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Sharla N. Alegria
University of South Florida

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Queer Identity? Discussing Identity and Appearance in an On-line “Genderqueer”
Community

by

Sharla N. Alegria

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Sociology
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Major Professor: Laurel Graham, Ph.D.
Sara Crawley, Ph.D.
Chris Ponticelli, Ph.D.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all the folks who have been targeted, harassed, excluded, abused, assaulted, or in anyway harmed because others perceived them to be “different.”

Acknowledgements

I am extremely thankful to my thesis committee; Sara Crawley, Chris Ponticelli, and especially my chair Laurel Graham, for their guidance, insight, work and inspiration throughout the process of writing and researching this thesis. In addition to my committee, I would also like to thank Donileen Loseke, Marilyn Myerson, Maralee Mayberry, Shawn Bingham and the late Spence Cahill for their advice, guidance, mentoring, role modeling, inspiration, and above all their genuine interest in my development as a person and as a scholar. I owe both Pat Greene and Joan Jacobs a great deal of gratitude for their encouragement and support. To my colleagues and classmates in Sociology; Diana Torres, Joshua Miller, Susan Kremmel, Annie Wagganer, Amy Lueders, Eve Hosley-Moore, Courtney Glover, Mike Mitchell, and Shawn Perkins; my work would not be the same without the discussions we have shared. I would also like to thank my friends and mentors from Vassar College, especially Gayle Sulik, John Schoonbeck, Kelsey Smith, Shira Hirsh, Su Gershon, and Oli Stephano. I would like to express my deepest thanks to my family, especially to my parents, my grandmother, my uncles, and my god mother for their unquestioning support and unfaltering confidence. The real credit for this thesis belongs to the people whose stories animate its pages; I am extremely grateful to the members of the “genderqueer” discussion community whose openness and passion made this work possible.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Queer Theory	5
Coming to Queer Subjectivity and Beginning Queer Research.....	9
Chapter 2: Literature.....	15
Interaction and Identity	15
Gender in Interaction and Identity	20
Queering Bodies.....	23
Queer(ing) Gender	28
Self Fashioning and Consumer Goods.....	29
Gender and Consumer Culture Literature.....	31
Chapter 3: Methods.....	38
Queer(ing) Social Science Research.....	38
Accessing Genderqueer Folk On-Line.....	41
Chapter 4: Findings.....	44
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions.....	55
References Cited.....	65
Appendices.....	69
Appendix 1: Discussion Questions	70

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ABSTRACT

The relatively new field of Queer Theory creates ways of thinking about people living without binary gender, but does not provide for a research model with which to give context to the material struggles of such people. Through the use of Internet discussion groups, the current research project attempts to examine the challenges that people who identify with the concept “genderqueer” describe facing as they fashion selves in social interactions; a process which inevitably requires consumer goods that typically only allow for heteronormative binary gender. Findings suggest that there are similarities in how respondents came to identify with “genderqueer,” but such similarities are less present in how they understand and apply the concept to themselves. This study shows a potential conflict arising between academic Queer Theory, which seeks to deconstruct identity categories, and a more popular use of “genderqueer” claimed as an identity by some respondents. In conclusion this thesis examines possibilities for activism and marketing that may come out of “genderqueer” as a widely recognizable identity category.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“Really though, all I know is that I hate clothes. I hate what they can do, the things they can say, the ways they're used, missused, misunderstood and I especially hate having to go shopping for them.”

Shopping has been conceptualized as liberating, empowering, narcissistic, community forming, alienating, and even transformative (Wilson, 1989; Baudrillard, 1969; Chau, 1992; Leach, 1994; Shields, 1992). For many people shopping can be a release from the stressors of work and home, a productive leisure time activity, or even an obsession. Yet others experience shopping as one of many loci of their social marginality; stores and malls are a palpable environment of perceived misunderstanding and disapproval. My exploration of understandings and experiences of identity and appearance of gender variant folk came partly out of my involvement with an on-line community for people who identify with the term “genderqueer” and partly out of my frustration with the constant gendering of apparel and accessories. I heard echoes of my own experiences from other community members and saw the group both supporting and strategizing alternative ways to wear and places to purchase clothes. People all over the country were describing their frustration with being called “sir,” “ma’am,” “he,” or “she” despite their attempts to look ambiguous and they came to each other for support and

advice for “presenting” (a term many community members use) as more or less feminine, masculine, or androgynous.

Stores themselves contribute to the consistent dichotomous gendering of social subjects. Although some stores sell clothes associated with different sub-cultural groups, nearly all neatly separate out the clothes intended for men from the clothes intended for women. Even children’s clothing stores contain separate sections for infant boys and infant girls. Clothes are not the only consumer products that are overtly gendered; soap, shaving supplies, perfumes, belts, nearly anything that a person can put on their body is gendered by production, packaging, and placement. Stores often go so far as to put men’s and women’s body products in separate aisles or on separate sides of isles. Products with no obvious difference, such as athletics shoes and belts, are often sized differently and put in women’s or men’ sections of stores. Most people probably never seriously question why they shop in the part of the store specifically designated for the gender with which they identify. Stores neatly divided into dichotomous masculine and feminine sections, as well as products carefully labeled and sold as women’s and men’s illustrate and contribute to the categorization of post-industrial Americans as always exclusively either masculine indicating a male body or feminine indicating a female.

For most people the sex marking of many consumer items intended for bodies is not a topic of great consideration. Sonograms tell doctors a baby’s sex then the doctor tells the parents who begin to make preparations to teach the child gender to match sex category¹ (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Maintaining clear lines around sexuality is done

¹ I am using West and Zimmerman’s (1987) phrase sex category to imply the way that people are placed into either the male or female sex category first by doctors, then parents and most every one else with whom they interact. As soon as a person can be placed into a sex category they are held accountable for

in hospitals by surgically “correcting” the genitals of any child whose sex may otherwise be ambiguous (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Kessler, 1998). As children get older they learn from their parents what is considered appropriate for people of their sex category. When children go to school proper gender behavior is enforced by separate bathrooms, gym classes, and other institutionalized activities, but it is also reinforced by the children themselves as they both learn to play with and to hold each other accountable to gender norms for their sex category (Thorne, 1993).

Appearing and moving through the world in clearly feminine or masculine ways seems to be an implicit part of being human for most Americans. For decades feminist scholars have been examining and deconstructing gender norms. Social constructionist literature on gender shows how dichotomous gender roles are transmitted, learned, enforced, acted out, and emulated by people, young and old, everyday. There have also been volumes of social science work looking at the ways in which consumer culture, including advertising, media, and consumer goods illustrate, proscribe, and reinforce gender norms. While both sets of literature provide excellent analyses of how gender gets to be dichotomous in the social world and how consumer culture and gender norms interrelate there has been little work done that acknowledges that there are people who are not comfortable identifying with heteronormative gender expectations but must find a way to negotiate a dichotomously gendered consumer society.

As both a feminist scholar and a person who does not comfortably identify with either side of the gender binary, I am afraid that the lack of work done in this area is a

behaving and appearing in the ways that have come to be associated with that category. The consequences for not conforming to these expectations, or for not being recognizable as fitting into either the male or female sex category can be fatal.

subtle way in which the scholarly work that argues for the deconstruction and blurring of gender identity boundaries fails to provide for a viable alternative. Issues related to transitioning from one binary gender category to the other as well as studies of drag seem to be popular among scholars of Queer Theory², while the difficulties of living with a non-gendered identity are not nearly as well represented³.

My research seeks to understand how people who identify with the term “genderqueer” understand gender, negotiate identifying with an identity that is not discursively available in many social situations, and experience using, presenting and purchasing consumer goods. While identification with the word queer may mean vastly different things to different people, I will use the word “genderqueer” throughout this paper out of linguistic necessity to describe the group of people with whom I am working. Furthermore, “genderqueer” is the word that people involved with my study have chosen to call themselves. This research will attempt to address the lives of people who do not identify consistently as men or women yet must still present themselves in social interactions. The problem this group would seem to face is that they must either use gendered consumer goods, such as clothes bought from stores or find an alternative such as making their own clothes in order to interact with others in public spaces. The potential problem I am attempting to investigate may not turn out to be an issue for social actors moving through the world, but it does represent a failure of queer theory to deal with the practical issue of shopping in a consumer world that only allows two genders and expects those genders to match only two sexes in heteronormative ways. This

² Judith Halberstam’s work on drag kings and FTM surgery, Judith Butler’s work on drag, and Dean Spade’s work on FTM surgery to name a few.

³ The anthologies *PoMosexuals* and *GenderQueer* are two books that do deal with the difficulties of living in opposition to binary gender, but neither offers alternatives to the projects they describe.

research examines issues of identity, presentation, and consumption faced by “genderqueer” consumers. Specifically, I am most interested in clothes, accessories, and body products because those items are most intimately attached to the person and as they make up the tools for the fashioning of appearance. I do not wish to presume or imply that all of the people with whom I collaborated to research this thesis attempt to present themselves as androgynous, rather they do not see masculine and feminine as necessary ways for humans to be and incorporate at least some part of that belief into their understanding of themselves.

Queer Theory

Queer Theory enters this thesis in two ways. First, it helped to frame my research question and research method. My understanding of refusing categorization and blurring binary identities comes from Queer Theory. I could not have asked the questions or conceived of the particular group of people I chose to work with had it not been for Queer Theory. Second, it enters this thesis by way of the respondents themselves. When this project was in its early stages, I was warned that by focusing my sights on people who self-identify as genderqueer, I would necessarily limit the project to others who would have read the theory books I had read, sat through classes similar to those I had sat through, and that these informants would reiterate the theory I had read back in the form of narratives of personal identity. As it turns out, what I heard from my informants did contain elements of the theories I had read but did not include references to books or articles or specific concepts. These subjects were not just like me; bits of theory had reached them, somehow, but they were not engaged with it through academic studies in the way that I am. This suggests to me that Queer Theory has, at least in some ways,

made inroads into more popular understandings of identity. My focus for this thesis is therefore on the understandings and actions of fleshed people, albeit by accessing only their online talk, rather than on the theory that makes it possible to think and write about queer(ing) identity. Regardless of my specific focus, Queer Theory is a prominent framework for both my understanding of the group with whom I worked and the ways the group talked about their understandings of gender and the problems they have encountered. For this reason a discussion of Queer Theory is necessary before a full explanation of the research.

Joshua Gamson states that Queer Theory attempts “to take apart the [sexuality] identity categories and blur the group boundaries. This alternative angle, influenced by academic ‘constructionist’ thinking holds that sexual identity categories are historical and social products, not natural or intrapsychic ones” (Gamson, 1996; 391). The key to ending oppression, in this model, is to refuse categorization (Gamson, 1996). In his introduction to the anthology *Queer Theory/Sociology* Steven Seidman writes “queer theory wishes to challenge the regime of sexuality itself, that is, the knowledges that construct the self as sexual and that assume heterosexuality and homosexuality as categories marking the truth of ourselves” (Seidman, 1996; 12). A body that cannot be categorized as male or female can neither be categorized as hetero- or homosexual. While examples of people transgressing, or transitioning across gender lines before the articulation of queer theory are available (such as Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), Judith/Jack Halberstam’s work on drag kings (1994, 1998, 1999), and images from the Stonewall Riots), the idea of taking on a gender identity that is neither maleness

nor femaleness would have been unthinkable before queer theory problematized heteronormativity.

Queer Theory works to break down dichotomies, blur boundaries, and illuminate the role of language in stabilizing and reproducing normative social structures. As a theoretical construct, “queer” can be used to destabilize categories and confuse definitions; however it is a construct that has come to have serious consequences for people’s lives and self understandings. The word “queer” is used sometimes to describe an identity category of people who are outside gender or sexual orientation norms, which actually works against Queer Theory. It is also sometimes used as an umbrella term to describe anyone who is not straight. More true to the academic use of the word, queer should be understood as a process of identity; rather than *being* queer one *does* queer or one *is becoming* queer. As a concept, it should not be understood as a fully inhabited or completely defined category of identity (Butler, 1993). Its meaning is unstable, temporal, situated, used for its momentary political efficacy and future oriented imagining (Butler, 1993). In other words the word “queer” from Queer Theory is intended to destabilize identity, not to create another identity category.

My goal for this project is to give voice to problems of identity performance faced by a group of people who discursively exist only because of the branch of critical feminist thought that has now become Queer Theory. The description and deployment of queer(ing) identity by academia has created a new possibility for personhood, an idea I will return to in the next chapter. I do not mean to imply that people who did not identify exclusively with either masculinity or femininity did not exist before Queer Theory, rather I mean to say that talking about them before would have been very different. Queer

Theory made it possible to adopt an identity in critique, or a position of “neither nor,” in a way that is a personal/political statement rather than psychological disorder.

I will use the phrase “genderqueer” in this project to describe the people with whom I worked. By using the word “genderqueer” I wish to imply a way of thinking about gender rather than any clear, common practice. I do not wish to presume that everyone who identifies with queer(ing) gender tries to look androgynous in every interaction all the time, nor do I wish to assume that gender identity is the most salient identity issue for everyone who identifies this way. For some, simple things such as referring to significant others in gender neutral terms such as partner is queering gender. For others, refusing to come out and identify their sexual orientation may be a way of queering gender. From my own casual observations I have seen a widely diverse group of people claim to identify with genderqueer, including drag kings and queens, transsexuals, androgynes, gays, lesbians, cisgender folk⁴, and even people in heterosexual marriages. What I do mean to imply is that this group holds in common an understanding of gender as fluid and more than binary and resists that binary. I am using the word genderqueer here out of linguistic necessity. It is a function of language that giving an idea a word also gives it a fairly stable definition. Any work that I do using “queer” as a concept must be understood as temporally, politically, and situationally limited to the specific people with whom I worked.

It may not be possible for me to achieve my goals and stay entirely true to the theoretical framework that I must use in order to be able to talk about queering gender.

Queer(ing) identity should be understood not as something one is, but rather something

⁴ A person whose physical sex at birth has followed a heteronormative trajectory; for example a person born female, raised as a girl, and identified as a woman.

one does. The word genderqueer then should be understood as a group of acts, intentions, and ideas that need to be given a word if I am to write about them coherently and not as a static identity category. The people who made this study possible do not all use the concept the same way, nor do they understand or experience the social imperatives of gender in the same way. This thesis may well walk the line between coherence and incoherence in places, but perhaps this is necessary in order to attempt to do justice to the complexity of people's lives and the demands of a theoretical framework that blurs boundaries and critiques language.

Coming to Queer Subjectivity and Beginning Queer Research

Like any research project, this project is reflective of my social perspective and theoretical orientations. This project comes partly out of my own frustration with trying to negotiate consumer goods to fashion a self that will lead others to categorize me and therefore interact with me in the ways that I want. It also comes from belonging to communities, both on-line and face-to-face, where I see others struggling with similar issues, though often from different perspectives. Carol Guess stated one problem of queer theory very well when she wrote "gender may be a performance, but it is a fleshed performance, potentially painful or aware of its prowess" (Guess, 1997; 161). I do gender and I am very much aware of myself doing it. The experience may be uncomfortable or erotic or any number of possible outcomes, but I am fully aware and acting as an agent doing gender. I am also aware of many other people struggling with similar issues, with similar goals, though possibly for reasons and in contexts different from my own.

The process of coming to identify myself with queering gender has largely resulted from reading and studying Feminist and Queer Theory. I did not think of my

discomfort with dresses, frustration with purses, or complete bewilderment by make-up as particularly meaningful until I began studying gender in college. When I turned 18 I even got a tattoo that is understood to mean “she” in language that does not contain such pronouns. My logic at the time was that I could not possibly regret this tattoo because I would never not be a “she.” Less than a year later I read part of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* for the first time and began exploring less normative, more theoretical and academic ways of understanding gender and sex. It took a couple of years of study to be able to understand that Queer Theory looks at gender as a production, a constant process of doing or performing what is taken to be expected of social actors based on the sex category to which they have been assigned (West and Zimmerman, 1987). This constant process of producing, doing, and/or performing gets repeated until it *feels* natural; so much so that even female athletes may wear make-up to practice, claiming that they *feel* “naked” or “not right” without it (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan, forthcoming).

At the same time that I was studying Queer Theory and Sociology I was also very fortunate to have been in an environment where experimenting with gender and sexuality was encouraged and supported. I found other people who were dealing with similar questions and realizations from different perspectives on different paths. I learned the value of words and the importance of using them in politically efficacious ways as situations may require. In my everyday life I learned to live with the categorization and accountability I know others will subject me to while maintaining an uncertainty or ambivalence about identity, especially as it pertains to my body (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

I have been fortunate to have had the support of primary significant others, as Berger and Luckmann (1969) would use the term to describe the people who are most important in shaping the way individuals can understand reality. Still, I find it hard to manage the tension I feel when I am called “ma’am” or to assuage the embarrassment of someone who calls me “sir” then notices the protrusions on my chest. It is easy enough for me to think about my self-fashioning, a term borrowed from Tasmin Wilton (2004) to describe the process of shaping an ever changing presentation of self out of available consumer goods, from a purely theoretical perspective in which I can understand gender to be a harmful social construct that I do not apply to my own self understanding. This project of constructing my subjectivity out of theoretical concepts that deconstruct and blur identities works only until I step away from books and papers and classrooms and start interacting with fleshed people in the social world.

I identify with, not a gender, but a gender project that critiques, deconstructs, and blurs binary gender connected to binary sex through parody, satire, and inappropriate citationality. The problem that I face is that this identity project is only discursively available in the theoretical work that I study and within small subcultural groups such as the on-line community that I mentioned earlier. While others who study Queer theory may understand my identity project, when I walk out of the classroom or away from particular groups of people, I am seen as a masculine female often a butch lesbian, a category in itself that is cause for alarm for many social actors as Judith/Jack Halberstam points out (Halberstam, 1998). The problems of recognition and performance working against my identity project became sharply visible to me about a year ago when I decided that my new job as a research assistant working in elementary schools and my escalating

responsibility as a graduate teaching assistant could be better accomplished with a self-presentation that was more “put-together.” I decided to start updating my wardrobe to include more items such as dress slacks, button down shirts, and polos that I did not select for their holes or unusual colors at thrift stores. Off I went to the mall armed with a gift card for PacSun, a store selling clothes intended to indicate a skateboarding/surfing lifestyle. After giving the sales associate a bit of anxiety over which term of respectful address to use (he called me “ma’am” then looked me up and down for a few seconds before nodding to himself and continuing with his statement) I found my way to a store that had a less specialized clothing selection and less attentive employees. My sophisticated theory could not help me negotiate the interactions I was having in the mall; it did not lessen the anxiety I felt when shopping in the men’s or boy’s section or bringing men’s clothes to the women’s fitting room.

The problems I experienced shopping are hardly revelatory. They could be seen as similar to the “bathroom problem” analyzed by Judith/Jack Halberstam (1998) in *Female Masculinity* and often described or depicted in accounts of transpeople.

Halberstam writes:

“Ambiguous gender, when and where it does appear, is inevitably transformed into deviance, thirdness, or a blurred version of either male or female. As an example, in public bathrooms for women, various bathroom users tend to fail to measure up to expectations of femininity, and those of us who present in some ambiguous way are routinely questioned and challenged about our presence in the ‘wrong’ bathroom” (1998; 20).

Halberstam argues that “women’s restrooms tend to operate as an arena for the enforcement of gender conformity” (Halberstam, 1998). She points out that the dynamics of men’s restrooms tend to be different, more sexually charged; individuals are subjected

to less scrutiny, but the stakes may be higher if someone fails to “pass” (Halberstam, 1998). Bathrooms, from Halberstam’s view, can be seen as a space where presentation of a correspondingly gendered and sexed self is put to the test. The stakes and degree of scrutiny may be different in women’s and men’s bathrooms but people are still subject to some level of accountability for presenting gender in a way that does not deviate from others’ interpretation of their sex category (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Crawley, Foley, Shehan, forthcoming).

The experience of shopping for clothes that do not present a clearly heterogendered⁵ self and the perceived scrutiny and surveillance of store associates and other customers presents a space in which the possibilities for fashioning a gendered self are policed (Ingraham, 1994). Where gendered self-fashioning is tested in bathrooms, gendered self-fashioning is produced with the items available for purchase in stores. Shopping can be viewed as a sort of liminal middle stage between Goffman’s frontstage, where social actors present themselves to an audience of other social actors, and backstage, where social actors are not in the presence of others and they can prepare for future presentations (Goffman, 1959). I use the word liminal to invoke the idea of being between presentations and preparing for presentation where the possibility for fashioning a vastly different person is ever present. In “Shopping for Women’s Fashion in Singapore” Beng Haut Chua points out that putting together appearance is necessarily backstage activity with store associates as coconspirators in the production of a personal front, gatekeepers that make sure clients do not embarrass themselves by wearing the

⁵ I am using the term “heterogender,” borrowed from Chrys Ingraham (1994) to indicate the normative expectations that sex is either male or female, male bodied people are masculine and female bodied people are feminine, and that men and women belong with each other.

same outfit as another client or purchasing unflattering clothes (Chua, 1992). Chua was researching high end fashion boutiques where clothing is very expensive and a high degree of service is expected. For most consumers of limited means store employees are less coconspirator and more dressing room openers and cash register operators. Social actors must still present themselves to others in stores even as they go about the backstage activity of purchasing new materials to fashion selves in other arenas and store employees may serve as obstacles to self-fashioning in a deviant manner. Furthermore, short of making or altering clothes themselves, social actors can only chose from the commercial items available to them in stores, catalogues, or on-line to fashion a self.

Chapter 2

Literature

Interaction and Identity

Becoming a social actor means sharing a collectively meaningful reality with others. In *Society as Subjective Reality*, Berger and Luckmann lay out a framework for understanding how members of a society come to experience a reality that makes sense and has meaning subjectively and objectively. Subjective meaning is meaning for the individual, while objective meaning is not intrinsically true, but collectively held by members of a social group. They identify what they call “three moments, externalization, objectification, and internalization that characterize all parts of society” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; 129). They argue, “the same is true of the individual members of society, who simultaneously externalizes his own being into the social world and internalizes it as an objective reality” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; 129). In other words, individual people present the reality or facts of their being as they understand themselves. The constant reinforcement of these “facts” by others leads the individual to believe and internalize them as objectively real. They argue that, “to retain confidence that he is indeed who he thinks he is, the individual requires not only the implicit confirmation of this identity that even casual everyday contacts will supply, but the explicit and emotionally charged confirmation that his significant others bestow on him” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; 150). Supporting this view of identity, Gauthier and Chaudoir found in

their ethnographic content analysis of female-to-male transsexual (FTM) Internet communities that FTM's use the Internet to form communities where they can both exchange tips on being treated as male in their interactions with others and feel reaffirmed in their masculine presentation even if only on-line (Gauthier and Chaudoir, 2004). In other words, a person comes to understand their⁶ identity to be real because people around them interact with them as if they understand that identity to be real also, and in order to maintain an identity it must be constantly confirmed, especially by those who are most significant to the individual. In the case of transpeople, being recognized and treated as their gender of choice by others reaffirms their personal sense of identity.

While interacting with others, people engage in collective processes of sense making or reality construction in which people act in ways that are consistent with social structures that are already in place (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, Cahill, 1998). Spencer Cahill, like Berger and Luckmann, uses the interactional model of person production, but focuses on the coercive power of person types and the accountability people have for doing the identity type that they embody. He argues that "collective conceptions of or institutions of the person are even possible only owing to exterior movements that symbolize and delineate them in some outward appearance; that is, they must be expressively embedded in bodily individuals" (Cahill, 1998; 135). In other words, socially meaningful person types are only possible because of acts and appearances that people present in and on their bodies. Those presentations are not entirely the doing of the individual. Individuals learn from interactions with others what is available and/or required of them to identify within the social structure. They are then held accountable

⁶ I wish to use a gender neutral pronoun here. Even though "their" is grammatically incorrect, it serves my purpose better than most other choices.

for the person type they are engaged in doing in social interactions. These types are based on outward displays embedded in bodies. People will act towards each other based on the commonly understood characteristics and expectations of the kind of person with whom they interpret themselves to be dealing. Being viewed as a competent social actor entails “doing” the person type that matches the presumed presented person type.

Gregory Stone also examines the importance of appearance in social interaction. He writes; “One appears, reflects on that appearance, and appropriates words of identity, value, mood, or attitude for himself in response to that appearance. By appearing, the person *announces* his identity, *shows* his value, *expresses* his mood, or *proposes* his attitude (emphasis in original Stone, 1961; 101). Stone uses the term “programs” to describe a person’s responses about their own appearance and the term “reviews” to describe others, responses to a person’s appearance. He argues, “When programs and reviews tend to coincide, the self of the one who appears (the one whose clothing has elicited such social responses) is validated or established, when such responses tend toward disparity, the self of the one who appeared is challenged, and conduct may be expected to move in the direction of some redirection of the challenged self” (Stone, 1961; 92). From Stone’s argument, social actors can be expected to either revise their appearance or their identity if their program is consistently challenged.

Individuals can and do negotiate the way they are interacted with and the ways they interact with others to more closely display the type of person they see themselves to be. Gauthier and Chadoir show with the case of Female to Male transpeople in online communities that people can study the characteristics of types of persons and presentations, but they will be held accountable for the identity they are perceived to have

by others. The degree to which an individual's subjective sense of identity is reaffirmed depends on how convincingly they can appear to match the characteristics of the person type they understand themselves to be and the degree to which they pass the interpersonal tests of accountability for that group.

Donileen Loseke's forthcoming article on narrative identity adds a much needed aspect of telling and acting out acceptable stories in order to situate identity within shared matrices of social meaning. She uses the term "formula stories" to describe "typical actors engaging in typical actions within typical plots with typical moral evaluations" (Loseke, forthcoming). Such stories situate actors in widely recognized and understood social classifications. Loseke further argues:

"[S]tories that seem too different from culturally sanctioned narratives might be evaluated as untrue or incredible and the story-teller evaluated as mad. The implication here is that social members must use socially circulating stories as a member's resource . . . There is considerable evidence that broadly circulating formula stories function in the background of our thinking and provide hypotheses and sometimes filter our perceptions" (Loseke, forthcoming).

In other words, socially viable identities, or person types, must be storied in ways that recognizably fit with that identity. For example it would not be possible to be understood as a mother without caring for children. There are steps, processes, and attitudes both past and future that are part of the formula stories for cultural identities.

Furthermore these identities and stories are not static; existing stories may change and new stories may emerge making for new possibilities for personhood. Ian Hacking argues that it is only possible to be a certain kind of person in specific, historically and socially situated moments (Hacking, 1986). To make his point he uses the example of split personality disorder. He writes, "multiple personality as an idea and as a clinical

phenomenon was invented around 1875: only one or two possible cases per generation had been recorded before that time, but a whole flock of them came after” (Hacking, 1986; 223). His claim, which he terms “dynamic nominalism,” is that “a kind of person came into being at the same time as the kind itself was being invented” (Hacking, 1986; 228). The people and the category emerged simultaneously, each shaping the other. “Making up people changes the space of possibilities for personhood,” or creating a new category of people creates the possibility for people to be understood as instances of that category. The possibilities for personhood change, meanwhile the people who are understood to fit the category shape the category as well. Hacking sees identity as two vectors:

“One vector is labeling from above, from a community of experts who create a “reality” that some people make their own. Different from this is the vector of the autonomous behavior of the person so labeled, which presses from below, creating a reality every expert must face” (Hacking, 1986; 234).

The phenomenon Hacking described creates a sort of loop where a label is created by experts, people are so labeled, then the label is characterized by the behavior of the people it is used to describe. It is difficult to fully see “genderqueer” fitting into the loop in the same way it is possible to fit “homosexual” into the loop. Homosexual was a legal and moral label given to a group who claimed the label and developed a whole movement around it (Hacking, 1986). “Queer” on the other hand is launched as a critique of identity categories, but in critiquing binary identity Queer Theory made room for queer(ing) identity. In *Bodies that Matter* Judith Butler writes, “if the term ‘queer’ is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but

always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (Butler, 1993; 228). From Butler’s work “queer” can be seen more as a political tool claimed but not owned, relinquished and redefined, recycled, constantly moving, shifting, always becoming and never quite arriving. The description and deployment of queer(ing) identity by academia has however created a new possibility for personhood. Some questions that remain to be answered, however, are what will be required for the personhood made possible by Queer Theory to become widely recognizable, and just how possible is it for individuals to claim an identity position if that position is not recognized by a community of others.

Gender in Interaction and Identity

According to the highly influential work of Don West and Candace Zimmerman and Judith Butler, the social reality of gender is reproduced and reinforced through repeated gender performance of individuals whose credibility as social actors is at stake (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990). Social constructionist perspectives on gender hold that gender is learned, performed, and enforced through social interactions with peers, media, and other social actors. Furthermore, such arguments separate gender from sex, or a person’s appearance, activities, and ideas from that person’s sex organs; some then go on to show how physical sex is also influenced by social expectations about gender. Candace West and Don Zimmerman wrote in “Doing Gender,” “the ‘doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production” (West and Zimmerman, 1987; 126). They use *sex* to refer to biological criteria, *sex category* to refer to placement based on sex criteria even though it is not displayed in every day interactions, and *gender* to refer to “the activity of managing

situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category" (West and Zimmerman, 1987; 127).

While displaying gender may be optional, being seen as an instance of either male or female sex category by others is not. Doing the activities, appearance, and attitudes of the appropriate sex category is a way of claiming social value and competence as a social actor. Take for example the act of shaving one's legs; instead of understanding shaving one's legs as something women do because they want to, West and Zimmerman and Butler would argue that people who want to have social credibility as women shave their legs because they see it as part of an ideal of femininity. The decision not to shave one's legs is easy enough to make, but it would mean losing credibility as a competent female. Gender is not an essential truth of bodies as much as a learned system of acts performed and interpreted as citations, or alignments with and references to previously established models of masculinity or femininity.

In her influential early work *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler argues;

"Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. . . Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is just that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler, 1990; 179).

In other words, gendered acts are outwardly displayed and repeated. These acts have meaning that is temporally and socially specific. For example, shaving one's legs is a

feminine act in the contemporary United States but it does not carry the same meaning in other places, nor has it carried the same meaning at other times in the history of this country. Contemporary American women shave their legs because that is one of the many feminine acts whose repetition *constitutes them as women*. Being female is not what makes them shave their legs, shaving their legs, along with numerous other acts that stylize their everyday appearance, mannerism, and speech genders them hetero-feminine and shows them to be an appropriate female. Gender is not an identity one can fully inhabit, rather it is accomplished through the repeated performance of acts, and it gains the appearance of substance, or it seems to be real, because social actors believe their actions as well as the actions of others to reflect the natural activities of people, marking them masculine or feminine in accordance with their sex.

Butler also points out that, “gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond” (Butler, 1993; 232). In so much as heterosexuality is one of the primary organizing institutions of social life, gender norms operate to produce heterosexual people. Chrys Ingraham argues that heterosexual marriage is used as the romantic end goal of gender socialization. She uses the term “heterosexual imaginary” to describe a

"belief system that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well-being. . . through the use of the heterosexual imaginary, we hold up the institution of heterosexuality as timeless, devoid of historical variation, and as 'just the way it is' while creating social practices that reinforce the illusion that as long as this is 'the way it is' all will be right in the world" (1999; 16).

The imaginary part of the term "heterosexual imaginary" is meant to indicate the way that people see their surroundings in terms of themselves, imagining that everyone and everything around them is just like them. These factors all combine to make a circle of heterosexual beings. Children are taught to follow gender norms so they can be heterosexuals and gain status because "boys just naturally like girls," because their parents "just liked each other" and they got married, because that is what people do. The heteronormative ideal reinforces gender into two dichotomous categories based on sex. If men must marry women, and everyone should get married, then everyone must be either a man or a woman. Formula stories that do not support heteronormativity are either unavailable or classify a social actor as deviant or pathological.

Queering Bodies

Recognizing a social actor as fitting neither male nor female heterogender becomes difficult or impossible for many because it is a subject position that is simply not a potential identity category for many people. Queering gender and sexuality attempts to question and refigure this formula, but refiguring the formula is no small task when dichotomous heterogender is reinforced even at the level of altering physical bodies that do not "naturally" reflect it. Anne Fausto-Sterling, a feminist biologist, has provided multiple examples and numerous arguments of the influence of gender expectations over bodily sex. Her book *Sexing the Body* examines the decisions that doctors make when confronted with an infant born with genitalia that is neither clearly male nor female. She argues that "labeling someone man or woman is a social decision" and that "our beliefs about gender- not science- can define our sex" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; 3). Rather than

arguing that sex defines or leads to gender, her work shows that social beliefs about gender can shape sex.

Fausto-Sterling describes a genetic difference that causes XX chromosome babies to be born with masculine external genitalia and fully functional internal female genitalia. In some cases, these inter-sexed infants can grow to be healthy reproductive women after surgery. These children become women by most appearances, but they have male external sex organs. Biologically, their sex is ambiguous. The doctor and parents, in such cases will decide to surgically make the child either male or female and the parents will likely try to teach the child gender, to fit into the assigned sex category. If the doctors and parents are successful the child may never know he or she was born with ambiguous genitalia.

Current medical technology allows doctors to look at sonograms and determine the sex of a fetus in utero. Based on this information parents will often begin to prepare for the gendering of the child. They may have a room prepared that is full of pink or blue clothes, gender-specific toys, and other accoutrements before a child is even born. Fausto-Sterling points out however, that when viewing a sonogram, doctors are looking for the presence or absence of a penis. The absence of a penis signifies female, however, a child with XY chromosomes may have a penis too small for the doctor to see. Doctors are concerned that male children are "able to pee standing up and thus to 'feel normal' during little boy peeing contests; adult men, meanwhile, need a penis big enough for vaginal penetration during sexual intercourse" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Even though the primary concern of most doctors is to preserve reproductive function, they are not likely to construct a penis for otherwise male children whose penises are "too small." Fausto-

Sterling shows that "surgeons aren't very good at creating the big strong penis they require men to have" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; 59). Thus, a child born with a penis "less than 1.5 centimeters long and 0.7 centimeters wide results in female gender assignment" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; 60). Fausto-Sterling is able to show that sex is influenced by heteronormative gender expectations; male children must grow up to be men who can vaginally penetrate women, while female children must grow up to be women who can be vaginally penetrated by penises. None of this is prescribed by nature; rather it is the social definition of woman and man.

Fausto-Sterling's work is important because she broke down the sex/gender connection from a natural science perspective and she also gave evidence to blur the boundary between social construction and essentialism, or nature vs. nurture, by showing that even physical bodies – what we take to be nature – are influenced by socially constructed ideas about gender. Feminist scholars had been making arguments about the social construction and performance of gender for at least a decade before Fausto-Sterling's book, the most influential among them probably being Judith Butler. She argues that "sex' is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices" (Butler, 1993; 1). In other words, femininity and masculinity are models to which people are compelled to attempt to achieve by regulating social forces. By repeating acts associated with one sex or the other people give materiality to gender and thereby perform their gender in accordance with their sex. Furthermore, she argues that declaring the sex of a body compels the gendering of that body, and acting in appropriately gendered ways gives that body subjectivity.

‘To the extent that the naming of the ‘girl’ is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain ‘girling’ is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully appropriates the norm. This is a ‘girl,’ however, who is compelled to ‘cite’ the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is not the product of choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no ‘one’ who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a ‘one,’ to become a viable as a ‘one,’ where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms” (Butler, 1993; 232).

Butler and West and Zimmerman differ in their approaches in several ways that are instructive for thinking about actual people “doing queer gender.” Butler was writing her initial work on gender performativity at the emergence of queer theory. She was concerned not only with how gender is “done,” but also how gender can be “undone.” Her motives are political and she is interested in queering gender, for this reason I will revisit her work in this project. West and Zimmerman wrote “Doing Gender” before queer theory discursively came into existence. They were writing from the perspective of symbolic interaction, focusing on the ways that people act towards and interact with each other. West and Zimmerman also use the idea of person categories and introduce a notion of an “if-can” test to explain how people put others into categories and hold them accountable for the traits associated with members of that category. They write “the application of membership categories relies on an ‘if-can’ test in everyday interaction. This test stipulates that if people can be seen as members of relevant categories, then categorize them that way” (West and Zimmerman, 1987; 133). In so much as the relevant gender categories are masculine and feminine since they reinforce heteronormativity, and

“queer” is less an identity category than a critique of identity categories, people who identify with queering gender identity will be seen and held accountable as either males or females with prescribed heterogender expectations in many mundane social interactions, such as dealings with strangers in shopping centers. For an individual who identifies with queering gender, being categorized as male or female means being treated as and held accountable for performing masculinity or femininity, even though the individual would not categorize themselves as fitting into either heterogender category.

Gender performance is primarily based on heteronormative notions of masculinity and femininity and any other sort of gender performance is likely to be subject to social pressure to conform. Examples of coercion to adopt and perform heteronormative gender can be found in rude comments to homosexual and androgynous appearing people, questioning or calling security for androgynous looking people in gender segregated public bathrooms, and extreme hate crimes such as the murders of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepherd.

Taking these understandings of sex, gender and identity together as they build on each other, individuals present their identities to others bodily, through appearance and performance. Gender identity then is made socially meaningful by its repeated performance by individuals both in their appearance and their interactions with other. Furthermore, individuals are coerced to “do” gender recognizably as either male or female. Missing from this theoretical view of gender performance is a discussion of what kinds of tools individuals use to produce a gendered appearance.

Queer(ing) Gender

Whether or not a person identifies themselves as either male or female, other social actors will assign them to one category or the other to maintain a sense of reality in which heteronormativity is an organizing social principle. As Marylin Frye argues in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, most every object and institution is sex marked. This sex marking of everything from bathrooms to deodorant serves to reinforce the binary gender system and make alternatives inarticulable.

Michel Foucault argues that “we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one, but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault, 1978; 100). Power is found in discourse, in the normal, the abnormal, in the spaces that are not given names.

Butler’s example of drag and Gauthier and Chaudoir’s Internet ethnography of FTM support communities show that people can and do learn to perform gender opposite to that of the sex category to which they were assigned. These examples show that individuals are aware of how to properly and improperly do gender appropriate to both sex categories. Doing queer gender, then, means acting and appearing in such a way that is not appropriate to either heteronormative sex category. If social subjectivity is contingent on performing expected heterogender identity for male and female bodies, it would seem as if people who do not identify themselves as heterogendered may not have credibility as social actors. Others would likely categorize them as male or female and hold them accountable for heterogender expectations to which they may or may not have interest in conforming.

Self Fashioning and Consumer Goods

Presenting a person is first done through symbolically meaningful outward expressions (Cahill, 1998). More simply stated, appearance and movement are the primary indicators used by others to place a person in a category. Movement, such as manner of walking or sitting is done by the individual, but appearance in Western capitalist countries, with few likely exceptions, must be purchased. The tools for making up appearance, clothes, hair, skin, etc. are consumer products that are symbolically objectively meaningful when read on bodies. It is the stylizing of appearance, done through the use of consumer goods, that gives materiality to gender. A person is successful in performing gender through the use of appropriate consumer goods.

Herbert Blumer, wrote in *The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism*, “symbolic interaction . . . sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people. The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing” (Blumer, 1969; 4). People come to associate meanings with objects based on how they see others act towards those objects. Furthermore, as Blumer borrowed from his teacher George Herbert Mead, “the parties to such interaction must necessarily take each other’s roles” (Blumer, 1969; 9). In other words, people understand objects as having meaning based on the way they see the objects being used and interpreted by others. Individuals not only understand the object as having meaning, but they anticipate the meaning that others will associate with the object. These meaning laden objects are integral for the formation and display of identity. They are not mere artifacts created from thin air; however, almost without exception, at least in post-modern capitalist American society, they are consumer goods.

I do not mean to ignore the importance of elements of appearance such as skin color, age, or ability, but consumer goods go over all these bodies and create different types of persons that are intelligible to others. For this reason, as well as a few others which I will explain, I wish to borrow the phrase “self-fashioning” from Tasmin Wilton rather than using the more traditional “project of self” or “identity formation” to describe the process individuals go through in order to present themselves. This concept, as she uses it, highlights how presentation of self is something that is not only done through interaction but is also done in a specific cultural time and place with specific resources in a given semiotic landscape (Wilton, 2004). Not only do the resources have meanings but they are primarily consumer goods, and as consumer goods they have symbolic value more than the cost of labor and material. The resources themselves have meanings and they are not necessarily what the individual would want. This idea of “self-fashioning” conjures an idea of identity that is similar to seasonal fashion spreads in magazines. Gender identity is changing as rapidly as consumer goods change because those consumer goods are the available materials for fashioning a gendered self.

Literature on consumer culture and marketing has argued that goods are marketed along gender lines for specific types of people (Simpson, 1994, Barthel, 1988, Clark, 1993). Understood together with Butler and West and Zimmerman’s work on gender, the gender differentiation of consumer goods means that consumers who use goods to perform gender in ways that refer to established heteronormative categories will gain social status as competent social subjects. Butler further argues that, “the materialization of a given sex will centrally concern the *regulation of identificatory practices* such that the identification with the abjection of sex will be persistently disavowed” (Butler, 1993;

237). Not only is it important to have and display the consumer goods associated with the gender an individual is performing, but it is also important to distance oneself from consumer goods associated with the other gender.

Gender and Consumer Culture Literature

Although theoretical work on gender focuses on the ways in which gender is performed and displayed, there is little work that examines the consumer end of gender presentation. Consumers and consumer culture meet through ads and shopping: both advertising and retail offer opportunities to construct the relationship of gender to commodities. The literature on advertising and gender is important because, even though consumers may not be swayed by advertising, the meanings that ads attempt to attach to products are still available as referents. Among the early and highly influential works of this sort are Erving Goffman's (1979) examination of gender in advertising in *Gender Advertisements* and Betty Friedan's (1963) work in *The Feminine Mystique* on the influence of marketing in creating the ideal consuming woman.

Goffman argues that marketers use gender in advertisements to make the messages meaningful to viewers. Advertisers use highly stereotypical depictions of gender in order to make the messages that they are trying to get across about goods meaningful to a broad audience. This strategy implies that the meanings marketers attempt to attach to goods are also likely to be highly stereotypical in order to be broadly recognizable. In so much as this is the case, goods such as clothing, are not likely to stray far from fairly normative, broadly recognized understandings of femininity and masculinity.

Betty Friedan analyzed documents written by and for marketers of household cleaning products and conducted interviews with those marketers. She writes, “In his own unabashed terms, this most helpful of the hidden persuaders showed the function served by keeping American women housewives – the reservoir that their lack of identity, lack of purpose, creates, to be manipulated into dollars at the point of purchase” (Friedan, 1963; 27). Marketers sought to find and sell goods to women’s insecurities, guilt, and unhappiness. Admen (and they really were men at the time) encouraged one another to persuade women to develop a pattern of “happiness through things,” and an understanding that “the only way a young housewife was supposed to express herself, and not feel guilty about it, was in buying products for the home and family” (Friedan, 1963; 38). The underlying idea in Friedan’s analysis of “hidden persuaders” is that marketers wanted women to lack identity, satisfying creative outlets, confidence, and overall happiness so that consumer goods could be used to attempt to satisfy those lacks. Identity and personhood was meant to be tied to things a woman possessed, the ways she used them, and the reasons she bought them. Ads were used to tie gender and personhood to products.

Goffman and Friedan showed that gender was one of the primary themes along which marketers advertised products. While these works are over 30 years old the themes they identified are still present in social science work on gender and consumer culture. In his book *Provocateur*, Anthony Cortese built on Goffman’s work. He argues; “Ads try to tell us who we are and who we should be” (Cortese, 2004; 13). Cortese points out two important functions of gender in advertisements. “First, ads try to tell us that there is a big difference between appropriate behavior for men or boys and that for women or girls.

Second, advertising and other mass media reinforce the notion that men are dominant and that women are passive and subordinate” (Cortese, 2004; 13-14). William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally also build on Goffman to show that ads rely on exaggerated displays of gender to ensure that their messages will be recognizable (Leiss, Kline, Jhally 1997). They further argue that ads promise visions of well-being and self improvement (Leiss, Kline, Jhally 1997). Not only do ads display gender differences, they exaggerate and emphasize those differences.

Advertisements play an important role in gendering goods, creating markets for goods along gender lines, and providing the recognizable symbolic meaning for individuals to use goods to present themselves as gendered. Trevor Millum, writing about advertising in women’s magazines, provides a top-down approach to thinking about the powerful relationship between advertisements, identity, and presentation. He identified advertising as means of social control, and argues that “institutions of social control guide the life of an individual by creating a new of idea of him [sic]- and encouraging him [sic] to conform as far as possible to that concept” (Millum, 1975; 22). Perhaps Millum’s research would be more powerfully applied to current consumer culture when read in the framework of Baudrillard’s work on the hyperreality of postmodernity. In *Simulation and Simulacra*, Baudrillard argues, “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 1988; 1). In other words, the models of femininity and masculinity in magazine ads, such as those Millum studied, do not represent real men or women. The images in the ads are simulations of gender. They represent the most highly feminized or masculinized ideas. Rather than depicting “real”

men and women, ads depict “hyperreal” men and women; more masculine or feminine than any walking, talking, everyday person. They display distilled images of gender within which people can simultaneously see themselves and see themselves falling short. The ad gives its viewer the opportunity to identify with the image and see that they fall short of the hyperreal of the image while offering them a product to help them come close to achieving the unattainable image of gender.

Advertisers hope that ads lead to the purchase of goods, but goods are purchased by embodied people in social spaces that are organized for the selling of products. These retail spaces have the potential to influence the social construction of gender by patrons, but compared to the literature on advertising, there is much less literature on how stores themselves mobilize gender in the quest to maximize profit. Stores are organized in the best ways marketers can devise to get consumers to part with their money, placing whole outfits or matching accessories close to each other so shoppers will be more likely to buy the whole set (Leach, 1993). In his book, *Land of Desire*, William Leach discusses the process by which department stores began organizing goods and laying out stores in order to get people to buy more goods. He explains that the introduction of escalators and elevators allowed merchandiser to put reliably high selling goods on second and third floors so that customers would need to walk deep into the store, past items they may purchase impulsively, to find the items they needed (Leach, 1993). He also explains that between 1921 and 1923 department stores started putting kindred goods together in adjacent departments. He writes, partly quoting a newspaper from 1921; “Women might visit the handbag and hosiery departments, which adjoined the women’s shoe section, ‘so that matching these items with the purchase of shoes is at once convenient and tempting’”

(Leach, 1993; 318). The idea was to put goods that are used together adjacent to each other in stores which has translated into stores that are highly gender divided, with goods women wear all grouped together in one area, goods men wear all grouped together in another, with boy's and girl's clothes similarly sectioned off. The consumer marketplace became more of a gendering social force as ready made clothes became the norm and marketing grew increasingly savvy.

In his essay "Spaces for the Subject of Consumption," Rob Shields argues; "In contemporary consumption sites, it is hypothesized that new modes of subjectivity (at least at the level of the person), interpersonal relationships (at the level of the small group) and models of social totality are being experimented with, 'browsed through' and 'tried on' in much the same way that one might shop for clothes" (Shields, 1992; 15). He is indicating the ways consumers can experiment with putting on different personas and claiming membership in different subgroups or "tribes." Even while consumer space does provide for many possibilities, that potential is limited by the items available for purchase and the symbolic meanings those items bear in the social world. While there may be "skateboard" or "goth" clothes, there are no "genderqueer" clothes; rather, there are "guys' goth" clothes and "girls' goth" clothes.

Literature on gender, advertisements, and retail is useful for understanding how goods become embedded with gendered meaning and how social actors may understand the use of consumer goods, however, this literature does little to address the embodied people who are using these goods to present a gendered self. This literature exposes the problem genderqueer identifying people may have with consumer goods. If products are

laden with stereotypes of traditional heterogender, using these goods may be difficult for those who reject gender as a personally meaningful distinguisher.

There is little if any existing work that addresses the gender separation of the physical space in which consumer goods are purchased, the interactions and understandings that maintain that separation, and the experiences of people who chose not to limit their gender presentation to items found on only one side of the divide. The organization of the store into men's and women's sections reinforces the idea that gender is binary, and the threat of hassle, or interpersonal accountability for being in the "wrong" section shows that binary gender is reinforced and reproduced in the process of buying goods with which to present a gendered self. The gendered division of the physical space allows for people to be only masculine or feminine, and the threat of hassle or coercion reinforces the idea that people are always only one or the other. This gap in the literature is especially troubling because it goes from advertising gender to performing gender with little acknowledgment of the consumption process. Social science research seems to have failed to understand social actors primarily as consumers of socially meaningful goods that are worn on bodies even while examining the meanings of goods and the performance of gender. Similar to television characters who never use the bathroom social actors seem to perform gender without ever inhabiting, negotiating, and enacting gender in sex-marked consumer spaces.

Maintaining a connection between consumer goods, physical space of shopping, and gender performance reinforces the importance of American social actors identity as consumer and provides at least an inroad for connecting the global consequences of American consumption with everyday interactions. There is far more work to be done in

this area than can possibly be accomplished in one paper; however, the current research seeks to examine the ways in which genderqueer consumers negotiate an identity that is not understood as a possibility for identity in many interactions with gendered consumer goods that must be purchased in gendered spaces.

Chapter 3

Methods

Queer(ing) Social Science Research

Dorothy Smith argues for a sociology in which those who were the objects of study and social knowledge become “its subjects, its knowers” (Smith, 1999; 59). For me this means that I am not simply studying a group of people, rather I am working with individuals who claim membership to a group and we are attempting together to articulate how those people came to be in that group, and how they understand, navigate, and assign meaning to the environment that they confront in their lived experience. The conditions I wish to study have real consequences for real people; rather than writing in an abstract way that seemingly takes itself to be value free I must acknowledge that I am taking a moral side.

I could get around some of the problems of social science research described by Smith by theorizing myself, in other words, by writing an autoethnography in which I not only acknowledge that I can only know from my own perspective but I also write only from my perspective. If I were to do this I would not be able show how others understand and use the concept genderqueer. Even though my attempt to give text to the experiences of others is exactly the act that Smith argues takes power away from them, without such work this group would be even more powerless as their struggles would not even be considered. In this way I can both try to show the problems this group faces and push for

solutions. Though I do include some autoethnographic material to both situate myself in and show my connection to my research, I want to be able to show that there are a number of people struggling and coming up with creative solutions to the problems of negotiating consumer goods and binary gender assumptions. Even though I am not writing an autoethnography, my work, like any research, should be understood as one analysis and one set of writing from the particular perspective of one situated knower. Many examinations of knowledge point out that all knowledge is produced by socially located people. To borrow from Donna Haraway, the goal of academic work should be situated knowledges, or information known by different people based on their specific social and temporal location. My work then is reflective of my situated knowledge.

Dorothy Smith's critique of social science literature is from a feminist perspective; in addition to the feminist ethical problems that Smith pointed out there are also components of social science research models that are odds with queer theory. In 2005, Stephen Valocchi called for the use of Queer Theory in social science research. He argues that the dominant identity categories used in sociology, especially as they relate to sex, gender, sex category, and sexuality do not do enough to capture the complexities of identity and desire in people's lives (Valocchi, 2005). He points out four projects in which sociologists were able to successfully embrace queer theory in their work, but were not able to fully get out of the limitations placed on them by the social science research model (Valocchi, 2005).

There is one particular element of social science research that is particularly difficult to balance with Queer Theory: identifying a population. The very idea of identifying a population to study implies that a group of people will be identified based

on something they all have in common, setting up a dichotomy between that group and everyone not included in that group. Queer theory works to break down dichotomies, blur boundaries, and illuminate the role of language in stabilizing and reproducing normative social structures. It highlights the play and contradiction of power and the intersection of identities. Most importantly, it defies definition, collapses categorization, and simultaneously speaks to similarity and difference while problematizing the two concepts as yet another dualism to be deconstructed. Even in the simple act of calling a group into being by naming them along the lines of some characteristic, the researcher has reified them as a group with an identity to be studied. The big problem for Queer research is that research cannot be done without decisions about who to include and who to exclude.

The idea that a group of people form a population to be studied does not sit well with my feminist beliefs about the potential for researchers to claim power over the people with whom they are studying. By naming the people involved in the research the researcher claims power and takes it away from the people being named. Feminist sociologists have found ways around some of these problems of power, such as referring to the people involved as narrators or co-researchers and using their words to describe group members. Still the researcher or in some cases, student of social life, has still made the initial decision of who is included in the group.

Genderqueer is a boundary blurring, deconstruction project; for this reason, I cannot find people who share a set of common practices as is the social science model for work on subcultural groups. Like many identity labels, I cannot presume to know exactly what the word means to everyone who adopts it, but since genderqueer is more of a conceptual critique of gender labels than a label itself, I also cannot presume that people

identify as genderqueer and present their gender ambiguously. I could not go out and pick the genderqueer folks off the street because I do not presume to know what this identification means to people and how or if they choose to display it. Coming up with a solution for the problem of a population was extremely challenging, and in the end was the result of a suggestion of one of my advisors. Rather than identifying individuals who identify with queering gender, I found a community that had already identified themselves as genderqueer. This community is an on-line blogging community. Since this community is on-line, I cannot talk about what people do, only about what they say they do. This project is not an analysis of these people so much as an analysis of how they actively construct, or talk about, themselves on-line. Taking this on-line community as my sample allows me to remain more or less true to the queer theory framework and still find people to work with.

Accessing Genderqueer Folk On-Line

Judith/Jack Halberstam presents components of the dilemma of doing queer research in *Female Masculinity*. She argues that “A queer methodology, in a way, is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior” (Halberstam, 1998; 13). My approach is a sort of methodological chimera, using the Internet to put together something between interviews and a focus group and sometimes including myself as a participant and sometimes as an autoethnographer.

To start, I needed to find a place where people had already declared their identification with genderqueer. Many organizations centered around non-heterosexuality at least discursively include “queer” as a population to serve, but the everyday use of the

word queer often does not refer to gender. In order to find a group of people who self-identified with genderqueer at least conceptually, I turned to the Internet community that had in large part inspired this research project. While Internet research is on the rise it is still not well developed in the social sciences, but the Internet provided me with a way to find informants without relying on my perceptions and connections. The community is called “genderqueer” and the community managers describe it as follows; *“This community is for those of us who don't feel we fit the binary gender system in use by most of society. Ungendered, many gendered, a gender other than the one society thinks you should be? Do you express your gender(s) in nontraditional ways? You just might fit in here!”* Currently the community has 1900 members, who are allowed to post and respond to other posts and 1400 “watchers,” who can read posts but cannot make posts and responses themselves.

In setting up my research I had two technical problems to overcome. First, I would be working with people all over the country, so face-to-face interactions were not an option, and second, I needed to make sure everyone involved went through the informed consent process. I set up my own blogging community where I could control who was able to view the discussion and invited members of the “genderqueer” community to join and to give their informed consent if they wished to participate. The result was similar to a focus group, or more appropriately, a “virtual focus group.” Nine people joined the discussion group from the beginning, and 2 more joined in response to a later, second invitation. Every week for 8 weeks I posted discussion questions to which the community responded. Members were able to respond both to my questions and each other’s responses, an option they used only occasionally.

I posted a description of my research project and asked people to join a new blogging community that I set up for the expressed purpose of research. In the process I explained my goals in doing this particular project and why I felt it necessary to find people in that particular Internet community to participate. Anyone who was a member of that community and over 18 was encouraged to participate; unfortunately several community members who were under 18 had to be turned away due to IRB restrictions. I regret that this research could not include younger members because it would have added to the diversity of the group. Sunday evenings for 8 weeks I posted discussion questions for the group. Participation the first two weeks was considerably higher than later in the study. For the first two weeks many members made multiple posts and all the members participated. As the study progressed some members did not respond to every question and few left comments on other members' responses.

Throughout the 8 weeks I occasionally posted questions or comments to group members' responses, but I did not find that these comments elicited much response. At times I took myself as a participant and at times stepped back in the more traditional position of researcher as observer and I include sections of autoethnography along with my analysis. There were several weeks where I provided one of the answers to my own discussion question because I wanted to democratize the research process and because it seemed appropriate to give group members information about myself if I expected them to give the same information to me. My responses to the discussion questions are not included in my findings. In writing my findings I gave group members new pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Chapter 4

Findings

Group members were asked to respond to questions asking about how they understand gender, how they came to question gender, what they wear when they are comfortable or uncomfortable with their environment, where they shop, and how they deal with overtly gendered consumer goods. The first few weeks focused on gender identity, two weeks in the middle focused on intersections of identity and on-line communities, and the last few weeks focused on shopping and consumer goods, specifically clothes and body products. Some questions provoked a good deal of agreement, while others resulted in a variety of divergent responses. Since these responses were provided on-line they should be understood as self-reports of practices and attitudes with no way to make sure the reports are accurate. Even if the responses deviate in certain ways from practices, they still shed light on how individuals describe their genderqueer identification and use of gendered consumer goods. Group members had ample time to formulate responses; there is no way to know how much time individual members spent preparing responses, but many are quite sophisticated in their content, though spelling and punctuation suffered in the ways common to Internet communication.

I did not ask questions about group members' biological sex as that would have gone against my queer framework, but most offered the information in some form or

another. Most were female-bodied and that played into how they understood and wrote about needing to use things like tampons and razors or modifying their bodies. There was one group member who is an MTF transsexual and one group member started their first post by declaring that they possess XY chromosomes.

There was remarkable consistency in the ways group members wrote about coming to question gender expectations. This question was important because it both gave me a sense of who the group members were and allowed me to see if in fact the only way to arrive at queer(ing) gender is by reading Queer Theory as I had. Many reported not ever fully understanding themselves as boys or girls or conforming to norms for people of their sex category but most did not give their non-conformity great consideration until later in life. They described moments or occasions when they realized that binary gender was not the only option. Lending support to Ian Hacking's argument about possibilities for personhood, members of this group seemed to find that there are possibilities for personhood beyond binary gender, even if they are difficult to explain. They exercised their autonomy in constructing their own personal response to the heterogender binary, even if there was no social or authoritative affirmation of this choice to mark it as within the realm of possibility.

ColorfulMissive:

*"I never quite conformed to standard gender roles. I remember being very pleased when, at the age of 5, my cousin (of around the same age) thought that I was a boy. (I'm biofemale.) But for a very long time the fact that I was different seemed irrelevant. I've always been a little reclusive and just all around odd, so being not gender normative was just one more eccentricity among many. It took me until I was around twenty to realize that gender *was* relevant."*

HardCandy:

"All through out middle school i though "hey all the other guys are doing this and that", being bio female. I never though anything of it until my teacher and everyone in the room

cornered me saying. "why do you dress and act like a little boy?". "Because i can." was the response but they gave me a bunch of sermens(sp?)about how it was suppose to be. And i guess it scared me back into a "femmine" role, cause i never thought about it being a problem."

SurpiseChicken:

"all i knew was that i wasn't a boy, but the girl thing wasn't working either. i didn't really think about it till high school, when i started learning that there were other people like me, who also didn't quite fit gender norms... until then, i was just a tomboy, and that was generally ok with me."

Those who did give consideration to their gender non-conformity expressed feeling as though something was off but they did not have the words or resources to understand what until they were adults.

One respondent described a particular childhood instance of trying to understand what it meant to act like a girl:

Superhero_Hampster

"Well one day I took out every peice of pink, girly clothing I had and put it on, telling myself that it was my favorite color and that I was going to pretend I was a fairy princess and I was going to giggle and do girl things.. and then maybe I'd understand what it was like to be a girl because at the time I just wasn't getting it. . . I know now I was questioning gender and more specifically questioning how other people were able to be 'girls'. . . But at the time I didn't have the words I needed to describe that curiosity or to express it, so it became an impossible challange that plagued me many times over the years. It took until I was Twenty-one to get everything I needed to really put the peices together, which was the longest wait of my life thus far."

There was a general theme of locating gender someplace other than on or in bodies or disregarding it as an unnecessary part of identity. At some point every respondent voiced some kind of frustration about expectations made of them based on their appearance.

ColorfulMissive

". . . society was going to assign me a gender (based on my physical appearance) whether I wanted it or not."

SurpiseChicken

*“the way i think about my gender is not at all influenced by my appearance. my appearance is my sex. **my gender has nothing to do with my body.** it's my mind.”*

MyDiary

“It is just simpler to let people think that I am what they see. So I suck it up and just let everybody assume that the appearance they see is the way that I identify. This is what makes it tempting to want to transition. Yet, I know deep inside that I would be no happier living as a man!”

HardCandy

“I've never been one to pay too much attention to my appearance, so for me my gender's always been an internal thing, based more on how I feel than anything else.”

DebraDay

“Do I have gender, sitting alone and still, naked in a dark room? I have identity, but I don't think it's anything firm and definite enough to call gender, the way most people use that term.”

Some respondents connected the frustration they felt to being accountable as either hetero-male or hetero-female since their biology did not parallel their genderqueer identity. Some respondents claimed “genderqueer” as an identity they inhabit, a finding that shows that some of them have not been exposed to academic Queer Theory although they have been influence by it, while others took an approach that was more queer theoretical and saw gender as something other people care about and apply to them despite their wishes. No matter which perspective respondents took they consistently expressed a frustration with understanding their gender in a way that was not identifiable to others since most others saw them only as instances of male or female sex category and held them accountable for masculine or feminine heterogender accordingly.

Some expressed a temporal fluidity with their feelings of gender, allowing these feelings to shift quite frequently throughout the week, even throughout a day: they may *feel* “male” at one moment and “female” the next. A gender image that might feel

comfortable in the morning might no longer feel comfortable as the day progresses and their social context shifts. Some expressed feeling more confident when their appearance more closely matched the way they felt gender at the time, while others felt that even if they could present themselves in a way that matched their gender others would not recognize their gender identity anyway. It may be that those who described their experience of themselves as shifting between male and female were using sex as a proxy for gender or it maybe that they did not have other language available to them, but the use of these words indicate that they are very much driven by the heterogender system even as they try to work against it.

SurpriseChicken

*“the fact that my gender identity will not be recognized by mainstream society during my lifetime does not affect my gender. i will never appear to a stranger to be what i really am, and i cannot let that hurt me. i will not appear to anyone to be genderqueer. that is just something i have to come to terms with. **i am not an androgynous looking person. that does not invalidate the fact that i feel genderqueer.**”*

Superhero_Hampster

“How do you use clothes to project a gender the rest of society won't even try to recognize?”

trhop

I find that I feel more confident, more like myself, when I dress in more "male" clothes.

Moraldiy

“I personally prefer male clothing, and i find that it helps me feel confident in my identity but does not change my feelings”

RockingSpring

“My appearance isn't relevant as much to how I think about my gender, as how I feel about my gender. I almost always feel better about myself the more my appearance matches however my gender is feeling that day. When, for whatever reason, I can't express the gender I want through my appearance, I tend to just end up a more frustrated person.”

Stone (1962) and Berger and Luckmann (1967) would have predicted that when confronted with dissonance, group members would revise their identity, their appearance, or their interpretations of interactions with others. In many instances group members voiced degrees of ambivalence about their identity and the way others treat them. They sometimes described wanting others to treat them as they understood themselves and sometimes dismissed appearance altogether to affirm that identity does not reside on their bodies. This ambivalence came out in responses to questions about how they understand gender and how relevant gender is to their appearance.

Questions about clothes and body products revealed several strategies and attitudes for dealing with the potential for tension between appearance, consumer goods, and genderqueer identification. It may be significant that descriptions of comfortable clothing and strategies for appearing gendered in particular ways were offered even when my questions were specifically about gender identity and not about clothes at all. Respondents often wrote about both clothing *and* identity even when my questions were about one or the other. Clothing and appearance seem to be intricately related to identity even when respondents do not locate identity on or in bodies. Furthermore, many respondents also reported dressing in ways that they understand to be relatively gender neutral (even as one member acknowledge that gender neutral mostly meant defaulting to masculine dress), wearing things like jeans and t-shirts or big sweatshirts as opposed to skirts or clothes that display sexualized body parts. There were also some who explained that they feel more confident and comfortable in clothes gendered to match the sex category to which they do not belong and they use clothes to cover curves and hide breasts.

trhop

*“At the moment, my favorite outfit is: Gap Men's Straight Leg jeans that hide my hips
VERY well, Abercrombie and Fitch sweater, Gap t-shirt.*

Although I love suit jackets/collared shirts/ties as well.

But I do dress more androgynously, i.e., more femininely, when I fear for my safety”

SurpriseChicken

“i can't dress femme. my gender switches from one end of the spectrum to the other, and while when i'm a girl i feel comfortable in jeans still, i do not feel comfortable when i'm a dude stuck in a skirt. working on maybe fixing that... doing what i can.

so yeah. i mostly wear masculine clothes. guy jeans, maybe a girl shirt, but pretty much i'm always in jeans and a tshirt. acceptable attire for either sex...”

DebraDay

“If I'm going someplace I feel safe, I kind of pick a theme; otherwise I prefer to totally cover up: long sleeves, jacket if it's cool enough, hat, and so on. I admit to being somewhat baffled by the way people react to me.”

At least one person did not seem to take meanings embedded in clothing too seriously.

Wanting_for_Nothing

“If I am getting dressed up in a dress or something tight for a show, it makes me feel vulnerable when I am walking around the street at night, it makes me feel like I am more of a target. I like to walk around with a hood on and jeans. If I am hanging out with my close friends, I will wear the most ridiculous shit I can find, revealing, atrocious, embarrassing, useless, it doesn't matter.”

The people in my group could be characterized as possessing one of several attitudes toward appearance, interaction, and identity. Some were frustrated that others would not understand their identity from their appearance and looked for other kinds of support. Others derived confidence from appearing in ways that matched expectations for the gender they most felt at the moment, which for some was fairly consistent and for others may change throughout the course of a single day. Still others seemed to step back from gender altogether, recognize that it is significant for most of society but not for them

personally and try to do what makes them comfortable, understanding that things like clothes and razors are embedded with gendered meanings that they cannot escape.

The activity of shopping presented more or less of a challenge for people with different attitudes, but no one expressed a real enthusiasm for fashion or a passion for shopping. Some respondents had devised shopping strategies to avoid confrontational interactions with sales associates or other shoppers while others described feeling detached and/or alienated from the activity of shopping and the wardrobe it produced. Others seemed less concerned with gendering of the clothes or the space the clothes came from they just wanted to find clothes that are comfortable and inexpensive and worried less about the gendered meaning of the items they purchased.

One strategy members reported using while shopping for clothes is finding stores that have both men's and women's sections that can be easily crossed.

SurpriseChicken

"i shop where the mens and womens departments tend to be close or kinda blended together (thrift stores or goodwill for example) or places where people don't really care or give you crap for being in the 'wrong' place, like walmart or sears."

HardCandy

"For the most part the places that I frequent sell both girls and guys clothes so I can easily try either on. I'm actually very lucky because in my local H&M and a couple of the other places where I shop most often they have never made an issue of my trying on guys clothes even if I go in there when I'm having a feminine day so I'm in a skirt, or whatever."

Another member described shopping with female relatives who seemed to be more engaged in the process. Rather than looking for fashionable clothes, this particular person looked for clothes that would be comfortable and not fall apart, a theme that was repeated by several community members.

Superhero_Hampster

“I shop wherever it is I get dragged to, sometimes JCPenny but I'm not above digging through secondhand clothes for something that fits. . .There aren't many places I do like to shop for clothes, I just like places that don't cater to the assumption that everyone who shops there is ultra femme(and those are hard to find).”

Not everyone was concerned with being held accountable for being out of place in men's or women's sections of stores. Two community members reported simply buying what they like or what was inexpensive and worrying less about the gender it was intended to reflect. Shopping on-line was another strategy that a community member reported using.

Consumer goods other than clothes seemed to provoke similar strategies from respondents, but not always the same strategies from the same people. The community was asked how they deal with “tension between your identity and the available consumer goods such as clothes, make-up, and accessories that are often clearly gendered.”

Wanting_for_Nothing

“I just deal with it. The color of a razor doesn't faze me, I'll grab whatever is there, as long as it's cheap, I think it is funny that the razors are colored "accordingly" but it doesn't bother me.”

RockingSpring

“I tend to just buy what I like, without as much paying attention to what gender it is intended for. Unless I'm looking for a particular gender presentation, then I pay more attention.”

HardCandy

“I honestly don't find that there is that much tension between my identity and everything else. I couldn't tell you why, I don't do anything to minimize it, it just doesn't seem to be an issue. It may be because I don't actively think one way or the other, I just do things my way without thinking about, or making an issue of it either way.”

SuperHero_Hampster

“With the necessities, pads and things, I grit my teeth and go for it. My bodily functions need to be taken care of after all, no shame in that. But deoderant? I have two. . . With things like razors, I'll usually buy the 'male' one. This last time I got pink because my sisters BF lives with us and uses the same brand I do, so I got the pink one because it would be harder to get them confused. I'll normally pick out the 'gendered' item that is darker colored, because I just like those colors better.”

These informants seem to have been making decisions about which products to use based on criteria other than the gendering of the product. Products that cannot be understood as anything but intended for females such as “pads and things” seemed to present more of a problem. They are conscious of the sex marking of the products, but most did not express difficulty or tension when using products intended for either gender; only one community member expressed experiencing significant difficulty with overtly gendered products for the body.

SurpriseChicken

*“once i tried to get a male razor. even the disposable ones are gendered. the 'female' ones were pink and the 'male' ones were blue. no nongendered yellow ones... but i didn't want my family freaking out on me... and i don't really wanna get rid of my peach fuzz with a pink razor. *shrug* so i didn't. i just don't buy things. . . either i grit my teeth and wanna cry and just get it done with (deodorant, pads/tampons, shampoo, goddamn bras) or i don't buy it at all (shaving products, hair gel, hats, backpacks, coats and jackets...) or i default over to the male crap.”*

The members of my research community described several ways people live with an identity that is not available to be occupied in most social situations. Not surprisingly, they described moments of tension, discomfort, and frustration around not being treated as non-gendered, but they recognized that most of society understands sex and gender as connected. Putting together a “program of appearance,” to use Stone’s term, was important across the board, but the degree to which community members felt challenged by the reviews of others varied. They acknowledged that they had to use consumer goods and those consumer goods are gendered and sold in gendered spaces, but this knowledge did not have the same impact on their reports of how or where people shopped or what they bought and used. Some community members were conscious of the space and the

gendering of products and did things to avoid confrontation and mismatch between the products and their identities, while others seemed to view the gendering of everything as silly and choose their clothes and body products based on price or comfort flowing between sections of stores and gendering of goods easily. Interestingly, and quite contrary to the expectations of many when I began this project, many of my community members reported learning about “genderqueer” identity from on-line communities and media or social events but none reported coming to identify with queering gender or “genderqueer” by reading Queer Theory and taking college classes. This finding is significant for several reasons. First, it means that some versions of ideas from Queer Theory are making their way out of academia. Second, the slips that many community members made between words referring to gender and words referring to sex suggests that they are not always differentiating between sex and gender, or it also may be that since they did not learn these ideas in a classroom, they do not have the language to talk about them any other way. Third, some of them let sex/gender drive their expression; describing actions they take when they *feel* or want to *feel* “male” or “female.” These findings indicate that some of the group members did not understand queer in the way it is used in Queer Theory, but they were still dealing with very real problems and using some variations of ideas from queer theory.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusions

The remarks from this group of genderqueer identifying people show the importance of the act of shopping and the practical use of consumer goods for shaping and inhabiting gendered bodies. Furthermore, the comments of the group show tension and ambivalence about gender, identity, and appearance, but only some of them described working on “programs of appearance” that would be reviewed to match their identity. Some had given up on the hope that their genderqueer identity might be readable from their appearance and movement. The identities described by my informants did, as queer(ing) gender identity would imply, seem to be in flux or at play. They were aware of the social expectations of consistent, clearly gendered presentation and behavior to match sex category, but they described using that knowledge sometimes to perform gender however they wanted at the moment. For some respondents gender performance was consistently masculine or feminine or what they understood to be androgynous while others described *feeling* a shift from one to another. No one in my virtual focus group claimed that they felt comfortable with either binary gender label.

Even though the group was small, they showed considerable diversity in how they talked about self-fashioning and using consumer goods. This research shows that there are multiple ways of understanding and moving through the world while identifying with queer(ing) gender. The people I worked with described different strategies for dealing

with possible points of tension, but they all seemed to understand that they would not be recognized by others as “genderqueer.” For some group members not being recognized was more of a problem than it seemed to be for others. They understood clothes and body products to have meanings and they used these products to produce appearances that are understood as gendered to others but that knowledge was not equally important to all group members.

Their responses indicated that the space and proximity of men’s and women’s clothes and the social class of store clients are factors in how they decide where to shop. Also, the responses indicate that my informants simultaneously worked with knowledge about the gendered symbolic meaning of goods and an understanding that the differences between the goods were more about form (and the sex category marking of the product) than the function of the product. One respondent mentioned using “men’s” deodorant to get “male” energy, and another reported that they do not consider the gendering of items they typically use “Unless I’m looking for a particular gender presentation, then I pay more attention.” These informants understood goods to be gendered, and would sometimes use them to present gender to others or affirm it for themselves, but also did not seem to take the sex marking of products as the most significant factor in their decision to buy and use a product.

It may be that tension between consumer goods and gender identity was only felt by those who were most influenced by the construction of gender through advertising and the gendering of retail spaces. It may also be that those who did not feel uncomfortable with gendered consumer goods saw the whole production of clothing and body products as gender as a sort of ironic joke that they could play with, presenting themselves as

hetero-masculine using one set of props, hetero-feminine with another set of props, or anything else they could imagine with the right combination of consumer goods. Without further research it would not be possible to tell which, if either of these situations is the case. However, my research does show that this group does understand clothing and body products as both a way to present their identity (even though they had no hope that others would recognize it) and a way to put on or take off identities. They did not describe their experience as quite so fluid as putting on woman and taking off man. They seemed to understand their bodies and recognition of identity by others as important but they did not seem to see identity as fixed or given.

Put in the context of narrative identity genderqueer is tricky to describe. The stories of my group members fall in line with each other only up to the point of discovering other possibilities for identity that do not rely on male/female binary and finding other people with similar perspectives through movies, glbtq activities, or on-line communities. They also generally felt some frustration about genderqueer not being recognizable, but that is where the stories stop lining up. Some group members wrote about considering modifying their bodies and taking on identity projects to reduce the frustration they felt about not being recognized as genderqueer. These particular people understood themselves to be becoming something else. Other group members seemed more or less unconcerned with the perception others have of their identity, unless that perception may put them in physical danger. There seems to be a fairly consistent “formula story” until discovering that there are possibilities for personhood beyond heterogender binary, and after that the stories diverge. It is interesting that a formula story seems to exist that describes the discovery of the repressiveness of the heterogender

binary, but that there is no single formula for how to deal with this discovery in one's life. Perhaps this reflects the presence of elements of Queer Theory in the everyday lives of these individuals: formulaic identities are problematic, that is one lesson learned. This finding indicates that the potential for queer activism that Butler wrote about is present in the everyday lives of social actors.

In her new book *Undoing Gender*, Butler writes:

In the same way that queer theory opposes those who would regulate identities or establish epistemological claims of priority for those who make claims to certain kinds of identities, it seeks not only to expand the community base of antihomophobic activism, but, rather, to insist that sexuality is not easily summarized or unified through categorization. It does not follow, therefore, that queer theory would oppose all gender assignment . (2004; 7).

Queer Theory does not insist on abandoning gender as a concept for everyone, but rather it holds that gender, sex, and sexuality are complex and that identities are not fixed, especially not by biological sex. If one goal of Queer Theory is to expand antihomophobic activism, then these stories of coming to see sex as complex, gender as fluid and constructed, and sexuality as difficult to describe or define show that Queer Theory is in fact making inroads into activism beyond college classrooms. Throughout this whole study I was the only person to narrate myself coming to identify with queer(ing) gender as a result of reading academic work on Queer Theory.

This study shows that Queer Theory is not just an academic phenomenon and queer activism is more than a possibility: it's actually happening. That does not mean that queer(ing) identity is easy, unproblematic, or always effective in deconstructing the heterogender binary. The biggest problem facing my virtual focus group, aside from the homophobia that Queer Theory is meant to tackle, is that they are not recognized as

genderqueer. Queer(ing) gender is a possibility for personhood only in some contexts, such as specific Internet communities like the one I used in my research and with groups of like minded people.

I have argued throughout this thesis that consumer items, specifically clothes and body products are one of the key obstacles that stand in the way of queer(ing) gender identity as a possibility for personhood. The physical landscapes in which goods are purchased and the meanings associated with using those goods are important for the production of gendered bodies. For the people in my discussion group the physical space created by this grouping of goods causes them discomfort and fear of confrontation. The only person to even mention shopping in stores solely for women brought up the issue only to explain how distasteful they find such stores to be. Most informants made reference to shopping in stores that have both departments while they specifically noted looking for stores where they will not be hassled for the items they buy or the section in which they shop.

The people involved in this study show that not everyone completely “buys” into binary heterogender, but the alienation many of them described when confronted by goods like pink razors and women’s deodorant does inhibit some purchases. If queer (not queer(ing) gender identity) gender identity became a recognized segment of the market, marketers would likely revise, revision, and rearrange marketing strategies and some store layouts to reach these alienated consumers. At the same time though, group members discussed trying on men’s clothes but having feminine days and using men’s deodorant to get “male energy” on some days and women’s deodorant other days. This suggests that genderqueer identified people sometimes like to purchase products

associated with a particular gender. Perhaps the most intelligent response from marketing would be market both men's and women's products to the same consumer. People would be encouraged to purchase clothes for "male days" and "female days" and "in-between days." Gender fluid consumers may have multiple wardrobes to reflect their ever changing moods, requiring the purchase of more and more consumer goods. In so much as this may lead to the dissolution of gender categories, it would reflect the goals of queer activism; however it would also lead to even greater divides in access to goods and strengthening of the capitalist market that privileges and rewards some at the cost of oppressing others. A gender revolution reliant on consumer goods may reflect the complex interplay of privileged and oppressed identities at work in and against social actors.

In her 2003 book *The Commercialization of Intimate Life*, Arlie Hochschild made an analogy: "Feminism is to the commercial spirit of intimate life as Protestantism is to the spirit of capitalism" (Hochschild, 2003; 23). She was suggesting that the spirit of women's liberation and personal autonomy got women out of homes and into the work place but that the Marxist critiques of the worth of domestic labor that had been important in feminism were forgotten by the commercial world. The result of reducing feminism to images of women's liberation and personal autonomy was that the capitalist market was able to make moves into the domestic arena. The labor of intimate life has not become egalitarian; it has been commercialized. Rather than men and women sharing responsibility for childcare, food preparation, and housecleaning these tasks are being increasingly hired out to for-profit companies commercializing the domestic sphere.

While feminism has led to measurable advances for women's equality it has also led to measurable increases in the capitalist marketplace.

If queer(ing) identity were taken up by rational capitalism it would likely be mined of the Queer Theory behind it and instead it would become a third gender with clear boundaries. It would no longer be queer(ing) identity; (as I have been careful to write implying process and movement) it would become a queer gender. There may even become a third section of stores located smack in the middle with the men's department on one side and the women's department on the other containing items like binders, pre-filled bras, stick-on facial hair, and wigs. The whole meaning of Queer Theory would be lost as marketers scrambled to put together ads with slogans such as "Think Outside the box. Don't limit yourself to girl's/guy's shirts" or "Gender rules aren't Your Rules" or "Gap Binders, Free To Be Bound." Already companies like The Gap and Old Navy market "boy-cut" and "boyfriend" pants.

There is certainly potential for this kind of marketing to advance some of the goals of antihomophobic activism, but the idea of identity in process and critique will be lost as the message gets simplified to encourage consumers to buy both men's and women's products. Binary heterogender may not be disrupted just adjusted as consumers are encouraged to "buy both" and not encouraged to question why there are only two in the first place. Gender may get dislodged a bit from sex category but the idea that there can be only two genders because there can be only two sexes is not likely to be questioned.

Queer(ing) gender identity has the potential for the kind of antihomophobic activism that Butler wrote about even if practitioners do not read Queer Theory. The

people in my group were living with ambiguity and complexity even though they did not use academic Queer Theory, but they struggled with the knowledge that their identity would not be recognized. Drawing from the arguments that Hacking (1986) and Loseke (forthcoming) make about identity and the problems the people in my group described facing, it would seem that personal, autonomous identity may become more secure as it is recognized by larger institutions, collectives, and authorities. Herein lies quite a dilemma; if “queer” were to be recognized as a possibility for personhood, it would become one of the many possible ways to narrate identity a formula story. Stories that follow the formula for narrating “queer” would be recognized; but from a Queer Theory perspective the story can only have a formula up to a certain point before narrating “queer” begins to limit how queer can be understood and what it can be used to do. Furthermore, as soon as this possibility for identity gets taken up as an identity category by the rational capitalist marketing machine, the possibilities may become even more limited if not devoid of meaning completely.

The opposition in Queer Theory to taking a direct stand for or against any potential ethical issue makes arguing for or against the creation of a new queer subject position by the capitalist marketing machine difficult. Perhaps the best way to move forward in both queering gender and giving viable, recognizable subjectivity to queer identified people is to start to focus specifically on what queering consumption might look like. If there can be any kind of queering gender or sexuality outside of academia and small groups of people either frustrated by or indifferent to others’ treatment of them, then the action of queering gender and/or sexuality will need to be recognizable on a broad social scale. I do not wish to argue by any means that this needs or even ought to

be done by people who claim a queer identity (making their “queerness” suspect in the academic sense), but it does need to be recognizable as disruptive and agentic rather than deviant and problematic. If change is going to be made the problem of accountability for heteronormative sex categories will need to be overcome. Sara Crawley (2002) argues that “we must begin to read (the gender and sexual identities of) others as they choose to be read if we hope to deconstruct rigid, dichotomous notions of gender and sexuality” (Crawley, 2002; 23). Perhaps recognizing people’s choice in constructing a genderqueer identity is a good step toward destabilizing heteronormative binary gender. Furthermore, if queering gender is going to be made recognizable outside of the already established, vastly powerful capitalist machine, work needs to be done before the opportunity to market wardrobes of every imaginable identity to every consumer is exploited by the ever growing consumer marketplace.

This recognition may make living in the world easier for some social actors, but the implications for the goals of Queer Theory are a bit grim. I would argue that the conflict between individuals wanting to be recognized and recognition threatening the possibilities for queer activism is a conflict that ought to be acknowledged and worked from not against. Gayatri Spivak (1989) calls for “strategic essentialism” where identities and categories can be claimed and abandoned based on their political effectiveness in any given situation. Claiming a genderqueer identity does not accomplish all of the goals of Queer Theory, it especially does not deconstruct identity categories, but it does at least blur heterogender boundaries and destabilize the heterogender binary. Further demeaning people whose gender expression is not “queer enough” or queer in the right way because it is not as theoretically informed and linguistically sophisticated as academic writing

would only confirm the critiques of Queer Theory as elitist and hardly seems like a positive step toward ending oppression. I think it is possible that the kind of “pop queer identity” described by some group members may be particularly effective in some contexts with some audiences to accomplish some goals where the more academic constructions of identity may be more helpful in other situations to accomplish slightly different tasks. The potential problems that may arise from this conflict need not lead to a further conflict over which position is the most politically efficacious. I would argue instead that the multiple sides of this conflict ought to be held in tension with each other as academics, queer identified folks, and social activists together work toward showing the complexities of sexuality and identity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Discussion Questions

Discussion Questions

1. What led you to start questioning the way most people use gender?
2. How relevant is your appearance to how you think about your gender?
3. Along the same idea as last week, does anyone have any stories about times when you were treated in ways that you really did or did not like in regard to your gender? Do you think your treatment had anything to do with your appearance? If your treatment was not related to your appearance what do you think it was related to?
4. What do you wear when you feel most comfortable outside your own home? Does this change based on where you are or who you are with?
5. Would you say that social factors such as race or class have impacted how you think about yourself in terms of gender and or sexuality? If so how?
6. Where do you typically shop for clothes? What do you like about the places you shop?
7. Do you feel like being a member of an on-line community about queer(ing) gender has been influential/important/significant for you? Do you find that such communities give you support or make things in the rest of your life easier to deal with? How so?
8. How do you deal with the tension between your identity and the available consumer goods such as clothes, make-up, and accessories that are often clearly gendered?