know? I basically I navigate with the intention of protection.”*

Again, the fact that HSU claims to be “progressive” was repeated. Students felt that HSU could do a better job at being inclusive, beyond just making those claims as an institution. Claims of diversity and inclusion were heard by students, but not seen. Nadir again articulated this:

*“I feel like there are spaces where I am allowed to, but there are some spaces where I feel more comfortable steering away, just for protection. So if I had a class where the majority of people don’t have this intersectional set of lens, I would feel more prone to being cautious but then again sometimes I’m like fuck it ya know?”*

The importance of spaces was a reoccurring theme for respondents; not just physical spaces, but places where folks can feel safe. This is a big concern for gender nonconforming people as well as members of the LGBTQ communities (Alvarez and Schneider 2008). Finding spaces where one can be out, and be themselves while not feeling vulnerable, is crucially important to a student's education (Rhoads 1994).

Hugo also expressed similar concerns:

*“So within the HSU campus it's like... it's about space and it's about where I can talk and where I feel safe enough to talk and who I get to share that information with. In terms of some spaces, some are not conducive to Trans and/or Queer people of color and because of that it's very difficult to know where I can be and not feel in danger or feel racialized or erotized or whether or not I'm going to get microaggressions from other parts of my identity if I enter these spaces. And yeah it all comes down to finding a group and I only got two other people... but we aren't accepting other people we don't know because of like how difficult it can be to talk about these issues.”*

Participants expressed the need to have spaces where they feel safe physically, but also spaces where they are being included and acknowledged. The last point Nadir makes of navigating their identity with safety as their main goal illustrated the importance of this. As already stated, non-binary identities risk being physically harmed; several participants reported fear for their safety while on campus. They worried they might be hurt or killed

due to their gender identity or expression. Hugo discussed the barriers of finding spaces that are sensitive to the experiences of queer people of color. In many spaces on campus, participants reported feeling they had to choose between their racial and gender identity. It becomes difficult for queer people of color, because their multiple identities do not take precedence over each other. They are all as equally important and deserve to be affirmed.

All participants expressed having a support system, usually friends, groups of friends or partners who were supportive of their gender identity. These were “safe” people participants felt physically safe around. Tee described their support system: *“They are really understanding my friends... very supportive when I came out to them.”* Hugo describes a group of safe people:

*“It can be difficult on campus without the support of my fellow um genderqueer, agender, and/or non-binary trans people of color. It would've been much more difficult. I've received a lot of support from my partner which is also really big deal to me and so I've been lucky that I've had some support. But in terms of institutional, nah. Like maybe the um some of the professors. They really great like um I love them.”*

Finding others who share the same identity was important to feeling supported; not all participants had queer friends. Questions about dating or relationships were not asked, only some participants described having supportive partners. Hugo expressed not having much institutional support, but receiving a lot of support from their professors.

*Degrees of Outness*

Whether students were “out” about their gender identity, and to whom, added complexity to daily interactions. Trans and gender non-conforming students may try to hide in the midst of other faces in the classroom in order to blend in and avoid discomfort. By doing so, they risk being misgendered, called by their birth name, assumed to be a gender with which they do not identify, and risk being otherized. Participants’ experiences could be largely impacted by the degree to which they were “out” around campus and in other aspects of their lives. The degrees of outness included the level to which participants were “out” to their partners, classmates, bosses, coworkers, professors and family about their gender identity. The outness heavily influenced students’ experiences either positively or negatively. Participants varied in their degree of outness; many were out in the public sphere, and some only in their private lives. Many different subgroups arose during interviews with the participants when discussing the degrees of outness. Several participants reported discomfort in their lives, and it was often due to whether they were out, and subsequently being misgendered by faculty, peers, bosses and friends. Participants also reported being uncomfortable with meeting new people, assumptions being made by faculty and staff, navigating unsafe spaces, dealing with offensive comments, being made fun of for their gender expression, and discomfort with their body.

In classrooms, while talking to faculty and staff, navigating different spaces, and even out with friends, all participants expressed feelings of discomfort in different

settings. When discussing the degrees of outness, Henry described being out to people: *“I do to an extent [tell others about identity]. Like as to how comfortable I feel with people because it’s really is a trust thing.”* Henry explained the process by which they decided to share their gender identity, and to what degree; it depended on how well they knew someone, as it was based on trust. Ariel St. Clair discussed their degrees of outness: *“if it comes up I talk about it openly I don’t hide it or anything like that but it’s just generally not a topic people think about discussing.”* Some student participants were very open about being out, including Chuck.

*“I can walk into a room and know everyone in this room thinks of that’s a man. That’s Chuck, that’s a man. It’s not like I come into classes and say “Hey I’m not a man!” I just come into classes and try to specifically NOT refer to myself as a man, or make suggestions. It’s this weird dance that I do around this kinda subject.”*

Chuck reported not explicitly revealing their gender identity in the classroom. Chuck neither confirms their gender identity but does not also deny it. They used specific language to steer away from normative language, which might suggest their gender identity to those with whom they are interacting. Casey stated, *“I’m very open about it... everyone that knows me or gets to know me, knows about it. Whether they like it or not.”* Casey explained they have been involved as an advocate for trans issues, assisting professors on educating the campus community on trans issues by being on panels,



screening queer films and going into classrooms to give talks. Casey was one of the few students who was very out about their identity. Many students were hesitant to reveal to classmates and faculty. As Tee points out when responding to being to friends, “*yes definitely, all of my friends.*” However, when asked about classmates replied, “*It depends. Not typically.*”

Those outside of gender and sexual norms also have to struggle with their sense of self, including their identity and how it is developed, maintained, and lived out. While choosing to not conform to societal pressures of gender roles and expressions, or rejecting essentialist views of sex and gender, many also have to exist with other intersecting identities like race, class, ability, which adds more layers of complexity to people’s identity.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The use of counter-hegemonic frameworks and approaches are critical to tell the stories of the marginalized and those who hold peripheral positions in society (Smith 2008). Using these approaches allows participants to describe their experiences, struggles and insights to a world they know. In this study, participants described their identities, and were given the ability to self-label their identity. Some students, as described in Chapter 4, gave their gender identities a new label, not conforming to already non-conforming labels such as non-binary or gender non-conforming. This is an example of how queerness cannot be bounded or constricted, as Corber and Valocchi (2003) have stated, there is no “critical consensus on the definitional limits of queer” (2). The beauty of queer is that it is uncertain. Many participants played with their gender identity label this way, which reflects the importance of terminology and language when it comes to self-labeling Sedwick (1990). The many labels used by participants to describe their gender identity also shows the fluidity of gender and labeling. Participants moved in and out between various labels, not subscribing to one.

Fluidity plays an intricate role in the lives of non-binary individuals. With the identity formation models discussed in Chapter 1, the various models did not allow for such fluidity. Proponents of the original identity formation models have acknowledged that forming a queer identity or LGB identity is commonly more fluid, with stops, starts, and backtracking (Cass 1984; Savin-Williams 1990). The same can perhaps be said about gender identity. Many of the participants would weave in and out on their degrees of

outness, depending on mutual trust with romantic partners, friends, classmates, co-workers, and faculty/staff, while also taking into consideration their own safety, and the context of the situation. There were apparent differences to the way participants came out, but due to the nature of the questions, further analysis is needed. Specifically, further research could delve more deeply into the differences in racial identity formation, and how participants formed their non-normative gender identities while also taking into consideration sexuality. The intersections of identity, and identity formation, must be further examined – beyond race and gender.

Progressive institutions like HSU could implement better policies and procedures to tackle issues of marginalization and victimization among their gender non-conforming students. The experiences explained by the participants in this study reflect literature on the well-being of transgender and gender diverse individuals, in classroom curricula, extracurricular activities, healthcare, housing and bathroom facilities. Seelman (2016) has offered recommendations on how to address marginalization and victimization of trans and gender non-conforming populations on college campuses. Her suggestions include: (a) education, including campus programming and support for non-binary students, (b) improving systems to change one's name and gender, (c) encourage inclusivity and recruitment of diverse groups of faculty, staff and administrators, (d) make physical changes to facilities such as bathrooms, and lastly (e) holding people accountable. Participants who lived on campus were harassed, and this was never reported or addressed. Housing should be held accountable, and should also incorporate better procedures to handle harassment issues, like the one discussed by Rawr in Chapter 4.

Concurrently, they can incorporate educational programming for incoming freshmen and people moving into the dorms. Institutions of higher learning can do better when it comes to supporting gender non-conforming students in all aspects of campus life.

It is not enough to hold institutions accountable; we must also hold ourselves accountable. We have a personal responsibility to do and be better to support gender non-conforming students by asking for and respecting pronouns, not assuming gender identities, listening to people of color, and advocating for marginalized communities. This research was an attempt to fill in the gaps on student identities that go beyond the gender binary. I hoped to bring these stories to light to further the scope of current LGBTQ scholarship. The results may help inform institutions of higher learning, cisgender individuals and queer people alike, and other gender non-conforming individuals who do not see themselves reflected in academia or society.

### *Limitations*

Though the current findings are enlightening, the present study is limited in a number of important respects. The study used a small sample of self-identified gender non-conforming undergraduate students at Humboldt State University. Ideally a bigger sample would be beneficial, to include more students from other universities rural and urban. Also, since the original research questions were focused on other aspects of gender non-conforming students, I was limited in my ability to fully grasp overall gender identity development, while also exploring sexual identity development and racial identity

development. Intersections of gender identity with other aspects of people's identities must be further studied.

The present study sought to provide current information on the ways that gender non-conforming student navigate their non-normative gender identity in a predominantly White, gender and heteronormative institution. Participants shared what they experienced, both positive and negative, in their queer journeys so far. They gave insights to their needs and views on HSU. Despite the study's limitations, there are important insights to the lived experiences of gender non-conforming identities.

#### *Future Directions*

In order to build a solid foundation on what we know about gender non-conforming students, future research needs to be conducted. More research on the experiences of gender non-conforming individuals in college and universities, as well as those who do not attend, would help us understand the lives of this population. There also needs to be theorization of gender non-conforming identities that are flexible and take into consideration the intersections of identities that move beyond gender and race. Having more data from participants who identify as people of color, upper, middle or lower class, disabled, undocumented or religious might provide insight as to the way specific identity categories experience the intersection where they locate and come together. Perhaps queer Black students navigate their non-binary identity differently than White non-binary identities, and possibly differently than Latinx non-binary identities. As Dube and Savin-Williams (1999) found that ethnic group differences mattered in the way

gay individuals process their identity, this needs to be investigated further in regards to gender non-conforming identities with other aspects of identity. Future studies could also explore family dynamics with individuals who hold non-binary identities.

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## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

**Experiences of Gender Nonconforming Students on the HSU Campus  
Informed Consent Form - Interview**

You are asked to participate in an interview about your experiences as a gender nonconforming student at Humboldt State University. This research is part of a class project for the course titled Soc 480 Community Action and Grant Writing taught by Meredith Williams, Ph.D. at Humboldt State University. We anticipate that our interview will take about 30 minutes to an hour.

Your participation is voluntary and with minimal risk. If you are uncomfortable or unwilling to answer any of the questions, you may skip that question, or discontinue the interview at any time. While we do not anticipate these questions will cause undue stress, you may find benefits in talking and reflecting on your experiences, and contributing to campus understandings of gender non-conformity. Although there will not be any compensation, your contributions may benefit gender and queer academic research at HSU and beyond.

Every effort will be taken to keep your identity confidential. We will not connect your responses to any identifying information about you. Information acquired from this interview may be presented in classrooms, journals, presentations, publications, and online, but will not be connected to your name. In the analysis and reporting of any information linked to this research, all identifying information will be removed. If we use any quotations from your interview (with your permission below), we may change some information so that your identity will not be revealed. If using a quote could compromise your privacy, we will not use that quotation.

If you have any concerns or questions, you may contact the principal investigator: Liza Olmedo, leo30@humboldt.edu. You may also confidentially contact our research supervisor, Dr. Meredith Williams, meredith.williams@humboldt.edu, (707) 826-4326. If you have any concerns with this study, contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, Dr. Ethan Gahtan, at eg51@humboldt.edu or (707) 826-4545. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, report them to the Humboldt State University Dean of Research, Dr. Rhea Williamson, at (707) 826-5169 or Rhea.Williamson@humboldt.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me about your experiences.

\*\*\*

I am at least 18 years old. I understand the above and consent to participate in this research.

Print Name:

Signature:

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_ It is okay to use direct quotes, as long as there is no identifiable information.

\_\_\_\_\_ It is NOT okay to use direct quotes from this interview.

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### **Interview Schedule**

#### *Experiences of Gender Nonconforming Students on the HSU Campus*

#### Opening Questions

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. Where is your hometown?
2. What brought you to HSU?
3. What is your major?

#### Transitional Questions

1. How have you liked your time at HSU so far?

#### Key/Essential Questions

1. How do you identify your gender?
  - a. If anything other than cis\*
    - i. Do you share that gender identity with friends?
    - ii. Do you share that gender identity with classmates?
    - iii. Do you share that gender identity with faculty or staff?
2. What are your gender pronouns?  
(Sometimes people identify with she/he pronouns. Others identify with they, them, and theirs while some use ze and hir.  
Do you use any of these?)--- If not, what pronouns do you use?
3. Tell me about navigating your gender identity on campus
  - a. Have you changed your name with the university?
  - b. How are your friends with your gender identity?
  - c. How are your classmates with your gender identity?
  - d. How are other students outside of the classroom with your gender identity?
  - e. How are faculty and staff with your gender identity?
4. Are you ever misgendered?
  - By whom?
5. Do you ever hear microaggressions, or subtle, disrespectful comments about your gender identity?
  - a. How do you usually respond to misgendering or microaggressions?
    - b. Does anyone ever intervene on your behalf?
    - c. Would you want peers to intervene?
    - d. Would you want faculty or staff to intervene?
6. Did you change your gender identity, or come out, after you arrived on campus?  
If yes:

- Did that change interactions with your friends?
  - Did it change dynamics with your classmates?
  - Did it change any of the interactions with faculty or staff?
7. How much do you participate in the campus, outside of the classroom?
    - a. Do you attend campus events?
    - b. Why or why not?
    - c. Do you hang out with other students, casually?
      - Why or why not?
  8. Have you ever skipped an event you wanted to attend because of your gender identity?
  9. Do you organize your own social events?
  10. Do you seek out other students with similar gender identities?
  11. What do you like most about being gender nonconforming at HSU?
    - a. What are the biggest challenges about being gender nonconforming at HSU?
    - b. What are you most afraid about being gender nonconforming at HSU?
    - c. What would you most like to see changed at HSU that might impact your experience as a gender nonconforming person on campus?
  12. What do you think about gender neutral bathrooms on campus?
    - Do you know where any are?
    - Do you use them?
    - Would you use them if they were in more buildings?
  13. If you could talk to the administration at HSU about being a gender nonconforming student, what would you say?
  14. Demographic questions
    - a. How old are you?
    - b. How do you identify your race?