A purpose of this dissertation is to offer a new look at the genderqueer body and experiences in order to further queer our current frames of thinking about gender in ways that challenge hegemonic structures of analyzing, defining, and evaluating lived experiences in relation to more than gender alone. Informed by Queer Theory and Gender Studies, and hinged on Endarkened Feminist, Feminist, and Post-Structuralist epistemologies, this study encourages a shift from only acknowledging the social construction of gender (both inside and outside the binary), to acknowledging the social process of becoming. As such, this study encourages valuing the relationships between intersectionality, liminality, and assemblages as a part of rhizomatic qualities of gender.

In order to accomplish the goals of the project, the researcher, along with nine participants, explored the genderqueer terrain of identity and representation through participatory action research, A/R/Tography, and Mindful Inquiry. Four critical questions helped aide in thinking about the genderqueer body: (1) What kind of body is the genderqueer body, and how is it understood and lived? (2) What is the liminal space in which genderqueer individuals occupy/navigate/live? (3) How is this liminal space productive or unsafe? and, (4) How can others embrace/utilize the productivity within the liminal spaces of their own identity in both social and educational spaces?

QUEER(ING) GENDER: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THINKING, EMBODYING,

AND LIVING GENDERQUEER

by

Dana Marie Stachowiak

A Dissertation Submitted to
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Approved by

_____
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by DANA MARIE STACHOWIAK has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair_____

Committee Members_____

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

_____
Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION, PARTICIPANTS, AND METHODS

Tomboy

by Mónica Palacios (1998)

When I was four, five, and six, I was extremely shy and I had
a pixie haircut.
Adults would stick their faces in my space and ask,
"Are you a boy or a girl?"
"Girl!"
Shouting up into their adult world.
Wishing they hadn't asked me that.
Wondering if I looked like a freak or something.
I just didn't feel like a little girl.
Sugar and spice and everything nice.
I don't think so.

It was raining really hard but my mom, dad, and little brother,
Greg, went to the toy store anyway. It was Sunday and we
respected our obligations.
Greg got this totally cool machine gun and I – I don't know
what possessed me, perhaps societal pressure—I got this doll.
During our drive home I knew I made the wrong choice. By
the time I got inside, I was bawling my head off because I
wanted a machine gun too. I cried so much, my dad went back
to the toy store and returned home with a
brand new machine gun.
I was really happy then.

I was always the Dad, the Soldier, or the Sherriff.

The Christmas that I was five was the year I got my cowboy
drag.
"Getty up, Miss Kitty."
I was just getting over the chicken pox, so my week had been
hellish.
But waking up Christmas morning to a cowboy hat, shirt, leather
vest with fringe, chaps, Levi's, 2-tone boots, and a holster with
2 guns – I was spent.
The land of little boys was ADVENTURE—DANGER—

BUDDIES!

And really cool toys.
Don't get me wrong, I never wanted to physically be a boy.
Although I did try peeing standing up a couple of times—and I
did pretend to shave with dad.
I liked my girl body. I just wanted what they had—
POWER!

    Almost everything about this piece by Palacios speaks to my soul. I was a

tomboy. I guess I still am. I distinctly remember running around our backyard

(we lived out in the country) with my older brother's underwear on when I was

four or five. They were so big on me that I had to use a pin to keep them on, but

there was something about the feeling of freedom I got when I ran through the

sprinklers with those underwear on and without a shirt. I went without a shirt for

as long as I could (which, was until my Mom told me that girls had to wear things

to cover their tops). I thought I was the coolest kid in my West Michigan middle

school when I wore my uncle's t-shirts in place of my own. As an adult, I have

come back to wearing more men's clothing than women's and sporting a shirt as

little as possible. Of course, I wear shirts in public to cover my breasts, but it is not atypical for me to walk around my house with just boxers. And, yes, I am also back to wearing "boy" underwear, now that I don't have anyone telling me I can't.

Growing up was tough as a tomboy. The world around me was screaming at me that I had to "be a girl" and wear dresses and have long hair. I was oblivious to gender norms until I was so indoctrinated with the rules at school that I started to feel weird about my tomboy appearance. I started to grow my hair longer – and managed to keep it long until college – and I spent more time accessorizing. I still didn't like dresses, and I was so happy when "power suits" for women became popular in the 90s (did they not know that was a little bit of heavenly drag for all the tomboys out there?); that gave me an excuse to dress nice, but not in a damn dress. I was the only girl in my close extended family, and all of my aunts and uncles loved it. I wanted to watch football, shoot hoops, and listen to rap music about girls with my cousin, Larry; but my family wanted me to wear makeup, shop, and prance around in dresses.

My well-meaning aunt took me on all these extravagant outings to learn about applying make-up and choosing the right colors for clothing. She bought me hundreds of dollars' worth of makeup, and I tried to wear it all for a while, but it just ended up gathering dust and mold. My Mom and another aunt tried desperately to show others I was not a tomboy by talking me into having a fancy dress-up party for my 12th birthday. They were so excited making special

invitations, getting all the decorations, and making a fancy meal for me and all my girlfriends. I don't remember any of the planning, but I remember the party. I nervously made jokes to impress the table full of girls I had at my house in my honor (this was also around the time I was figuring out that I didn't really like boys all that much), and I was the first one out of my huge dress when my Mom said it was okay for all of us to change and go play.

My gender has always been somewhat awkward for me. I was a dancer for ten years, but I was so uncomfortable in a leotard and prancing around the stage. Something was not right; I was just not like the other girls in the class. I remember watching the male dancers and thinking, "I wish I could wear *that* outfit and lift the girls instead of tap dancing in this sequin dress." I felt much more comfortable as the point guard out on the basketball court; that outfit suited me. But I always made sure to change out of my basketball uniform in a stall because I did not want the other girls to see that, in fact, I was a girl too.

I have spent my life navigating a world of in-betweens in regards to gender. I love my female body, but I don't want to wear women's clothing styles or hear anyone say, "hey, girl," when they are talking to me. And I never know what to do when I'm walking towards a closed door with a(nother) man: who opens the door – him or me? I would not trade my anatomy, but I would love to go back to not having any hips (I cried for a week when I got them) and having people think my short haircut is cute rather than "too gay." I want to be my

partner's caretaker, the one who makes her feel safe and fixes things for her; I want to birth a child but not be called "mom" (my partner and I have actually talked about having our maybe child call me "dad"); and I want to be the lead in the tango or merengue or cumbia. But society says I can't have both worlds: I can't be female and male at the same time.

Complicating matters for me is that I am also queer. I first walked through this world calling myself "straight." And then, when i was no longer afraid, I began to call myself "gay." But never "lesbian." To me, that word carries a feminine tone, and I am by no means *feminine*. Or, sometimes, if you say "lesbian" in a deep voice, it carries a masculine-dykey-i-wear-flannel-shirts-and-men's jeans tone. And I am definitely not *that* kind of lesbian. It was almost too long before I encountered the word "queer" as a safe and fitting term to describe my sexuality. I like men. I *love* my female partner. So this term fit because it named my sexuality without also naming my gender. It was almost like I claimed being gender-less for a while, although, that didn't feel right either.

I first encountered the term "genderqueer" quite recently in a queer space. So, I did like any person of this day and age would do and Googled it as soon as I was alone. There were tons of definitions – some that I outright did not agree with and some that almost brought me to tears because of happiness and relief that I wasn't alone in how I felt about my gender. So, I "listened to [my] body" speak (Fraser & Greco, 2005, p. 21) and made room for "individual reflexivity"

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(Kosut & Moore, 2010) to embrace the in-between, liminal space of my gender identity that the term, genderqueer, offered. This embracing restored years and years of self-destruction and confusion. I finally felt like me.

A transgendered friend of mine declared to me that he "didn't want to be the last genderqueer standing!" I was quick to reply, "Well, I do!" and left it at that. But I thought, read, and talked a lot about trans (it was one of those things I felt like did not fit my absolute feeling of a genderqueer identity) and what it meant to make a physical shift from one gender to another, feeling as a person "doesn't fit" in their assigned gender. My friend is trans – he's happier now; I am not trans, and I know I never will be. I don't desire to switch to the male gender like my friend did, because even though I am female, I don't feel female, and I certainly don't feel a desire to be anatomically male. The <u>Handbook of Social Justice in Education</u> (2009) defines genderqueer as "a person who identifies as a gender other than "man" or "woman," or someone who identifies as neither, both, or some combination thereof" (p. 299), and this aligns with my own felt sense of my gender. While this is foundational to my claiming genderqueer, my organic definition also includes that claiming genderqueer is done in the interest of embracing the liminality and fluidity within the assemblage of identity.

When I think of my genderqueer body, I think of it as:

1. a contested terrain (Fraser & Greco, 2005, p. 12)

2. "simultaneously stereotyped, proliferated, ignored, and silenced"

by self and others (Pillow, 1997, p. 350).

3. a "state of soul, not one of mind, not one of citizenship"
   (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 62).

4. both felt and socially constructed (Salamon, 2011, p. 3; Kosut &
   Moore, 2010, p. 13).

5. one that occupies a productive liminal space.

My genderqueer body is more than an identity, more than a presentation of gender. It is where assemblages of identities and (*dis*)identities meet and sinuously dance in a limnal space. My genderqueer body is a continuous place of (dis)identificaiton, undergoing "metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation" (Muñoz, 1999). With all that said, it is safe to say that I am still encountering/living/navigating/ traveling/disidentifying/embracing genderqueer. This project and the participants in it are part of that journey.

I believe that all of our identities are overlapping, that they are an assemblage of not only social characteristics, but also culture, experiences, and self-identification (Beech, 2011). It is a liminal space; one that is not fixed, but constantly in flux and evolving. I believe that thinking about bodies and identities as assemblages "forces a reconciliation of opposites through their inevitable collapse" (Puar, 2005), and this is my intent for claiming a genderqueer identity. Unfortunately, social and institutional structures advocate for fixed, very specific

identities, and those most closely aligned to the social norms are privileged and also sold by our society as ideal. This sets up binaries and hierarchies that are dangerous to folks who do not fit within the binary names.

I am particularly interested in genderqueer people such as myself, as they reject binary terms of gender, not ascribing to male/masculine or female/male as indicated by their biological sex. This occupation outside the binary is a forced liminal space, and in-between place, but I believe it can and is also a productive space for awareness and social change. I believe all individuals are an assemblage, continuously "recycling and rethinking encoded meaning" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 31) in every single situation we encounter, in every single decision we make. But I am not convinced, though, that all people recognize the in-between, liminal space this puts us in or the possibilities for social change within this space. Because genderqueer folks consciously live/navigate/travel/disidentify in this liminal space, and this living/navigating/traveling/disidentifying has a productive potential for social justice, I think that an exploration of genderqueer bodies and experiences in this space offers a valuable and ground-breaking way to disrupt our current thinking of gender.

Project Goals

My intent for this piece is to expose, explore, and question the productivity found within this liminal space of gender identity, specifically related to the genderqueer body. I want to explore the liminal space that genderqueer people

occupy, unearth its productive state, and find ways to encourage all individuals to become aware of and embrace the liminal spaces in which they occupy. Within this, I think that people will begin to work from a continuum of gender, not the hierarchical model that we currently hold. I think the potential for social change and social justice as a result is vast and much needed.

Throughout my work, I offer a new look at the genderqueer body, one that is separate from the transgender umbrella under which it normally falls. I situate this work around the premise that embracing the liminality and assemblage of identity deconstructs gender and allows for authentic conversations about bodies. Salamon (2011) describes a liminal space that is unique to the genderqueer identity as occupied by the "disjunction between body image and "literal body"" (p. 33), a contested terrain of "felt body" (p. 3) versus socially/biologically constructed body. Related to this is Jasbir Puar's (2005) call for a shift in conversation to embrace assemblages of identity as being "possible not through the identity markers, but rather, the temporal and spatial re-orderings that the body reiterates" (Puar, 2005, p. 136). Essentially, Puar is asking people to consider the liminal spaces their identities occupy versus the temporary intersections of identities in which we generally think. People occupy this space both consciously and unconsciously. Genderqueer individuals are tediously aware of this space in ways that gender-conforming or those embodying other forms of gender expression are not often aware.

The words and photos of genderqueer participants serve to drive the research in this project, and I juxtapose the participants' words with related scholarly works and photographs of their genderqueer experiences and bodies. The ultimate intent of this project is for the written, spoken, and photographed pieces to uncover the productivity of the liminal space of assemblages, as well as to encourage dialogue around the ways in which we confront/navigate gender in both social and educational spaces.

Research Questions

In order to accomplish the goals of the project, I, along with nine participants, explored the genderqueer terrain of identity and representation. Four critical questions helped aide in thinking about the genderqueer body: (1) What kind of body is the genderqueer body, and how is it understood and lived? (2) What is the liminal space in which genderqueer individuals occupy/navigate/live? (3) How is this liminal space productive or unsafe? and, (4) How can others embrace/utilize the productivity within the liminal spaces of their own identity in both social and educational spaces?

Reflexive Application of Positionality and Subjectivity

My work in this project is very personal. While I hold to the belief that my identities are an assemblage, there are positionalities that are important for me to consider when I set forth in my work. Most notably, my gender, race, sexual orientation, and education are my "social, locational, and ideological placement[s]

relative to the research project [and] to other participants in it" (Coleman, 2010, p. 157) that necessarily influence the way in which I approach my work. First, I am white, and I understand the power and privilege that comes with my whiteness (Johnson, 2005b). Where all of my identities overlap and are negotiated, I understand that my whiteness allows for some easier, and possibly not any, negotiations of myself. As a researcher, my primary interests lie in qualitative studies, queer theory, gender studies, and promoting social justice. I am queer and have a female partner. And, most essential to this work, I am genderqueer.

Since I am studying the genderqueer community in which I am a member, I will also be an active participant in the research. I identify as female biologically, socially, and personally, but my androgynous appearance often gets me labeled as "gender non-conforming" in most social settings. I am hesitant to call myself female, as well, based on the social constructs related to femininity. This leads me to generally think of myself as genderqueer because I do not embody femininity alone; I also embody masculinity and sometimes both at the same time. As such, I am constantly working against heteronormativity through a process of continuous self-examination in relation to norms in all of my experiences and social and political contexts. While I believe that this piece of my identity is at the crux of the study, my other positionalities intersect and flow with one another to create my personal frame of reference.

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I am conscious of the importance for me to "concentrate on reflexively applying [my] subjectivities [and positionality] in ways that make it possible to understand the tacit motives of participants" (Hatch, 2002, p. 9). As such, critical reflexivity was something I strived to achieve throughout this project. While I acknowledge that discussing my subjectivity and positionality can be both limited and limiting (Pillow, 2003, p. 184) to the project and audience, I also believe that critical reflexivity promotes humanity, honesty, and constructive discomfort for me, the participants, and the readers. That said, critical reflexivity promotes a continuous examination of hegemonic beliefs, assumptions, and power.

Participant Selection and Overview

Participant selection. Genderqueer is somewhat of a counterculture that sets itself apart from mainstream transgender discourse. As such, there is very little discussion and visibility of genderqueer individuals, making it a relatively difficult population of people to locate in large numbers. I recruited participants through snowball sampling (Glesne, 2010; Hatch, 2002) by sending a flier (See Appendix A) to two closed, private Facebook groups for genderqueer individuals to which I belong in the local area. Participant selection was based on sex, race, age, and gender. Sex (i.e., biologically female or male) and racial diversity of participants was important in order to explore multiple types of genderqueer experiences. I believe that choosing one's gender is an intimate, complicated, and organic process; therefore, I wanted participants to be of adult age (i.e., 18

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years), under the assumption that older individuals have had more time to explore and challenge gender norms.

Because genderqueer individuals do not claim to be explicitly male or female gendered, the gender diversity of participants was insignificant; however, it was important to this study that participants were either self-ascribed genderqueers, or transgender individuals who had not had sexual reassignment surgery or hormone therapy. While I recognize the inherent dangers regarding the reification of norms and the re-imposition of limitations on transgender by restricting this study in such a way, this restriction was necessary for meeting the goals of this particular project. A focus of this project was on the in-between space of gender in which genderqueers live, and while a relevant argument can be made that transgendered folks live in this in-between space for some time, I was particularly interested in folks who live in this in-between space without the impending possibility (i.e., after sexual reassignment surgery) of fitting within the gender binary. Additionally, I did not want the struggles of transitioning that some transgendered individuals experience to be inadvertently appropriated or overlooked during this study.

Participants. I had participants fill out a small demographic survey (See Appendix B). There were 10 participants total, including myself, and they ranged in age, from 24 to 38 years. Two participants described themselves as Latina, one as African American, and seven as white. Nine of the participants resided in

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Greensboro, North Carolina area; however, one participant, David, moved to Los Angeles, California towards the end of the study. KJ resided in San Francisco. All participants described themselves as genderqueer, and only one participant described hirself as also transgender. Eight of the 10 participants were biologically female and two were biologically male. Seven participants described their sexual orientation as queer, two as gay, and one as lesbian. One participant, Avery, talked about his sexual orientation as an ongoing development: "Honesty [I'm] still working on it. I ID as queer mostly, but draw a lot of power from 'faggot.' But that's more so a gender thing, like IDing as a 'GQ faggot.'" All participants had some form of higher education, with five identifying as full-time students. Two participants were currently finishing undergraduate college degrees, one participant was finishing her Master's degree, and KJ and I were finishing our doctorates. I provide this information in summary form in Figure 1: Participant Overview.

All of the participants, with the exception of KJ, agreed to use their real first names in this study. Also important is the pronouns that each participant prefers. Both biologically sexed male participants, Avery and David, choose to go by "he" and "him" for purposes of this project. During the course of the study, Avery changed his name from John, and started to play with the idea of using the pronouns, "they" and "them." For consistency in this project, he graciously allows me to use "he" and "him" at all times. Kelly, Gigi, Lucia, Danielle, Nego, and KJ,

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all biologically sexed females, use the pronouns, "she" and "her." Gigi remarked that she is fine with not using pronouns, and so referring to her as Gigi at all times is also acceptable to her. Kat, a biologically sexed female, prefers to use the pronouns, "ze" and "hir," and I do so throughout this project. KJ is the only participant who had undergone surgery to alter her body at the time of the study. She explained that she had top surgery because she felt no connection to her breasts as a part of her female sex and, as she said, "could not wait to get rid of them." KJ does not consider or call herself transgender.

Participant introductions. I use this section as a visual introduction to each of the participants in this study. It became very apparent throughout the study that an understanding of what genderqueer is requires visual representation as well as representation through language.

Photo 1. Participant Introductions

Avery.

Avery is a 21 year old genderqueer male who is finishing his Bachelor of Arts at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Kelly.

Kelly is a 25 year old genderqueer female who is finishing her Bachelor of Arts at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro in Chemistry.

Gigi
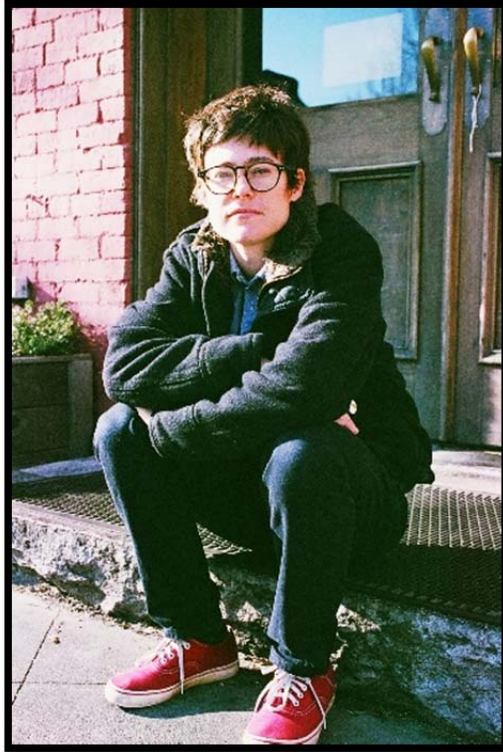
Danielle

Gigi is a 34 year old genderqueer female who works in web design and development.

Danielle is a 25 year old genderqueer female who works as a hair stylist.

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David.

David is a 28 year old genderqueer male who is currently studying at the Art Institute of California – Hollywood.

Nego.
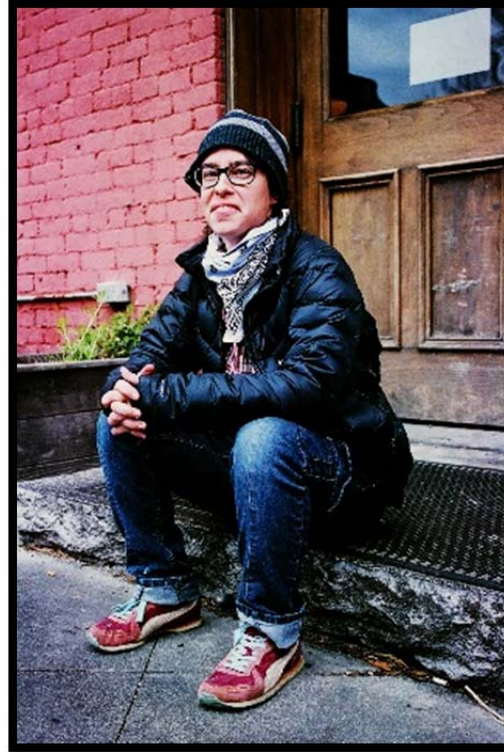
Nego is a 38 year old genderqueer female who works as a nurse.

Dana.

I am a 32 year old genderqueer female who is completing my PhD at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

KJ.

KJ is a 30 year old genderqueer female who is completing her PhD at Stanford University.

Lucia.

Lucia is a 25 year old genderqueer female who recently finished her Master of Social Work at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Kat.
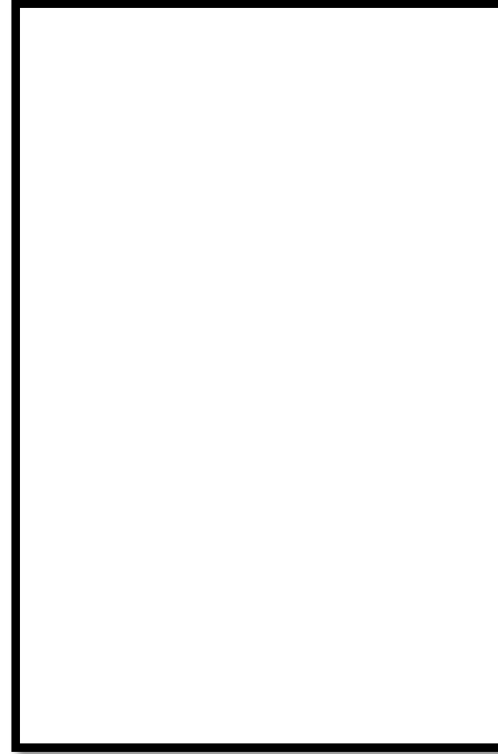
Kat is a 37 year old genderqueer female who works as a professor of mathematics education.

Figure 1. Participant Overview

Name	Age	GQ/Trans	Bio Sex	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Education
1. Kelly	25	GQ	F	Gay	African-American	BA
2. Avery (John)	21	GQ	M	Queer/NA	White	Finishing BA
3. Gigi	34	GQ	F	Queer	White/Latina	BA
4. Dana	32	GQ	F	Queer	White	PhD Candidate
5. Lucia	24	GQ	F	Queer	White/Latina	Finishing MSW
6. Danielle	26	GQ	F	Lesbian	White	BA
7. David	28	GQ	M	Gay	White	BA
8. Kat	36	GQ/Trans	F	Queer	White	PhD
9. Nego	38	GQ	F	Queer	White	BA & BSN
10. KJ	30	GQ	F	Queer	White	PhD Candidate

Epistemological Perspectives

The "cultural nature of [qualitative] research" is that which "arises from deep, sometimes even intimate relationships between human beings and within human beings themselves" (Dillard, 2003, p. 231). I believe that qualitative research is most valuable when the researcher and the participants collaborate, becoming co-researchers, and I think that this is fostered through relationships that develop within the research process. It is from my beliefs, as well as the nature of my study, that I am most drawn to three different, yet overlapping, epistemologies for this study: Endarkened Feminist, Feminist, and Post-Structuralist.

Endarkened feminist epistemology. Endarkened Feminist epistemology was constructed by Cynthia Dillard (2000) and is "based on a combination of race, gender, nationalism, and spirituality" (Wright, 2003, p. 202). The overall foundation of Endarkened Feminist epistemology seems to rest on the mind-body-spirit/soul connection (stemming from hooks, 1994), and I believe is a sound way to navigate both the pedagogical and research realms because of its privileging of multiple forms of knowledge and understanding. Dillard (2008) lays out six tenets of this Endarkened Feminist epistemology, which include:

1. Self-definition forms one's participation and responsibility to one's community.

2. Research is both an intellectual and a spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose.

3. Only within the context of community does the individual appear and, through dialogue, continue to become.

4. Concrete experience within everyday life form the criterion of meaning, the "matrix of meaning making."

5. Knowing and research are both historical (extending backwards in time) and outward to the world; to approach them otherwise is to diminish their cultural and empirical meaningfulness.

6. Power relations, manifest as racism, sexism, homophobia, and so on, structure gender, race, and other identity relations within research. (p. 280)

Additionally, I put together a list of the beliefs of Endarkened Feminist Epistemology that I found most valuable and most-affirming of my beliefs about what mindful, responsible, and ethical research should involve. These include: (1) importance of community; (2) spiritual underpinnings; (3) mind-body-soul connection; (4) re-search (continuous striving for understanding, searching again and again, Dillard, 2003); (5) opportunities for transformation; (6) clarity in research and findings; (7) opportunities for transformation; (8) social justice work; (9) rigorous reflexivity; (10) values human experiences; and (11) values personal relationships.

Feminist epistemology. Closely related to Endarkened Feminist epistemology is Feminist epistemology. It, works to "challenge existing power structures and promote resistance," as well as, "raise consciousness" acts of

oppression and structures of hegemony related to gender, essential goals of this study (Hatch, 2002, p. 17). Feminist Epistemology also emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality when doing qualitative research. With this work, I ultimately hope to challenge the gender binary and raise awareness about genderqueer identity as a productive liminal space of existence. I put together a list of the beliefs of Feminist Epistemology that I found most valuable and most-affirming of my beliefs about what mindful, responsible, and ethical research should involve. The list includes: (1) knowledge is "value mediated" (Hatch, 2002); (2) solidarity; (3) gender (Olesen, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2006; Hatch, 2002; Anderson, 1995); (4) conscious-raising (Olesen, 2010); (5) expose harmful power structures (Hesse-Biber, 2006); (6) historically situated structures (Hatch, 2002); (7) awareness; (8) social justice work; (9) rigorous reflexivity; (10) values human experiences; and (11) values personal relationships.

Post-structuralism. While both Feminist and Endarkened Feminist epistemologies inform and support my desired research, I see these as supporting of a more over-arching paradigm. Hatch's (2002) explanation of Post-Structuralist epistemology, in that it "is an antiparadigm because its tenets can be used to deconstruct [most other] paradigms," fits the core motivation for my study (p. 17). Through my work, I seek to deconstruct and destabilize the universal Truth of the gender binary, a foundational standpoint of Post-Structuralist epistemology. Likewise, Hatch mentions that "many post-structuralist scholars in

the social sciences identify themselves as critical theorists or feminists" (p. 18), and this supports my notion that Feminist and Endarkened Feminist epistemologies are closely linked and supportive of a more structured paradigm.

This led me again to creating a list of the core tenets of Post-Structuralist epistemology that align with my views as a researcher. They include: (1) antiparadigmatic; (2) rejects ideals of emancipation; (3) linked to queer theory; (4) supports multiple realities (Glesne, 2010; Hatch, 2002); (5) involves cultural studies; (6) belief that there are multiple truths; (7) truths are local, subjective, and in flux; (8) social justice work; (9) rigorous reflexivity; (10) values human experiences; and (11) values personal relationships.

When comparing these three epistemologies, it is indeed evident that there are places where all three overlap, and these places of overlap just happen to be among the core things I believe as a researcher. These include: (1) research as social justice work; (2) research with rigorous reflexivity; (3) research that values human experiences; and (4) research that values personal relationships. Figure 2 shows the core tenets of each epistemological perspective, as well as depicts where they all overlap.

Figure 2. Epistemological Perspectives
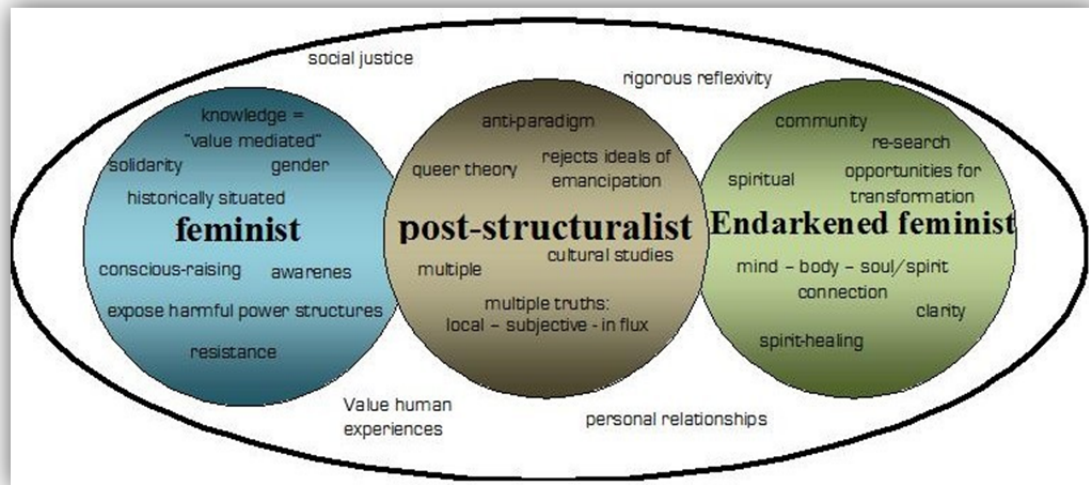
Methodologies

Since the epistemological perspectives related to my research on genderqueer identity and liminal space overlap in the areas of social justice, reflexivity, value of human experiences, and value of personal relationships, it is essential that my methodologies also overlap and sustain these four areas. As such, my research is situated in such a way that it "combine[s] epistemology, politics, activism, and aesthetics" (Denzin, 2010, p. 49) by being participatory action oriented and supported by both arts-based and mindful inquiry.

Participatory action research. I am particularly interested in the power that alternative forms of scholarly research and writing offer. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a platform for this type of work as it often incorporates storytelling, art, music, movement, and writing forms in the methods (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). PAR is a methodology that supports my core beliefs

that the researcher and participants should actually work collaboratively, almost

as co-researchers, as well as is supported by the three epistemologies that frame

my work. It is "democratic, equitable, and liberating" (Wimpenny, 2010).   As

such, this creates important space for action, self-reflection, and dialogue, all

foundational aspects of this project and PAR. As Glesne (2010) states, PAR is

"committed to social transformation through active involvement" of participants

(p. 23), and this projects seeks to fulfill that.

      A/R/Tography. A/R/Tography (A/R/T) is as an *extension* of PAR, offering

arts-based alternative methods of data gathering and presentation with a focus

on the aesthetics and creativity of the work. It is similar to PAR in that it works to

"trouble the structures of research," (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2007, p. 87).

A/R/T is an arts-based methodology that embraces embodiment and continuous

engagement with the world through aesthetic encounters with image and text.

A/R/T supports collective and continuous interrogation of the world through living

inquiry that works to disrupt normative thinking and encourage an organic

research process that is flexible, unpredictable, and relational. It is "an inquiry

process that lingers in the liminal spaces between *a(artist)* and *r(researcher)* and

t(teacher)" (Springgay, Irwin, & Kind, 2005, p. 902, italics original), not privileging

one over the other; rather, a/r/t are in tandem.

      While all participants engaged in A/R/T throughout the data collection

process, a clear example of the merging of image and word is demonstrated by a

male participant, Avery. In this particular journal entry (see "Methods" section for

more details on journal and photo blogs), John used only a picture of himself and a few words to capture the essence of his thoughts about gender and being genderqueer.

Photo 2. Avery and Rooney Mara

i officially look strikingly similar to rooney mara in the girl with the dragon tattoo
it's been a goal of mine. now it's been realized. don't know how to feel about it.
also what does it say that a style icon of mine is a really androgynous girl, who not only defies, but essentially pisses on gender roles?

Mindful Inquiry. Another extension to PAR is Mindful Inquiry, which also supports multiple and alternative forms of gathering and presenting data (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). But, more important to my own beliefs and to this reserach, Mindful Inquiry advocates a sociological mindfulness that creates spaces for the co-researchers to be mindfully aware of themselves and their world (Schwelbe, 2001; Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Mindful Inquiry purposefully puts the person at

the center, and that is important to my work with genderqueer individuals: I want their voices to be what speaks through my findings.

I created a concept map for the methodologies in much the same way as the concept map for the epistemologies section (See Figure 3). Each square includes the main tenets of each methodology, and the larger square both holds these together and includes the overlapping tenets. PAR is at the top, as it is the primary methodology, and A/R/T and Mindful Inquiry are located as extensions of PAR work. It is important to note that the four overlapping areas are of social justice, reflexivity, and value of human experiences and personal relationships. These are located outside the methodologies to denote the connection to all three.

Figure 3. Methodologies
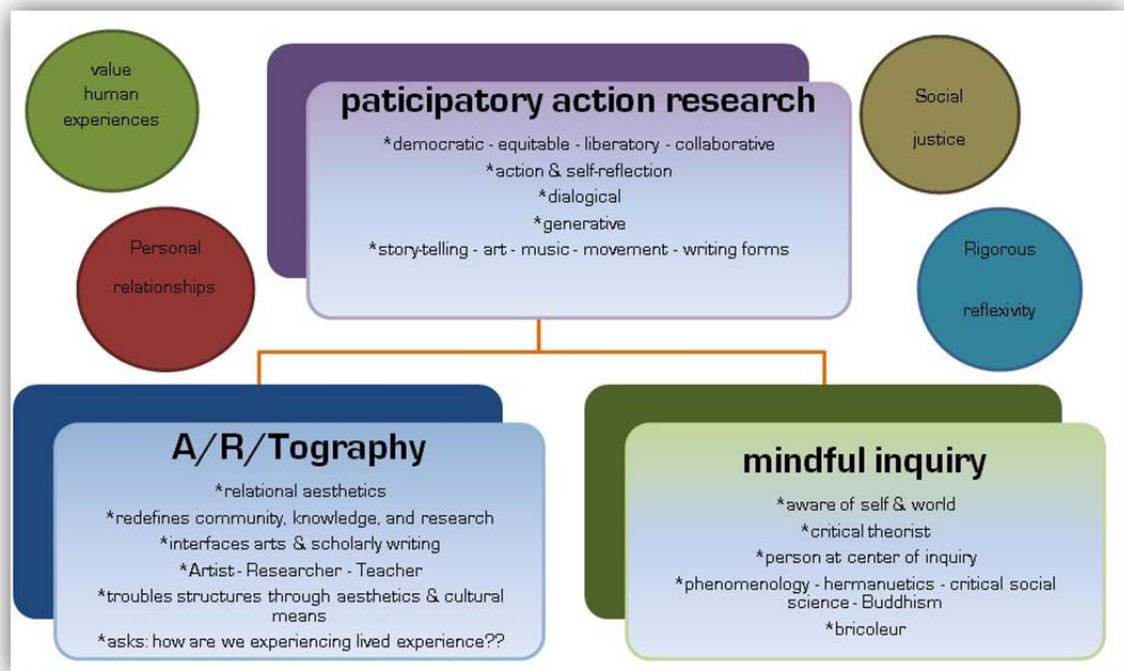
Data Collection Methods

Just as the epistemologies and methodologies for my research are all closely connected, so, too, are the methods that I used for this study. The methods carry the same overlapping tenets of social justice, reflexivity, and value of human experiences and personal relationships. Each method is participatory, artistic, and mindful, and is helpful in shaping pathways to exploring the experiences of genderqueer people and their bodies. I conducted interviews and, along with the participants, engaged in journaling and reflexive photography.

I originally planned to conduct three focus group meetings over a total of three months; however, it was quite difficult to get this busy group of genderqueers in one place at the same time. As such, I conducted individual, paired, and focus group interviews (Glense, 2010; Hatch, 2002) across the three months, with the first set of interviews being individual or paired. Each of the interviews ranged from thirty minutes to two hours. Interviews were conducted similar to Narrative Action Reflection workshops (Lorenzo, 2010, p. 132) in that they not only contained questions, they also contained free-writes, storytelling, and interactive journaling. These first interviews provided the background, context, and logistics for the research project, as well as a general discussion about what the word genderqueer means, namely, how the participants defined genderqueer.

I asked three general questions to activate critical thinking about gender and being genderqueer. First, I asked, "Was there a particular point in your life

where you started to question your assigned gender." I wanted participants to begin by digging into their past and thinking about their entire process of exploring gender and claiming genderqueer. In tandem with this, I then asked participants to describe some of their experiences as they questioned and transgressed normative notions of gender. The purpose of this was to provide an initial space for sharing and listening to stories and experiences. Finally, I asked, "So, what does it mean to you to be genderqueer?" I wanted to ask this question outright, with the knowledge that the answers were going to shift as we explored our genderqueer experiences throughout the project, because I wanted to see where commonalities and differences were in regards to participants' definitions for genderqueer. Fortunately, all participants expressed very similar defining aspects of what genderqueer is and what it is not. The definition of genderqueer will be further analyzed and discussed in Chapter 3.

We were able to have all but two participants at the second set of interviews; however, the two absent participants did listen and respond to this focus group meeting, as well as participated in individual interviews with me. This set of interviews focused on the themes that emerged in the previous set of interviews, as well as the themes that emerged in the participant blogs. Most participants blogged about encounters and experiences they had since last we met related to being genderqueer; thus, I asked, "What are the emotions and/or feelings that came up for you, both in the process of the encounters or experiences and while you reflected on them?" Another theme that was

discussed was the intersection of transgender and genderqueer, and why participants identified or did not identify as transgender as well as genderqueer. We also discussed the in-between, or liminal, space that genderqueers occupy. A specific question I asked about this theme was, "What are the privileges of being in this liminal space," as participants were quite reflective of the relationships and interactions they were able to have because they blurred the lines of gender.

Finally, I conducted one focus group (with five participants) and one paired interview. One participant was unable to interview because he moved across the country. He did, however, correspond with me via e-mail. This final set of interviews focused on three themes, including fashion/dress/performance, intentional interactions, and relationships with others. I asked participants to discuss experiences they have had when shopping for clothing that does not match their biological sex (i.e., females shopping in the men's section and males shopping in the women's section). I also pushed participants to discuss ways in which they intentionally interact with others as a means to encourage others to re-think the gender binary, as well as ways in which they intentionally *do not* interact with others as a means for safety. Finally, participants connected these intentional interactions with the relationships they have with family members, partners, co-workers, and classmates. Namely, participants discussed the impact their genderqueerness has on those relationships.

Participants engaged in action research and self-reflection throughout the data collection process through the creation of an individual journal and photo blog that documented their everyday experience(s) as genderqueer. I encouraged participants to explore different styles of writing, artwork, and photography in their journal entries, and requested that they try to complete at least five total journal entries and ten photograph submissions over the entire data collection process. I chose to have participants use online blog spaces for their journals because they offered direct insight into the experiences and reflections of participants throughout the research process. The flexibility of journaling whenever and wherever was beneficial to the busy participants, and offered an unthreatening approach to sharing since journaling requires no additional training and is often seen as non-academic in nature.

The photography in which the participants engaged potentially led "to a deeper and more personalized engagement and form of control of self-representation [as genderqueer] over time" (Gourlay, 2010, p. 84). The online availability of the blogs created a space for ongoing processing, reflexive thinking, interactivity, and community for the participants. Each participant shared their blog with me, and all had the option to keep their blogs private from others, shared with others, or to create a mix of both private and public entries. A few shared theirs with other participants in order to strengthen our community of co-researchers and engage in additional dialogue. The online format allowed me the opportunity to continuously monitor, pull together themes as they

emerged, analyze up-to-the-minute data, and be critically reflexive throughout the entire data collection process. This was especially important to me in order to maintain validity, authenticity, and rigorous research.

It is important to note a difference in KJ's participation. I met KJ at a conference on queer studies when I presented on my dissertation topic, as well as showed the photographs I took of the genderqueer participants at an exhibit within the conference. This was not until late into my dissertation project, when I was coding and analyzing data. KJ came to my presentation session, and we engaged in a brief conversation afterwards in which she expressed an interest in my work as a genderqueer individual who had top surgery. At that point, I asked her to be a participant in the study, and she agreed. KJ read transcripts and journal entries, as well as engaged in interviews and conversations with me via phone. She also created journal entries in response to the existing data and her own experiences as genderqueer. KJ's responses fit well into the scope of the project and the existing analysis of my data, and her contribution to this project adds additional depth and pertinent information about being a genderqueer individual.

Deep-rooted connections. It is important to notice the deep-rooted connections between my epistemologies, methodologies, and methods, as they lay the foundation for a very strong research project. Not surprisingly, rigorous reflexivity, social justice, value of human experiences, and personal relationships connect the epistemologies, methodologies, and methods.

Figure 4. Connections

RIGOROUS REFLEXIVITY

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

SOCIAL JUSTICE

EPISTEMOLOGIES

feminist — post-structuralist — endarkened feminist

METHODOLOGIES

participatory action research

a/r/tography — mindful inquiry

METHODS

focus groups — journaling — storytelling — photo novella — de/construct

VALUE HUMAN EXPERIENCES
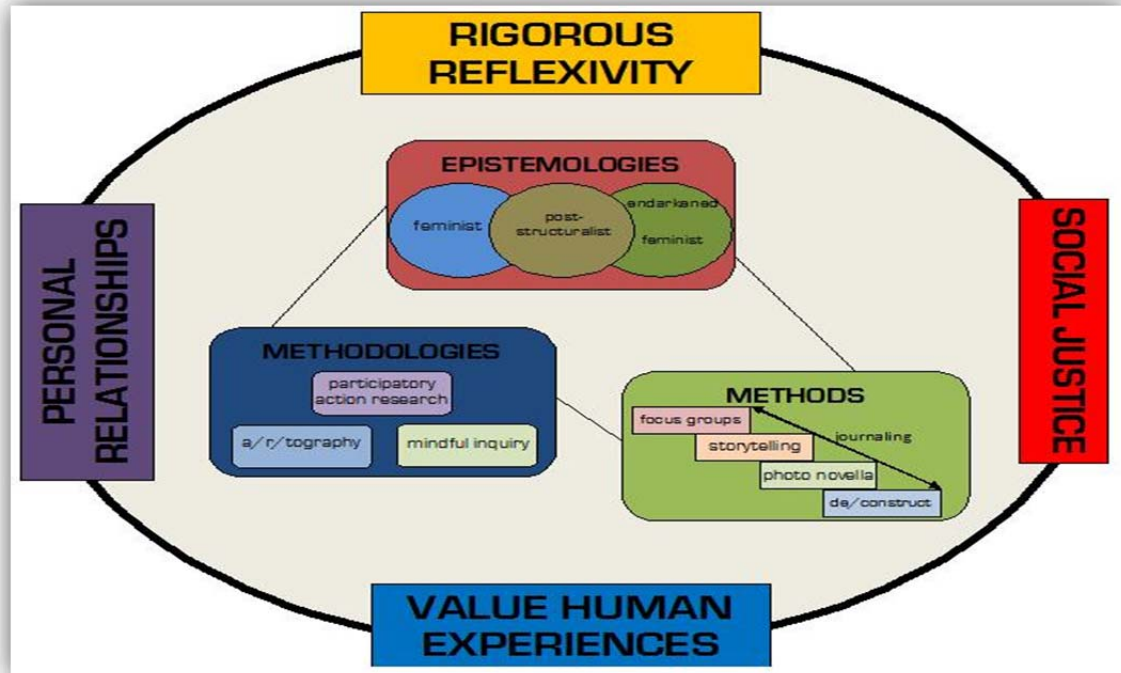
Data Analysis and Interpretation

I used an exploratory approach of data analysis and interpretation through inductive thematic analysis as I reviewed the data collected from participant interviews, blogs, and focus groups (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). I first began by transcribing all the individual, paired, and focus group interviews. I coded the transcribed focus groups, my own field notes, blog entries, and other pertinent data collected over the course of the project (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011; Glense, 2010). Within this, I uncovered patterns, themes, and interrelationships that answered my research questions and informed the theoretical underpinnings I used to support my project. The following four themes

were uncovered and are discussed in the remainder of this piece: (1) What is Genderqueer?: Mining an Organic Definition; (2) Becoming Genderqueer: Comfortable In Our Own Skin; (3) Performing Genderqueerness: Fashion Advice and Tips; and (4) Intentional Interactions: Re-writing Ours and Others' Stories on Gender. As previously discussed, I sought to be continuously reflexive during the entire scope of the project, and especially during the data analysis and interpretation process.

Research Trustworthiness

I will strive for research trustworthiness through in a number of ways. These will include: member checks (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985); triangulation (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2010); thick description (Glesne, 2010); and peer review and debriefing (Glesne, 2010). Throughout the data collection process, as well as the data analysis and interpretation, I asked participants to locate and choose important themes they wanted to discuss. This, along with asking for participant input on drafts of my dissertation chapters, was my way to conduct member checking. It should be noted that triangulation was achieved through the groundwork of related theoretical, epistemological, and methodological frameworks described, as well as through the alternative and reflexive points of data (i.e., focus groups, participant journals and photographs, reflexive photography, and my personal reflections). I also engaged in peer review and debriefing with participants, mentors, and friends regarding my codes, analysis, and interpretation.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: QUEER THEORY AND GENDER STUDIES

AS MODELS FOR INTERPRETING GENDERQUEER

> Bodies speak, without necessarily talking because they are coded with and as signs. (Pillow, 1997, p. 351)

Queer Theory and Gender Studies

Our body is "an entity that is invested with meaning" (Kosut & Moore, 2010, p. 1) that is visible and invisible, personal and political, privileged or marginalized. Our sex is determined at birth – you are declared either male or female. Consequently, expectations about our gender, gender expression, and gender presentation are mediated through society's gendered expectations. The dichotomous thinking of gender creates norms of male and female ways of being. Genderqueer people claim a space, an identity that does not adhere to norms, but rather to how their body feels; oftentimes, either the male or female gender is not a felt aspect for a genderqueer individual. Rather, some genderqueer individuals claim an in-between; thus, they dislocate norms as they navigate this claimed space. While I argue that all genders navigate this in-between space at some point(s) throughout their life, I believe this space is acknowledged and claimed most often by gender non-conforming individuals almost by default. As

such, this in-between space is what makes genderqueer individuals unique and valuable for this study.

Queer Theory and Gender Studies especially inform my work. Gender Studies critically explore gender boundaries, what these boundaries mean, and the implications of these boundaries in a sociocultural context. With this, the core intent of Gender Studies is to "interrogate the mundane experiences of space, place, and identity as people navigate the tricky terrain of daily living and illustrate how this living does not fall neatly into either/or categories" (Wright, 2010, p. 64). My work is supported here since I seek to explore the everyday lived experiences of genderqueer individuals in order to understand how they navigate the world and the impact that their lived experiences and claiming of a genderqueerness have on one another.

Just as Gender Studies troubles, or queers, the binary understandings of gender, Queer Theory works to queer society's "rigid normalizing categories" and our "taken-for-granted assumptions about relationships, identity, gender, and sexual orientation" (Meyer, 2007, p. 15). This critical approach offered by Queer Theory creates possibilities to dislocate hegemonic structures, and is more focused on the actions that occur as a result, not the philosophy. This presents an "epistemological challenge to 'universalizing' or 'minoritizing' ways of thinking about sexuality and gender, drawing attention to the ambiguous operations of power as a disciplinary force in the construction of identities" (Rahman, 2010, p. 952). Queer Theory, thus, is presented "as a pedagogy" (Britzman, 1995, p. 53)

that is both critical and encourages the use of everyday narratives in order to destabilize normalizing constructions.

My argument here is that we need to queer our current frames of thinking about gender even more, in ways that challenge and press against hegemonic structures of analyzing, defining, and evaluating lived experiences in relation to more than gender alone. We need to move from only acknowledging the social construction of gender (both inside and outside the binary), to acknowledging the social process of becoming. Supporting the social process of becoming values the relationships between intersectionality, liminality, and assemblages as a part of rhizomatic qualities of gender as a process.

Gender as a Social Construction

People most often use gender to describe a person's sex as male or female, creating a binary that imprisons a rigid definition of gender. Although Butler (2004a) asserts that "gender is produced through overlapping articulations of power" (p. 3) that force individuals to acquire and perform related social norms, our society operates through a hegemonic and heteronormative discourse that gender is biologically fixed. The gender binary asserts that a person is either male or female, but never both, interchanging, or neither. Even more, Bulter (1994) argues—and I agree—that gender is socially constructed as a means to organize and marginalize people, bearing the gender binary that puts men first and women second. This dichotomous thinking encourages oppression and marginalization of those who do not conform to the norms or are seen as

lesser in the hierarchy of the gender binary. Outside of this binary lie

genderqueer individuals, the focal group of this study.

It is important to pause here to define and clarify the distinction between

some important terms, including gender and sex, and genderqueer and

transgendered individuals. As Enke (2012) reminds us, it is important to

remember that

> Language itself is a social activity; words, phrases, and uses effectively
> communicate only within a community that grants rough consensus to that
> particular expression. At the same time, language adapts around cultural
> changes and may be open to new words and new grammars; in that same
> measure, communities and individuals do learn new languages all the
> time. (p. 16)

Although often used interchangeably, gender and sex are not the same thing.

"Sex is generally considered biological, and gender is considered cultural"

(Stryker, 2008, pgs. 8-9), and gender is assigned at birth to parallel with a

person's sex. Sex is related to one's anatomical make-up, and in Western

cultures, this is either male or female. As such, these two genders identified by

feminine and masculine characteristics are expected to coincide with female and

male genetalia, respectively. Thus, female *gender* coincides with feminine

characteristics and having a vagina; and male *gender* coincides with masculine

characteristics and having a penis.

As Stryker (2008) emphasizes, however, "the important things to bear in

mind are that gender is historical (it changes through time), that it varies from

place to place and culture to culture, and that it is contingent (it depends on) a lot

40

of different and seemingly unrelated things coming together" (p. 11). The Western view of two genders creates an oppressive gender binary of severe inequalities and prohibitive stereotypes (ex, only men have short hair, and only women have long hair). This binary system "implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it" (Butler, 1990, p. 6). Systemically, the gender binary supports inequality among the two genders and stereotypes that can be exclusionary. Gender becomes a much "more complicated topic when you start taking it apart and breaking it down" (Stryker, 2008, p. 7). Gender roles are culturally coded lifestyle attributes that coincide with particular conceptions of femininity or masculinity (Enke, 2012; Stryker, 2008). In Western culture, the stereotypical male gender role is to be the primary financial provider, while the female gender role is to be the caretaker of the family. Society's demand on people to adhere to gender roles is oppressive in that it robs individuals of the freedom to choose to do and act as they desire. An example of this is when men choose to be stay-at-home dads. Since being the caretaker is typically seen as a female role, these men can face unfair treatment from others for not abiding by gender norms.

Related to gender roles is gender attribution. Gender attribution, on the other hand, refers to how others perceive another's gender. If a woman dresses according to the male gender stereotype, but is biologically a female, others still may perceive her as male because of her attire aligning with the male gender stereotype. This, of course happens only if she "passes" as a man; if not, others

may perceive her to be a cross-dresser or drag king (both of which she may be). The pressure to "pass" so as not to endure the scrutiny that comes with not following gender norms is oppressive and taxing on individuals. While stereotypes and roles are constantly shifting and sliding, shifting from one gender attribute to another not related to your assigned gender is still seen as taboo.

Gender attribution, stereotypes, and roles are all socially and culturally constructed realities that play into the oppression and marginalization within the gender binary. While somewhat socially constructed, both gender identity and gender expression offer choices for individuals. Gender identity is referred to as a person's felt sense of his or her own gender, which may or may not coincide with the gender they were assigned at birth. For example, even though I am biologically female, I do not *feel* as though this is my gender identity; I feel as though I am both male and female or neither at times. Thus, I identify as genderqueer instead of female. Furthermore, gender expression is how a person chooses to indicate their gender identity. I present my genderqueer identity by oftentimes presenting in an androgynous manner. Likewise, if a biological male feels as though his true gender identity is female, he may choose to follow stereotypical female dress and wear skirts and heels as a means to express his gender identity as female. Dave, a participant in this study, often feels as though he is either gender, and some days he chooses to wear makeup (stereotypically female) and sport facial hair (stereotypically male).

Photo 3. Dave in Make-Up and Facial Hair

While complicated and evolving, an understanding of the complexities of gender

can aide to an understanding of the genderqueer participants in this study, as

well as to an understanding of the oppression these individuals face as a result of

the gender binary.

Genderqueer individuals are often described as falling under the umbrella

of transgender, which can also include transsexuals, intersex persons, drag kings

and queens, and two spirit persons, to name a few (Teich, 2012; Beemyn &

Rankin, 2011; Girshick, 2008). However, "what counts as *trans*gender varies as

much as gender itself, and it always depends on historical and cultural context"

(Stryker, 2008, p. 19, italics original). While most individuals who fall under the

transgender umbrella feel as though their gender identity differs from their sex or assigned gender, differences in a definition of transgender emerge when different individuals choose different courses for expressing their gender identity. The majority of people who describe themselves as transgender "assume that their need to cross gender boundaries has a physical, sex-linked cause" (Stryker, 2008, p. 9); thus, they choose to physically alter their body and their biological sex operatively and/or hormonally to match their felt gender identity. While I recognize differing definitions for what constitutes as transgender, for purposes of this study, a transgender person who is on hormone therapy or who has or is planning sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to embody the opposite sex is referred to as transgender.

Related, there is debate as to what constitutes as SRS: does it entail a reassignment in genitalia, or does it also include the removal or implantation of breasts, as in the cases of female to male SRS or male to female SRS, respectively? One participant, KJ, who had a double-mastectomy, considers herself genderqueer but not transgender because she has not changed her genitalia. On the other hand, there are some people who claim transgender who "understand their sense of being transgendered to be entirely unrelated to biological sex differences and to be related to psychological and social processes" (Stryker, 2008, p. 9); thus, they do not undergo SRS or hormonal changes to their body.

It is often the case that individuals who describe themselves as genderqueer often present both types and/or a mixture of gender expression, identity, and roles. These individuals often feel in between male and female or neither male nor female. Transgender, then, is very different from genderqueer, but the two may also overlap in some cases. A transgendered person who is considering transitioning to the opposite sex may call themselves genderqueer because they have not quite fully transitioned to another sex. Or, because transgender "implies movement away from an initially assigned gender position" (Stryker, 2008, p. 19), a transgender who has fully transitioned may also identify as genderqueer. For the same reason, a genderqueer person might also refer to themselves as transgender. Kat is one such participant who considers herself transgender as well as genderqueer, but does not desire to physically alter her biological sex. Even as genderqueer falls under the transgender umbrella, not all genderqueer individuals consider themselves transgender because they choose to "resist gender norms without 'changing sex'" (Stryker, 2008 p. 21).

Claiming transgender is also problematic to some genderqueer individuals because the umbrella creates increased visibility of transgender—which acts almost as a third gender—while all other identities underneath are still left marginalized or invisible in society. As such, the idea of putting genderqueer (or any other gender non-conforming identities) *under* a transgender umbrella implies the very oppressive hierarchy that we are trying to avoid. Genderqueer individuals, as Stone (1991) states, "speak from outside the boundaries of

gender, beyond the constructed oppositional nodes which have be predefined as the only positions from which discourse is possible" (p. 351). Claiming genderqueer as an identity inevitably puts gender expression outside of the gender binary, and this is one way to dismantle the binary and allow for visibility of other gender representations/expressions.

Whether thinking in terms of the gender binary (e.g., female and male), or in terms of those outside the gender binary (e.x., transgender and genderqueer), the very notion of gender, in any form, is socially constructed. Even as the attributes of each gender seem to "fit" certain individuals, gender is a fictive reality that is socially and culturally mediated. McKay, Mikosza, and Hutchins (2005) cite du Gay's description of "the key recursive and interrelated social practices through which meanings are constructed" (p. 279) in relation pertain to all social constructions of reality (e.x., race, class), and help us understand how gender identities are mediated. These social practices include:

1. Production: how cultural objects are "encoded" from both technical and cultural viewpoints;

2. Representation: the signs and symbols that selectively construct commonsense meanings about cultural objects;

3. Identification: the emotional investments that consumers have in cultural artifacts;

4. Consumption: the diverse ways in which people actually use cultural objects; and

5. Regulation: the cultural, economic, and social technologies that determine how cultural objects are both created and transformed.

Dismantling the gender binary, then, involves not only recognizing the power of these social practices that work to keep the binary system in place, but also recognizing that these same social practices shape genders that do not fall within the binary system. Then, instead of looking at these existing social practices as oppressive only, we can reclaim the power of the practices in ways that activate new social relations, such as those produced by transgender and genderqueer individuals.

Gender as a Felt Sense: Disidentificaiton and In-Between Spaces

Genderqueer individuals, as implied by the very name, *queer* gender constructs and activate new social relations because the "reality" of their gender as genderqueer is produced by the fiction of the gender binary. In this way, genderqueer individuals disidentify, meaning that they "neither opt to assimilate within [the binary] structure nor strictly oppose it" but instead disidentify as "a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11). Genderqueer individuals, such as Dave in Figure 1, often both do and don't do what society expects or accepts – Dave has a beard (e.g., he's male, so that's accepted) and make-up (e.g., he's not female, so that's not accepted). Although not everyone chooses to disidentify, disidentification is not limited to genderqueer

individuals or those who do not fit within societal norms. Any time a person goes against dominant ideology in order to restructure thinking, they disidentify.

Disidentification takes a critical consciousness of understanding norms and understanding how to break down those norms (Muñoz, 1999); David is a good example of someone who moves through disidentification with a critical consciousness. However, disidentification can also happen without a critical awareness of how disidentification works to break down hegemonic thinking. My brother (who embodies his male gender) can serve as an example here: he pierced his left ear and wore an earring in the early 90s, when it was not widely acceptable for men to wear earrings; he did so because it was the "in" thing to do. My dad was furious, but over time, it has become socially acceptable for men to wear earrings, and he no longer thinks twice about his son sporting an earring. My brother disidentified, or contested the dominant thinking about who can and cannot wear earrings, without being critically conscious of the larger effects it had on societal norms and power. In this way, it is easy to see how disidentification creates a space where "binaries begin to falter and fiction becomes the real" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 20); thus activating new social claims and relations and dismantling dichotomous thinking.

Disidentifying dismantles oppression and creates agency through the acts of individuals seeking to "activate their own sense of self" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 5) that is both informed by and in opposition to dominant ideology, but should not be used as support that we completely dismiss the importance of gender as a social

construction. Salamon (2011) argues that "what we feel about our bodies is just as 'constructed' as what we think about them, and the power of social construction as a model of understanding embodiment stems from its insistence that these categories are not separate but always intertwined" (p. 76). This is what Salamon refers to as the "felt sense" of our body. Some individuals who queer gender choose alternative labels, such as genderqueer, do so because they feel as though they do not fit in their assigned gender.

That said, a genderqueer body shows us how the deep-seeded nature of gender is, in fact, fictive, but also that the social construction of gender offers "a way to understand *how*...felt sense arises" (Salamon, 2011, pg. 76, italics original). Kat, a participant, found other genderqueer participants in agreement when she explained felt sense of being genderqueer by saying:

> I don't feel "trapped" in my body and I don't hate my body and I don't wish I were born with a different body—I haven't even really thought about that—I have figured out that I *feel* my body or relate to my body or experience my body a certain way, which I interpret to mean that I am [non-transitioning] trans.

A felt sense of gender is most certainly a product of the five social practices as delineated by du Gay (as cited in McKay, Mikosza, and Hutchins, 2005), but it is also highly contextual and personal. This felt sense manifests through our lived experiences in relation to the social construction of gender and the attributes that are socially linked to what mediates masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and so forth. The ways in which we either identify or disidentify with how these socially

constructed ideals are attached to the multiplicity of our identity. Merleau-Ponty (as cited in Salamon, 2011) further reiterates the felt sense by writing, "What I am all told overflows what I am for myself" (p. 43). Felt sense of gender essentially translates to a critical embodiment of self, driven by both the corporeal body and the psyche, and the impact of social, cultural, and institutional theories of hegemony on both the body and the psyche.

The felt sense of genderqueerness for ascribing individuals places them in a liminal space. It is a space that is "a positionality of divine betweenness" (Alexander, 2005, p. 252) that is more than being caught in between borders of male and female. It is a state of being both outside and inside the borders, continuously, independently and/or simultaneously. It is about being in a place where we recognize that we are free to embrace our identities in any way imaginable or necessary. And although this can be a frenzied feeling to knowingly (and unknowingly) embrace all of our identities, having a critical consciousness of the freedom, the lack of borders and binaries, and the potential for selfhood within this liminal space is powerful (Koshy, 2011; McMaster, 2005; McLeod, 2001). As such, this liminal space is an important piece of genderqueer identity.

While there are many ideas about and definitions for the liminal space (e.g., Pötsch, 2010; Turner, 1995), the definition I use in this work focuses mainly on the in betweenness. Typically, queer identified people (i.e., either by self or society) are labeled as a marginalized group in society. I think an underlying

importance, though, is a move to see genderqueers as a group that is in between, to see them in a liminal space, versus in a space that is "on the edge" or "just outside" of the norm. Similarly, Muñoz's (1999) writing on a "theory of migracy" and Lugones's (1987) writings on "'world'-traveling," both suggest that people of a minority status (genderqueers, in this case) spend a lot of time "traveling back and forth from different identity vectors" (Muñoz, p. 32), continually evaluating and reevaluating experiences and interactions. While neither a theory of migracy nor 'world'-traveling exclusively cite liminality, this movement indicated within both theories certainly does invoke thoughts of the time spent and negotiations made while in a liminal space as people are traveling back and forth.

Simultaneously connecting and disconnecting from the social constructs that define individuals, moving freely within/out of borders, is something that most people do without notice. When we do this, we become empowered to judiciously analyze hegemonic structures, reject hierarchical thinking, and claim our own selfhood and voice. Having this critical consciousness in the liminal space allows individuals to "see double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another" (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 549), and the information gained from these multiple perspectives allows us to see the fabrication of our hegemonic society and gives us the liberty to construct our own knowledge. As such, we can begin to "question, refashion, or mobilize received ideas" in a way that empowers us "to act as an agent of change" (McLeod, 2000,

p. 219) in transforming old knowledge to new, socially just and equitable knowledge. Thus, we move from being mostly passive actors in our identity formation to active participants.

People typically labeled as marginal (e.g., racial, sexual, and gender minorities) do often occupy the liminal space with astute attention, but every individual – inside our outside of the binary – inherently occupies this liminal space at one point or another. We all have access to the decisions and negotiations that happen while we occupy the liminal space, and this is recognizable to us if we strip ourselves of being defined by the social constructs and dominant intersections that attempt to fix us to an identity and put a social value on who we are (or who we are not). While my argument is that all individuals occupy by this space, I also argue that genderqueer individuals, just by being, are privileged to be constantly aware of their location of liminality in everyday experiences. As such, exploring the terrain of genderqueer individuals' experiences offers valuable insight into the potential of liminality. The potential here is that the liminal space allows individuals to challenge and/or dislocate established structures and "the key recursive and interrelated social practices through which meanings are constructed" (McKay & Mikosza, 2005, p. 279).

According to Pötsch (2010), a "liminal space is inherently disruptive," and thus presents a call to do something about the disruption of hegemonic structures that seek to embrace the liminal space—not as limit*ing,* but as dynamic and with interchanging borders. Liminality offers interwoven sites of

awareness, resistance, and movement in everyday lived experiences. This

attention to liminality carries privileges of (1) awareness of the multiplicity of self,

(2) resistance to hegemony and related forms of oppression, and (3) lateral and

connecting (versus hierarchical and dichotomous or binary) movement.

Individuals need to be genuinely grounded in the self in order to stay in ambiguity

and to work as a collective. An awareness of one's occupancy in liminal spaces

offers a sense of self and a comfort with ambiguity that supports collective action

and agency against established structures and power. The collective that is

driven by an awareness of liminality allows for individuals to feel equally invested

in dislocating hegemonic structures, empowered through autonomy that is only

possible as a collective, and enabled by both individual and shared voice.

A word of caution is in place here, however: consciousness of our

traveling in and out and through the liminal space is a privilege, but also a

burden. Individuals must exercise critical awareness of the decisions and

negotiations that we make in this space so as not to reify existing hegemonic

structures of power and domination. The danger here is that the continuous

nature of liminal spaces presents paths that have never before been traveled. As

such, negotiations made within liminal spaces may be new, and while the hope is

that a sense of norms dissolves in a liminal space, there is also the potential that

norms provide a form of comfort; thus, they become reified, even if seemingly

separate and justified on the basis that the liminal path is new. Similarly, while

liminal spaces offer opportunities for power to be challenged and shattered, it

could also lead to the reinstatement of different forms of power and privilege. In other words, rather than acknowledging that no two experiences travel similar paths in liminal spaces, one could become dogmatic in their ways of navigating liminal spaces and become a leader of experiences rather than a partner of shared experiences. Within this, there is then the possibility that liminality could be turned into a mimetic event rather than an authentic event.

A final concern is that an awareness of liminality can lead to individuality rather than a collective if the inherent disruptions that occur in liminal spaces do not carry the similar investments for all involved. In this case, it is important that we are continuously conscious that while travel within and throughout liminal spaces is individual, the disruptions that occur are invariable. Some people, such as genderqueers, may spend a lifetime aware of travelling within and throughout liminal spaces, while others may only be aware of travel within and throughout liminal spaces as events (e.g., a sudden event that forces an individual to be aware of their occupancy in a specific liminal space for a short span) or periods (e.g., different stages in life that make an individual aware of being in and out of liminal spaces). In all types, the breakdown of hegemony that inevitably occurs is commanding. This, nevertheless, reminds us of the strength of a continuous awareness of liminality in everyday experiences versus a limited awareness.

Gender as Rhizomatic: Intersectionality, Assemblages, and Becoming

        The benefits and limitations of the framework of intersectionality.

Genderqueer individuals do not fit into the gender binary sometimes by choice,

but also because this "dichotomous model of gender fail[s] to capture the

complexity, diversity, and fluidity of the [genderqueer] experience" (Diamond &

Butterworth, 2008, p. 366), and this leads to a disruption in the hegemonic

structure of the male/female gender binary. Due to this often contested,

challenged, and oppressed disruption in binary thinking caused by the

emergence of genderqueer as a gender identity, it is important to understand

gender "in the context of power relations embedded in social identities" (Sheilds,

2008, p. 301). With this understanding, we can begin to dismantle the

problematic and violent gender binary, open up a space for all gender non-

conforming individuals to claim voice and agency, and advocate for equity and

social justice among genders, as well as within other binaries.

        Intersectionality was introduced by Crenshaw (1991) and Colllins (1990)

as a means to interrogate places of both privilege and oppression as a result of

social power relations within the meeting of different identities. Acting as "a lens"

(Patrana, 2010, p. 55) to inform such analysis, the framework of intersectionality

works to magnify the multiple ways in which pieces of an individual's identity

meet, or intersect, and examine what happens and interrogate why at that point

of intersection. The framework leads to the understanding and naming of new or

previously silenced identities, as well as a closer understanding of dominant identities.

For example, one might ask what it means to be a "gay genderqueer" (e.g., a new or previously silenced identity) and examine what privileges and oppressions a person might face as gay and as genderqueer. Or, one might further interrogate our understanding of what it means to be a "white male" (e.g., a dominant identity) and examine how and why the privileges of being white and being male work to place the white male as the ideal socially constructed person in our society. Both questions bring a new and critical awareness to the social construction of identity that is important in creating spaces for voice, agency, and social justice. In this way, the framework of intersectionality has been particularly useful in gaining awareness of gender identities because it fosters a closer look at the experiences people have relating to gender, and thus enables critical interrogation of dominant ideals of "binary oppositions" and the structure of "universalisms" (Rahman, 2010, p. 952). Essentially, a space for the discussion and visibility of genderqueer identity has been carved by the framework of intersectionality.

However productive the space created by the framework of intersectionality, the term intersection is dangerously problematic in that it implies that only certain factors must align in order for two or more of our identities to come together and have significance over our situations and experiences. Because the "intersectionality theory directs us to researching the standpoint of

those identities located at the site of intersection" (Rahman, 2010, p. 951), it asserts that the different aspects of our identity can be turned off, ignored, or simply managed. Intersectionality necessarily privileges certain identities. For example, if I am interested in understanding the oppression experienced by gay genderqueers, the lens of intersectionality reveals the two intersections of *gay* and *genderqueer*, but neglects to consider the impact that each individual's race, ethnicity, or class may also contribute to the oppressions they experience. Thus, it is safe to say that "the prevailing view of social identities [becomes] one of uni-dimensionality and independence, rather than a true intersection" of identities (Bowleg, 2008, p. 313). Of course, more constructs can and do meet at one intersection, but rather than see all of a person's social constructs as making them a whole person, the framework of intersectionality privileges a view of just the parts of a person's whole being.

As a result of this privileging of certain social constructs of a person's identity, the framework of intersectionality becomes an additive versus interdependent framework that "conceptualizes people's experiences as separate, independent, and summative" (Bowleg, 2008). This means that instead of analyzing the experiences of a person who is gay and genderqueer, for instance, one would look at the experiences the person has as gay first, then as genderqueer (or vice versa), but not the experiences the person has as a *gay genderqueer*, who also bring with them their racial identity, class identity, an religious identity, to name a few. Aside from it being problematic that this

additive approach does not consider an individual as whole being, it is also problematic because it eliminates the possibility of other related and important narratives, such as those related to being a gay genderqueer. While it is true that privileging one's identity as gay may be an advantage over their identity as a genderqueer in certain situations, the same is true for their whole identity as a gay genderqueer. The leaving out of such narratives when analyzing an individual's experiences undoubtedly silences significant pieces of who they are as a human being.

A key question of intersectionality then becomes, "How do [our] intersections matter" (Pastrana, 2010, p. 62)? This helps to maintain hegemonic structures of hierarchy and power by forcing classification of social constructs. Hierarchical organization of identities "imact[s] people's lives in concrete and devastating ways and justif[ies] a sliding scale of human worth used to keep humankind divided" (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 541). Think, for instance, of a Muslim American: the framework of intersectionality coerces the Muslim American (and others, for that matter) to decide which part of their identity—the Muslim or the American part—is most significant, most advantageous. This causes the person to hide (if they can) or silence/deny the Muslim part of their identity when it is not safe to reveal it in America. Yet again, we see that a piece (or pieces) of the individual's identity is (are) "taken-for-granted" (Puar, 2007, p. 206), rendered invisible, and silenced. A sense of falseness to identity is also rendered here because choosing either/or denies a full and truthful sense of self. It seems as

though the framework of intersectionality continuously leads us down a path of limited understanding of motionless identities, as well as a broadening of subjugation and oppressions (Bowleg, 2008; Shields, 2008; Puar, 2007).

As a consequence of the framework of intersectionality, imaginary lines are created between identities, and thus, individuals are necessarily fenced inside the borders that the language of the framework creates. Both Anzaldúa (2007) and Bhabha (1994) speak to the notion of living in the borderlands, the in-between spaces that separate, join, and straddle different cultures. While the borderlands of identity put an individual in an advantageous space of "both/and" living (e.g., it allows room for one to embrace their whole being), it also implies a sense of entrapment; these imaginary borders are similar to our physical borders that are difficult to cross and inside which to gain full acceptance. Living in the borderlands of different cultures is thus similar to living in a mind frame of intersectionality. Like different cultures, our identity is seen as singular and frozen inside the phony lines, only intersecting with other pieces of our identity on occasion (Morris, 2002). And, because we are multidimensional beings, these borders only work to confuse us, and to create contradiction and ambivalence. Fraught with the choice of either/or rather than the option both or many, we "undergo a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 78) that leaves us heavily burdened. The borders created by intersectionality force us to choose which identity to which we lean and to which

identity we contest or ignore. Within this, we are often stuck, trapped, and, as a result, we are not truly whole beings.

Genderqueer individuals most certainly occupy the borderlands of gender identity because they feel both male and female. But because of the borders set up by society, it is often difficult and dangerous for genderqueers to slide back and forth between, as well as through, male and female identity. In much the same way, because of a reliance on choosing either/or identity, the framework of intersectionality supports a binary system that poses particular issues for genderqueer individuals. Even while a space for genderqueer voices to be heard may be a result of analysis through intersectionality, the fact that the framework continues to uphold a binary philosophy, genderqueers face systemic oppression. Since genderqueers do not fit neatly into the male/female binary, a dependence on any binary system poses a threat to the ultimate dismantling of binary thinking.

Considering a framework of assemblages. I argue that genderqueer individuals carry this privilege in a liminal space of gender, with benefits of fluidity and and critical consciousness of self and identity. Fluidity within identity requires a paradigm shift of our current thinking around identity. We most often speak of identities as intersecting, where my race, for example, intersects with my gender, thus making me a 'white female.' The term intersection is dangerously problematic in that it implies that only certain factors must align in order for two or more of our identities to come together and have significance

over our situations and experiences. Although we are often encouraged to think

of ourselves as being multidimensional (i.e. having intersecting identities) versus

just having *an* identity (See, for example, Tatum, 1999), intersectionality asserts

that the different aspects of our identity can be turned off, ignored, or simply

managed. Intersectionality necessarily privileges certain identities.

While visibility and voice are important benefits of the framework of

intersectionality, the framework fails to recognize that "intersections travel with

[the everyday] cycle of our lives" (Olesky, 2011, p. 265). For example, my

queerness comes with my whiteness, comes with my femaleness comes, with

my northernness; they never just intersect at certain points. Along with the work

of Jasbir Puar (2007), I argue that we come as a package, as an assemblage.

According to Puar:

> As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components—race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion—are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency. Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification: you become an identity, yes, but also timelessness works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity in every space. Furthermore, the study of intersectional identities often involves taking imbricated identities apart one by one to see how they influence each other, a process that betrays the founding impulse of intersectionality, that identities cannot so easily be cleaved (p. 212).

Where intersectionality privileges stability of socially constructed and accepted parts of our identity, assemblages embrace the fluidity and uncertainty of all parts of our identity. *Figure 5 Intersectionality versus Assemblages* is a visual to represent this difference between the two frameworks.

F*igure 5. Intersectionality versus Assemblages*
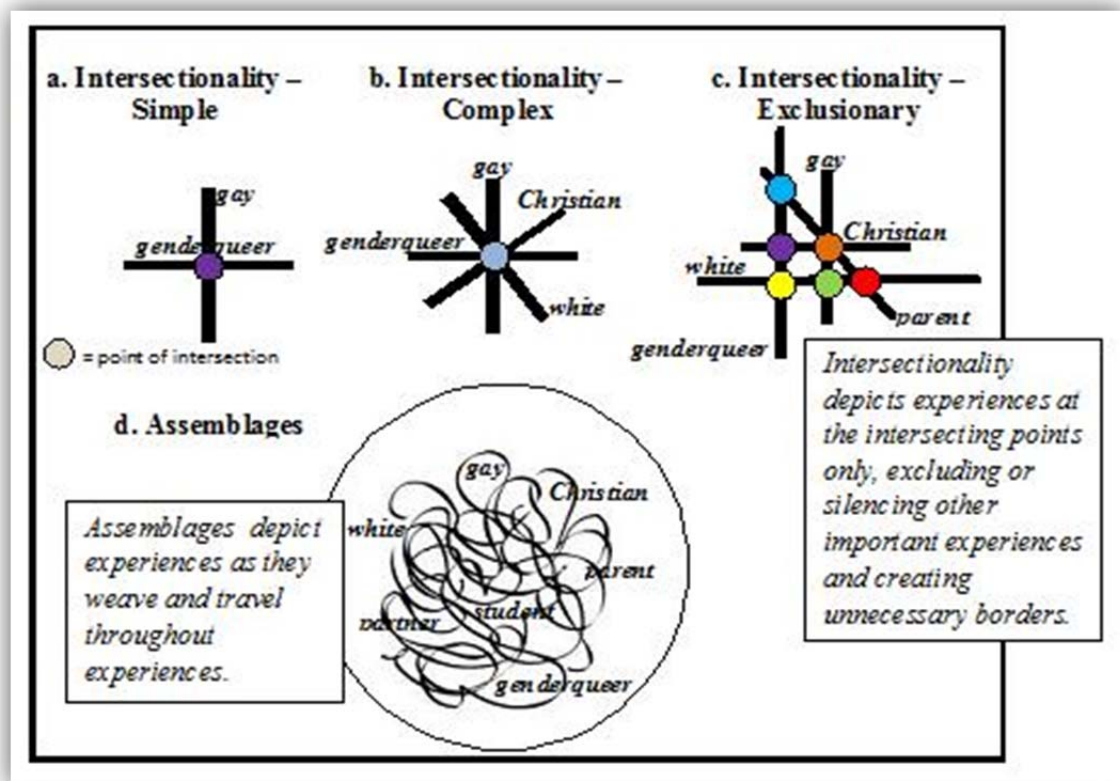
Through this visual, it is obvious how complicated and messy the framework of intersectionality can become. Part (a), *Intersectionality – Simple*, shows a distinct privileging of two identities that can happen as a result of intersectionality. It also shows how borders are created between the two identities, gay and genderqueer. But more telling of the confusing and

burdensome borders that intersectionality establishes is shown in part (b),

Intersectionality – Complex. The space in between the gay and Christian

identities, for example, is the confusing borderlands of which Anzaldúa (2007)

and Bhabha (1994) speak; it is clear in the figure where the border lines are

drawn. The visual also makes it quite evident how only certain experiences are

privileged while others are excluded, specifically in the *Intersectionality-*

Exclusionary part (c) of the diagram. One can also notice even more confusing

borders and borderlands created. While part (d), *Assemblages*, looks chaotic and

messy, it clearly shows that "assemblages are collections of multiplicities" that

require a recognition of "other contingencies of belonging (melding, fusing,

viscosity, bouncing)" as a part of one's whole being (Puar, 2007, p. 211). One

can see that assemblages work in ways that emphasize a deviation from and

discord with hegemonic structures of power.

It is also depicted in the figure how a framework of assemblages

embraces an exponential number of connections throughout different features of

our identity. Simply put, "there are no points or positions [within a framework of

assemblages]; there are only lines" (Deleuze & Guattari, as cited in Puar, 2007,

p. 196) that traverse and re-traverse in multiple and immeasurable ways. With

that, assemblages necessarily "deprivilege binary opposition[s]" (Puar, 2007, p.

205), which, as we know, is the complete opposite of intersectionality, and this

makes a framework of assemblages an incredibly productive philosophy. This

bodes well for a desire to disband hegemonic structures and advocate for equity

and social justice. This is especially promising for genderqueer individuals and other minoritized groups because it assures a prominent and continual space for voice and agency.

According to Puar (2005), "an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency" (Puar, 2005, p. 128). Identity as assemblages remind us that all of the pieces that make us up come with us in every situation, every circumstance. I am always queer, although it may be in the forefront of my performance in some situations, while it sits quietly (but not invisibly) in the background in others. Intersectionality implies that pieces of your identity come together at a certain point only; assemblages embrace the liminal, fluid space of identity – that same space occupied by gender queer people. While the liminal space of genderqueer identity is not the same as assemblages of identity, the two are certainly interwoven and contingent. Moving the conversation from intersectionality to assemblages creates a place, a visibility for genderqueer, as well as all forms of identification.

One concern with a framework of assemblages is the possibility that people will take advantage of the messy nature of the philosophy and find it as a reason to not take responsibility for change and transformation. Puar (2007) reminds us that "intersectional identities and assemblages must remain as interlocutors in tension" because "intersectional identities are the byproducts of attempts to still and quell the perpetual motion of assemblages, to capture and

reduce them, to harness their threatening mobility (p. 213). As we have already learned, intersectionality does provide us with a closer look at experiences, and for that, we need to continue to keep intersectionality in sight. This will work against those who seek complicity rather than transformative actions within a framework of assemblages. Where intersectionality seeks to dismiss a step to thinking in terms of assemblages is where our work to dismantle hegemonic structures is threatened. A continuously critical conscious mind for assemblages is needed here.

A move from thinking in terms of intersections to thinking in terms of assemblages takes work. It requires a critical consciousness that is not readily a privilege to most people who embrace a comfortable place among a binary. Because of their outright rejection of claiming a binary status as either male or female, genderqueer individuals are incessantly aware of their occupancy within the liminal space. This puts genderqueers in a unique position of already being "gifted at coping with liminality and could perform work involving the reconciliation of multiple points of view" (McMaster, 2005, p. 105) and the teaching of the work necessary to begin dismantling hegemonic structures. The framework of intersectionality does not allow for the opportunity to do such work, leaving us at a "lack of language to describe" (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008, p. 373) our experiences. A framework of assemblages allows us opportunities and the language. Even as the idea of assemblages suggests disarray that looks similar to life in the borderlands, the difference of this liminal space remains salient.

Within a framework of assemblages, we are not forced to choose either/or/both; we are free to embrace "all." Because of assemblages, we are thrust into this liminal space by design.

Intersectionality gives us a false sense of rooted identity, one that is socially constructed and given unchosen rank and status. Assemblages give us liminality; liminality gives us a truer sense of selfhood; and together, assemblages and liminality give us a space we can choose to call 'home' (Anzaldúa, 2002). In his writings on identities, McLeod (2000), references the work of Paul Gilroy in relation to what we call home and how we arrive there. Recognizing the multiple places and cultures he calls home, Gilroy struggles to find his roots. Instead, he speaks of the *routes* he has taken and continuous to take throughout life. In the end, he deems the routes as the most important aspects of his experiences because they have caused a transformation in his self and his beliefs. I like to think of intersectionality as roots and assemblages as routes: roots are meant to fix us, to keep us in one place; routes are meant to takes us places and challenge us in transformative ways. As I continue to consider and understand the inner-workings of assemblages throughout the course of my dissertation, my hope is that additional ways in which a framework of assemblages reifies power and privilege through social, cultural, and institutional theories of hegemony will be more clearly exposed. As such, I strove to keep intersectionality, assemblages, and liminality in tension throughout this study.

Gender as a Rhizome. Pairing a framework of assemblages with thinking in terms of gender as rhizomatic further lessens the limitations imparted by our current binary forms of thinking. According to Linstead and Pullen (2006), rhizomes are based on: connections; heterogeneity; multiplicity; ruptures, breaks, and discontinuities; and experimentation (p. 1302). Thus, if we think of gender as a rhizome, we can read gender as a state of *becoming* versus a state of static *being*. Connections are being made all the time based on our lived experiences that are mediated through the bringing together of the different social constructions of who we are and our life stories and/or moments. As such, a move toward thinking of gender as a rhizome is inherently a move toward the recognition of the connectivity of our multiplicity and a move away from binaries and socially constructed labels. Like Salamon (2010), however, Linstead and Pullen emphasize the importance of the influence that gender as a social construction has on gender as a rhizome.

The heterogeneity that comes with reading gender as rhizomatic pulls together different levels of connections, and as such, emphasizes the individuality of a single moment; no one rhizome is the same, as each connection is contextual. Likewise, the multiplicity of rhizomes in this manner of thinking emphasizes that the knowledge gained from one moment can and often collides with other moments to create the story of our own gender. Unlike binary thinking, rhizomatic thinking thus allows for "the possibility of the other and different connections" through the intentional or unintentional ruptures, breaks, or severing

of connections (Linstead & Pullen, 2006, p. 1302). In this sense, those who ascribe to the genderqueer identity (or other non-normative identities) rupture the hegemonic notion of gender and create space for others and different modes of non-normative thinking. As people make and sever connections, they are essentially experimenting with the idea of queering the norms of their own stories of reality of gender and the stories of others' reality of gender.

When we read gender as a rhizome, it "offers possibilities of the other, possibilities of change and transformation, and possibilities for freedom and emancipation that go beyond the constraints of biological sex and socially ascribed genders" (Linstead & Pullen, 2006, p. 1303). Within this connectivity of rhizomatic thinking, we can also see the relationships between intersectionality, mulitiplicity, and assemblages, and, thus, identify the multiple liminal spaces in which we occupy throughout our lived experiences. Figure 6: Gender as a Rhizome, depicts these relationships. Liminal spaces are not labeled, as they are re/un-fashioned within the movement created throughout the rhizome.

Figure 6. Gender as a Rhizome
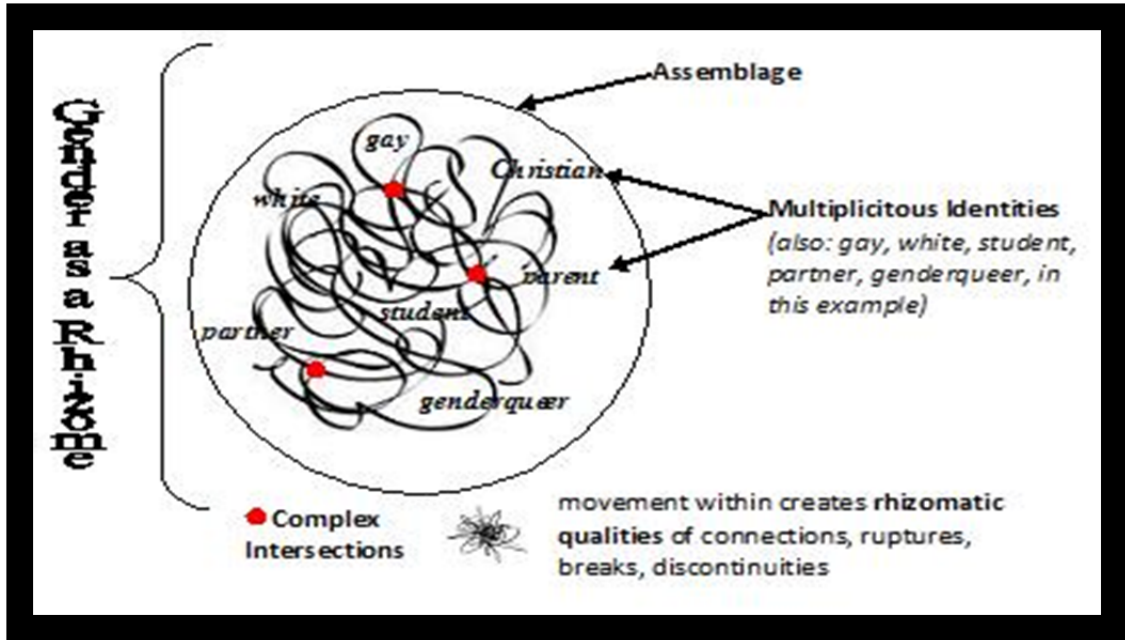
Recognizing the rhizomatic nature of gender thrusts our thinking into understanding gender as a process. As we will see from the participants detailed in the chapters that follow, naming genderqueer as a gender identity has and continues to be a process.

Conclusion

Thinking of gender as a rhizome ensures the important recognition of all the complex intersections of our identity, our multiplicitous identities, the liminal spaces in which we travel, and the movement of the process of gender. This recognition is important because of the reality of the individuality of the day (Lugones, 2006). Our experiences from day-to-day, even interaction-to-interaction, are never the same; our experiences are contextual and change

based on the situation, the environment, people involved, and the physical location. My gender presentation and performance as genderqueer, for example, vary quite a bit in one day as a literacy consultant at an elementary school during the day, and as an instructor of elementary education at a university in the evening. Because of the pervasiveness of both heteronormativity and hegemonic configurations in elementary schools, I find myself more aware of the choices I make based on the way I dress or present as genderqueer, often making sure there is some "marker" of my femininity, even if it is as simple as wearing small pair of earrings or a pink shirt.

Even as I move from classroom to classroom, I make negotiations in regards to my genderqueerness based on my relationship with the students and teachers. In some classrooms where I know that the teacher professes a strong Christian faith, I find myself sometimes asserting my own beliefs in God in sort of a way to overshadow my genderqueer identity and highlight a connection we have (note: I do not claim Christianity as a part of my identity, but that's another dissertation topic). Right or wrong, I am certain I do this to make the other person feel more comfortable, as well as to make myself feel a little more comfortable on some level too. In these situations, it is sometimes easier to let other pieces of my multiplicitous identities speak for me. On the flip side, I find myself embracing my genderuqeerness more when I teach at the university level because of the notably more liberal atmosphere. In the university classroom, I

am more open about my genderqueerness and the ways in which my gender identity informs decisions I make about teaching and interacting with others.

The more important recognition here, however, is that not only do genderqueer individuals, such as the participants and me, make daily negotiations within the rhizomatic nature of our gender, so do cisgender, or normatively gendered (i.e., male and female), and transgender individuals. My own partner, who is biologically and socially female (cisgender), makes decisions about her gender based on the situation she is in. If she is hiking, for example, she may choose to embrace her more masculine qualities in the way she feels, thinks, acts, or represents her gender, whereas she generally embraces her more feminine qualities each day. While seemingly simplistic and perhaps unconsciously, she challenges the norms of gender, creating new possibilities and connections, which, in turn, exemplifies the complex and rhizomatic nature of gender – making connections, forging heterogeneity, acknowledging multiplicity, and allowing space for ruptures, breaks, and discontinuities.

My argument is that having a critical consciousness of the rhizomatic nature of gender leads to a breakdown of hegemony and creates a possibility of transformational and socially just thinking in regards to gender. But even more astutely, I do not hesitate to take this one step further, advocating for a critical consciousness of the rhizomatic nature of *identity* as a whole. I define identity here as "fluid, partial, contradictory, non-unitary" (Britzman, 2010, p. 184), multidimensional, and always in the process of becoming. In this way, we can

see how gender becomes a part of the multiplicitous identities within the assemblage of our identity, and another part of our identity can take the helm as a central piece we may also negotiate. Thus, the movement within the rhizome is highlighted, and even more possibilities of breaking down hegemonic structures become available, not just in regards to the social construction of gender, but also in regards to other social constructions of reality. It is important to note a critical consciousness of the rhizomatic nature of our identity is not the answer to ending injustices; rather, it is a tool that we can use to begin to breakdown injustices. Keeping this in mind is important in preventing, not only the reification of norms, but also the hierarchical categorization of social constructs, such as race and class.

CHAPTER III

ADHERING TO THE NORMS TO QUEERING THE NORMS: BECOMING WHO WE ARE

Beers and Genderqueers

The summer before I started work on my dissertation, Lucia asked me to meet with her at a local pub one night for a couple of beers. Being friends and young academics, we often engaged in deep conversations about the injustices of the world, our feelings about the gender binary, and how we might be able to change the world as we work for social justice. This night was different, however; Lucia said she wanted to talk to me "about being genderqueer." I was not quite sure what to expect: Did she want to know the *definition* of genderqueer? Did she want me to tell her all about what it means to *me* to *be* genderqueer? Did she want to know *how* to be genderqueer? Having just finished my pilot study for my dissertation where I explored what it meant for a few folks in my circle of friends to be genderqueer, I figured I had this conversation nailed. And I was, after all, a flaming genderqueer myself. Well, I was not quite as prepared as I thought I was to answer all of Lucia's questions. She was, at the time, trying to figure out if genderqueer was an identity that fit with her, and she was looking to me for some sort of mentoring and guidance. Even before the Blue Moons started to impair my thinking and my

speech, I was already tripping over my explanation of doing and being and becoming genderqueer. The questions kept coming, and my answers kept getting more and more incoherent as my head swirled from uncertainty and alcohol. *What is genderqueer? Why do you call yourself genderqueer? What makes a person genderqueer? Why isn't genderqueer the same thing as transgender? Or, are they the same? How do you know if genderqueer is the right label for yourself? Do you have to wear all masculine clothing as a genderqueer female? Can genderqueer females be in a romantic relationship with other genderqueer females?* The answer I kept coming back to was, "Um, it's just how I feel; I don't know how to explain it any more than that."

        We talked about how I never felt like a girl, but I did not feel like I was supposed to be a boy either. I had just recently finished reading Gayle Salamon's (2011), <u>Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality</u>, so I attempted to describe what she, and ultimately I, meant about having a "felt sense" of being genderqueer. I shared that I spent most of my childhood and some of my adulthood conforming to the norms of femininity, but that I never felt comfortable, or that who I was on the outside did not match who I was on the inside. Lucia tended to agree with having similar feelings growing up. We talked about our own feelings about the word, *transgender*, what it meant to us, and how it did or did not apply to our genderqueer identities. It was during this time that I really started to understand the breakdown of language and labeling, even if used with the best intentions. We talked about how the very

nature of the label, *genderqueer,* was to queer normative thinking around gender as such, the "rules" to being genderqueer are fairly flexible – except that a genderqueer person queered the gender binary in some way.

By the end of the conversation we had had more beers than we had answers (and I had even more questions than beers at this point), but Lucia felt pretty confident that she was genderqueer, and I felt pretty confident that investigating the genderqueer terrain was important and necessary work. It was here that I was able to start formulating the questions that would ultimately drive this project. This start was basic because, at this point, I just wanted to really understand two things: (1) What is this genderqueer body? and (2) how is it experienced and lived. While this entire project seeks to explore and share the answers to these questions, this chapter, in particular, begins the dialogue about what it means to be genderqueer, namely, how gender is rhizomatic rather than static, not just for the genderqueers in this study, but for all individuals. This chapter seeks to share the intimate ways in which the participants have become and are becoming who they are as genderqueer. It is about the process, not the definition, of genderqueer.

Adhering to Norms: Gender Policing from Others

Gender policing is not anything new. Our gender is policed as soon as the world finds out our biological sex. Little girls have rooms that are decorated in traditional "girl colors" of pink or purple, and little boys have rooms that are decorated in blue or green, traditional "boy colors." I, for one, remember growing

up with a pink and red accent colors in my room that matched my Strawberry

Shortcake wallpaper. My brother, of course, grew up in a room with race cars

and racing stripes on the walls, and sheets and comforter to match. I had a

matching Strawberry Shortcake blanket that I carried with me everywhere, and

my brother had one that we affectionately referred to as his "chicken blanket" (we

grew up in the country, surrounded by farms, so the blanket had chickens and

barns on it). As children, the well-intended adults around us typically adhere to

the rules of gender, making sure that our biological sex and gender presentation

match the expectations that society has for girls and boys: girls dressed in pink

and playing with dolls; boys dressed in blue and playing with trucks.

While some of these rules may go overlooked at times, replaced with

phrases that create excuses that are acceptable when children cross gender

lines, such as, "She's such a tomboy; she loves playing in the sandbox," or, "He's

going to make a great dad someday; he loves playing with those dolls," the rules

are again reinstated when we enter public schools. Here we see well-meaning

teachers separating boys and girls into different lines, teaching opposites using

distinctions between "boy things" and "girl things," and making comments such

as, "Act like a girl!" or "Act like a boy!" And, of course, these comments carry

unspoken messages about the rules of gender, about what is and what is not

acceptable for the gender you were assigned at birth.

Gender policing continues throughout life, and often goes unquestioned if

we follow the rules and fit the norms. We are inundated with societal messages

about gender roles and gender presentation for men and women. As parents, we are given roles of caretaker (women) or breadwinner (men). As employees, we are often expected to follow dress codes that match our assigned gender, or work in environments that seemingly complement our gender. As consumers, we either shop in the men's section or the women's section of department stores, or in the section of toys for boys or the one for girls, whichever matches our biological sex. And, within this gender policing, we are often overcome by a message that gender and sex are the same. Thus, we often do not question our gender because it matches our biological sex, and, after all, how could biology be wrong?

The participants all described similar childhoods and adulthoods at both home and school filled with gender policing and constant reminders that it is "a serious offense to violate gender norms" (Girshick, 2008, p. 133). There were numerous moments during interviews and focus groups where participants recalled definite memories of intentional bullying and harassment from their peers in school and society because of their genderqueer presentation. All of the participants eluded to an excessive amount of name-calling and harassment from their peers; however, these moments of remembering were met with a caution about discussing them and obviously painful memories. Lucia put is simply when she said, "It's still really hard for me to, like, think back. I feel like I've erased a lot of those experiences from my mind," and everyone shook their head with piercing silenced and solemn agreement. I probed gently for details surrounding

these experiences, but was met with discomfort and an obvious aversion to share, so decided that I would leave the decision to share with each participant. No participant shared their most painful stories of gender policing and harassment without a sense of erasure or sarcasm.

While this was particularly interesting to me given the close-knit relationships within our group, it was not terribly surprising. The context of this project leaves each participant a bit vulnerable, as all but one participant is using their real name and sharing photographs of themselves. Additionally, the majority of my data collection happened during focus groups, which can set up a vulnerable environment. The journal portion of my data collection was geared towards the participants raising their awareness of their current lived experiences as genderqueer, and most of the participants focused on positive interactions, challenging (but not necessarily painful) experiences, and navigating their genderqueer presentation, not painful experiences.

It was easiest for participants to share examples of gender policing from families. Avery and Danielle similarly lamented about how, although gender policing was pervasive in their schools and in the society around them, it was not so at home with both their close and extended families. Avery remarked that his family was used to him "going against the grain" and experimenting with all aspects of life, so he has always found support in those closest to him. Danielle, who describes her relationship with her mom and brother to be "very close," could not say enough how supportive her mom was and continues to be,

especially. She said, "I never questioned my gender[queerness]. My mom has always been, always supportive."   As a result, both Avery and Danielle believe that their strong family support has made it a bit more bearable when dealing with the harassment they sometimes receive for violating gender norms in school and in society.

Lucia discussed a similar situation with her family in that they were quite supportive. She said, "I've always been able to play around with [gender]" and that her family never pressured her to conform to gender norms. Although she spoke of a home life that was quite supportive, Lucia's comments show just how easy gender policing convinces us that gender and sex are the same. Lucia remarked

> My family is very laid-back, and I was never gendered. I was in the sense that I was bought girly stuff, but I wasn't in the sense that gendered language was used in my house. My parents never made reference to what man I might marry someday or anything like that.

While Lucia's thinking here is reasonable based on the way we are taught to think about how gender and sex are parallel, we can see the fallibility of paralleling gender and sex in her statement. By her parents buying her girly stuff, Lucia was, in fact, gendered by her parents. Because she is a biologically sexed female, her parents matched that with society's rules for the female gender by purchasing her clothing and toys normally associated with the female gender. Additionally, she was referred to as "she," "daughter," and "sister" by her parents and brother, all female gendered language. What actually was

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happening in Lucia's house is that her parents never made reference to *heteronormativity*. Eliminating the language of "man and woman" in reference to matrimony is eliminating the language of heteronormativity, not gendered language. By looking more closely at Lucia's comment, we can see how easy it is to conflate sex and gender, even for individuals who spend a great deal of their lives analyzing their own gender in relation to their sex.

Kelly and I both expressed having the most difficulty with gender policing from our families, specifically our parents. Not only did we grow up in homes that were filled with gender normative and heteronormative language, we also encountered a great deal of overt and covert harassment for not conforming to gender norms. In both our cases, this has happened mostly in our adult lives, as the ways in which we queered gender norms in childhood was simply labeled as "tomboyish," an acceptable term for a straight female who straddles both masculinity and femininity (but ultimately adheres to female norms at the end of the day). In one of my own journal entries, I reflected a lot on the things my parents do and say in reaction to my genderqueer presentation. In one part, I wrote

> My Dad doesn't talk about it, but his way of showing his disapproval for my genderqueerness is by relaying facial expressions of disgust at my boyish hairstyle and clothing. My Mom, on the other hand, is quite verbal. She often refers to my haircut as "too gay" (translation: Why do you want to be a boy?), or says things like, "Should I call you 'Dan' instead?"

Neither my Mom nor my Dad bullies me intentionally. For all they believe, they are protecting me from harassment from others because, again, it is unacceptable and oftentimes dangerous in society to not conform to the norms. But my parents' protection has led to turmoil and anxiety over, not just the approval of society in terms of my gender presentation, but especially the approval of my parents in terms of my gender – not to mention their approval of everything else in my life. While I live my day-to-day life as a happy genderqueer, visits from my parents from their home in Michigan to mine in North Carolina are visibly happy, but internally chaotic.

I spend the majority of my time with my parents proving my femininity. Instead of spiking my hair and accentuating the mohawk that I currently sport, I spend the weeks prior to their visit growing it out, and when I am with them, I comb my hair over and fluff it up to portray a more feminine and female-approved hairstyle. Instead of wearing my most comfortable men's cut jeans, I reach into the back of my closet and pull out a pair of jeans I bought in the women's department. They are cut to show my feminine curves and they fit tighter around my thighs. While the cuts of my shirts do not often reveal much difference in gender, the colors do; as a result, I make sure to wear as many purple and pink shirts that I can while I am with my parents. Not only do I spend a great deal of time hemming and hawing over my dress, I also spend a lot of time consciously monitoring my bodily gestures. I keep my hands at my sides more often than I

keep them crossed over my chest; I cross my legs like a girl; and I make sure my movements are much softer.

Kelly is newly exploring her genderqueer identity, so she spoke quite a bit about her interactions with her family members, as Kelly expressing her genderqueerness is all new for them as well.   In her journal entries and during discussions in focus groups, Kelly described the exploration of her genderqueerness to be fun and exciting when she is around her partner, whom she considers her family. Her parents and sister, however, make it difficult for Kelly to feel okay exploring her genderqueerness. Kelly described quite well a painful reason why she and I, in particular, struggle so much with gender policing from others. The last statement in one of her journal entries speak volumes as she reflects on a trip to see her family over a Thanksgiving holiday. She wrote

> My mother and father have not seen my hair since I last cut it and I'm nervous. I'm not quite sure why I am able to be ok with my gender presentation away from here and then transform back into a 15 year old nervous child when I'm around them. I think it's because it is one thing to be judged by strangers, but to be looked at disapprovingly by your parents is devastating.

This sheds light on the significance of internal violence that is a result of gender policing, namely in the form of our gender policing on ourselves as a result of gender policing from others. This will be discussed in detail in the subsequent section; however, it is important to point out that this is an ultimate example of hegemony at work: there is a distinct hegemonic relationship between gender policing from others and gender policing from ourselves. While Kelly and I

shared extreme examples of our own participation in the hegemonic society in which we live, as we will see, all of the participants participate as well.

Before discussing the role of hegemony in the experiences of the genderqueer participants, I want to end this section by sharing Kat's experiences with gender policing from others. Hir experiences have often been unique because of so many of these experiences have happened when ze has been out with hir adolescent son. In some cases, ze has chosen to internally analyze situations, but ultimately leave the situations, in order to avoid confrontation in front of hir son. In an experience that Kat highlighted in one of hir blog entries, however, it is clear that experiences of gender policing – if met with intention –can be powerful teaching moments.

> Bojangles Server 1: May I take your order, sir?
>
> Bojangles Server 2: That's a ma'am.
>
> Bojangles Server 1: Sorry, may I take your order, ma'am?
> *Hmm, say something? Say what?*
>
> Me: You want to tell them what you want?
>
> My kid: Okay, I'd like the 4 supreme combo.
>
> . . .
> Me: Did you notice they called me sir?
>
> My kid: Mm, hmm. Then they called you ma'am. You liked that?
>
> Me: Sure.
>
> My kid: But they didn't think you were both. Just one or the other.

Kat ends this entry by writing, "How did he get so smart! Nailed the binary!"

Failing at Gender as Socially Constructed: Gender Policing of the Self

All of the participants recognized that their attention to their felt sense of gender and gender norms has been and continues to be a part of their entire life journey. The hegemonic structures of our society have been at work throughout the participants' lives. What is unique about the participants, however, is that they knowingly spent/spend a great deal of time participating in their own gender oppression via gender policing of the self. In particular, individual surveillance of social, cultural, and political contexts created a sort of self-regulatory adherence to cisgender normativity to some extent in each person's life. Like Foucault's (1977) panopticon model, "each person is his/her own panopticon in the sense that he/she undertakes a particular policing and monitoring of the self" as a means for gender-normative performance and attempts to "pass" as cisgender" (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2001, p. 90). All participants named times of working to adhere to gender norms or *do/perform* the gender that matches their biological sex. Doing gender for the participants comes with performative strategies similar to those outlined by Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli: silencing, editing, imitating, masking, manufacturing, and parodying (p.90). These authors argue that individuals can choose when to execute each strategy based on the context of their experience, and therefore, some strategies can be executed alone. I disagree with this claim to some extent, however. For example, I believe that silencing can not only be an intended strategy, but it is usually also

an unintentional strategy as a result of the use of another strategy. In particular, if I choose to edit certain mannerisms in order to appear more feminine than genderqueer, I am, in effect, also silencing parts of my identity expressed by the mannerisms I am editing.

With that said, it is important to note that these strategies are overlapping, and therefore, always accompany one another, whether intentional or unintentional. The examples of these performative strategies that I give in this section are described only as a means to highlight each of these strategies, but it is never without the understanding that these strategies do not work alone; rather, all of the strategies are playing into hegemony.

Avery talked about how he used to spend a great deal of time editing his mannerisms as he performed masculinity. In one focus group, he said, "I used to think, *I can't talk with my hands, and I can't do this, and I gotta keep my hips in line.* But I was a fucking gymnast and a swimmer and I played volleyball and like….gay." Avery knew that in order pass as male, he needed to adhere to certain rules of masculinity. If he did not, as he remarked, he "felt like I failed at masculinity." Failure, in this, is based on heteronormative expectations and ideals of success in relation to gender presentation and performativity. But Halberstam (2011) would rebuke that this failure should actually be seen as a good thing; it should be to "recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logistics of power and discipline" (p. 88). Avery has come to know and live this today, continuing to say

> I don't get why I was trying so hard. I'd probably be different if I hadn't tried so hard. But now…I'm okay with being so hypervisibly [gender]queer. And, personally, I find it incredibly empowering to just basically walk around with [my] middle finger up all the time and do whatever I want.

Avery found the significance in failing at masculinity to which Halberstam referred. In his comment about not understanding why he tried so hard to adhere to the norms of the male gender, Avery realized that had he not painstakingly edited his mannerisms and masked his queerness, he may have missed the important critical work he did with questioning the rules of masculinity and the gender binary all together.

David, on the other hand, did not describe a feeling of a failure of masculinity as much as he described a feeling of success at a performance of masculinity. In his journal entry, David wrote

> I hid behind the expected "male norms," silently clinging to the shadows to my true feelings and expressions. In secret, ravishing in the sensual textures of femininity, exploring the boundaries of images and beauty.

David recognized that performative strategies were at play for a great deal of time during his life, and that these strategies resulted in his own silencing of his own desires of femininity, his own participation in hegemony. While Butler (1994b) argues, and I agree, that all genders are performative, the type of performance in which David partook while hiding behind expected male norms was one informed by the compulsory gender normative society in which we live and enacted out of fear and oppression. The performance of genderqueer in

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which David (and the other participants) now enact is different in that it works to push against hegemonic structures of gender as forms of agency and resistance. Lucia and I shared similar stories of the use of performative strategies to do our own policing of gender, specifically centered on imitating, manufacturing, and parodying. I describe our type of performance here as "shape-shifting." I steal this term a bit from Episode 9 of the first season of the HBO Series, *True Blood*, where one of the main characters, Sam Merlotte, reveals to Sookie Stackhouse, the star character, that he is a shifter. Among a world of vampires and other supernatural creatures, Sam has the ability to transform from human to animal at any time in ways that keep him hidden, safe, and privy to certain information. In order to shape-shifts, Sam says, "I need a live animal in order to shift. Ya know, like a model, kinda like an imprint." He explains how he uses the Collie as his model, as what he shifts into because a "Dog's easiest for me. People like dogs. Most other animals leave you alone." It is within this idea of shape-shifting that I make parallels between Sam's character and the female "characters" Lucia and I used to shift into.

Luica's and my model, our imprint, when we used to work hard to perform femininity, was any female around who portrayed over-the-top femininity. Neither of us shifted to this extreme, but the blatant identifiable markers of femininity made it easier to mimic, sort of ensuring (even if just in our minds) that we can "pass" as female.   We both shared that we were bullied quite a bit growing up, and as a result, turned to shape-shifting as a means to stop the bullying. Lucia

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said, "I got bullied a lot for being 'one of the guys,' and so then I tried to conform [to femininity] more, and in high school, I tried to be more girly." As an educator, I shape-shifted between genderqueer and "feminine" on a daily basis for the same reasons Sam shifts to a Collie: secrecy and safety. In most of my roles as an educator, revealing my genderqueer identity was not safe. I encountered homophobia in the form of name-calling, derogatory language, verbal threats, physical altercations, and intentional silencing. Even though the outside harassment stopped as a result of Lucia's and my shape-shifting, our performances of the female gender were not only a lot of painstaking work, but were also always constantly at odds with our genderqueer cores. Lucia's and my internal oppression was deafening and painful as a result of gender policing ourselves and participating in the violent features of hegemony.

It is important to point out that while each of the participants' experiences of gender policing of the self have played into a system of gender oppression, each of these stories, however, illuminates the privilege of being genderqueer. Genderqueer individuals have the ability to claim some sorts of their assigned gender, whether it be through clinging to and accentuating parts of their femininity or masculinity. As such, genderqueers are able to more easily navigate passing in ways that others, such as transgender individuals, may not be able to navigate so easily. Gigi specifically talked about how, even after coming out as genderqueer, she was able to use this privilege to make her experiences less complicated. She said, "When I came out [as genderqueer], I

was pretty isolated, and I could change to keep myself isolated." Gigi talked about feeling like she was "the only genderqueer around," and so she kept herself isolated as such by using performative strategies related to the social construction of the female gender in order to pass when it made for uncomplicated (on the surface, at least) experiences with others who adhered to the gender binary. While this contributed to oppression of genderqueer, it contributed, also, to the privilege of being genderqueer and being able to shape-shift when necessary.

All of the participants recognized this privilege, but it is interesting that the biologically sexed males in the group, Avery and David, felt as though shape-shifting was much easier for biologically sexed females in the group. They said their belief in this is stems from the cultural ideological perspective that it is more socially acceptable for females to exhibit some masculine characteristics than it is for males to exhibit feminine characteristics. As an example of this, Avery talked about the difficulty he would have quickly using a performative strategy, such as editing his mannerisms, if he was also wearing a skirt. Even if Avery's mannerisms were considered masculine, society would mostly likely read "feminine" by his skirt first, and continue to question his gender or even harass him for his gender-bending presentation. On the other hand, it would be less difficult for any of the female genderqueer participants to put on a pair of earrings, for example, in order to assert some degree of femininity over her otherwise masculine appearance. As I mentioned before, her masculine

presentation could be chalked up to the more socially acceptable "tomboy" characteristic rather than genderqueer. In short, it is more socially acceptable to be read as "tomboy" (as a female) than "sissy" (as a male). And, as Kat's son so astutely figured out, society reads either/or, not both/and in terms of gender especially.

Conflict Between the Felt Sense of Gender and the Social Construction of Gender

Most striking for the participants in this study was the acknowledgement of spending a great deal of time adhering to the norms of the social construction of gender, but always feeling an inner conflict with their felt sense of gender. But this is a logical tension. Felt sense comprises of our literal body plus our psyche, both of which are driven by social constructs (Salamon, 2010). Our felt sense of gender is mediated by the ways in which we identify or disidentify with our biological sex. And, our socially constructed gender is mediated by the social practices related to our biological sex. As such, both the social construction of gender and our felt sense of gender inform one another, and ultimately, inform the ways in which we identify with, disidentify with, and perform gender. Salamon (2010) cautions that we should keep this tension in reach and not try to delineate a distinction between the two; rather, we should ask "who or what such distinction serves" (p. 72). In the same breath, we need to keep in mind that the social construction of our gender and performativity are not the one and the same, but are connected and also in tension. We cannot escape the social

construction of gender or the ways in which we perform gender. We can, however, work to dismantle social constructions by using performativity as a means of agency and empowerment. That said, when individuals adhere to norms through using performance strategies, such as those described in the last section, they are reifying the cycle of privilege and oppression via hegemonic agency. When individuals perform their genderqueer identity, they are interrupting the cycle of gender privilege and oppression, and breaking down the hegemonic structures that keep the cycle in motion.

Even as no one – of any gender – can escape the tensions between their socially constructed gender and their felt sense of gender, it is not reasonable to dismiss the conflicts and tensions that the genderqueer participants feel between the two. Because genderqueer individuals, by the very nature of claiming genderqueer, dismantle the gender binary just by being, this tension is quite prominent in their everyday lived experiences. Most of the participants recognized this tension as being much less significant in their experiences since they began claiming genderqueer as a piece of their identity. They all, however, also recognized that this tension was a necessary and beneficial part of their experience of becoming who they are as genderqueer individuals.

Lucia talked about how her felt sense of gender when she was younger made her feel "very much like one of the guys," but that this, in turn, made it so she "always felt so different" because there were things about her that made her feel like "one of the girls too." As is with most individuals, Lucia was made to feel

that she could not be both one of the guys and one of the girls; she had to be one

of the girls because her biological sex, and society, said so. She described the

tension she felt as "awkwardness from, like, 11 all the way until 18," until she

went away to college and began to explore the fiction of her reality of what her

gender can and cannot be. Nego also described the tension as an awkward

feeling growing up. Nego internalized this feeling as meaning that she was "ugly"

because she did not present as feminine. Nego, as well as Gigi, also explained

their feelings of awkwardness as subsiding once they started to explore the

fictive nature of their reality of their constructed gender. Nonetheless, for Lucia,

Nego, and Gigi, the conflict between their felt sense of genderqueerness and

their socially constructed female gender continue to be in tension, but that a

critical consciousness of this tension has helped them to navigate their daily lived

experiences of this tension.

Kelly and I both first noticed a conflict between our felt sense and socially

constructed gender as related to the performative strategies that played out

between the two. As Doan (2010) writes and we are acutely aware, "Gender is

not a dichotomy but a splendid array of diverse experiences and performances"

(p. 638). I felt the similar feeling of awkwardness described by Lucia, but with my

gender presentation related to the clothing I wore. I spoke of always feeling

awkward in women's clothing, specifically when

> I cried for like a week when I realized I had hips. When I'd go shopping
> with my Mom and she'd hold up these women's pants, and they were
> curvy, I'd be like, "No way am I wearing those!" I was relieved when I first

tried them on and they didn't fit – I was relieved I didn't have a feminine figure. But the days those curvy pants fit, I cried. I love my female parts, but I'd much rather hide them behind masculine clothing.

It was here that I not only felt a conflict, but I also, in a way, felt as though I was failing at genderqueerness because of my hips, and that I was failing at femininity because my felt sense of gender did not match my biological sex. It was when I realized I had hips that I felt like I was performing the female gender whenever I had to buy pants in the women's section of the store.

Kelly talked about seeing this same conflict through performativity about a year before the study began. She said

I started to feel like I was dressing up. Like, if I wear super feminine clothing, I feel not myself. It kinda felt like going through the motions…or, kinda like I was in a costume.

Kelly talked about how every part of getting dressed, from picking out her clothing to doing her hair, felt like she was getting ready for a performance of the female gender. A successful performance for her meant that she passed as female and no one questioned her gender as female. But a successful performance also meant failing at her felt sense of genderqueerness and giving into hegemony and oppression.

David wrote a lot about how he experienced the tension between his felt sense of gender and the social construction of his gender. He remarked in his journal entry that

> Growing up with the conflicting inner desires to express myself socially against society's expected norms was a daily struggle. I never felt as ease in public, desperately trying to avoid extra attention. For years I was at an inner war, loving and hating everything about myself.

What David describes here is what each participant eluded to in some form or another: a deep *craving for* critical embodiment – wanting to be read as both a subject and an object of genderqueerness, not just an object of the gender binary – and a deep *fear of* critical embodiment. Critical embodiment means an adherence to one's own felt sense of gender, as well as one's own queering of their socially constructed gender. But it also means queering one's own felt sense of gender and adhering to one's socially constructed gender. Critical embodiment is having a critical consciousness of how one embodies and theorizes gender, which, according to Salamon (2010) is one in the same, allowing "for a resignification of materiality" (p. 38). The tension arises when we realize that critical embodiment exposes the fictive nature of social constructions, and in some sense, the fiction of our felt sense of gender. David later wrote, "Peace came at long last just accepting who I am," essentially accepting the rhizomatic nature of gender and identity in general.

Gender as a Rhizome: Becoming and Being Genderqueer

While it is true that gender is a rhizomatic process of becoming and being for everyone, this process of discovery for these genderqueer participants has been riddled with confusion, gender policing, silencing, and liberation, all in conflicting, colliding, repeating, and empowering pathways that have led to their

decision to disrupt the gender binary through a claiming of genderqueer

(Linstead and Pullen, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Locating genderqueer as

an identity has been and continues to be a process for each participant. When

asked about choosing genderqueer as a description of her identity, Nego said,

"When I look back over a large span of time, I can see a lot of shifts in the way I

was thinking about [gender]." Although she does not use genderqueer to

describe herself on a regular basis like the other participants, Nego said that

using genderqueer works for her at times because her feelings about gender are

"just sort of changing all the time." Lucia expressed a similar sentiment of

changes and shifts in regards to her discovery as a genderqueer. She said

> Discovering myself as a woman doesn't completely fit, but saying that I feel like I want to be a man doesn't fit. And, so for me, it's been a process of finding out what exists in the middle of that, if there's anything.

For Lucia right now, genderqueer is that middle, where she can embrace and

explore both her feminine and masculine self, and, as she remarked, "feel very

comfortable" in the genderqueer space. Both Nego's and Lucia's comments

directly highlight the overall feeling from each participant: that gender is not fixed

and stable, but in a constant cycle of becoming and being.

Avery was a unique participant in that a life-changing part of his becoming

and being genderqueer happened quite overtly during the course of the study.

Avery started the study using his birth name, John. About midway through, he

informed us all at a focus group meeting that he was considering changing his

name to Avery. When I asked him to talk more about his name change, Avery

told us

> My birth name was given to me in the hopes that I would carry on the legacy of someone whom I never met and whom my parents define(d) in very gendered ways with which I didn't feel comfortable. I often felt strange introducing myself given my gender presentation/expression/identity and then using such a gendered, common name. So I shopped around for almost a year and wanted names that have been used for both men and women and one that felt like it fits, which was something I just knew when I came across it. I purposefully chose a first name that, in my experiences, has mostly been used for women, and a middle name that has mostly been used for men. I wanted my name to, at least more so, accurately reflect my understanding of myself.

Within the month, he posted a message on his personal Facebook page that

revealed his name change, and asked his friends to start referring to him as

Avery. Avery's name change is a direct reflection of his process of

understanding his genderqueer identity. Simply put, the name, John, no longer

fit his genderqueer self. This was a definite point of disruption, breakage, and

regrowth within the rhizome of Avery's gender identity.

Danielle does not name any specific points of disruptions, but rather a

series of disruptions that created a new pathway of thinking about gender for her.

In focus group meeting, she described that

> I know I didn't wake up one day, and say, "I am gender queer and I don't give a fuck about how you feel about that." I kept hitting this wall of concern of others. Finally, after multiple run-ins with this wall, I pumped the brakes and started doing and saying things that I wanted to do and say. For me it was about peeling away at the gender binary. Once you see how the machine works I think you decide if one wants to stay in the binary or make your own rules.

For Danielle, part of her being and becoming genderqueer is about finding disconnections and discontinuities with her personal beliefs about gender and the beliefs of others, and rupturing – or sometimes even severing – the places of disconnect so that she can create new pathways of understanding gender (Linstead and Pullen, 2006; Lugones, 2005, 1987; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). As she so eloquently put it, this is not a one-time thing, it is both consciously and subconsciously an ongoing process, rhizomatic in nature.

Each participant was in a separate place of becoming and being genderqueer. For Lucia, Kelly, and Kat, claiming genderqueer is new, as is exploring what it means for each of them to be genderqueer. David and Avery, in their individual processes of becoming and being genderqueer, are both reaching out to find other biologically sexed males who may be genderqueer to explore, perhaps even claim, genderqueer as a part of their own identity. Nego, Danielle, and Gigi are all in a place of understanding how to use their genderqueer presentation as a form of subtle protest against hegemony and as a site for coalition building. As a result of meeting, both KJ and I are working to break down the unintentional exclusion of individuals within a working definition of genderqueer. One thing is certain for all of us genderqueers: we embrace the rhizomatic nature of gender.

Conclusion: Queering the Norms? Or, a Genderqueer Norm?

The purposeful sequence of this chapter has been to show the process of becoming and being genderqueer, starting by sharing the ways in which all of the

participants participated in the gender binary to its fullest, but with hesitation, in the earliest years of their lives; to discussing the wars we had with our inner and meaningful and important work to queer and dismantle the restrictive and oppressive norms of the gender binary, we end up recreating a new set of norms for genderqueer. Or do we? Were these norms even intentional or just happenstance? Perhaps there seems to be a norm based on the way we look, but are these unintentional norms parallel to the norms created by the gender binary? Meaning, if genderqueer norms are not meant to rank and sort who belongs, who does not belong, and how people belong, in the way that the norms of the gender binary do, are they as dangerous? The next chapter attempts to dig into, if not answer, these question

CHAPTER IV

WHAT IS GENDERQUEER?: CREATING OUR OWN NARRATIVES OF

GENDER

When I was in the 6th grade, I loved the rap group, Kris Kross, but not

because of their ability to rap like the best of them or their ability to spit out lyrics

that blew your mind. I loved Kris Kross because of how they dressed: they were

known for wearing their clothing baggy…and *backwards*. And that, when you are

in the 6th grade, is awesome. Everyone at school tried it, even the girls. This

was amazing for me because it meant that I got to wear boys' clothing, and it was

acceptable as long as I wore it backwards. While Kris Kross was queering

fashion and the rules of dressing, I was queering gender – and getting away with

it. I wore a pair of my brother's pants and my one of my uncle's t- shirts (see

Chapter 1) quite proudly on several occasions.

The first time I tried wearing my clothing backwards was the most

memorable for me, however. I was in the basement of my parent's house on a

Saturday night, and I had managed to convince the hottest girl in the school that

a sleepover at my house would be the most fun she would ever have in her life.

As we were listening to the radio and dancing like we were at a grown-up club,

Kris Kross's number one hit, "Jump," came on the radio. We screamed with

excitement and sang and danced…well, *jumped*. Out of breath and full of

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enerGy, we decided it would be a great idea to dress like Kris Kross (my idea, I'm sure) and "perform" to their entire album. My older brother's closet was the perfect place for us to pick out our wardrobe; his clothing was all masculine, and since he was older and bigger than us, his clothing would be baggy on us.

I was excited on multiple levels that night. First, the hottest girl in school was at my house, undressing right in front of me, so I was able to explore my sexuality. I had already managed to play "Seven Minutes in Heaven" with another girl at a sleepover a few weeks back, so this was hardly new for me. So mostly, I was excited to explore bending the rules of gender, which felt completely different from and unrelated to my sexuality. Wearing my brother's or boys' clothing was something that had been forbidden since I entered school. I did not realize how much I missed it until that night. Until then, I thought it was normal for every girl to feel uncomfortable in her clothing, that it was just a part of growing up. I always felt so uneasy wearing skirts and dresses. Not only did I feel like I was dressing up, but I also felt like being in a skirt or dress was one big performance that I was nervous about throughout. But that night in my parent's basement, I realized how much better I felt in boys' clothing. Even though I was technically wearing it for our little performance that night, I felt like I was who I was supposed to be. I felt good about my body and my gender presentation at the same time, something that I had not experienced feeling in years. My felt sense of gender finally matched my gender presentation. I did not know it at the time, but I was constructing my own definition of genderqueer in that moment.

Throughout the data collection process for this project, I asked the participants to journal, talk, and think about how they went about defining genderqueer both before and during the project. First, I proposed that we focus on a working definition for genderqueer, meaning that the more we discovered about ourselves and others through examining, analyzing, and sharing our lived experiences as genderqueer, the more cohesive our definition of genderqueer might become. At each focus group meeting, I asked the participants to tell me their definition of genderqueer. Without exception, each participant's definition of genderqueer changed only in the slightest, and only to include a more solid understanding of their own affiliation with the term. In other words, a definition of genderqueer is organic in nature and varies from person-to-person. This is not to say that there are not some limitations to what the participants believe genderqueer to be, but it exposes the unconventional and flexible qualities of genderqueer as an identity, and thus, shows how genderqueer works to rupture the gender binary.

Resisting the Cis-stem: Discomfort with the Gender Binary

While the participants agreed that the definition of genderqueer is organic and that there are no other concrete rules to being genderqueer, they did discuss the norms often associated with being genderqueer. These norms of being genderqueer included: (a) identifying as some kind of combination of male and female, not identifying with one or the other solely; (b) wanting to maintain their biological sex, not have SRS; and (c) queering the gender binary, not wanting to

participate in the gender binary. The gender binary operates in favor of individuals whose gender presentation and identity match their biological sex. But it also operates in favor of any individual who crosses the gender binary and is able to pass, giving the impression that who they are on the outside (their presentation) matches who they are underneath (their biological sex). It is a system that privileges cisgender and cisgender presenting individuals and oppresses genderqueer and gender non-conforming individuals.

The genderqueer participants in this study expressed their desire to not try to pass as either gender, but to express themselves as some kind of combination of both male and female, masculinity and femininity. David said, "I, personally, identify as neither male nor female; [I am] something in between," when he described being genderqueer. David sometimes presents as male only and sometimes, as female only; but generally, David presents as in between male and female. Similarly, Gigi said, "If anything, you know, I have sometimes referred to myself as a third gender." One picture David took for this project shows him wearing women's high heels, but also exposing his masculine legs (i.e., hairy, in this case).

Photo 4. David's In-between Genderqueerness

All of the participants agreed with David's and Gigi's statements, wanting only to refer to their gender as genderqueer, meaning whatever combination of male and female, masculinity and femininity, of their own choosing. The in between and third spaces of being genderqueer loosely resemble, what Licona (2012) refers to "the very epistemology of borderlands rhetoric" (p. 16) introduced by Gloria Anzaldúa (2007). In my work and in my thinking, I refer to this as the liminal space (see Chapter 2).

The borderlands to which Anzaldúa and Licona refer describe very tangible borderlands between the contested physical terrain of México and the United States, as well as borderlands of those related social and emotional identities. I believe that the borderlands of being genderqueer are similar. These borderlands are physical, between male and female, and are very much a contested physical terrain, as well are also a part of felt sense for genderqueers. The implication of the word "borderlands" carries quite a different, and perhaps

more specific substance, for Latin@s than the spaces in which genderqueer

individuals occupy. As such, I believe that using borderlands to describe this

space should be reserved for the Latin@s with which it originated. And, with that

then, I do not think the term, borderlands, is as flexible a term as needed when

describing the third space that genderqueers often occupy.

Liminal space is a description that offers room for the felt sense of gender

that is so pervasive for genderqueer individuals. In his journal, David talked

about himself as "male and female both physically and emotionally," and about

how he's "created a dual personality [with] David the male, and "glitter" the lady-

boy. In further describing his being somewhere in between male and female,

David wrote that

> Identifying as genderqueer is…an emotional perspective. It is rooted in
> one's personality responses. Some may even go as far to say, 'It is a
> matter of the soul.'

This is place where the felt sense of one's gender was revealed. All of the

participants felt as though they (dis)identify with male and female, in ways that

are tied to an emotional and felt sense to belonging to both expressions of

masculinity and femininity (Salamon, 2011; Muñoz, 1999). Lucia described this

as "an internal kind of experience with being" genderqueer. When genderqueer

became an alternative to male or female for gender, each of the participants felt

as though their experiences were not about becoming genderqueer, but about

finding the language for who they have been all along; genderqueer *felt* right.

It is interesting to note that most participants still referred to themselves as either a genderqueer *female* or a genderqueer *male*, subtly naming the importance of their biological sex to their identity. I, for example, often caught myself telling mostly cisgender people that, "I'm genderqueer, but I'm female. I just don't like the gender binary." I felt as though I had to not only explain genderqueer, but also my desire not to transition from my female anatomy to male anatomy. There is a significance in this need for the genderqueer participants to assert their biological sex. As intensely as genderqueers work to dismantle the gender binary, they are, in some respects, still giving in to the power of the system that compels them to continue to hold on to the piece of the binary that says you are either female or male. It is almost like the participants are saying, "I don't fit the norms, but I still do underneath. And even though that is a private matter, I want you to know that I'm still "normal" on your terms."

Lucia made a statement regarding the gender binary that all agreed with; she said, "Genderqueer…best applies to me because it captures my discomfort with having to identify with either side of the binary." This discomfort was often described by the participants as constricting and oppressive because of the obvious oppressiveness of the power of gender norms in society. The discomfort was both as a matter of gender presentation (i.e., feeling as though it is not normal to present as female and/or male) and felt sense of gender (i.e., not feeling like male or female fits one's identity). The word, discomfort, seemed to highlight more than just the participants' struggle to have their gender

presentation fit on either side of the binary, however. Discomfort, here, also highlighted the participants' discomfort to *not* have their biological sex – usually made to carry the same meaning as gender in larger society – known to others.

My suspicion is that this assertion of biological sex had more to do with the participants disidentifying with transgender individuals who have had sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) than it did with the participants feeling a need to identify with the gender binary. As Muñoz (1999) reminds us, "Disidentification is [a] mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentifcaition is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (p. 11). It is important to mention that all of the participants expressed, as Gigi put it, "I'm not transgender, so I don't have that experience, and so speaking in generalization about what the transgender experiences is, I don't feel comfortable with that." However, everyone agreed that it was important to talk about our experiences of *not* being transgender, and that this was likely to position our conversations as being controversial, possibly problematic, perspectives. In these particular conversations, transgender was used to refer to those individuals who had SRS, but we also recognized that transgender is often an umbrella term that encompasses more than individuals who have undergone SRS.

When talking about why these genderqueer participants are not also transgender, most spoke of close friends who were transgender and had undergone or were considering undergoing SRS. Danielle spoke specifically

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about her best friend transitioning from female to male and how his feelings and her feelings about their bodies were "definitely different." She said that, "I don't identify with transgender because "I love my body and parts that I was born with," whereas her friend told her that he felt as though he was born into the wrong body. Lucia expressed a similar feeling when she said

> If somebody said, "Oh, this is Lucia, and she is trans," that would not offend me, or I wouldn't feel necessarily like it was a wrong fit. The only thing that kind of deters me from using [transgender] is that I don't go through a lot of the shit that some of the trans people I know go through.

And as such, Lucia felt as that she did not "want to appropriate their experiences" with her own. Everyone acknowledged and uneasy feeling of using both genderqueer and transgender to describe their gender identity because their experiences of genderqueer and the experiences of their transgender friends were not parallel.

Kat admitted to me later that she struggled with this part of the conversation. She particularly struggled with Lucia saying she did not want to appropriate the experiences of transgender individuals by calling herself transgender since she has not had SRS. Kat journaled in response

> I did feel like the overall conversation was invalidating because it set up a definition of trans that not only excluded me from it, but also said that I was appropriating what I did not deserve by claiming the term. It is true that the medical establishment is an oppressive system, especially for people involved in medical Transition (among other groups). Not currently being involved in the system in this particular way definitely provides me privileges—certainly economic ones, for example. Top surgery is expensive. Medical transition is also not one big monolithic thing, either. I

don't want to downplay the oppression that trans people who medically transition experience. I actually don't know whether I will do any of the things people do in medical Transition. I would like a lot of the changes that hormones would have on my body. I might start hormones at some point. I may decide to have top surgery at some point. I don't know. It is hard to say for the future. For now I am "non-transitioning." But I don't think being trans is like a checklist—I don't think there are certain things I should have to do to "count."

When I first met KJ after presenting my preliminary findings of this study at a conference, she mentioned also feeling like Kat, as a bit excluded from the conversation about transgender versus genderqueer. She said, "I am genderqueer, but I have had top surgery, and so I feel like maybe I do not fit then. But then, where do I fit?"

I asked KJ to talk about her top surgery and her feelings about being genderqueer, but not transgender. Even though she does not identify as transgender, she said she did feel like her surgery was "like a rite of passage into the transgender community" in some way because she understands the medical journey that so many transgender individuals have to endure. KJ said, however, that she was genderqueer before her surgery, and that did not change after her breasts were gone because gender for her is a felt sense. She said her felt sense of being genderqueer did not change as a result of her surgery; however, she admitted that she may feel different had she had SRS.

Kat's and KJ's feelings of not being sure where they fit within a genderqueer identity are incredibly valid and show how having such conversations can come across as problematic or exclusionary. The participants

concluded, however, that their reasons for not also claiming transgender as an identity did not set up a checklist in their minds as to who can and cannot count as transgender or genderqueer. The conversation was meant to show their support of and recognition for transgender individuals who have undergone SRS, and also for the genderqueer participants to assert that they have spent time interrogating their own privileges as genderqueer.

Still, there were too many conversations to write about that included comments such as, "I love my penis!" or "I love my vagina!" or "I love my breasts!" As David once eloquently put it

> Social masses take up the inherited viewpoint, broad and uneducated as it may be, and assume that being genderqueer simply means a person is gay, a drag queen, a tranny, somewhere who wears clothes of the opposite sex because they hate their genitalia. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The statements from these conversations highlight the relationship with the genderqueer participants also feeling the need to assert their biological sex, as well as the relationship with the participants disidentifying with transgender individuals here. We all discussed how troubling it is that the belief of the general public is that all individuals who queer the gender binary also want to change their biological sex. It is particularly troubling to us because this assumption is then often put on us as well. We all recognized, as I said

> We could all be considered transgender because we are all kind of fucking with the gender binary. But it oftentimes gets translated in others' minds that – and this is just my own feeling – it often implies that we are

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transitioning from male to female or female to male, that we're taking hormones, or that we've had or planning to have SRS. And I don't want to be labeled under that; I struggle with that.

This assumption that genderqueer individuals want to change their biological sex trivializes the definition of genderqueer to queer gender norms. This assumption also reiterates Butler's (2011) questions of which bodies matter and in what ways? For KJ, having top surgery made sense for her genderqueer identity, whereas changing her biological sex made sense to her only if she had a felt sense that she was transgender. The participants feel as though their gender presentation, coupled with their biological sex, is a way to queer the norms of gender because the norms say that our presentation and our sex need to match; where they do not, it is queer. Gigi commented that if she were to identify as transgender, "it would feel very much to me like I was participating in the binary gender system, and I don't believe in the binary gender system." Everyone acknowledged that this statement was not made to generalize that all transgender individuals want to participate in or even see their transgender identity as participating in the gender binary. Everyone though, agreed that Gigi's statement rang true for each of them.

Genderqueers' desire not to participate in the gender binary is undermined when the assumption is made that all people who transgress gender norms want to change their biological sex. For the participants in this study, genderqueer is related to transgender because both identities queer or transgress gender norms. Participants felt that the two are distinct, however, when sharing that they do not

desire to reassign their biological sex, nor do they desire to fit within the binary system, or pass as cisgender.

In general, the participants felt as though they themselves and other genderqueers they know do not usually also consider themselves transgender; likewise, the participants also felt that the transgender individuals that know who have had or are considering SRS do sometimes also consider themselves genderqueer. Kat, for example, began this study calling herself both genderqueer and transgender, even though she has not had or has not considered SRS. The more she delved into her lived experiences as genderqueer, however, the more she considered claiming only genderqueer as a part of her identity, or genderqueering, as something she does with her gender identity. Nego talked about how, for her to have a felt sense for transgender, she felt like she would "either have to feel, like, a lack of affinity for [my] assigned sex, or a stronger affinity for another one." This is not to say these are also the case on a larger scale, but a version of this particular conversation played over and over again in interviews and focus groups, with all of the participants quite matter-of-factly asserting their desire to not have sexual reassignment surgery or adhere to the gender binary.

Not adhering to the gender binary was a form of empowerment for each of the participants in some way. Most specifically, the space for rhizomatic movement of gender that this creates "offers possibilities of the other, possibilities of change and transformation, and possibilities for

freedom and emancipation that go beyond the constraints of biological sex and socially ascribed genders" (Linstead and Pullen, 2006, p. 1303). For Danielle, "genderqueer means being whomever you want to be with no disclaimer on why or what," and this is particularly empowering because it is a form of taking back the same privilege that cisgender people have when they do not have to explain why or what kind of female or male they are. Avery remarked that

> I'm finding that through wrestling through this concept as a potential point of identity is that, in actuality, I'm finding that it's a source of yet another form of empowerment for me. It is an act of revolution for me. It is an act of resistance. I love fucking with people's ideas of what gender should look like or mean.

What Avery is talking about here is the fact that it is easier for him to tell someone, "I am genderqueer," rather than telling someone, "I am male, but I sometimes like to wear women's clothing or men's clothing or a combination of both." Claiming and stating genderqueer as an identity puts the responsibility on the other individual to learn and understand genderqueer, rather than the genderqueer individual either having to give a loose, and often misunderstood, translation of what genderqueer is (i.e., Avery's, "I am male, but…" statement), or go into a long conversation about what it means to be genderqueer.

Nego was particularly invested in genderqueer as supporting, as she put it, "a comfort with ambiguity" and "sense of autonomy" that allows an individual to have "voice." KJ followed up with Nego's comments by saying that, for her,

being genderqueer meant being okay with confusing gender presentation. Nego further explained this confusion and ambiguity by comparing it this to the work she does with social justice and activism. In particular, Nego discussed how, by being a part of any type of collective action, one has to be able to sit with and be comfortable with the ambiguity that often comes with decision-making and movement within the collective. She continued to say

> You have to be really grounded – that's the thing – in order to feel really comfortable in a kind of wishy-washy open-ended kind of thing. You have to feel really comfortable with yourself in order to be in that space.

Nego likened the democratic process of action that takes place in a collective to the process of action that takes place as one is queering the norms of gender. Walking through the world as genderqueer requires a comfort with oneself that is resilient. For genderqueer individuals, the space that they occupy between masculinity and femininity, male and female, is often undefined, uncharted terrain; thus, the individual is continuously making informed decisions regarding their gender presentation, or the ways in which they choose to genderqueer. Such decisions, according to Nego, require each individual to be grounded in their convictions, beliefs, and sense of self, and, in turn, generates a sense of autonomy in regards to one's genderqueerness.

This consciousness-raising is a form of empowerment for genderqueer individuals. Nego's reference to the ambiguity within the space between masculinity and femininity, and male and female, is a direct reference to the

liminal space in which genderqueer individuals occupy, or the borderlands

rhetorics that Licona (2012) describes as being a space of resistance, coalition,

and activism. In no matter what part of the liminal space, being genderqueer, for

all of the participants, is a form of empowerment that leads to resistance,

coalition, and activism in order to dismantle the gender binary.

Movement and Freedom: Simultaneously Embracing Femininity,

Masculinity, and Biological Sex

The liminal space of genderqueer is created within the rhizomatic nature

of genderqueer, and this was quite evident when the participants talked and

journaled about how being genderqueer is about simultaneously embracing their

feminine and masculine characteristics and their biological sex (Linstead and

Pullen, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Initially, the participants described the

rhizomatic nature of being genderqueer as flexible and fluid, but even those

words did not accurately capture this. Lucia said, "I hate the word fluid; it's more

like I can move and that I can present as femme sometimes and be okay with

that." Fluid, for Lucia and others, was too simplistic, as it implied a sense that

being genderqueer was effortless and uncomplicated. Danielle followed up in

agreement, bringing up that being only male or female feels like being in a box,

but being genderqueer makes her feel like she is "not completely in a box"

because she, as she put it, "I can wake up every day and just decide, like, if I had

a skirt and wanted to wear one, that's fine." As Danielle continued, she

illustrated how unfixed the definition of genderqueer is when she said

I call myself female, queer, gay, and lesbian. I try not to say all of that at once, but I usually use at least one of those to describe my identity. Genderqueer means all of those things to me.

Nego, too, likened being genderqueer to be outside of a box. She said

I feel like it means I have a lot of wiggle room in that, 'cause I feel like, as opposed to a box, it's like an area to stretch out in. So, yeah, that's the appeal to me is that it's just kind of noncommittal.

Genderqueer leaves room for choice. It leaves creates freedom for the breaks, ruptures, connections, disconnections, movements, and growth that are a part of its being rhizomatic to exist. And, to the genderqueer participants in this study, these breaks, ruptures, connections, disconnections, movements, and growth are essential to being genderqueer and breaking the gender binary and dismantling gender norms.

When I asked the participants to elaborate on the rhizomatic nature of their genderqueer identity, each talked about their appeal to both their masculine and feminine characteristics and/or the nature and processes of their biological sex. Kelly, Lucia, and Gigi engaged in a conversation about how they all enjoy being a woman physically and emotionally, but how they also prefer to present more masculine than feminine. Kelly talked specifically about how her masculine characteristics and her feminine characteristics work in tandem when she said

There's a part of my femininity that I embrace. Like, I love being a woman; I just don't necessarily like conforming to feminine things. So, yeah, there's no part of me that feels like I want to be a man or should've

been a man. I just think I'm more comfortable with myself when my outward appearance is more masculine than feminine.

Kelly continued to talk about how she prefers to wear men's clothing and men's styles, from her t-shirt to her underwear. She said that women's clothing does not fit her body shape well, and women's styles are not particularly appealing on her.   Lucia also said that there are parts of her femininity that she likes and embraces. She exclusively mentioned "the parts of my body that are attached to being a woman," saying, "I want to have children. I like that I have a vagina. I don't know how else to put it." Like Kelly, clothing is important to Lucia's genderqueer identity; however, she struggles with it differently than Kelly, saying

I do struggle with, for example, having curves and having a really small waist, and having big hips, and not being able to wear, you know, men's clothes because [they] don't fit as well as women's.

Lucia did express that the styles she wears tend to be more masculine, even if the clothing is from the women's section. She also said one of the most important pieces of her feminine side is that she always wears lacy women's underwear. To Lucia, this was a form of empowerment and a way for her to queer the norms of being genderqueer. Meaning, it is not an expected norm of being a masculine-presenting genderqueer female to also wear feminine underwear. Lucia talked about enjoying the way in which she queers this norm, but also the way in which it is secretive, translating to a form of invisible

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empowerment for her (until she pulls down a section of her pants to show off her lacey underwear, as she did in one focus group).

Gigi was a bit different than Kelly, who wears men's clothing, and Lucia, who wears women's clothing. She talked about being able to wear a mixture of men's and women's clothing based on whatever fit or looked better. She used other terminology for masculine and feminine characteristics, too, but put it simple, saying, "I am butch, but I also like being femme." Butler (2006) reminds us that also identifying as femme "contextualizes and resignifies "masculinity" in a butch identity (p. 167). Gigi expressed that she is more outwardly butch in the way she presents herself through her masculine dress, mannerisms, and actions, and she is more inwardly femme through her emotion and ways of thinking.

Nego, Kat, and I all talked about the significance of our breasts in terms of our genderqueerness. Kat informed us that she queers gender by binding her breasts to conceal them and give her a more masculine physique. Nego mentioned that she queers female gender norms by never wearing a bra to cover or lift her breasts. I do not try to conceal my breasts through binding, nor do I not wear a bra; however, my breasts are an important feature of my femininity, and I often think to myself, "Don't you see my breasts?!?" when I am referred to as "sir" in an interaction with a stranger. I do not like the roundness of my hips, and I often conceal them by wearing men's pants, but it is important to me that my breasts are somewhat visible as a mark of my feminine characteristics.

Both of the genderqueer males in the group also journaled about their bodies in relation to being genderqueer. Avery wrote that his gender

> has everything to do with how I dress [my] body, how I carry [my] body around, and how I conceptualize myself and my interactions with others…I like how my body is, at least in terms of what genders it to others. I don't mind my adam's apple (though it is a bit big); I enjoy my genitalia, my body hair patterns, and my facial hair.

Avery queers gender in the way he uses his body, particularly through his gate, his gestures, and his dress. David journaled about similar ways of queering gender, saying, "I, for one, born biologically a man, LOVE MY PENIS! But sometimes, the only way to express myself is with a little glitter and a pair of pumps."

Clearly, part of being genderqueer for all of the participants is about felt sense and self-expression in ways that inherently dismantle the gender binary, but also thrusts them into a liminal space. The fluidity of this movement "is not merely a movement across a binary boundary (which nevertheless leaves the boundary in place) or across several horizontal boundaries between multiple identities. [It] is motion" (Linstead and Pullen, 2006, p. 1305). Thus, the breaks, ruptures, connections, disconnections, movements, and growth that happen as each of the participants queers gender, is a direct indication that gender is and ought to be thought of as a rhizome.

Genderqueer*ing*: Genderqueer as a Verb

Kat spoke and journaled extensively on genderqueer being more than a label or an identity, that genderqueer can and should also be used as in verb form, as in genderqueering. In the last focus group meeting, when we were all talking about our overall definition of genderqueer that has developed throughout the course of data collection, Kat made a comment in which everyone agreed. She said

> I'll say I identify as genderqueer, but every time I say it, what I'm really thinking is that that's an oxymoron, and I'm just saying it as a shortcut because, when people ask you about your gender, you have to say it. Like, you have to say something quick, but to me, genderqueer is not really, it's about more like a verb kind of thing. It's about identifying, but it's not like a class. Like, it's not about being in a class or an identity.

What Kat was eluding to is that genderqueer is about both being and doing, simultaneously, unlike class, as an example, which is generally just a label of who you are as a being alone. All of the participants agreed, going back to many of their original sentiments about genderqueer, in that it is about queering gender norms, which is an act of *doing*. Avery followed up by saying that, for him, "Genderqueer wasn't about a point of identity necessarily; it was more like a concept" of being and doing combined. As the group agreed, they continued to talk about having a felt sense of being genderqueer – that this is just who we are – and about how being genderqueer (or even just being read as genderqueer) also rests on what you do with your body, such as how you dress or carry yourself. Our intentions as genderqueer and as genderqueering will be

discussed in more detail in *Chapter 6: (Un)Intentional Inter(Re)Actions: Queering It Up, Strutting Our Threads, and Baring Our Souls*, but I do want to highlight the significance in thinking of genderqueer as a verb, as genderqueering.

This study is not the first to discuss an identity as also being an act. Elkins and King (2001), in a chapter about transgender individuals, discuss stories of transgendering, as in transgendering being both an identity label and a performative action. In a general sense, Elkins and King write about how biological males partake in "maling," that is, their performance of gender norms of masculinity, such as wearing their hair short or not wearing skirts. Similarly, biological females partake in "femaling," or their performance of gender norms of femininity, such as wearing long hair and wearing high heels. Elkins and King say that, as a rule of the gender binary, only biological males are supposed to "male" and only biological females are supposed to "female." They say that "this rule is broken where males "female" and females "male"…[and] we use the term transgendering" (p. 124). Figure 7: Transgendering, is from the Elkin and King chapter, and highlights the binary system and the act of transgendering visually.

Figure 7. Gendering/Transgendering
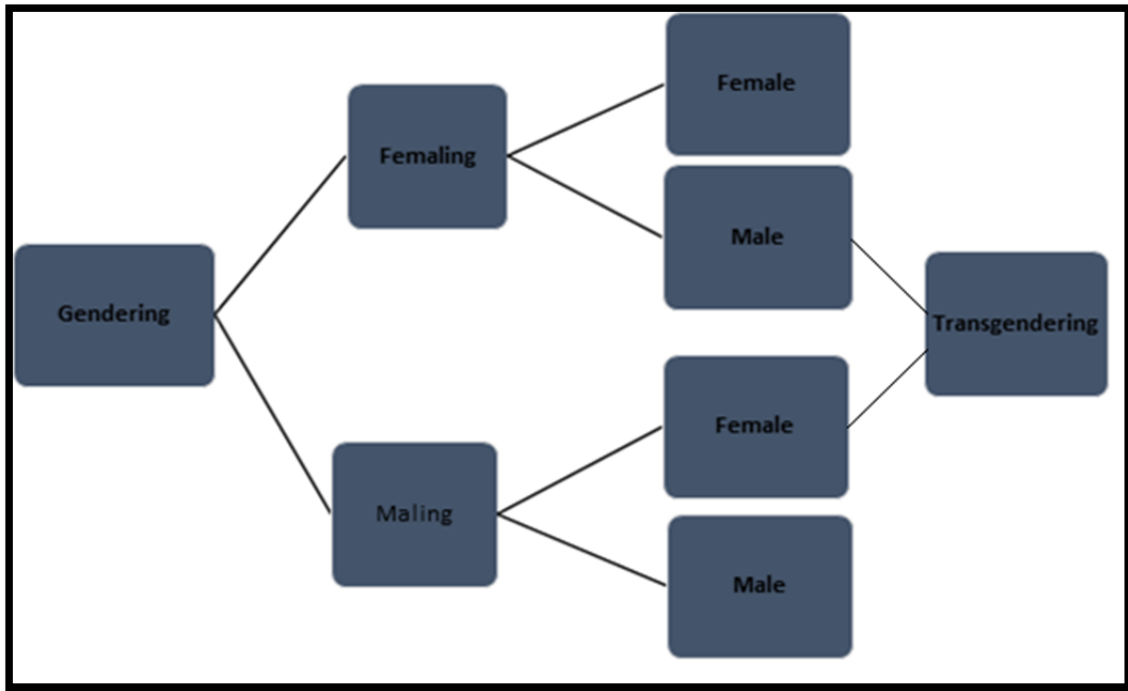
According to their diagram, Elkins and King suggest that males can only do male gender or do female gender, and females can only do female gender or male gender. Males maling is gendering, and females femaling is gendering. But, males femaling and females maling is transgendering. As such, Elkins and King do not leave room for males who male and/or female, or females who female and/or male.

The participants in this study are left out of the gendering/transgendering model by Elkins and King (2001). As genderqueer individuals, we male and/or female – sometimes we female only or male only, and sometimes we female and male simultaneously or interchangeably. Even if a genderqueer female females, for example, because she also males or males and females at times, she is still

considered genderqueer. I created *Figure 8: Genderqueering*, to expand on the

Elkins and King diagram in a way that includes genderqueering, and to also

depict how genderqueer and transgender are interrelated.

Figure 8. Genderqueering
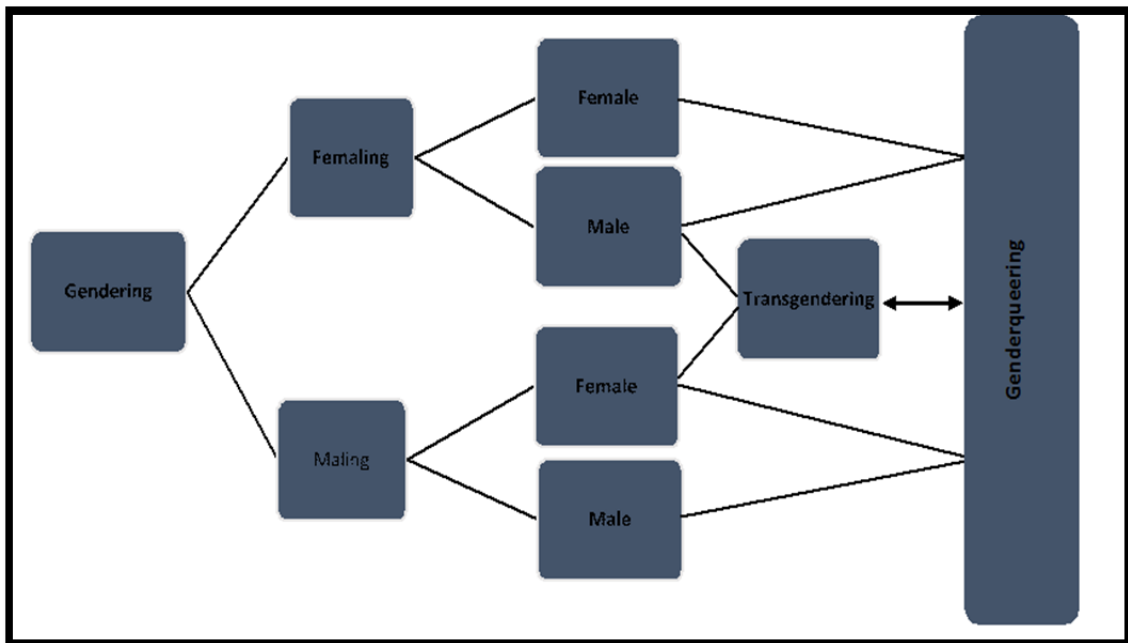
The first part of the diagram is the same as Elkins's and King's. Where it is

different is where two new lines are drawn from female and male on both sides of

the diagram. They connect with genderqueering to show that females female

and/or male, and males male and/or female; thus, they are genderqueering. The

new diagram also shows that transgendering and genderqueering are

interrelated; a person can both be and do genderqueer and transgender.

This diagram, however complicated and inclusionary, still appears to be

exclusionary of other individuals who queer the gender binary, such as cross

dressers, drag kings, and drag queens, to name a few. While all of these types of gendering are related, they are not necessarily one in the same; however, these individuals, like genderqueer individuals, are often put under the umbrella of transgender. Unlike genderqueering, however, cross dressers, drag kings, and drag queens, are often only maling or femaling; thus, according to Elkins and King (2001), they are transgendering, and therefore, are included in both their original diagram and the one I created for this section to highlight genderqueering.

Conclusion: Reconfiguring the Transgender Umbrella and Challenging the "Rules" of Gendering

One of the very first and the very last things all of the participants and I talked about in focus groups was how troubling the transgender umbrella that is often used in literature and common discussion to encompass all individuals who transgress gender norms. As you can see in *Figure 9: Transgender Umbrella*, transgender is quite literally the umbrella term used in place of all of these terms below.

Figure 9. Transgender Umbrella
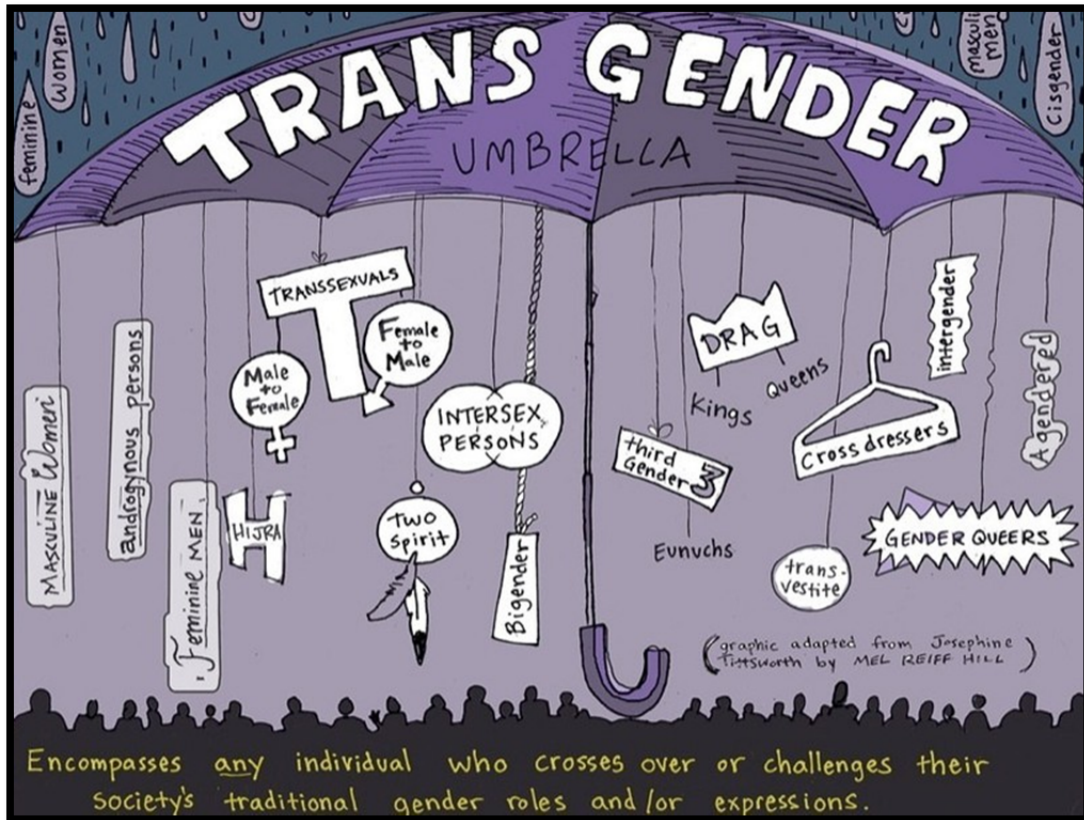
This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, all of the individual identities below the umbrella are rendered invisible when referred to as transgender versus their individual name in conversation. The intent for the all-inclusive term, transgender, is well-meaning for ease of conversation for individuals who are unfamiliar with or uncomfortable with genders other than the norms of male and female. In the same breath, the transgender umbrella silences the labels that are above it by assuming that cisgendered men and women cannot transgress or queer gender norms without being mentioned below the umbrella.

As the participants have shared throughout this section, however, this umbrella terms makes it anything but easy for them when they are placed as a general term for their gender versus their individual term of genderqueer. Unfortunately, using the word transgender does carry the connotation for most cisgendered individuals that all individuals under the umbrella feel as though they do not fit in their body or desire to have SRS. Instead of focusing on what makes genderqueer individuals unique – their in-betweenness, their felt sense of gender, and their occupancy in a liminal space of gender – the focus is on what makes genderqueer individuals like every individual who transgresses gender. Even the recent change from using transgender to using trans* leaves a lot of individuals invisible and unrecognized.

There were several different ways in which the participants and I tried to rework the transgender umbrella into a more all-inclusive snapshot of gender. One of the first things we discussed was taking the genderqueer term completely out from underneath the umbrella. While doing so was beneficial for genderqueer individuals, any other individuals who transgress the norms of gender still remained under the umbrella term of transgender. Kat also pointed out that, as long as we use an umbrella in such a way, "this way of thinking is basically an "identity" model of "classifying" people—putting people into classes or categories." Classifying individuals is problematic as our identities are not linear as models such as the transgender umbrella would have us believe. Classifications also impose certain definitions and characteristics that may not

pertain to every individual put into that classification. Genderqueer individuals, classified under the transgender umbrella, often have characteristics, such as the assumption that all genderqueers desire to have SRS or feel like they were born into the wrong body, imposed on them.

Looking more closely at the transgender umbrella as a source of imposition of classifications led our group realize again the importance of thinking in terms of genderqueer as a verb, as genderqueering. If we start to look at genderqueer as doing (verb) along with being (adjective), we also account for the rhizomatic nature of gender as discussed previously. The movement within the rhizome of gender allows a space for individuals who transgress the norms, but label themselves genderqueer, to also be transgendering, but just choosing not to label themselves as transgender. The transgender umbrella, thus, becomes a place for a necessary close examination of the contentious terrain it creates.

CHAPTER V

FINDING REFUGE IN QUEERNESS: SAFETY OF PEOPLE, PLACES, AND GENDERED SPACES

Broslaughter
by Avery (2013)

HEY FAGGOT they yell either while running away or from the safety of a vehicle. TELL ME SOMETHING I DON'T ALREADY FUCKING KNOW I yell back with a middle finger raised and my purse swinging from my hips. Before these words ever pass my lips I know they ain't about shit. They turn tail and run because queers can't bash back now can they? But if looks could kill I'd be doing countless consecutive life sentences for broslaughter by now. Because when you're seen, when you're visible, when your body gets read before you get the chance to read them right back the motherfucking house down, you're a target. And if my shoes weren't so goddamn tight I'd be swinging both balled up fists in a rainbow arc straight at your fucking face. Or I'd just spray your latent ass with mace.

But here's where it gets sticky. My self-defense would stand up in a court of law. I could sit there punk ass faggot hair and all and recite my story in oh so objective terms to make any jury clutch their pearls and drop their jaws. But when CeCe McDonald snatched her own life back out of a neo Nazi's hands, the court started making demands. How the fuck can anyone tell me that it ain't because she's black? Because she's trans? That's a big fucking crock of

baby back bullshit that we've been calling out since it fucking happened, yet there she is locked up in a fucking prison. And motherfuckers wanna tell me we live in a progressive era? Well I wanna know for who? Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee. Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. Well I bet if we took a minute and drew up the ledger going tit for tat, the state would owe much more than a halfway decent education at a public university that I still gotta pay for to be here today.

So let me lay it out for you in no uncertain terms. The only reason I disidentify with my *cough* WHITE *cough* queer history is because I know that history. ACT UP and Queer Nation spreading the word about visibility, throwing kiss ins in malls and painting rainbow murals on city halls. But they didn't stop to think that some people are better off not being seen. And when you make some of us visible, our assailants get off scott free. Because with hypervisibility comes great responsibility. We can't just see trans and queer folks without any context and assume that ignorant dude bros are gonna respect us. We can't paint humanistic portraits of people of color and expect that white supremacy isn't gonna shit on that too. We can't just pay homage to rendering the invisible visible or the unheard heard and rationally anticipate sweeping cultural change. And some people gotta play it safe.

So in this cultural moment when visibility is something we fight for and violence is something we condemn, how the hell is a bash-back queer supposed to cope? Pacifism just might be a privilege that some of us can't afford, and visibility is something we don't all have access to and that some of us don't even

fucking want. For some of us there was never a closet
to come out of and some of us have always been in
the streets, so I'll need your "it gets better," "turn the
other cheek," "violence is not the answer," "LGB-fake
T," "marriage equality," "skittles in your hoodie
pockets" people to take several seats.

I open this chapter with an incredibly powerful and moving slam poem

written by Avery because it highlights the (in)/(hyper)visibility of being and doing

genderqueer that came up in so many interviews, focus groups, and journal

entries. Sometimes the (in)/(hyper)visibility of being and doing genderqueer

provides comfort and safety, and sometimes it provides vulnerability and

endangerment. Avery said he wrote this poem because, based on his

genderqueer presentation, "I had experienced street harassment on three

separate occasions…so I was really, really angry." He said his anger was fueled

by the fact that he didn't have an opportunity to [confront] them" because his

harassers drove away.

Safety was a large topic of conversation for the genderqueer participants

in this study. In some cases, genderqueering has been a form of safety, but in

many cases, genderqueering has resulted in unsafe situations for the

participants. The unsafe situations reflect the power of dominant thinking that

favors the gender binary and shuns those are gender non-conforming, such as

the participants (Butler, 2006; Johnson, 2005a, 2005b; McLaren, 2003). The

(un)safety of people, places, and gendered spaces were discussed by the

participants at length, many of them sharing painful stories of harassment and bullying, but some also sharing hopeful stories of social change and transformation.

(Un)Safety of People: Heteronormativity and Genderqueering

Feeling safe or unsafe around other people is both internalized anxiety and absolute reality for the genderqueer participants. Sometimes, it is a feeling of safety or unsafety that we get. Other times, it is a certain way we get looked at by others that lets us know if a person is safe or unsafe. And, sometimes, we are downright harassed verbally and/or physically. In general, the participants remarked that they felt as though people became most angry and threatening when they felt "tricked" into thinking that a male participant was a girl or a female participant was a boy. I described this, in particular, when talking about several of my interactions with men. I said

> I feel funny when guys look at me. Sometimes, I feel like they are attracted to me, which is weird. Other times, I feel like they are just trying to figure out what I am. But a lot of times, I also feel like there's anger behind their eyes, right? Like, "You look really good and you fooled me, so I'm pissed off," look.

Even as several of the stories of participants of the (un)safety of people involved anger as a result of the other person feeling tricked and varied from participant to participant, the most shocking and troubling similarity between the participants' stories was the amount of unsafe interactions each had had with straight, white men.

Avery journaled that all of his "awful narratives of unsafety" happened when he was in middle and high school, particularly in the locker rooms with his male classmates. He wrote

> "straight" boys would harass me while I changed and like touch me and sometimes in incredibly inappropriate ways like my ass or my junk and be like "do you like that? i bet you do, faggot." none of it ever came to my being like full on sexually assaulted, but i've been harassed a LOT. Pretty much every time I took a PE class I would show up late cause I couldn't handle the locker rooms.

Avery continued to say that the majority of his narratives of unsafety as a child and adult have been with *white* boys or men explicitly. He emphasized

> I feel the racial factor is important because I've never been bothered by a straight man who wasn't white, or didn't look hella white. I don't know how to relate to straight men generally, but in particular all of my violent experiences have been with white straight men.

The power that males of any race exert over females or female-presenting people is problematic. As Johnson (2005a) writes, we are taught at an early age that "male dominance promotes the idea that men are superior to women" (p. 6). With this, we are also taught that all males should be tough, or masculine. This frame of thinking has resulted in a long history of men verbally and/or physically assaulting women, gay men, and gender non-conforming males. Race is important to consider here when we think about the white misogynist culture that dominates our society (Bell, 2008; Johnson, 2005a, 2005b; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; McLaren, 2003). White cisgender males' sense of entitlement gets agitated

when they are confronted with a genderqueer male such as Avery because gender has become conflated and power has been displaced. This disruption of norms and privileges is perceived as a threat, and as such, leads to harassment.

Lucia described an ongoing experience she had that again reveals the power of a sense of entitlement in men, as well as the power of heteronormativity (Johnson, 2005a, 2005b; McLaren, 2003). A male peer in Lucia's graduate program expressed his attraction for her, and he flirted with her and asked her out on dates on multiple occasions. When she told him she was queer and only interested in women, he did not stop pursuing her. Not only did it become harassing and disrespectful, Lucia also said, "it was baffling, because I felt like, I'm kinda like you; I'm kinda a dude, ya know? Like, why are you attracted to me?" The male peer looked beyond Lucia's sexuality and felt he had the right to pursue her because the rules of heteronormativity and patriarchy "encourage in men a sense of entitlement in relation to women" (Johnson, 2005a, p. 31).

In the face of heteronormativity, Lucia said she finds "refuge" in her genderqueerness "because it makes my body not desirable by men, which…I don't want to be seen by men, straight men." Lucia was feminine-presenting when she had this experience with her male peer, but since embracing the more masculine side of her genderqueer identity, she says she has different experiences with straight men now. Lucia's experiences with straight men as a genderqueer female have been similar to Avery's in that the men generally use

their sense of entitlement to assure her that they can "make her into a woman" if she responds to their advances.

Danielle talked about similar encounters with straight white men asserting their privilege and entitlement when they ask her out or make a pass at her. She remarked that, "I assume everyone knows I'm gay. So when a guy hits on me, that's like insulting to me." The insult is in the assumption that the man has the right to make advances at her because he is a man and she is a woman, regardless of her gender presentation being more masculine and her sexual orientation being lesbian. Danielle says such advances are threatening to her because she worries about having to assert her queerness more; something she feels uncomfortable having to do. She remarked, "Sometimes I feel like, well, what did I wear that day…to make them…did I say something…what cue did I give them?" In this way, Danielle becomes hypersensitive in regards to her genderqueer presentation because, like Lucia, she usually finds refuge in her genderqueerness; however, instances such as the one she described strip her of the power that her genderquerness normally holds against heteronormativity.

I shared that I, too, have been met with the entitlement of straight white men, and it is oftentimes when I am with my feminine-presenting partner. There have been several instances where white men have rendered me invisible, as well as my partnership with my girlfriend. Instead of making advances at me, as in the examples with Lucia and Danielle, the men made advances towards my partner. In one particular instance, my partner and I were at a bar watching a

local band perform. I was standing behind my partner with my arms around her waist, dancing with her to the music. A white man came up to my partner, looked her straight in the eyes, and said, "You look like you need someone to dance with." Even when I asserted my presence and said, "She is taken care of," he continued to address her only, asking over and over if she would dance with him. It is in these moments where I feel quite unsafe because of the aggressiveness with which the men typically approach and proclaim their entitlement.

Avery brought up an important point that not only are men the perpetrators of harassment, so are women, and he has also seen his share of harassment from women. He mentioned that "I feel…that it's important to call it harassment because it [is] the same kind of unwelcomed touching and commentary that we only think men are capable of." Avery continued to say that harassment has happened most when he presented more femme by "some butch, some femme" women. He described two incidents at a club involving lesbian women, one butch and one femme. In both cases, the women forced lap dances on him without permission and, as he said, "made comments that made me feel really strange" about the situation. The femme woman's comment to Avery was: *I don't usually like dick, but I might like yours tonight.* This is a particularly curious statement for several reasons. Was it harassment? Or, was she hitting on Avery because he she found him to be an attractive female-presenting person? When I asked Avery his thoughts, he said that often in cases involving women,

we are less likely to understand what are essentially the same actions and attitudes differently depending on who acts them out. Had it been a man, especially a masculine man, who touched me like she did and made the same comments as her I would've immediately said it was sexual harassment. But because she looked femme and made it known that she is not, at least usually, attracted to men (which she equated with penises) I didn't feel as unsafe or threatened. In that way I wasn't afraid of her, though I definitely was not flattered like she seemed to want me to be.

It is important to declare the woman's actions as harassment because the same actions by a straight man would be called harassment because harassment is usually categorized as unwanted sexual advances by another person. According to Johnson (2005a), "most discussions of gender violence and harassment focus on questions of the [male] individual rather than [the system of] patriarchy" (p. 46) that also includes the involvement of women in the patriarchal system. As such, it is also worthy to note that the actions and statement made by the woman were demeaning and belittling. Here, the system of power came into play in a similar way it does with men because the woman who harassed him did not necessarily elevate other women as a result; it actually worked against her to equate her harassment with that typically equated with the type of harassment only enacted by men.

The amount of stories involving the unsafe interactions participants have had with others is distressing. A large-scale conversation among the participants that centered around safety with people never came to fruition during focus groups, interviews, or journal entries. In most cases, the participants breezed by comments regarding their outright avoidance of unsafe situations and individuals

in order to maintain safety of people. This avoidance oftentimes was described as a deliberate choice to spend time with like-minded friends and family exclusively (Tatum, 2003). As we have seen in the sharing of participant experiences, the persistence of heteronormativity, white male entitlement, and power in the interactions the participants have had with other individuals is astounding. It is evident that the pervasiveness of our hegemonic society in terms of binary gender norms is in serious need of confrontation and dismantling.

(Un)Safety of Place: Genderqueering in the Southeast

Of the many commonalities between participants, one was our current or previous residency in the southeastern United States, particularly North Carolina. Conversations about place that focused on experiences in relation to place focused particularly on the *unsafety* of the genderqueer participants in the Southeastern United States. Since places are "centers of experience," we must also consider "the complex relationships of personal, historical, cultural, and political narratives of a specific place" (Gruenewald, 2003, p 625). As such, the (un)safety of place overlaps somewhat with the (un)safety of people, as most experiences the participants described involved other individuals; however, each participant made a distinct reference to the (un)safety being related to place first and people second in the stories that follow.

KJ described her experiences of frequent travel between Altanta and Western North Carolina as especially jarring. In one journal entry, she wrote

I remember one time when I had a mohawk and I had to stop and get gas somewhere in South Carolina. I just had this eerie feeling, and it was raining outside, so I put my rain jacket on and put the hood up before I even got out of the car. Just so I didn't look to odd, didn't confuse anyone. Even still, I had to walk in to pay, and I kept my hood on, but the man behind the counter definitely creeped me out a bit. There's just something that gets your guard up when you live in a body that's often threatened (this is true I think for women, queers, people of color, disabled people in various ways)…I get that sense where the small hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

KJ also journaled that she feels this sense of threat or unsafety less in other parts of the United States than she does in the Southeastern United States. Her journal entry revealed a sentiment that was similar for all of the participants: "You just get a gut feeling that a place is unsafe." This gut feeling comes from a lifetime, as KJ put it, of living "in a body that's often threatened." Because of the hypervisibility of their genderqueerness and a recurrence of unsafe experiences related to this hypervisibility, the participants all talked about hypervigilance of the safety of situations. Avery remarked

Safety is something that, for me, is kind of like a feeling rather than something I objectively or rationally try to measure. I can feel when a room or a space is unsafe.

His statement resonated with all of the participants, with each of them commenting that they read whether places or situations are safe or unsafe as soon as they enter into them. This "reading" of places or situations comes as a result of the oppression of violence. Young (2010) writes that "the oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge

shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are *liable* to violation,

solely on account of their group identity" (p. 43). Although as a result of an

unfortunate cause, this knowledge does bring the privilege of being able to "read"

places or situations as safe or unsafe.

I shared an example of a gut feeling of being quite unsafe as a

genderqueer female with a female partner on a cruise ship that left the Port of

Charleston, South Carolina. I said

> My partner and I went on a cruise that left out of Charleston, and most of
> the people on the ship were from South Carolina. I got a lot of dirty looks
> and stares from the men. It was scary as shit being genderqueer on that
> ship. I did not want to go near the railing, like at night especially, because
> I thought, who knows what these angry, and now drunk, men might do.
> That's just one experience, but it's like a lot of my experiences here in the
> South. Being genderqueer in the South, for me, is really unsafe. Or, just
> doesn't give me a warm and fuzzing feeling.

My experience also involved straight men, not just with the Southeast as a place;

in fact, we were in the middle of the Atlantic. However, the social and historical

narratives of the South as being generally unsafe for genderqueer individuals is

what drove my reading of my unsafety. A sense of place is important to think

about here when considering the social and historical implications of gender

normativity and heteronormativity in the Southeast (Gruenwald, 2003; Kincheloe

and Pinar, 1991). The South, in general, has a particularly violent past in terms

of human rights for individuals who debunk normativity and challenge hegemony.

Even if a person has no other reason than the history or social aspects of

place to get a gut feeling or read that it is not safe, this is enough reason for the

person to remain hypervigilant regarding their level of safety. The laws in Michigan, where I am from, are not especially welcoming for gender non-conforming individuals, but the historical and social narratives in Michigan allow a feeling of safety that does not exist for me in the Southeast. KJ mentioned generally feeling safer where she lives now in the Bay Area than when she lived in the South, but in comparing the history and social narratives of the two places, there is good reason for her to feel this way. David, like KJ, lived in North Carolina, but he recently moved to Los Angeles for school. He describes his experiences as "completely and utterly different" in regards to safety in that he feels safe and free to be himself more in Los Angeles than he ever did in North Carolina.

Similarly, Kelly described feeling safer in Rhode Island than in the Southeast; then again, Rhode Island just became the 11th state to allow gay marriages. She said

> My partner's from South Carolina, and whenever we are there, I feel a little unsafe. It's the only place where I notice I get dirty looks or double-takes, or people, like, trying to figure out what's going on. And, also, we're an interracial couple, so that's, I mean, we have a lot working against us in the south.

As an African American genderqueer female, Kelly's reading of the safety of a place is also dictated by her race and the history of racial tensions in that place. Kelly said that her genderqueer identity seems more visible than her race, but not visible without. To her, most people first read her as genderqueer, then gay,

then black, then as a same-sex counterpart of an interracial couple. This proves the importance of thinking in terms of assemblages of identities. Kelly brings all pieces of her identity with her into every situation, but some pieces of her identity are more visible than others, depending on the situation. Because of the social, political, and historical narrative of the South, all pieces of Kelly's identities are read, not just a single identity or the intersection of some (Puar, 2007, 2005; Anzaldúa, 2007; Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Kincheloe and Pinar, 1991). They are constantly and synchronously visible.

Lucia spoke similarly about her ethnicity as factoring in to the safety or unsafety of a place because of the visibility of pieces of her identity; however, she spoke specifically about how her ethnicity is often read first and is most visible. She talked about the fact that there is an "exoticism of foreign women's bodies" in the Southeast that creates a different level of unsafety. Lucia said that no matter the masculine presentation of her genderqueerness, her foreign female body trumps it because, as she put it, "it's like nothing else matters, and I'm fair game." She continued to say that

> there's something about the accent and the exoticness of being form somewhere else, and I'm from Argentina, so there's like, I get a lot of, like, "Latin this, Latin that." And, I guess that feminizes me more; I don't know how to explain it. But there's something about that that makes it unsafe.

Again, we can look to a sense of entitlement that men have over women, but also the sense of entitlement because of Lucia's status as "foreign" to the men with whom she had encounters. Both the "male gaze" and the "white gaze" are at

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work here. Shome (1999) says that "one of the most oppressive ways in which whiteness marks the body of the "other" – especially if one is a "foreign" other, since "difference" in that case is even more magnified under white eyes, is through the gaze" (p. 120). No matter how much Lucia tried to be read as genderqueer first, others often choose her racial narrative as "other" or, foreign, first, but not without the recognition of her queer and genderqueer identities.

Even as most of the participants' experiences of unsafety occurred in the South, they also shared feelings of safety where they lived in the South; however, this was mostly due to personal choice to live in that place due to its historical and social narrative of acceptance towards people of minority statuses. As residents of the same progressive city in North Carolina, Avery, Nego, Lucia, Kelly, and I agreed that we are somewhat safer in that city than other places in the state. Avery remarked that our queerness "is occasionally celebrated" where we live, and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community is prominent and supported on a positive level. All of the participants acknowledge that there are pockets around the United States that are either/or/both/and (un)safe for genderqueer participants, but that the Southeastern United States generally has more unsafe places than safe places because of its history unfair treatment of individuals who do not conform to normative practices.

(Un)Safety of Gendered Spaces: Genderqueers Forbidden

Undoubtedly some of the most unsafe spaces for genderqueer individuals are those spaces that are already marked with admittance for either one gender or the other. Locker rooms, bathrooms, dressing rooms, and men's and women's clothing stores or departments are where the majority of harassment and violence against gender non-conforming individuals happens. Because the gender presentation of "does not quite match the "man" or "woman" signs on the door, [these spaces] can be the sites of violence and harassment, making it very difficult…to use them safely or comfortably" (Chess, Kafer, Quizar, and Richardson, 2010, p. 95). Not surprisingly, genderqueer individuals are often unsure of which gendered space is the safest in any particular setting. Masculine presenting females endure harassment from women in female gendered spaces, and from men in male gendered spaces. The same goes for feminine presenting men. An overwhelming number of stories of unsafety from the genderqueer participants came from gendered spaces. Gigi astutely remarked that

> I know for me, when I feel unsafe in a situation, I realize it's because I don't feel like I'm…all of the sudden I feel like I'm not allowed to be. There's something about it, like, because I'm not a bio dude, [others feel] I'm not allowed to be in the men's section. I do find [an unsafe feeling] to be rooted in that feeling of, you know, just all of the sudden, it's a permission.

The stories of unsafety in gendered spaces were similarly rooted back to a feeling of needing permission to be in a space, and ultimately, rooted to issues of power and privilege. In other words, the dominant group (i.e., gender conforming

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individuals in this case) exercise a sense of power to say who can and cannot be in a space; and, that same dominant group has the privilege not to have to worry about knowing whether or not they belong in a space, as well as the privilege not to have their presence in a place questioned or challenged.

I journaled about an experience I had while shopping in the boy's section of a store. I was shopping for clothing for myself, as I am too small to fit into men's shirts, and I prefer the masculine, rigid cut of men's and boy's clothing as opposed to the feminine, curvy cut of women's and girl's clothing. I was watched very closely by the woman behind the check-out counter as I shopped. She stared at me as I sized up button-down shirts against my body, and she even asked if I knew what I was looking for at one point. The woman was totally questioning my purchase with her eyes - she saw female, dressed male-ish, buying boys' clothes. The in-between space of my gender expression confused her and made her uncomfortable. Because I could read her uncomfortableness, this, in turn, made me uncomfortable in my own skin. This led to an awkward interaction when I went to pay for the two items I had picked out. Our conversation went something like this:

Woman: "Wow! These were great finds at great prices!"

Me: "Yeah. I totally scored!

Woman: *<puzzled look>*

Me: "Uh, can I have a gift box? These are for my nephew. I'm trying to get him to dress better at his age. And we are the same size, so I tried them

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on and know they'll fit."

Woman: "Good luck with that! I've got a box right here for you."

Me: "Thanks. I hope he wears them."

I could see the woman's body language and demeanor change when I made mention that the clothes were not for me. But, as much as my little conversation was meant to make things more comfortable, it worked only to her benefit and not mine.

I continued my journal entry with my own questions and comments about the experience. I wrote

> Why couldn't I stand up for myself? Why couldn't I engage in some queer conversation with her, as much as it made her uncomfortable? I do on most any other day - and sometimes to the point of putting myself in harm's way to queer things up and speak my mind. But, I realize that often do not assert my genderqueerness in in department stores because of the oppression I feel around over-feminized women - who are white - who are wealthy - - the type of women you usually see in department stores. And, come to think of this, I usually only do this with older women, too - - the ones over 50-looking. Definitely some issues around race, class, and age to explore here. What is it with this demographic that leads me to cave?

On that day in the boy's section of the store, I gave into the system of hegemony and allowed it to work towards my internalized oppression (Young, 2010). In that space, I felt the need to at least pretend to conform to norms in order not to face conflict in my interaction with the woman who worked there. In that space, it did not feel safe to be genderqueer. As a result, I gave up a part of myself and rationalized my actions by hoping it would make the woman more comfortable.

Gigi shared a similar story about feeling surveilled in a gendered space and subsequently choosing to make a piece of her genderqueer identity invisible in order to make the other person feel more comfortable. She said, "I always feel under surveillance [when choosing which gendered bathroom door to walk through], whether it's actually happening or not." Her sense of this feeling results from often being unsafe or unwelcome in a space as a result of dominant structures forging fictive rules of the gender binary. Gigi wrote

> While my friend was still in the stall, just about to come out, a woman walked in and looked at me through the mirror. She immediately stopped, unsure if she was in the right restroom, then, unsure if I was in the right restroom. I'm sure I looked like a deer in headlights, looking guilty of doing something I wasn't supposed to be doing. I always feel like a dirty old man in that situation.

Gigi's feelings of doing something wrong are unfounded, yet grounded in the power of the rules of the gender binary.   Equating herself to a "dirty old man" is even further proof of hegemony at work because, typically, "dirty old men" are cited as those who participate in acts of perversion towards others, most often women or girls. Gigi was simply using the restroom – a right she has as a human being – but because the "rules" of the gender binary say that there are bathrooms only for male and female genders (Chess et al, 2010; Young, 2010). Since Gigi did not match the sign for the women's restroom, according to dominant society, she was most likely participating in perversion instead of participating in freedom to use the restroom.

Gigi continued to talk about how the power of the gender binary caused

her to practice internalized oppression when she wrote that in order

> to make [the other woman in the restroom] comfortable, I said, "Hello," in the highest pitch I could muster to prove I was indeed, in the "right" restroom (I could argue that I wasn't actually in the "right" restroom, but that's another conversation). I'm guessing that…I will never feel comfortable in bathrooms and dressing rooms that are set up for binary gender systems.

Not only did Gigi feel the need to render a piece of her genderqueer identity

invisible, she also felt the need to prove herself worthy of occupying the space of

the woman's restroom. She had to prove that she, too, belonged there, despite

what her presentation of gender alleged. Again, Gigi's actions are unfounded,

but supported by systems of power and hegemony that made her feel unsafe to

be.

Kat wrote extensively about the power of the gender binary system in a

journal entry also about restrooms as gendered spaces. She specifically shared

how it feels having to choose the "right" restroom, and the implications of

choosing the "wrong" restroom (wrong according to others, of course). She

wrote about a time she chose to go into a port-a-potty that was marked for

women only, mostly because it was what opened soonest. She described

hearing a conversation from outside the stall that about how she – or, in their

words, "that person" – was getting away with choosing a port-a-potty that, in their

eyes, she did not have a right to choose. Kat said that she heard someone say,

"If I tried…line…I bet I would get caught," and although muffled, she knew the

people were alluding to an idea that her gender did not match the gender marker

on the door of the port-a-potty, and, therefore, she deserved to be caught for

doing something wrong. Kat reflected a bit more, writing

> They think …that I'm "trying to get away with something." They think
> they've caught me? Or they think I got away with something? Both? It's a
> little room with a pedestal toilet. And a sink. And a trash can. And a door
> that locks.

Kat said that if a men's port-a-potty had opened first, she would have went in

there, and she figured a similar conversation could have ensued because of her

genderqueer identity. Either way, a conversation about her doing something

wrong left her feeling uncomfortable, and ultimately, unsafe, because of the

possibility that she could face repercussions if the people talking about her had

chosen to "turn her in."

Kat continued to write that one of her biggest frustrations with gendered

restrooms is also the feeling of anger she gets from people who think she has

chosen the wrong restroom for herself. She wrote

> The way bathrooms categorize people (women – preferably those who
> feel comfortable in pink dresses, men – preferably those who feel
> comfortable in blue pants, and parents with infants and toddlers) while
> excluding everyone else sets up certain people – me, namely – to look like
> an asshole for taking someone else's space.

Along with other people feeling as though Kat is breaking a rule by choosing one

gendered bathroom over the other, she said that people also respond with

aggravation towards her because she is where she does not belong, and as

such, she is encroaching on spaces that are not hers to begin with. Kat said this happens most often when she chooses to use the restroom labeled "family" as opposed to "men" or "women." She chooses this restroom because it allows for both genders and, as such, seems safer to her than the risk of choosing the "wrong" restroom. But even so, others have reacted towards Kat as not belonging in the non-specific gendered restrooms either, or as not belonging to any acceptable gender, in a sense.

As a genderqueer male, Avery's stories were not much different from Kat's stories in regards to restrooms. Blatantly put, Avery said, "Bathrooms have always been a serious issue for me. I don't feel like I can even speak in men's restrooms," as a result of the anger and intimidation he has encountered in men's restrooms. He said, however, that he feels safer in women's restrooms, "probably because when I go out I'm more femme and because most of my friends with whom I go out will either be women themselves or in drag."

The anger and intimidation that both Kat and Avery have met when using gendered restrooms reveals the sense of entitlement that cisgendered individuals have in regards to gendered spaces (Carbado, 2010; Chess et al, 2010). It also reveals the gender oppression that genderqueer individuals face when challenged by the gender privilege of cisgendered individuals. The in-between nature of genderqueer identity and presentation makes it difficult for these individuals to cling to any sense of privilege and/or entitlement that might make it easier for them to choose a restroom. Genderqueers are not often welcome in

gendered spaces in which they do not and cannot pass as the gender assigned on the placard outside the space.

Interestingly, KJ described an encounter in a women's restroom as being different than those she had had before her top surgery. She wrote

> Before my surgery, I never had a problem using the women's room. I guess maybe I just thought my boobs were so obvious. And I never experienced any outright hostility from women who thought I was in the wrong restroom. And I'm not sure I ever noticed anyone look at me funny or seem confused and think maybe THEY were in the wrong restroom . . . until after my surgery.

KJ said that her encounter was not necessarily unsafe, but rather, eye-opening. She continued to write

> I was standing there washing my hands when the door opened and an older woman came in. I looked up in the mirror just in time to see her glance at me, turn around, look at the sign on the front of the door, come back in, and go into a stall.

This experiences was particularly eye-opening for KJ because it made her more aware of the hypervisibility of her genderqueerness brought on by the lack of her female marker of breasts. She remarked that she is now more aware of the choices she makes (or cannot make) in regards to what restroom to use. She finds herself "more willing to wait for the gender inclusive restroom to be available" or more willing to walk out of her way to use the gender inclusive restrooms.

Gender inclusive restrooms were discussed by several of the participants as being generally safe, but quite scarce in most places. The university that Avery, Kelly, Lucia, and I currently attend recently hosted a conference for a women's and gender studies organization, and the conference committee placed "Gender Neutral" restroom signs over several of the restrooms in the conference arena. Avery said, "When they did the gender neutral bathrooms, it was awesome, and I felt, like, so comfortable and at ease." I linked Avery's reaction with my own reaction of seeing "Gender Free" restroom signs at another conference. I was, however, a bit concerned with the notion that individuals are free of gender. Although I argue that people can be more than one gender, I do not agree that people can be without gender, simply because of the pervasiveness of the gender binary and gender norms. But, whether labeled as "Gender Inclusive," "Gender Neutral," or "Gender Free," these options offer less stress for genderqueer individuals, and grant us access, privilege, and freedom of choice.

Conclusion: Safety Not Guaranteed: People, Places, and Spaces of Contention

I question the word, "safety," always, and I especially questioned it as I wrote this chapter centered on (un)safety. I do not think that we are every truly safe in any place, space, or situation. Because of the historical, social, and political narratives of each situation we enter or individual we encounter – no

matter how distant the history related to unsafety – we are never guaranteed that past unsafe narratives will not show up in current.

This led me to reflect on a recent shopping trip with my partner. Now, I have had my experiences of being asked to leave the women's dressing room before. And, I have trekked across stores from shopping in the men's or boy's sections to try on stuff in the women's sections because I felt like I was not allowed in the men's or boy's sections. Increasingly, however, I have noticed that dressing rooms are available for "all" (read: both) genders. When shopping with my partner, I noticed that none of the dressing rooms in the department store were labeled with gendered signs. Of course, the dressing rooms were located in each respective section, men's or women's, but they were not marked as being accessible to only one gender or the other. As such, the "rules" of the gender binary are only applicable via conjecture that everyone knows them. I have seen people choose the nearest dressing room out of convenience, which has led me to see men in the dressing rooms nearest the women's section, and vice versa. My partner was trying on dresses, so we were "clearly" in the women's section, but I noticed a sign in the dressing room in that section that intrigued me. It read, "Fitting rooms are monitored by same gender security personnel." See *Photo 5: Genderqueer Dressing Rooms?*

The assumptions that were made in this posting were blaring. First, the dressing rooms were not labeled, so any gender could use them, including gender conforming and non-conforming individuals. The wording in the sign

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assumed that, because the dressing room was in a section normally used by women, it only needed to be monitored by the female gender. Second, no gender non-conforming individuals were visible as store employees. The wording suggested that the store had the adequate personnel to monitor the dressing room. I argued that there was no one there to monitor me, a genderqueer individual. And third, the wording in the sign assume that there was a need for the dressing rooms to be monitored in the first place.

As a former employee in the retail arena, I know that the "monitoring" that was taking place was related to loss prevention for the store, so why couldn't a person of any gender do this monitoring? Why did it have to be the "same" gender – what does that even mean when there were not even gender markers on the dressing room in the first place? And, if there is an argument that the "monitoring" is for the safety of the individuals in the dressing rooms, who is monitoring my safety?

Photo 5. Genderqueer Dressing Rooms?

In reality, there is no dressing room with a label – either fixed or assumed – that fits my gender category. As genderqueer, I am not a recognized as a legitimate gender, and often get kicked out of or harassed for being in either female or male dressing rooms. Where am I to go? Where is it safe for me? I can ask the same question of gender inclusive restrooms: are they really safe? Who's to say there will not be someone in that restroom who believes that someone else does not belong?

The bottom line is that, no matter how much we look for safety, it is never guaranteed. This is not to say that the hunt for the safest people, places, and spaces should cease; however, it serves as a reminder that the system of privilege, oppression, and power is mighty. It serves to remind us, as Avery poetically wrote, that "with hypervisibility comes great responsibility" to remain critically conscious, socially vigilant, and equity-minded.

CHAPTER VI

(UN)INTENTIONAL INTER(RE)ACTIONS: QUEERING IT UP, STRUTTING OUR THREADS, AND BARING OUR SOULS

As discussed in Chapter Three, a significant part of being and becoming genderqueer involves gender policing from others and from ourselves. When others police our genderqueer identity (i.e., insist that our biological sex match our gender presentation), power, as a result of the gender binary, is inherently at work to make us invisible as genderqueer. If we allow policing and conform to gender norms, we are playing into the system; thus, we allow invisibility. If we disallow policing and continue to queer the binary, we are disrupting the system; thus, we forge visibility.

While reflecting on gender policing and visibility and invisibility, I was reminded of a recent article I had read in the *Albuquerque Journal*. A female-to-male transgender (FtM) student was being forced to wear the female-designated graduation gown because his birth certificate still denoted that he was biologically female. The student, Damían Garcia, legally changed his name last year and has been out as transgender his entire high school career, but he "never [came out] in a dramatic way…to avoid the drama" (Briseño, p. A1). By choosing to be an out transgender male in this way, Garcia created a powerful and empowering visibility for other transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. Garcia

said the staff at his high school have been supportive up until they decided to enforce the "archdiocese policy that the color gown students wear is based on the gender listed on their birth certificate" (A3). This sudden lack of support for Garcia is a form of gender policing and is threatening to render Garcia invisible as the male he feels he has always been.

Garcia said his choice for handling the issue initially was to just not walk at graduation because wearing the white gown for females "would be totally degrading and embarrassing" (Briseño, p. A1). His story was thrust into the spotlight, however, when there was "an online petition started by supporters" (A3), a peaceful protest organized by friends, and a front page article published in the *Albuquerque Journal*. As such, Garcia's story became one of hypervisibility, highlighting one of the many issues regarding the trouble with the gender binary.

Being genderqueer and genderqueering, allowing or disallowing gender policing, and allowing invisibility or forging visibility, are all decisions genderqueer individuals make with great frequency. Like Garcia's, these decisions are inevitably influenced quite a bit by genderqueer individuals' everyday lived experiences. These experiences depend on our interactions with or reactions to other individuals, situations, places, and spaces. Whether intentional or unintentional, these interactions and reactions are a large part of what make genderqueer both an adjective and a verb. As Butler (2004b) wrote, "The body gives rise to language, and that language carries bodily aims, and performs

bodily deeds that are not always understood by those who use language to accomplish certain conscious aims" (p. 199). And, as we have learned in previous chapters, the genderqueer body gives rise to a language that is not well-understood by others; a language that, besides being foreign, also creates a tension between normative thinking about gender and the fiction of gender as a reality.

The participants in this study talked and journaled about some of the experiences they have had related to their genderqueer identity and presentation that were mostly the product of another person not being able to understand the language of the genderqueer body. Three different types of inter(re)actions were most prominent among all of the participants: avoidance, confrontation, and thoughtful reflection. With avoidance of situations often came an invisibility of the genderqueer self that was a result of a need for assumed comfort for the genderqueer individual and whomever else was involved in the experience. Confrontations were often a result of a reaction of irritation from the genderqueer person in regards to some type of harassment, threat, or uncomfortable feeling related to their genderqueer identity. Confrontations generally brought about a hypervisibility to the participants' genderqueer identity and the fictive nature of the gender binary. Experiences that involved thoughtful reflection usually resulted in a visibility of genderqueerness that gave power to the genderqueer individual and a teachable/learning moment for all involved.

Invisibility and Avoidance

All of the participants talked about avoiding potentially unsafe situations, either because they read the situations as unsafe or because the situations were actually unsafe. KJ commented, "If someone is being menacing, I just ignore it and get myself out of there as fast as possible." Such avoidance and the invisibility created in these situations is quite necessary for the safety and well-being of the participants and others involved. But a lot of the situations that the genderqueer participants talked about avoiding did not involve physical safety; rather, the situations made them feel as though being and doing genderqueer made the other person or people in the situation uncomfortable. In choosing avoidance and invisibility, the participants exposed how, "as a dynamic 'map of power' the moral discourses both constitute and erase, deploy and paralyze [genderqueer] identities" (Butler, as cited in Cromwell, 2006, p. 511). The participants allowed the majority to determine the genderqueer narrative uncomfortable and position genderqueer as minority. In this moment, the genderqueer is erased, or becomes invisible, and their existence is undermined by the majority.

As a hair stylist, Danielle interacts with other people all day long, and her genderqueer identity is not something she can hide easily. Although she said she does "not deny who I am to anybody," such as by "making up boyfriend stories to make my guest feel comfortable," Danielle also does not engage with her guests who seem uncomfortable with her genderqueer identity as much as

she does with those guests who seem comfortable with her. She commented that

> If I know someone is uncomfortable with me, I usually don't interact with them as much or at all if I can help it. At work, I sometimes can't avoid the situation so I just make it quick and professional.

Danielle admits that it is easier for her to make conversations with guests "quick and professional" than it is to silence her genderqueer presentation. She said

> I can't stress out every time I would get a new guest, wondering if they are going to judge me because I look so young, my short hair, my tie or vest, or lack of make-up. That's too much to think about when you're at work. So I don't.

Even as Danielle does not silence her genderqueer presentation, it is still problematic that she feels the need to silence her conversations, whether or not they involve talking about her being genderqueer. Now, it is true that even cisgendered individuals probably do not have outright conversations about their gender, but this is mostly because it is unnecessary.   With cisgender comes the privilege of not having to talk about your gender because it is assumed. And, with the assumption of one's gender, comes the assumption that, if you are a girl for example, you like certain things and can talk about certain things related to what it means to be a girl.

In a slightly opposite form of avoidance, Nego talked about creating invisibility of her genderqueer presentation through her somewhat gender neutral

work attire as a nurse. As such, any conversation about genderqueer or genderqueering is rendered invisible as well. Nego said

> One of the several, but definitely one of the factors that made me decide to go back to school to be a nurse is the clothes. Prior to that, I was teaching, and I was just so frustrated by the typical office casual attire because I didn't' really feel comfortable in any of it.

Nego's choice to avoid her genderqueer presentation via dress, either by queering the gendered office attire in her previous job, or hiding behind gender neutral scrubs, verifies the power of binary and hegemonic thinking. Avery also said that there are times he chooses to make himself visible as an assumed cisgender male by dressing in jeans in a t-shirt, and, as such, making him invisible as genderqueer. In this act, Avery avoid oppression as genderqueer and reaps the privileges of being male.

Dress was something I talked about as being a way in which I create invisibility for myself. Going to my parent's house is particularly difficult for me in regards to my gender presentation. My parents struggle with my queer identity alone, and for them, queer and being with a female partner automatically equals that I "want to be a man," so I try to downplay the masculine side of my genderqueer identity when I am with them. In this sense, both Avery and I are solidifying the existing power of gender norms and playing into both external and internal forms of oppression in regards to gender. By avoiding conversations or interactions with others, Danielle, Nego, Avery, and I created an invisibility of genderqueer that is troubling. We were participating in the hegemonic system

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that thrives and survives off keeping anything that threatens normative thinking and power reifying power and hegemony.

An argument can be made that anyone who queers the gender binary by way of their visible genderqueer presentation can never be completely invisible. However, visibility does not just mean being seen or heard; it also means being recognized and acknowledged as a valuable and respected citizen. Invisibility is a most powerful form of oppression when it works to silence recognition and acknowledgment of human beings (Young, 2010; McLaren, 2003). Silence can indeed sometimes be empowering, but the ways in which silence via avoidance was described by Danielle, Nego, and KJ were disempowering rather than empowering because it kept them unrecognized and disrespected. The silence confirmed the reality of oppression and a sense of inferiority to gender norms.

KJ recognized that she participates willingly in hegemony when she said, "Generally, I tend to avoid confrontation. I'm a quiet, meditative, Buddhist, pacifist type, and I probably don't speak up enough when I should." Speaking up and/or asserting one's genderqueer identity is particularly powerful because it can break down the constructs of gender normativity and disrupt the cycle of privilege and oppression. The sections that follow highlight the situations in which the participants pushed against the hegemonic structures that keep the gender binary in place.

Hypervisibility and Confrontations

In the face of invisibility, silence, and oppression, all of the genderqueer participants did talk or journal about times that they made their genderqueerness not only visible, but hypervisible, in ways that forged a pervasive presence of confidence, power, and equity by the participants. The experiences of the hypervisibility of the genderqueer participants usually followed their conscious or unconscious efforts to confront the violence of the gender binary aggressively and uncompromisingly. In most cases, genderqueerness was made hypervisible through dress, commentary, or gestures. Again, an argument could be made that just by our nature of being outside of the gender binary that genderqueer individuals are already hypervisible; however, the hypervisibility to which I am referring in this section is not projected onto us by others. It is, instead, projected *by* us.

Confrontation and hypervisibility generated by genderqueer individuals is akin to transgender rage that Stryker (1994) writes about:

> Transgender rage is a queer fury, an emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one's own continued survival as a subject, a set of practices that precipitates one's exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for being a subject. (p. 240)

Rage does not mean physically violent, and it is important to recognize that not one of the experiences of hypervisibility discussed by the participants was physical or threatening. The fictive narrative of the gender binary and the

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confines of normativity create an unstable realm of reality. When the instability is ruptured, confrontations occur and make room for hypervisibility of genderqueer individuals.

Avery talked about how he uses his clothing and dress, in particular, to assert his genderqueerness. In one focus group, he said, "We've all heard the saying, 'Clothes make the man,' but I'm gonna change that to say, 'Clothes make the queer.'" He later continued by writing

> There are certain aspects of my presentation that I can't control, like my height, the fact that I grow facial hair (which I have a strange relationship with), and my genitalia. But the rest, I have control over. And I love messing with that. I do these things for myself, but I do them for myself so I can project the kind of message that I want to others…and also for me to say, "This is how I'm feeling today."

The messages Avery sends via his genderqueer presentation are telling. He first wrote about his favorite demin vest that says, "Queers 4 Satan" on it (See *Photo 6: Queers 4 Satan*). Avery said that the vest "is for show, but passersby don't need to know that" because he is trying to convey of message telling others to leave him alone, or "back off." Although Avery's genderqueerness often elicits harassment from others, the vest works to counteract those violent confrontations, all the while being highly confrontational in and of itself.

Photo 6. Queers 4 Satan

Avery also wrote about his choice to "wear leggings with leather on them," coupled with a more masculine gender presentation. For him, this says, "I'm confident in who I am, and I want to mess with what you think people ought to wear." Avery said wearing "heavy make-up and a crop top with the Pokemon logo on it" also achieves the same welcomed confrontation. Jokingly, Avery did say, "I don't know what that says, except that I'm awesome." Which, in a sense, is quite truthful. If awesome means courageous and confident, Avery is correct because he is confidently fucking with the gender binary. Either type of dress, described by Avery often invites reciprocated confrontation that he says he appreciates more so than confrontation that is not invited. Like the rest of the genderqueer participants also recognized, Avery knows that he will get, and expects that he will get, reactions from others because of his genderqueerness,

but confrontations as a result of a such hypervisibibilty that he chooses are easier to deal with because he is prepared for those on some level.

Danielle talked about an experience she had with me that created a space for the hypervisibility of our genderqueerness that she often chooses not to create herself. Danielle cuts and styles my hair, and while I am at her salon, we often engage in witty banter about genderqueerness and queerness, share stories of our experiences as genderqueer, or talk about our female partners. We do not generally hold back with our conversations because we are friends and are comfortable sharing our lives with one another.   We do, however, keep the conversations "appropriate" because of the close proximity of other guests in the salon. Being ourselves in such a manner is maintaining our visibility as both genderqueers and queers. Where the particular situation to which Danielle referred became hypervisible was in a comment I made about another guest nearby.

The guest was staring disapprovingly at Danielle and me, in such a manner that made it obvious and uncomfortable. Where Danielle would usually retreat, as described in the previous section, she had no choice but to be hypervisible with me by way of me staring back at the woman and loudly saying, "Some people stare too much." I continued my conversation with Danielle – still no holds barred – all the while continuing to stare back at the woman. Through the woman's stares, she was allowing the visibility we had already created as we chose not to deny our conversation and way of being; but through my reaction to

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her staring, I made space for a prevalent reality of the significance and importance of our genderqueer identities. Thus, we became hypervisible in the situation. As Gigi commented, "It's like Dana was saying, 'I'm not gonna be uncomfortable here; I'm gonna make YOU uncomfortable.'" By forging a hypervisiblity of our genderqueerness, I took the power away from the woman and disrupted her oppressive acts. The woman did eventually stop staring at us, and the entire situation left both Danielle and me feeling empowered.

Gigi described a similar situation when she was at a restaurant by herself to get "breakfast and coffee before work." She described two cisgendered men standing in line next to her, taking up a lot of space physically and psychologically. Gigi said that one of the guys

> was staring at me. He turned to his friend and goes, 'Hey, does that look like a girl or a boy?' And I looked at his friend, and I'm just staring [back] at him. And he stares at me. And, I smile at him like, *I'm right here. I can hear what's going on!* So he ignored his friend and stopped staring. I mostly don't get upset when people are confused about my gender because I'm genderqueer, so, like, [I know] it's not clear. So, it makes sense to me that people would be confused by it.

Although Gigi said she often ignores people who stare at her, she said that this situation was different because one of the men was so vocally rude about asking his friend about her gender. The man attempted to quiet Gigi's genderqueer identity by insisting that his friend and he label her as a boy or a girl, not let her be anything other than within the gender binary. Even though Gigi did not answer with, "I'm not either; I'm genderqueer," she allowed for a recognition of

the futility of such a question about gender; as such, she made gender non-conforming identities hypervisible instead.

Kelly admitted feeling "better" after hearing stories such as those shared by Danielle and Gigi. She said

> For some reason, I've been real snappy about being confused for a guy. Like the other day I was shopping for some clothes [in the men's section], and some guy was, like, down the aisle from me and just staring. And so I just looked at him until he looked away.

Kelly wondered if the anger and confrontations she had experienced as a result of situations similar to Danielle's and Gigi's was, as she said, "because [identifying as genderqueer] is new-ish for me." Such confrontations are not likely to stop, but Kelly's hypervigilance led to hypervisibility. Her instinct to push back against the man's attempt to make her feel unwelcome or not allowed to shop in the men's section were empowering; it took the power from the man, who was imposing that she was not allowed or welcome to shop in the men's section because she is biologically female.

Hypervisibility, like visibility, is problematic when it comes as an imposition from others in positions of power. The imposition of hypervisibility from people in positions of power is often used as a means to render people of minority status invisible (Young, 2010). This works creating a hypervisibility that encourages seeing minoritarian people as "other than" or outside of the norm; thus, it creates oppressive conditions for the minoritarian people. Stryker (1994) reminds us that "through the operation of rage, the stigma itself becomes the source of

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transformative power" (p. 240). Even though the simple act of just being one's

genderqueer self does not seem like a particularly powerful and empowering

modes of response, this act allows genderqueers to reclaim the hypervisibility

that results from being outside the norm (as created by the social constructs of

the gender binary) as their own; thus, reclaiming power.

Visibility and Thoughtful Reflection

When the participants talked about just being who they are as

genderqueer, they referred to visibility. Like invisibility and hypervisibility,

visibility came as a reaction to an experience or situation. Visibility, however,

seemed to follow more thoughtful reflection centered on the participants

engaging in teachable moments regarding the breakdown of the gender binary.

Rather than (re)actions based in fear (invisibility) or anger and frustration

(hypervisibility), reactions based in promise and hopefulness grounded the

participants' choice to create visibility of genderqueer identity. This choice to

create visibility commands what Anzaldúa (2000) calls "the work of conocimiento

– consciousness work…that promotes self-awareness and self-reflectivity" (p.

178). Self-awareness and self-reflectivity require that a person considers

themselves, as well as the participation of others, lived experiences, and spiritual

and emotional perspectives when choosing to act. Not only is the work of

conocimiento empowering, it also allows for individual and collective agency.

Nego talked about how she creates visibility of genderqueers and other

gender non-conforming individuals whenever she fills out forms. She said

When I'm filling out a form, an online form, a registration form of some kind, and it asks for gender, and then it'll have boxes for male or female, I've actually emailed the people. I'll say something like, 'Just something to think about: If you wanna know sex, that's fine, but if you want to know somebody's gender, then just leave it blank. Or, if you want to know what someone's sex is, it's fine to say male or female, but if gender is what you're interested in, then just leave it a fill-in-the-blank.'

This is something Nego said she has been doing for a while now and has recently started seeing positive results in people respecting her choice to leave her gender blank, or people actually creating a space for genders outside the binary genders. Most of the participants said that they have intentionally left gender boxes blank or crossed out the options and wrote, "genderqueer." This small gesture of change creates an opening for genderqueer individuals, as well as other gender non-conforming individuals, to be recognized and acknowledged as human beings worthy of checking an option that fits who they are. A shift in the frame of reference is a result of conocimiento (Anzaldúa, 2000), which creates a visibility for the self and for others.

Gigi journaled about how, as she has matured, she uses her clothing to create her visibility as genderqueer. She wrote

My outfits have allowed me to proudly express my genderqueerness without explicitly being obnoxiously out about it. It's like my subtle way of being subtle. Whereas before I was spouting theory and words, now, I strut my threads.

For Gigi, the ways in which she pushes against the gender binary most prominently is how she chooses her attire to match the masculine side of her

genderqueer identity. She shops in the women's section, but mostly shops in the men's sections of clothing stores, and she generally styles her outfits to match the current styles of masculinity. Gigi remarked, "It's my subtle way of being subtle" about creating a visible space for her genderqueer identity.

Avery said that, despite often using his choice of attire in order to assert a hypervisible genderqueer identity, he "make[s] conscious efforts a lot of the time to present in a queer way" so as to create a space for him to queer the norms of gender presentation. When I asked him to explain what this means to him in more detail, he said

> I want to make people double-take at the same time that I don't want to invite questions every time. I sort of think of my fashion sense or how I dress as a sort of confrontation for the eyes of heteronormativity. My message may change day to day, but underneath it all, I'm always sort of baring my soul. I'm telling you who I am without words. To walk out the door or to go to a queer event or some mildly safe space dressed up in women's clothes – whether in total or a mix of women's and men's – is a really specific experience of empowerment for me. I sort of take pride in being a failure to masculinity.

The ways in which Avery describes this type of empowerment – "I'm telling you without words" – is parallel to the ways in which Gigi describes being "subtly subtle." No direct confrontation is needed to make a statement about the presence of genderqueer identities, but a space is carved and visibility is created.

I often say to my friends that I "femme it up at home, and queer it up in real life." As I described previously, I generally make the ways in which I queer gender invisible when I am at my parent's house, where I call home; I call this

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"femming it up." In a journal entry about genderqueer visibility, I recalled a

specific time when I "queered it up" in order to make my genderqueer identity

visible in my work place. I wrote

> In the previous county where I worked, I was terrified that I would be outed as both queer and genderqueer, which meant that I could lose my job, so I dressed in heels and skirts, trying to assert my femininity. Essentially, I was silencing myself and letting my genderqueer self be invisible. The fear of losing my job was real, as I was eventually outed and let go. When I first began my job as a curriculum coordinator in a new county, I vowed to remain true to my genderqueer self. I specifically wore men's pants, men's shoes, and a button-down to the first meeting I had with all of the teachers with whom I would be working. And I wore a tie. I sold my genderqueerness that day with a tie. And I have never looked back.

My actions promoted self-awareness and self-reflectivity that created a sense of

agency in regards to my genderqueer identity (Azaldúa, 2000). As Avery said

earlier, the clothes really do make the genderqueer. After that day, I have never

needed to outright talk about my genderqueer identity. The space for visibility

that I created also created a space for the people with whom I worked to consider

genders outside the binary on their own. When people ask about my gender

(which they do), I am honest with them. I feel as the visibility created on that first

day made it safe for them to ask and for me to be honest. That is a power of

thoughtful reflection and visibility.

One space that is often safe for honest visibility is found with children. All

of the participants talked about experiences where we have had kids ask us, "Are

you a boy or a girl?" And, unlike when being asked by adults, we see an

innocence and honesty to that question and find it easy to react in a way that

allows for a powerful teachable moment (Stachowiak, 2012). Gigi commented, "I love kids because they will, without judgment, without baggage, ask, "Are you a boy or a girl?" It's, like, it's a great question. What a great question." Nego followed up with, "I think it's great, and I love having that conversation" with kids. Nego and Gigi both talked about the joys of having those moments with kids because they seem more open to talking about and thinking about the possibility of genders outside the gender binary than adults. Perhaps this is because the power of hegemony has not gotten ahold of them yet in the ways it has adults.

As former elementary classroom teachers, KJ and I talked a bit about some possible outcomes of our visibility as genderqueer. We both talked about how we often answered the question, "Are you a boy or a girl?" with "What do you think I am?" From there, we pushed the conversations to have the students think about what makes someone a boy and what makes someone a girl. Generally, the students would begin by pointing out norms of gender, such as, "Boys wear pants, and girls don't," or "Girls like pink, and boys like blue." However, the teachable moment really came when we would ask the students why some girls, for example, wear pants, but are still called girls, or why some boys have earrings, but are still called boys. More often than not, the students would end the conversation saying that it really does not matter what gender a person is, as long as they are happy with who they are inside and out. The conversations we had with students often only involved this piece of debunking

gender norms versus talking about all different types of gender, but even so,

these conversations led to thoughtful reflection on the part of the students.

KJ shared an interaction she had with a kid that shows the power and

possibility of visibility. She wrote

> The greatest is when I met the child of a good friend (both her parents are queer - one is a transman and the other identifies as a "daddy") and she asked me, "What pronoun do you prefer?" I loved it. How great if we could get kids asking that, rather than "are you a boy or a girl" -- those two choices are so limiting.

This moment shows how the child's awareness of the fiction of the gender binary

created a powerful and empowering conversation for KJ. It shows how

thoughtful reflection and visibility can create choices that are unlimiting and

disruptions of normative thinking in ways that can start to queer the landscape of

normative thinking.

Conclusion: Not Getting Too Comfortable with Visibility

An increased visibility, or even hypervisibility, of genderqueer and other

gender non-conforming individuals is important, such as with the case of the FtM,

Damían Garcia, discussed in the introduction of this chapter. Visibility and

hypervisibility lead to increased access to privileges and power generally

reserved only for cisgender individuals, making for more equitable work

environments or school settings, for example. Garcia was able to navigate high

school as a male without incidence, and even though he did not "think the school

[would] change its mind" (Briseño, 2013, p. A3), the hypervisibility of the issue

with the graduation gown was empowering for him and has the potential for transformative changes around gender policing.

There is a word of caution about visibility, however, because a comfort with visibility can lead to a comfort with invisibility. The story about Garcia is a great example of the problem of becoming comfortable in visibility. Instead of wanting to challenge his school's policy regarding graduations gowns, Garcia first opted to remain silent and not walk in his graduation ceremony. He had already been recognized and supported as a transgender male – something that could have been quite the opposite – and, so, for him, that visibility was good enough; it was *comfortable*. At the point when Garcia made the intentional decision not to walk, he also made the unintentional decision to be invisible, not just as transgender or male, but also as a graduating student. And, as we saw in Garcia's story, there was an important place for hypervisibility in order for Garcia to be recognized and respected as a human being.

I turn to my own story regarding comfort with visibility. As an out and supported genderqueer in the elementary school where I work, I sometimes overlook comments made by teachers that assert cisgender norms and privileges among their students. One recent example concerned a lower elementary school student who was biologically male, but presented more feminine and had a genderqueer name (i.e., a name that is often used for both males and females). As the teachers joked about the boy's long hair making him "look like a girl," my only reaction was to say, "Maybe he likes it that way." Initially, I saw this as a

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way to be an ally for the student, but I completely missed that, at the same time, I actually rendered myself invisible. The teachers (and I) had become so comfortable with my visibility as genderqueer, that matters involving *other* gender non-conforming individuals, such as this young boy, went unnoticed.

I missed an important teachable moment and an important moment for hypervisibility. I also missed that I had become comfortable in the privilege that my visibility afforded me, a privilege not to have to think about my genderqueerness (or anyone else's) in my work place. Invisibility as a result of safety is valid, but it is unacceptable as a result of fear or comfort. Butler (2011) encourages us to think about how, once we name something and it becomes visible, "the naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm" (p. xvii) and reification of privilege at the expense of others' oppression. We cannot become so complicit in the way things are – even if they change in transformative ways – that we materialize norms and miss opportunities to further equity and justice. We must always be sure to stand at the edge of our visibility and recognize the need for an act of hypervisibility.

CHAPTER VII

QUEER(ING) CISGENDER NORMATIVITY: THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

AND PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are a number of lists of privileges certain people have based on their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and so forth, that can be found around the Internet and in scholarly texts (see McIntosh, 1998, for the example that started this trend), working to help individuals understand their involvement in and the effects of the cycle of privilege and oppression. While these lists serve to expose nuances of privileges that are generally overlooked by people in the majority, in hopes that this exposure creates more critically conscious individuals, the lists can also reify norms in dangerous ways. As such, I reserve the space to not speak about cisgender privileges, but I do want to bring to light cisgender normativity.

Cisgender normativity is reified through our hegemonic culture via notions of heterosexuality, gendered roles, and gendered practices (Meyer, 2008). We saw the violence of these within the context of this study, specifically around the ways in which the participants revealed their experiences related to gender oppression, internalized gender oppression, gender policing, and unsafe situations. So, how do we queer cisgender normativity in a manner such that it

challenges normative cisgender understandings and deconstructs the language that supports the gender binary?

We need to first look at the language of gender itself. Gender pronouns, first names based on gender, and characteristics of masculinity and femininity are just a few places of language that deserve to be queered. More faces of people doing queer things need to be made visible in positive ways. Queer theory and gender studies need to hold to their promises of working against heterosexual and cisgender normativity. And, education needs to focus on critical pedagogical experiences that support queer(ing) curriculum and pedagogy in ways that challenge norms. This final chapter serves to look at theoretical implications, pedagogical considerations, and my personal considerations for further research on queer(ing) cisgender normative thinking.

Theoretical Implications for Queer Theory and Gender Studies

Salamon (2008) writes that "feminism…has not been able to keep pace with nonnormative genders as they are though, embodied, and lived" (p. 115), and I argue that both queer theory and gender studies have been similarly behind. Feminism opened the door for women's studies, but women's studies is often linked to gender studies (as in, "Women's and Gender Studies"), and following the lead of feminism, both often fall short to embrace all forms of gender, including transgender and genderqueer, into critical conversations. Gender studies misses the mark, often reifying what it seeks to challenge: binary modes of thinking, heteronormativity, and cisgender and cissexual privilege

(Salamon, 2008; Stryker, 2008). Trans* studies is gaining momentum, but it "does not as yet have anything like a stable footprint within the academy" (Salamon, 2008, p. 115), so the responsibility of discussing trans* issues currently falls on the shoulders of women's and gender studies. And, even within discussions of trans* studies, as this study has shown in particular, genderqueer identities (and others that fall under the transgender umbrella) are left invisible.

Queer theory has the potential to carve out a space for all-inclusive discussions of gender; however, as Stryker (2008) writes, "'*queer*' remains a code word for 'gay' or 'lesbian'" (p. 214), and even though queer theory often discusses the LBGTQ community, the T(rans*) is usually discussed in passing, and Q(ueer) is usually omitted. Take Rodriguez's and Pinar's (2007) promising book, <u>Queering Straight Teachers: Discourse and Identity in Education</u>, for example. It opens with a strong chapter by Elizabeth J. Meyer that describes queer theory and the ways in which it can be beneficial for educators and education in general in transforming education for social justice. While Meyer fails to explicitly discuss transgender, she does briefly discusses "how gender works to limit students' opportunities" (p. 17). This leaves a hopefulness that at least one of the remaining chapters will speak to genders "beyond" the binary. Unfortunately, the rest of the book only focuses on lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities, and works to reify gender norms. Transgender and queer identities, if mentioned, are included in the LGBT acronym, or, in most cases, not mentioned

at all. Dean Spade (as cited in Salamon, 2008, p. 122) refers to this as "LGB-fake-T," and I would extend this to read, "LGB-fake-T-no-Q."

As discussed in Chapter Two, the tenets of queer theory and gender studies informed my work throughout this project because of the ways in which they promised to challenge and de- and re-construct hegemonic heteronormative thinking. These promises worked well to frame my study, but the overall scholarly works related to queer theory and gender studies failed to support the data that came as a result of this qualitative study. I do not believe that this is because the framework of queer theory and gender studies are lacking; I believe it is because the practice of the two is compromised when they are faced with the pressures of our hegemonic society. Critical engagement is lacking in both queer theory and gender studies, and as such, praxis also falls short in uncompromising and damaging ways. Queer theorists and gender studies scholars need to carve out and cement spaces for all-inclusive studies of transgender and queer identities. I am hopeful that this study contributes to that endeavor.

One of the ways I think a space for transgender studies and queer identities can be made is through turning our attention to thinking of gender in terms of being rhizomatic in nature, as I discussed in-depth in Chapter Two. Gender is not static. Even if thinking in terms of the gender binary alone, it is difficult to prove that one's social construction and sense of their gender does not adjust with each new place, situation, or moment in life. For example, if a

cisgender female goes hiking, how much of her femininity does she take with

her? How much of her masculinity does she take with her? The same questions

can be asked if that same cisgender female goes to a high school dance. Most

likely, different pieces of her masculinity and femininity will take precedence in

different ways in each of the scenarios. While she remains a cisgender female,

the presentation and performance of her gender are rhizomatic: there are breaks,

ruptures, dis- and re-connections being made and re-made in the process. As

such, gender is just as much about being as it is about doing. And doing is

definitely not static. If we can begin to see the male and female genders as

rhizomatic, we begin to see an opening for the very real possibility of considering

gender non-conforming identities, such as the genderqueer identities discussed

in this study.

In each theme that was revealed through this study, the participants'

genderqueer identities reveled the realities of gender as rhizomatic: the complex

intersections of our identity, our multiplicitous identities, the liminal spaces in

which we travel, and the movement of the process of gender. In Chapter Three,

for example, the participants discussed ways in which they queered the norms of

the gender binary to express their genderqueer identity. Within the queering of

gender, each individual was made to acknowledge the breaks and ruptures that

needed to take place in order to be recognized as genderqueer. Breaks and

ruptures are processes within a rhizome. When the participants shared their

synchronous embracing of masculinity, femininity, and biological sex in Chapter

Four, they also revealed the movement that takes place within a rhizome. In the same chapter, the act of genderqueer*ing* also showed the recognition of movement. Chapters Five and Six were perhaps the most revealing of the ways in which gender works as a rhizome. The participants shared interactions – safe, unsafe, intentional, and unintentional – that required a critical consciousness of the constant processes of navigating and negotiating gender as a rhizome.

Pedagogical Considerations: New Visions for Critical Pedagogy and Queer Pedagogy

Currently, school curricula support the dangerous cycle of privilege and oppression by upholding standards that teach towards normative hegemonic beliefs and binary thinking of us/other, male/female, and gay/straight, to name a few. The current curricula does not support critical thinking that could challenge and dismantle the cycle of privilege and oppression (Pinar, 2011; Apple, 1999; Ladsen-Billings, 1998). Consequently, this leaves many students behind, including genderqueer individuals such as the participants in this study. While consciousness-raising, critical thinking, and dialogue are essential to student success (Apple, 1999), they are, by dominant and unjust design, missing from our current curricula. When considering the shortcomings and downfalls of our current curricula, Gloria Ladsen-Billings (1998) asks an essential critical question: "How can pedagogy promote the kind of student success that engages larger social structural issues in a critical way" (p. 204)? This is essentially a call

to situate pedagogy in a more critical paradigm that raises consciousness of social justice and emphasizes the experiences of students and others.

The merging of critical pedagogy and queer pedagogy offers a response to this call that supports a focus on consciousness-raising and social justice. Critical pedagogy and queer pedagogy "are mutually reinforcing philosophies that share a radical vision of education as the path to achieving a truly equitable and just society" (Meyer, 2008, p. 25). The tenets of critical pedagogy and queer pedagogy set up a particular landscape of promise for people who are marginalized and those who work for social justice. Both are hinged on a liberatory potential that it promotes, and it is supported by an agenda that values personal experiences and critical dialogue (Giroux, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Freire, 2003; McLaren, 1994). The hope is that working through a critical pedagogical stance will help forge a new consciousness among individuals that will create equity across classes, races, and genders. Paulo Freire, whose work is undoubtedly the most influential in critical pedagogy, refers to this as "conscientization," a critical understanding of the world, particularly regarding the influence of the social constructs and hegemonic powers that exist to oppress. Freire advocates that a "critical praxis of reflection, dialogue, and action" be a part of living a critical life (Darder, 2002). Critical praxis, thus, is the work of theory and practice in tandem, and it is the crux of where critical pedagogy and queer theory meet.

Considering critical pedagogy. Seeking a solid and cohesive definition for critical pedagogy is not an easy task, as "there are various (and sometimes competing) definitions, approaches, and emphasis" throughout the field (Cho, 2010, p. 320), but I think it is important to take a critical look at our current language of critical pedagogy around genderqueer individuals. It is important to note, however, that "at its core, critical pedagogy has the following two major agendas: transformation of knowledge (e.g. curriculum) and pedagogy (in a narrow sense, i.e. teaching)," and in tandem, these agendas seek "to construct alternative or counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge, and therefore power" (Cho, 2010, p. 227). It is within this framework of Freirean praxis that critical pedagogues advocate for the emancipation of people who are oppressed or marginalized from hegemonic structures as the ultimate goal of critical pedagogy.

With a focus on the liberation of people who are oppressed and marginalized in some way, the work of critical pedagogy relies on their experiences in society through the use of critical reflection, narratives, and critical dialogue. This is premised on the notion that people who are oppressed will "question the system they live in and the knowledge being offered to them, to discuss what type of future they want" in a manner that is both empowering and liberating (Shor, 1999, p. 28). The hope, then, is that this critical reflection and questioning will invoke the sharing of personal stories of and dialogue about oppression and marginalization. It is an aim of critical pedagogy that through these means, people who are oppressed will decenter the current hegemonic

discourse in ways that recenters and redevelops knowledge that focuses on equity across races, classes, and genders. This work of critical pedagogy, then, is a "means [of] bringing the laws of cultural representation face to face with their founding assumptions, contradictions, and paradoxes" (McLaren, 1994, p. 218). This puts the hope of critical praxis in the hands of all of us in understanding how we operate as the oppressed and the oppressor, as the praxis of reflection, dialogue, and action, requires transmission across and within hierarchical laws of society. Critical pedagogy thus "provides the capacities, knowledge, skills, and social relations through which individuals recognize themselves as social and political agents" of change and emancipation (Giroux, 2003, p. 480). The major avenues to emancipation through critical pedagogy are narratives and critical dialogue.

Critical pedagogy is education for social justice that is both a process and a goal with the ultimate aim being full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs (Bell, as cited in Hytten & Bettez, 2011, p. 8). Therefore, the avenues to emancipation should be seen as such. As is the case with critical pedagogy, "there is no single conclusion as to what an emancipatory education might consist of in practice," nor is there a cohesive definition of emancipation (Galloway, 2012, p. 165). Adding to the incohesiveness, the terms emancipation, liberation, and freedom are often used interchangeably in reference to the potential of using a critical pedagogy framework. The definitions of these terms can also vary slightly and just enough

to add to the ambiguity. It is within this section that I attempt to briefly sort out the distinctions associated with these terms to minimize the ambiguity.

According to Freire (as cited in McLaren & da Silva, 1999), freedom "means unmasking the social and cultural mechanisms of power as a basis for engagement in emancipatory action" (p. 56). In other words, Freire puts freedom as a precursor to emancipation because it works as a means to critically analyze the world and envision equity among all races, classes, and genders. Thus, freedom should be understood as the work that takes place within critical pedagogy, namely as narratives and critical dialogue, not as a result of critical pedagogy.

Critical pedagogy partly relies on the narratives of oppression and marginalization in order to expose, interrogate, and eradicate the dangers of hegemonic structures. McLaren and da Silva (1999) emphasize that "we must name experience in order to understand it," and stories of oppression are valued as the most important in critical pedagogy (p. 64). Naming an experience is done through reflecting on and sharing of personal narratives that center around the pain and suffering experienced through the hands of oppression. Understanding experiences of oppression involves a critical interrogation and questioning of the particular hegemonic structures used to oppress. Self agency and resistance is fosted through this naming and understanding of experiences of oppression in the critical pedagogical sense, in order for people to claim authority over their own lives.

Narratives are a "reflective posture" that "Freire calls an 'epistemological relationship to reality,' that is, being a critical examiner of your experience, questioning and interpreting your life and education rather than merely walking through them" (as cited in Shor, 1999, p. 31). An epistemological relationship to reality means that narratives of freedom expose, rather than deny, the reality of positionalities, one's own subjugated history, or the possibility for liberation, in the everyday realities of life. This necessarily requires the conscientization to which Freire speaks, as narratives require more than just storytelling; they require critical reflection of one's own history and the influences of social structures.

These "narratives of freedom" (McLaren, 1994) allow the voices of people who are oppressed and marginalized a space in which to be heard in order to counter hegemonic grand narratives and write their futures void of oppressive conditions. People who are oppressed and marginalized need not only share their stories among others who are oppressed; they also need to share their stories with privileged individuals so that they, too, can recognize and work against the reality of oppression that exists within society. Narratives of freedom in critical pedagogy "always [keep] in mind the omnipresent relationship between the social and individual" (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 21). This requires recognizing the reality that the social often dictates the individual, but that the individual has the power to transform the self and re-order the social. In this sense, narratives of freedom in critical pedagogy provide an avenue for emancipation from oppression.

Narratives genuinely require critical dialogue, another vital piece of freedom within a structure of critical pedagogy. According to Freire (as cited in Darder, 2002), critical "dialogue is a…self-generating praxis that emerges from the relational interaction between reflection, naming the world, action, and the return to reflection once more" (p.82) that happens genuinely during the sharing of narratives. For dialogue to be transformational, however, it requires commitment on the part of all those engaged. This commitment to critical dialogue involves people having immunity to "the bureaucratization of their minds and openness to discovery and knowing more" (Freire, 2007, p. 99). This means that participants need to be willing and able to critically interrogate not only their own reality, but the reality of others as well. Critical interrogation through dialogue comes with a responsibility of compassion, "directiveness, determination, discipline, [and] objectives" (Freire, 1998, p. 102). Considering different approaches to dealing with oppressive realities—and then acting on them—is what makes critical dialogue transformational.

Liberation should be understood as "critical transformation" that happens as a result of the knowledge formed through the sharing of narratives of freedom and critical dialogue around systemic structures of oppression. It is where the work of changing the "psychological conditions" of people who are oppressed takes place through a continuous and unfinished cycle (McLaren & da Silva, 1999, p. 69). This goes hand-in-hand with the consciousness required for narratives of freedom and critical dialogue. According to Love (2010), this

"liberatory consciousness" requires that people live their lives with the awareness

and new knowledge gained through attaining freedom. Essentially, this is where

people who are oppressed and marginalized begin to own and write their

experiences with counter-hegemonic thought. Liberation embodies Freirean

critical praxis through an emphasis on awareness and analysis of one's previous

and current life experiences, recognition of the action(s) that needs to take place

for emancipation to occur, accountability through community building (Love,

2010; Pharr, 2010). Freedom and liberation work to erupt in an action against

the hegemonic truth, and when this is successful, one is said to be emancipated

from oppressive systems.

Emancipation, then, is where social change takes place. Critical

pedagogy supports "Freire's emancipatory trajectory from oppression [which] is a

humanizing process that centers on the reinstatement of people's innate

character of being through praxis" (Galloway, 2009, p. 175). As an example with

genderqueer individuals, a social change that is emancipatory could involve a

person moving from referring to oneself and other people as either male or

female, to simply referring to oneself or other people as genderqueer. In this

way, the gender binary is broken down and space is made for the

acknowledgement of those who do not fit within the norms of the binary. Simply

put by Racière (as cited in Bingham & Biesta, 2010), emancipation "entails a

'rupture in the order of things'" that have been the norm (p. 32). While freedom,

liberation, and emancipation are all linked to individual choices by people who

are oppressed and marginalized, critical pedagogy rests on the use of pedagogy, the act of teaching. As such, the role of the teacher is vital; a role in which the teacher assumes the responsibility of taking the students "on the adventure of critical thinking (hooks, 2010, p. 43), where the environment is focused on learning.

The relationship between teacher and student can be viewed as binary, with the teacher's knowledge as superior to the student's knowledge. Freire (2000) counters this, however, by offering what he calls "problem-posing education," where the teacher and student are seen as co-constructors of knowledge. This is the type of educator that critical pedagogues envision playing a part in critical pedagogy. There is still the teacher and student roles within critical pedagogy, but instead of those labels, "the teacher is unequivocally [the emancipator] while 'the oppressed' are presented as a distinct group" needing emancipation" (Galloway, 2009, p. 179). Even though the teacher and students engage in sharing of narratives and engaging in critical dialogue in critical pedagogy, there is still the notion that students need the emancipator-teacher to lead the way to emancipation. This creates an unnecessary and prevalent binary that still puts the emancipator-teacher in a superior role.

In conjunction with this binary, Bingham and Biesta (2010) also note that "although emancipation is oriented towards equity, independence and freedom, it actually installs *dependency* at the very heart of the 'act' of emancipation" (p. 31). The emancipation binary suggests that the students cannot emancipate

themselves without the involvement of the teacher. Thus in much the same way

that the male/female binary creates a dependency for females (and gender non-

conforming individuals) on masculine characteristics as the standard by which to

live, the emancipator/emancipated binary creates a dependency on the

characteristics of the emancipator for the soon-to-be-emancipated (Galloway,

2009). Understanding the function of dependency within emancipation to which

Bingham and Biesta speak takes an interrogation of the literal meaning of

emancipation. It "literally means to give away ownership" of oneself or of

something (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 27). In the case of emancipation in

critical pedagogy, then, it requires a reliance on the already emancipated

consciousness of someone else (i.e., the teacher) by the oppressed (i.e., the

student). The language of emancipation does eliminate the language of the

oppressor/oppressed, and this puts the teacher in a more positive light: instead

of the *oppress*or, s/he is the *emancipat*or—there to do good works for people

who are oppressed—who helps others to the path of being emancipated.

However different this language, though, it does not negate the fact that the

concept of emancipation sets up a binary system that fosters hierarchies and

dependence.

Critical pedagogues encourage the tension created by the power of

language and privilege of authority (ex., hooks, 2010; Ayers, 2004; Freire &

Macedo, 1987). Teachers indeed have more authority over what is being taught

and learned than the students. The key for critical pedagogy, though, is to keep

this balanced with the understanding that teachers also become the students of the students in the sharing of narratives and critical dialogue. In this way, a partnership can emerge between the teacher and student rather than a binary.

Because of the potential binary and dependency created through the language of emancipation, there is also a need to question the authenticity of the individual voice and transformation. While I question the term authenticity, specifically questioning if we can ever really be authentic within our society of constructed realities, I use the word here to correspond with the language of critical pedagogy, which values authenticity in individuals (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994). Critical pedagogy cultivates the critical transformation of emancipation on the part of an authentic individual. Authenticity can be understood as self-actualization as a result the bringing together of one's own narrative alongside critical conversations that interrogate an individual's old realities and foster dreams of an individual's new realities (hooks, 1994). While this is a collaborative process in critical pedagogy, emancipation is seen as an individual choice that is authentically generated through individual voice.

Orner (1992) argues, however, that "student voice, as it has been conceptualized in work which claims to empower, is an oppressive construct" because it "perpetuates relations of domination in the name of liberation" (p. 75). The emancipator has a level of superiority in the emancipator/emancipated binary because of the use of critical pedagogy as a way to lead people who are oppressed to empowerment and emancipation; this situates their voice as

dominant. They, as the emancipator, are privy to information and knowledge to which people who are oppressed are not yet. The reliance on a pedagogical method of emancipation "presupposes *ready-made hierarchical worlds of sense* in which individuals form intentions, make choices, and carry out actions in the ready-made terms of those worlds" (Lugones, 2005, p. 86). If the emancipated are dependent on the emancipator for learning how to speak for empowerment, how can we be sure that the voice of the emancipated is authentic? How can we be sure that their individual unconscious subjective relations to and assumptions of power are being examined without any influence of the dominant voice of the emancipator? And, in turn, how is the emancipator/emancipated relationship different in the least from the colonizer/colonized relationship that has repeatedly been named as supporting a society built on hierarchy and inequity?

It is also troubling that the act of speaking is privileged over other forms of communication because it, too, supports domination and calls into question authenticity of voice. Privileging dialogue may be "a benefit, or a potential benefit [to some], others may regard it as a threat, and others as an impossibility" (Peters & Burbules, 2004, p. 259). People who are marginalized and oppressed based on particular aspects of their identity are always at risk for discrimination and unjust treatment. There may be "times when it is not safe for [them] to speak; when one student's socially constructed body language threatens another; when the teacher is not perceived as an ally" (Orner, 1992, p. 81). If dialogue is seen as a part of the pathway to emancipation, can those who do not,

either by choice or situation, participate, become emancipated? It is lack of safety that could also jeopardize authentic student voice. If an individual does not feel safe speaking truthfully, s/he may speak in ways that are not true to their situation, but rather in ways that meet what appear to be the needs within the critical pedagogy framework. Another crucial question to ask is if the framework of critical pedagogy actually oppresses some individuals in new or different ways than they are already oppressed?

Considering queer pedagogy. I return to genderqueer individuals to navigate conversation around this question. The tenets of critical pedagogy— reflection, narratives of freedom, critical dialogue, a return to reflection, and action— present a framework geared towards freedom from oppression for genderqueer and others who may be marginalized or oppressed. Critical pedagogy, which is constructed with binary views, acknowledges that women are oppressed and men are the oppressor; however, genderqueer individuals have not been considered in the equation. Life within the gender binary is not easy for women, and life outside of the binary is particularly dangerous for genderqueers because of the lack of understanding and acceptance of these individuals within society. Because genderqueer individuals lie outside the gender binary, this leaves them with unrecognized and unnamed risks of gender discrimination and oppression (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011). Because the gender binary is upheld by the critical pedagogical framework, it renders genderqueer individuals

invisible. It is this binary that needs to be dismantled in order to eliminate oppression and create equity and positive visibility among all genders.

The possibility of equity and anti-oppression is a goal of critical pedagogy, but, as we have seen, it is stifled by the language of emancipation. While the language of emancipation poses particular problems for all people who are marginalized and oppressed, it poses a particular danger to genderqueer individuals by putting them into a binary with similar colonizing effects as the gender binary from which they are trying to escape. Why would one want to follow a framework that replaces one form of oppression with another, similar form? Genderqueers embody assemblages by embracing both the feminine and masculine characteristics of their identity rather than claiming one gender over another. Binaries do not recognize the assemblages of identities that people represent; they privilege certain identities that are viewed as superior. Thus, it is plausible to say that emancipator/emancipated binary does not acknowledge assemblages either. The language of emancipation, therefore, does not recognize that the emancipator and the emancipated can both be on a continuum of being oppressed or being the oppressor, or the emancipated and the emancipator.

As an example, I am white, which puts me in a place of racial privilege and as well as an oppressor. At the same time, however, I am genderqueer, which puts me in a place of gender disadvantage and oppression. When coming to a search for anti-oppression and equity within genders, I do not just bring

experience of genderqueerness and oppression; I also bring experience of whiteness and privilege. This is an important assemblage of my identity but is overlooked within the language of emancipation in critical pedagogy. The same could also be said for a black genderqueer. Even though this individual has identities that are oppressed and marginalized in society, s/he may have experience working towards self-actualization in regards to race. If we negate her/his experience when seeking genderqueer anti-oppression, then we render this important part of her/his identity invisible. It is within this thinking that we can also call into further question the authenticity of voice. Without the validation of assemblages of identities, there is profound potential that important pieces of stories will be left out of narratives of freedom. If people are not considered their assemblage of self in critical pedagogical work, then conscientization and self-actualization are truncated; thus, the authentic voice cannot thrive and contribute. This argument makes clear that silencing and oppression of some individuals are products of the current framework of critical pedagogy.

Additionally, the dependency created within the emancipator/emancipated binary implies that genderqueer individuals cannot possibly know what they need in order fight against gender oppression. Instead, genderqueers need someone who has surpassed (or, is not subjected to) oppressive conditions, or someone who is privileged. But, as mentioned above, a slice of the assemblage of my identity is not subjected to oppressive conditions, and therefore, my own person has the experience needed for emancipation. Because the

emancipator/emancipated binary does not acknowledge assemblages, it cultivates dependency in others rather than the self. This creates disconnect between the self and the collective that works to perpetuate individualism, unjust power structures, oppression, and silence.

It is noble that the goal of critical pedagogy and the work of critical pedagogues is to support people who are in marginalized and oppressed situations. But a lack of a space for those outside of the binary way of thinking, such as genderqueer individuals, or without a space for assemblages of identity, the work of critical pedagogy is easily called into question. I offer a call for an approach to critical pedagogy that is informed by queer pedaggy. Queer pedagogy works to decenter, destabilize, and deconstruct forms of knowledge, specifically binary thinking. Multiple realities are embraced as "always local, subjective, and in flux", and the ideals of emancipation are rejected (Hatch, 2002, p. 18). Queer pedagogy supports a new language for critical pedagogy that challenges the troubling hierarchical and binary language of emancipation, makes space for individuals to engage with and de- and re-construct cisgender normativity, and challenges traditional understandings of gender identities. A space for the acknowledgment of the rhizomatic nature of gender is created through queer pedagogy in that it presents "a theoretical framework for teasing out the space between either/or positions, and it provides a way to contend with the whole as an alternative to the juxtaposition of parts" (Villaverde, 2008, p. 130). There is tremendous potential that critical pedagogy that is grounded in

queer pedagogy could transform the landscape of promise for social justice and liberation from oppressive conditions in a way that extends to all individuals, thus it necessarily creates a much-needed space for genderqueer individuals.

For critical pedagogy and queer pedagogy to productively meet in classroom settings, teachers need to be aware of and understand both, specifically in how they differ from the traditional curricula that focus on groups, normative structures, hierarchies, and places that are out-of-context and unrelated. In my study with genderqueer individuals, critical and queer pedagogies are particularly important because they offer an integration of student narratives into the curriculum. This offers visibility and creates space for genderqueer voices to be heard; thus, genderqueer narratives in a critical and queer pedagogies offer counterstories (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) that encourage the dismantling of the gender binary. Critical pedagogical experiences rooted in queer pedagogy takes radical love of both teacher and students to be willing see one another in themselves, to see similarities and productivity in differences.

This study can be viewed as a critical pedagogical queer experience because the methods used followed the process of critical pedagogy. This allowed for the genderqueer participants "to re-create their own history, culture, and language" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 145) in ways that were empowering and transformational. Freire & Macedo call this, "Literacy for Emancipation," but I like to call it, "Literacy for Social Justice," because it seeks to create literate

students who are empowered and act for social justice. All of the data chapters (3-7) reveal how the participants were critically reflective; how they shared genderqueer narratives; and how critical dialogues created community, partnerships, and a language for the genderqueer participants to claim as their own. This can be done on a smaller scale in classrooms where critical pedagogy and queer pedagogy meet. The teacher and student can use the process of critical pedagogy and the de-/re-centering and de-/re-stabilizing of norms via queer pedagogy to

Future Research

There were a few other themes that emerged as a part of my research and data collection for this study that I would like to explore more in the future. Participants touched on the various ways in which being genderqueer carries certain privileges, and some of these were discussed briefly throughout this piece. One interesting place of privilege that was not discussed thoroughly in focus groups or journals, and as a result, not at all within this piece, was with the seemingly homoerotic relationships that genderqueer females sometimes have with cisgender men. Most of the conversations focused on the unsafe relationships and interactions genderqueer females have with straight, cisgender men (see Chapter Five); however, all of the female genderqueer participants talked about how these relationships and interactions are friendly and, sometimes, even flirtatious.

Gigi, for example, talked about how she is sometimes seen as "one of the guys," and is therefore included in conversations and activities with other men that cisgender females, such as her partner, are not usually privy to. Gigi talked about how this often makes her feel safer around straight men than her partner because she does not have to worry about unwanted flirting or harassment from these same men in ways that her partner sometimes has to worry about. Even when the conversations have turned flirtatious, Gigi said that her genderqueer identity allowed the conversations to remain unthreatening and humorous. KJ talked about how, as a result of her relationships with men and also being thought of as "one of the guys," she was recently invited to be a "groomsguy" in her cisgender male friend's wedding. Often a place for other males only, KJ was able to partake in wearing men's attire and being a part of the pictures with the groom and the other men in the wedding. I am particularly interested in the nature of these relationships, specifically how they form initially, and how they function in both private and public spaces. I would tentatively like to title this piece, *When It's a Privilege to be Genderqueer: Homoerotic Connections and Safety in (and) Relationships Among Men and Genderqueers*, and use a post-structuralist qualitative lens to understand and articulate the nuances of these relationships and interactions between cisgender men and genderqueer females.

Finally, I am interested in looking more closely at critical pedagogical experiences that emphasize the nature of gender as a rhizome. Without calling it that, I have had numerous conversations with cisgender and gender non-

conforming individuals about the ways in which gender evolves, changes, and re-arranges throughout life. As such, I am particularly curious about the ways in which conversations of the rhizomatic nature of gender would take place between cisgender individuals, gender non-conforming individuals, and cisgender and gender non-conforming individuals collectively. I believe that if we start to have conversations about gender as rhizomatic rather than static, we can begin to queer gender norms in productive ways.

CHAPTER VIII
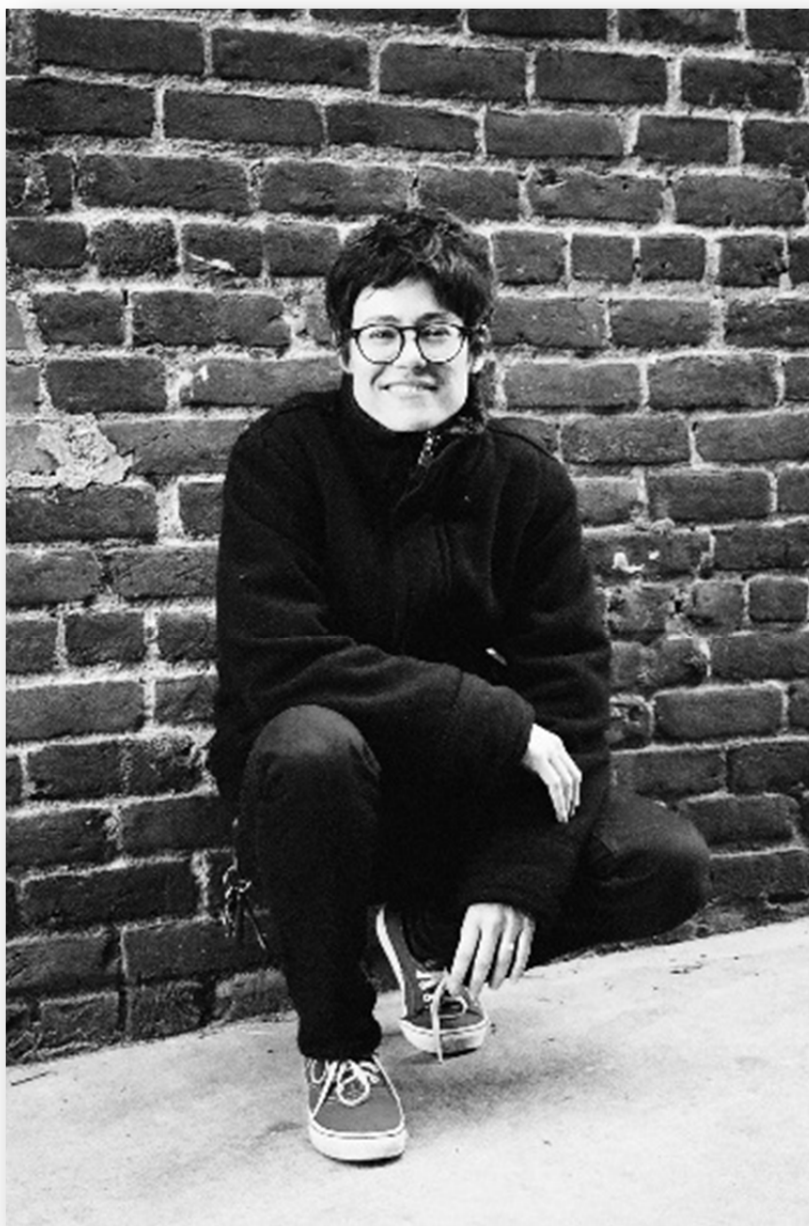
IN (Y)OUR OWN WORDS: READING OUR BODIES AS TEXT

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Lucia
35mm Film

"Discovering myself as a woman doesn't completely fit, but saying that I feel like I wanna be a man also doesn't fit. And, so for me, it's been about finding what exists in the middle of that, if there's anything."

Gigi
35mm Film

"My entire "adult" life has consisted of figuring out how to walk this Earth as a genderqueer within the mainstream."

Nego
35mm Film

"Genderqueer … means I have a lot of wiggle room in that, cause I feel like as opposed to a box, it's like an area to like stretch out in. So, yeah, that's the appeal to me.

Danielle
35mm Film

"Genderqueer means being whomever you want to be with no disclaimer on why or what."

David
35mm Film (courtesy of David)

"I, for one, born biologically a man, LOVE MY PENIS! But sometimes, the only way to express myself is with a little glitter and a pair of pumps."

Kelly
35mm Film

"There's a part of my femininity that I embrace, like I love being a woman, I just don't necessarily like conforming to feminine things."
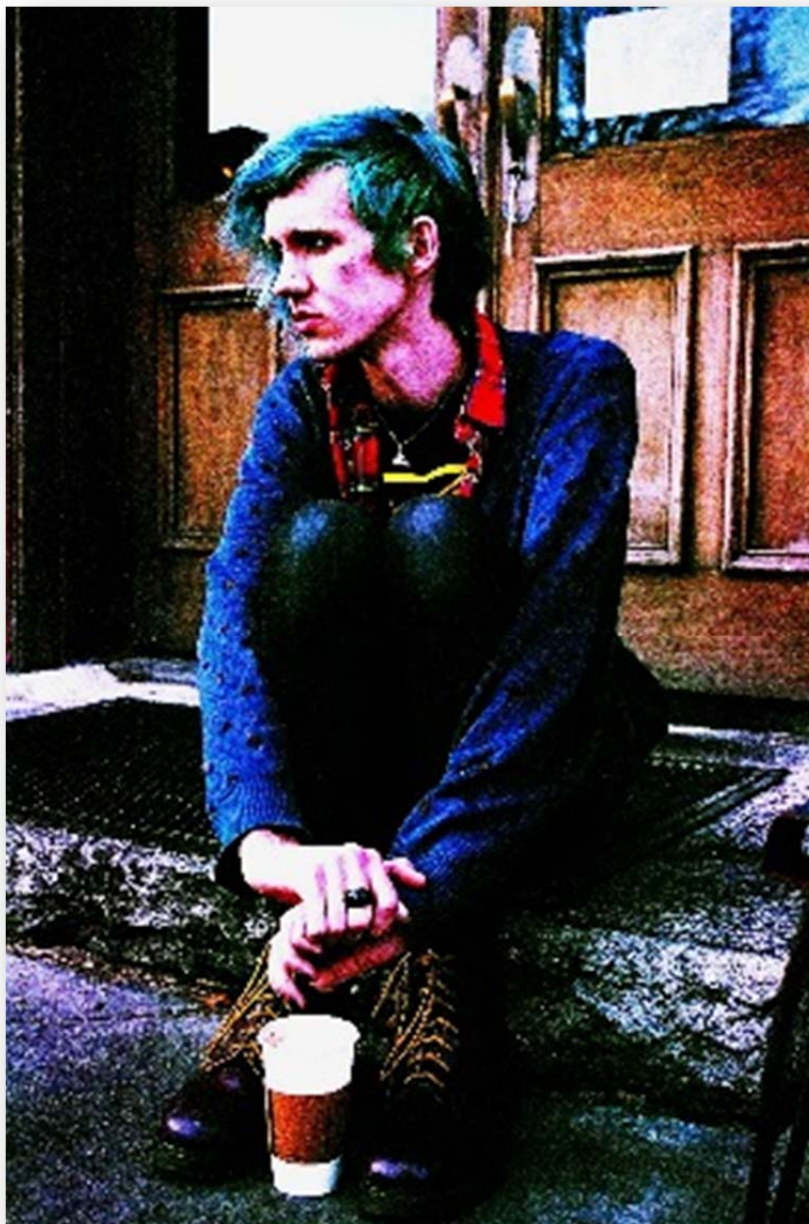
John/Avery
35mm Film

"We've all heard the saying, 'Clothes make the man,' but I'ma change that to say, 'Clothes make the queer.'"

KJ
Digital Camera (courtesy of KJ)

"Genderqueer is my own internal feel sense of my identity. Calling myself a man or a woman just doesn't fit."

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