

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, &
Professional Papers

Graduate School

2016

What Do You Think I Am?: On Perceiving Unintelligibility in the Nonbinary Gender Experience

James Warwood

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd>



Part of the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Warwood, James, "What Do You Think I Am?: On Perceiving Unintelligibility in the Nonbinary Gender Experience" (2016). *Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers*. 10679.
<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/10679>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

WHAT DO YOU THINK I AM?:
ON PERCEIVING UNINTELLIGIBILITY IN THE NONBINARY GENDER
EXPERIENCE

By

JAMES DEAN WARWOOD

Bachelor of Arts in English Literature, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana 2013

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
in English Literature

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2016

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Dr. Casey Charles, Chair
English

Dr. Louise Economides
English

Dr. Elizabeth Hubble
Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

© COPYRIGHT

by

James Dean Warwood

2016

All Rights Reserved

ABSTRACT

Warwood, James, M.A., Spring 2016

English Literature

What Do You Think I Am?: On Perceiving Unintelligibility in the Nonbinary Gender Experience

Chairperson: Dr. Casey Charles

What does it mean to be “retired from gender,” and what role does such an identity play in daily life? Engaging with the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Judith Butler, this project attempts to elucidate the experience of nonbinary – that is, external to the male/female gender binary – gendered individuals, and the ultimate unintelligibility of that experience. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to perception allows for an exploration of the social norms and regulations that determine how gender is defined in Western culture; combined with Butler’s significant work on gender and its performativity, phenomenology proves a useful tool for revealing the constructedness of gender. Although an arbitrary system, the gender binary serves as a mechanism of so-called social truth: because the nonbinary reality rejects this truth the nonbinary gender performance not only appears unintelligible to the binary other but also represents a threat to social stability. This paper uses the memoirs in *Gender Failure* – written by two self-identified nonbinary individuals – to consider how social norms inform binary perception and how that perception constitutes the nonbinary self. Perceived from within the binary matrix, the nonbinary self appears unintelligible: as a result, the validity of their gendered reality is threatened. Conscious of the conceptual gap between nonbinary and binary individuals, this project explores gender as the subject of the perceptive act and not only outlines the delegitimization of the nonbinary reality but also suggests opportunities to make space for non-normative gendered experiences.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One, How Do You Tell the Truth?: Constructing a Nonbinary Self In A Binary World	14
Chapter Two, The Razor Edge of Accommodation: Violet Perception and the Nonbinary Body in <i>Gender Failure</i>	37
Conclusion, Making Space	64
Works Cited	67

Introduction

It's almost akin to the Sisyphus myth – the toiling journey of gender transition and pushing the boulder higher up the hill, and as soon as the perceived summit of inhabiting the other gender is reached, the stone rolls down the other side as I realize this gender doesn't provide any lasting reflection of my inner self either. So, it must ascend again, over and over, each day, as the most fitting expression continually changes.

– Drew Cordes

Articulating your personal identity may be as simple as filling out the “About Me” section of a dating site profile. Information such as physical appearance, hobbies, likes and dislikes is presented with the assumption that the reader will be able to assemble a coherent and accurate image of who you are as an individual. However, the other person cannot form a unified whole based solely on the information you provide: instead, this information acts as superficial additions to a basic – and normative – social object. In other words, the reader of your “About Me” presumes that underneath these unique qualities is an individual who complies with imposed social norms.

The project of this paper is to define such an interpretive act when the perceived object does not adhere to a socially sanctioned and normative template. The constrictive nature of this template of course means that few people actually fit; in fact the template itself seems to be the exception to the reality of human experience. Gender, a stringently regulated identity category, stifles this reality to the extent that deviations from the norm become unintelligible modes of identity. I focus on nonbinary gender identities – those that break from the gender binary altogether – as the ultimate deviation. As a perceived object that rejects the normative template, the nonbinary individual cannot be perceived as coherent without first explicitly defining the reality of the foundational nonbinary self.

Because the nonbinary self does not fit the regulated gender template, the binary other cannot empathetically conceive the reality of that self. In other words, this disconnected understanding of gender means that the binary other cannot truly understand the nonbinary experience. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, interpersonal empathy requires common ground, or the potential for shared experiences. Without this empathy, the other cannot accurately perceive the reality of the self. Certainly this conceptual distance exists between all individuals as nothing can be identically experienced by more than one person; however, the oppositional nature of the nonbinary self's relationship to the dominant social structure creates a disconnect so fundamental that it can only be cognitively understood by the binary other – in other words, true empathy is impossible, meaning that the viability of nonbinary personhood is threatened.

The work of Gayle Salamon in *Assuming A Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* provides a useful starting point for the project of this paper. She draws on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and the psychoanalysis of Freud for a consideration of transgender embodiment and personhood. For Salamon, the transgender body takes shape in the intersubjective relationship between self and other. However, where she sees bodily constitution in this contact, she does so on the assumption that the body that is perceived is legible for the binary. I take up Salamon's arguments and extend them to where the perceived gendered body cannot be recognized: what happens to embodiment and personhood when intersubjective relationships cannot construct a coherent self?

Throughout this paper I will also engage primarily with Merleau-Ponty as well as Judith Butler. I find Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological interest in intersubjective and

indeterminate perception makes for a productive consideration of nonbinary specifically and gender more generally; a phenomenology of perception breaks apart the perceptive act, seeking out the elements that determine *why* we know what we do. Investigating the external influences that inform binary perception and challenge nonbinary presentation, I suggest the sources of the incommensurability between these two gender categories. In combination with Butler – particularly her work on the origins and performativity of gender – the phenomenology of perception produces the foundation for Chapter One, which lays out my understanding of the nonbinary existence at its points of contact with the gender binary.

My purpose here is not to say that binary individuals simply cannot understand the nonbinary existence and therefore should not even try; on the contrary, my hope is that an understanding of the regulatory nature of the gender binary, and the ways that it influences the perception of gendered bodies will allow for a consciousness of the compulsory gendering practices in Western societies. While I contend that the empathetic gap between nonbinary and binary individuals can never be completely closed, I do think that an awareness of gender as it is presented here will make it possible to make space for the nonbinary gender experience in the binary imaginary.

I. Merleau-Ponty and His Phenomenology

Merleau-Ponty opens *Phenomenology of Perception* by acknowledging that no sufficient definition of phenomenology exists due to its paradoxical nature. Phenomenology claims to study essences abstracted from existence, while also returning essences to existence in order to better understand the world. Phenomenology places in

abeyance the assumptions of the natural attitude – the set of uncritically adopted beliefs about the world – understanding that this attitude presupposes that all meaning is available at the surface; at the same time it is a philosophy that must retain such naïveté in order to achieve a “direct and primitive contact with the world.” It calls itself a rigorous science but tries to describe our experience “as it is” without considering physiological origin or causal explanations provided by scientists, historians, or sociologists (vii). Given these conflicting interpretations of phenomenology, one may wonder whether it is a philosophy with any utility.

Literally, phenomenology is the study of phenomena: our perception of things; things as we perceive them in our experiences; and our experience of things and of our perception of things (Smith). More specifically, phenomenology studies consciousness as constructed by our experiences of the world. This investigative project aims to reveal the process of acquiring and attributing the meanings that represent objects, and how those meanings inform our experiences and thus our consciousness. Phenomenologists consider experience as primarily structured by intentionality. Merleau-Ponty defines intentionality as the recognition of “consciousness itself as a project of the world, meant for a world which it neither embraces nor possesses, but toward which it is perpetually directed” (xvii). Intentionality, then, is simply the direction of experiences of consciousness toward the world. Individuals experience the world only through this perpetual direction: classical Husserlian phenomenology states that certain conditions such as embodiment, cultural context, language, or social background enable and shape such direction (Smith).¹ These conditions make up and inform the acquired meanings of things in a

¹ For further reading on the foundational phenomenology of Edmond Husserl, see *The Idea of*

given experience. Thus the world only becomes a meaningful object as determined by the nature of the intentionality in the moment of experience.

Taking in the intention – “the unique mode of existence” – expressed in the experience of things allows the phenomenologist to begin to expose the origins of things (Merleau-Ponty xviii). A study of origins must be rooted in the description of “things themselves,” refusing to judge the world by means not based in my own point of view. Explanations of the world not derived from my experience can be nothing for me but hypothetical. By transcending the hypothetical through experiential description, the phenomenologist can grasp the “real” thing rather than an ideal instituted by an external rationale (viii). Such idealism does not allow for the transience and complexity of reality; rather than perceive the world according to a single, stable notion, the phenomenologist must continuously dismantle their perception in search of further and more complex meanings. Phenomenological analysis takes nothing for granted, and is a perpetual beginning based on an enduring “wonder’ in the face of the world;” such wonder persists even after a meaning or origin appears to have been revealed. Phenomenological analysis finds a transcendental consciousness of the world that demonstrates the strange and paradoxical nature of reality (xiii).²

Merleau-Ponty’s metaphysical project is not to abstract out the basic structure of reality, but to reawaken the complexity and depth of reality by highlighting “the limitations of our modern way of looking at things, so that we might ‘transcend’ these limitations” (Marshall 58).

Phenomenology.

² Husserl’s transcendental consciousness diverges from Kantian transcendence, which makes the world immanent in the subject, precluding a sense of wonder toward the world. The transcendental consciousness proceeding from such wonder evinces the impossibility of a complete phenomenological analysis of experience (Merleau-Ponty xiv).

This project challenges the determinate empirical and intellectual approaches to the problem of being: for the former, the real is only what has been experienced; the latter only allows for a single, determinate conception of meaning. Merleau-Ponty takes issue with these limiting approaches and instead offers a “philosophy of ambiguity,” which allows for an indeterminate being, one that is always present in its absence and creates a complex reality in compelling the phenomenologist to persistently seek its meaning (ibid.). In this methodology, the incessant quest for the ambiguous being results in the accumulation of meanings, which are then challenged, replaced, or adjusted as new meanings are incorporated. This process complicates the instinct to uncritically perceive the world: the phenomenologist recognizes the limitations inherent in “our modern way of looking at things” and consciously continues seeking the reality of the indeterminate being. As an act with a permanent beginning, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perception makes possible a fluctuating meaning and appearance of the object. This ambiguous approach to being gives way to a more accurate portrayal of reality, which is itself unstable.

The complexity of reality is especially visible in the intersection of my various experiences and acquired meanings with those of the other. My perception of the world thus becomes imbued with new and often conflicting meanings. If I am to allow for the possibility of an indeterminate world, then I need to understand the world as constituted by more than my own consciousness. In order to accept a plurality of consciousnesses, I must conceive my consciousness as inherent in “its body and its world”: that is, my consciousness possesses a body, which then allows my consciousness to become a self. This done, I am then able to accept that other consciousnesses also inhabit other bodies (Merleau-Ponty 351). Thus, the other becomes not only a perceived object in space, but also an object possessing its own self, making intersubjectivity possible. As a self – as a consciousness with a body – the other can experience

the world as I do, but necessarily derives different meanings from those experiences: because the other is an *other*, a certain solipsism delimits my perception of the world, implying a perpetual difference between my experience and the other's. The intersecting and engaging of my experiences and the other's through communication merges our respective meanings, indicating a lived world more complex than I had originally perceived.

Merleau-Ponty requires the establishment of common ground for productive – that is, meaningful – communication. His common ground materializes in the potential for two individuals to share an experience – the significance is in the *potential* more than the literal sharing of an experience. Two strangers will almost definitely differ in the experiences that have shaped their selves, but Merleau-Ponty understands the very potentiality as necessary in creating a common ground. Communication on common ground will be built on shared or near meanings and thoughts – expressed as speech – will be deemed intelligible by each individual. While the existence of infinite other selves seems to complicate the establishment of common ground, the prevalence of normative modes of thought increases the potential for shared meanings between two individuals. When one individual does not adhere to the norm, however, communication with the other becomes a challenge.

II. Complicating Gender

As a result of the plurality of selves and unproductive communication, the “truth” of reality and its stability become uncertain. This project will dwell on the unstable reality of gender categories. The gender system of the Western world gets its meaning from a heteronormative binary. Based on the biologically sexed body, this binary recognizes two legitimate gender identities: female and male. Because the stability of Western reality depends on the gender

binary, society enforces adherence to given norms – those phenomena that “represent the average or ideal towards which all other phenomena move” (Mary Poovey qtd. in Butler, *Undoing* 50). The imposition of normative behaviors creates a structure in which delinquent gender identities and performances are extremely apparent. The general term that stands for so-called gender delinquency is transgender. Judith Halberstam describes transgender as “a gender identity that is at least partially defined by transitivity” (161). Gender transitivity can emerge as the crossing or blending of gender categories, physical gender movement through surgery, or the movement away from binary boundaries. The transgender category includes transsexuals; cross dressers; androgynous, nonbinary, agender, and genderqueer individuals; and intersexed individuals. These all are gender experiences that subvert the traditional conception of a binary gender and thus threaten a stable Western reality. For this paper, I will use the term “nonbinary” to mean any gender identity that does not fall on the binary spectrum – thus, it will not include, for example, transgender individuals who identify as women or men.

In one way or another, these transgressive gender identities relate themselves back to the binary, as Kate Bornstein says of androgyny: “Androgyny assumes that there’s male stuff on one side of a spectrum and female stuff on another side of that spectrum. And somewhere in the middle of this straight line, there’s an ideal blend of ‘male’ and ‘female.’ However, by saying there’s a ‘middle,’ androgyny really keeps the opposites in place” (115). Androgyny – as well as male-to-female and female-to-male transsexuality – reifies the gender binary in its need of the spectrum for its definition. Although nonbinary identities dislocate themselves from the binary continuum in a way that other transgender identities do not, they too require the existence of that continuum: without a gender binary, “nonbinary” would be meaningless. Does nonbinary also reify the gender binary? Certainly, the existence of identities that refuse the female and male

classifications poses the possibility that the gender binary is in fact unreal. At the same time the necessary acknowledgement of these classifications allows the gender binary continued existence, if only as a social construction.

While the nonbinary identity recognizes the reality of the binary (and its consequences), it nonetheless complicates the validity of the Western ideal of gender. As with all transgender identities, nonbinary does not follow a predetermined gender narrative; indeed, its very divergence from the binary suggests that the nonbinary experience is not mappable at all. Much of the binary system is built on the assumption that gender naturally follows from primary sex characteristics and thereafter remains immutable. In some cases, the sexual surface is ambiguous, as is the case with some intersexed individuals. Such unintelligible bodies are punished – through surgery or physical violence – in an attempt to emphasize the significance of the body in assigning gender, which, in turn, plays a critical role in social organization.

For Sigmund Freud the reality of the intersexed body confounds the link between the visible sexual surface and the medical “truth” of physiology: where a sexual configuration does not adhere to binary expectations – and, moreover, the explicitly established expectations of the medical complex – “truth” becomes an unstable construct (7). The same confounding might be seen in the link between a nonbinary gender performance and the “truth” of the binary matrix. A gendered performance is first perceived at the surface of the body: the visual image presents itself before other aspects of the perceptual object become known. This initial image can be read – by the binary other – as situated within the binary matrix. Assigning a binary gender based on an indeterminate performance may be a struggle for the binary other, but because the hegemonic matrix constricts its subjects, binary readings seem to be the only feasible option. However, this other will still recognize the incoherence in the nonbinary performance, and such a performance

pushes “us up against the limits of gendered representation: the limits of what about gender we can consign to representation, of what we can process as identity in the visual” (Prosser 223). Faced with a performance that exceeds these limits, the binary other is either deeply disturbed or compelled to reevaluate their conception of “truth.”

Gender ambiguity causes “loss of cognitive orientation” in the binary other: “People will regard any phenomenon that produces this disorientation as ‘disgusting’ or ‘dirty.’ To be so regarded, however, the phenomenon must threaten to destroy not only one of their fundamental cognitive categories but their whole cognitive system” (Murray S. Davis qtd. in Bornstein 72). The binary cognitive system depends on the matrix that determines the templates for social interactions, such as in business, academic, or romantic relationships. When presented with a non-normative gendered being, the binary other has the option to reject or incorporate the perceived meanings into their understanding of the world; the cognitive disorientation, however, often causes a fear or discomfort that impedes acceptance. The cognitive orientation established by a stable gender system hinges on the exclusivity of binary categories; thus the very possibility of nonbinary identities disrupts the promise of security – hence the violent retribution many gender transgressors face.

III. Perceiving the Nonbinary

As a tool for understanding perception, phenomenology allows for a critical examination of what creates gender in the social mind. The pursuit of meaning in the nonbinary being with an ambiguous approach to perception precludes the possibility of a definitive “truth.” By accepting the possibility of an indeterminate gendered being, the phenomenologist can investigate the signs that inform our understanding of gender while critically aware of the presupposed facticity of the

binary system. The perceived indeterminate being will not, therefore, be limited by unreflective conceptions; the unending search for meaning in the nonbinary being leads to an blended image whose very incoherence suggests that binary gendered signs do not have an definitive basis. Thus the investigation of nonbinary reveals the tenuous stability of the binary gender system.

Transcending the limitations of modern perception opens up an exploration of nonbinary identities at their points of contact with the binary matrix. Identifiable conflicts or disruptions highlight the constructedness of gender: gender identities that violate the binary have the ability to elicit conflict because they represent a threat to the power structure defined by the binary matrix. The enforcement of the gender binary is always in the service of established power structures: not only does it maintain the male/female hierarchy but it also delimits the gendered norms that determine the shape of those structures (Whittle 210). The reality of gendered beings existing outside the binary delegitimizes the regulatory mechanism that establishes the “natural truth” of those hierarchies.

Chapter Two will utilize Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of ambiguous perception to investigate the incoherent nonbinary selves depicted in a collection of personal essays. *Gender Failure* – originally a spoken word performance – portrays the nonbinary lives of Rae Spoon and Ivan Coyote. The memoirs that make up *Gender Failure* offer an intimate glimpse into the subjective and intersubjective experiences of the binary world. Tracing the points of contact between the nonbinary existences of the authors and the binary matrix demonstrates the difficulty of living an authentic nonbinary life within that matrix. Even as they reveal the instability of the binary, Spoon and Coyote's narratives emphasize the constriction of norms and expectations that precipitate illegible gender performances.

A phenomenology of perception begins to approach the origins of gender: by dismantling the immutability of the binary, the phenomenologist can locate the signs that inform readings of gendered bodies and ultimately recognize how those signs reinforce the hierarchal power structure. In order to understand the extent of Spoon and Coyote's supposed gender delinquency, Merleau-Ponty's ambiguous perception must take into account the intersubjectivity of identity formation. In order for the nonbinary self to understand and define their identity, they require the binary other's perception of and subsequent reading of their body: the other's interpretation will mark the nonbinary body as nonconforming, a classification that determines the nonbinary self's situation in and experience of the external world. Just as my reading of the other brings them into being for me, I come into being for the other: embodiment is always intersubjective (Salamon 46).

Merleau-Ponty's focus on intersubjectivity implies that the two individuals have the ability to establish common ground: that self and other share or could share similar interpretations of signs and objects. However, in the case of the meeting of nonbinary and binary individuals, common ground cannot be located because the binary other – having never experienced the binary from outside – will not be able to comprehend the reality of the nonbinary experience. This obstacle is further complicated by the language barrier present in the nonbinary self's articulation; because the language used by the nonbinary self originates from within the binary, binary others will always overlay the self's words with their own meanings. Thus, there is incommensurability in the interactions between nonbinary self and binary other. This division necessarily implies an insufficient empathy in such interactions; this means the binary other possesses a fragmented understanding of the nonbinary existence such that, even when the other allows that existence, the nonbinary self's ultimate illegibility precludes its validity in terms of

the gender binary. The aim of this project is to demonstrate the social isolation of the nonbinary existence in terms of its illegibility – as seen in *Gender Failure* – while also proposing means for making space for such existences within the binary matrix.

About pronouns: Because of their position outside the gender binary, nonbinary individuals frequently prefer personal pronouns that reflect that position. Gender-neutral pronouns range from the familiar (they/them/theirs) to the unfamiliar (zi/zir/zirs). To avoid confusion – and because Spoon and Coyote have explicitly stated their preferences – I will use the third-person singular pronoun “they” when speaking about nonbinary individuals. However, “they” will also be used in its traditional binary – singular and plural – forms in this paper; to the best of my ability (given the constraints of language) I will make it clear what “they” refers to.

Chapter One

How Do You Tell the Truth?: Constructing a Nonbinary Self in a Binary World

To live as nonbinary – without and against the gender binary – the self must negotiate a social system that seeks to delegitimize its existence. Performing and articulating an unauthorized gender in a system structured by fixed binary meanings implies a necessary revision of perceptual mechanisms. The nonbinary self – itself filtered through hegemonic modes of thought – faces perpetual erasure of its reality by the binary other’s interpretation of their gendered performance: in being offered up to an alien gaze, the body risks being stolen from its reality (Merleau-Ponty 167). When the nonbinary self performs an identity that appears delinquent in regulatory social contexts, the other does not recognize an intelligible being; consequently, the self becomes marked as less than human – a being denied personhood.

The unintelligibility between self and other arises from dissonant meanings. Because the nonbinary self moves within a heteronormative binary matrix, its intentions oppose the available meanings with which the other perceives the world. This incommensurable relationship leaves the self at risk of unintelligibility: the nonbinary self necessarily relies on binary signs for its performance, precipitating the attribution of binary meanings. Thus the structure of the gender binary invalidates the reality of the nonbinary. The binary other experiences the world according to fixed gender norms instituted by a regulatory apparatus. Its instinct to look for normativity in a gendered performance supports the goals of such an apparatus – namely, to produce the image of a stable gendered “truth.”

In social encounters, the initial visual perception is the site of contact between self and other, and the product of that perceptive act lays the foundation for the self’s potential intelligibility. Gender expression, in the form of bodily cues and signs, inform the other’s

reading, which precedes the constitution of a unified being. In the first moments of an interaction, the observer will instinctively seek out the gender of the self: establishing this identity categorization is crucial for determining how to understand and behave toward a social object, and failing to comprehend it causes extreme discomfort in the observer (Crawley et al 37). Without the rubric of binary gender, the regulatory script of social interactions falls away and the immutable “truth” of gender, the persistence of which allows for an exclusive category of “personhood,” becomes destabilized.

Socially sanctioned gender performances – and the successful execution thereof – delineate the criteria for personhood. Consequently the conceptual “person” is constituted by the very apparatus that imposes a stable binary; Judith Butler asks: “To what extent do *regulatory practices* of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person? [...] And how do the regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity?” In other words, when “identity” is assured through stabilizing concepts, “the person” is called into question by incoherent or discontinuous gendered beings “who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 23).

The nonbinary self threatens the legitimacy of the gender binary: indeed, the very existence of this self precludes the stability of the binary. When regulatory practices are rejected and the nonbinary reality disrupts “the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force. That regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe” (Butler, *Gender* 185). The revelation of this fiction suggests that the notion

of the “person” and even reality itself has been constricted in service to the maintenance of a hierarchal power structure.

Restricted by this framework, the nonbinary self must actively construct itself as a viable person. To do this means addressing the perceptive act as normalized by the binary apparatus. The nonbinary self, aware of its inhuman status, presents its identifying self with a self-consciousness not possessed by binary individuals. Thus it has the ability to alter and recontextualize binary meanings in its performance and articulation of self. Understanding the conduct of the nonbinary self facilitates a phenomenological investigation of gender as a system. Where the binary would have its subjects defined as determinate beings, following Merleau-Ponty’s method of ambiguity urges the phenomenologist to seek out the infinite meanings that constitute the nonbinary self; as this perpetual process unfolds, the phenomenologist transcends the limitations set by the binary. Effecting this mode of perception allows a move toward the origins of gendered meanings, thereby expanding the conceptual reality and legitimizing the nonbinary existence.

I. Where Does Gender Come From and What Does It Want?

Where gendered meanings derive from perception, the bodily surface of the other is the primary object; that object is the site of visual cues, the contexts of which inform our interpretation. The other – even before speaking – becomes a meaningful figure as a result of my reading of their body. Of all the cues I might find presented by the other, gendered attributes seem the most straightforward. In observing the other, I can pick out certain attributes – e.g. hairstyle, clothing, body language – that will tell me whether to gender the other as male or female. It may happen that the other presents a blend of gendered attributes; regardless, as a

subject of the binary matrix, I will categorize the other as either male or female, based on the meanings I already possess.

Consider this example: While grocery shopping, I observe an individual of middling height, with long electric pink hair and a beard, wearing makeup and Carhartts, and walking in a way that evinces femininity. The gendered attributes that appear at the surface of this body conflict with one another, resisting my initial effort to categorize. The presence of the beard however, strongly suggests a particular genetic makeup, and so declares the ‘real’ gender of this individual. The binary instinct to equate gender with sex prioritizes visible sex characteristics in the act of assigning a gender. This process often leads to misreadings of gender performances, which are the result of the “negotiation between the individual’s gender identity and the limitations of the socially sanctioned binary sexes and gender” (Davidmann 197).

According to Western society, socially sanctioned gender identities proceed from the biological “fact” of sex. Two primary approaches to understanding of gender are based on this correlation: essentialism and social constructionism. Gender essentialism maintains “that men and women have inherent, unique, and natural attributes that qualify them as their separate genders” (Jakubowski). In this framework, then, gender equals sex: gendered identities and characteristics are predetermined by biology, and because the sexed body apparently can only take one of two forms – either naturally or surgically – this necessarily means that only two genders exist. Thus the existence of a binary implies that gender mirrors sex or is in some way restricted by it (Butler, *Gender* 9).³ when sex determines gender, nonbinary identities are an impossibility. These identities deviate from nature in their presentation, but, according to gender

³ Sex itself can be categorized as a socially constructed binary, as exemplified in the coerced surgical reconstruction of an intersexed newborn’s genitalia. See Butler, *Gender* 59-67.

essentialism, such an identity still is actually binary: one only needs to look close enough to determine the “truth” of the body to reveal the gender (Kessler and McKenna).⁴

The binary matrix embodies this understanding of gender: in order to enforce binary genders, a regulatory apparatus would require the conception of a “natural” gender for the denotation of “normal.” The reliance on anatomical or chromosomal sex to define “normal” suggests that gender is an immutable category, thereby restricting the range of acceptable human experience. However, the reality of gender transgressors demonstrates that the physical body is not the “actual” source or indicator of gender.

Social constructionism finds that source in the social forces that contribute to the collective conception of “normal.” In this model, gender is not considered an essential and biological quality – although membership in arbitrary gender categories *is*, as it happens, determined by the configuration of sexed bodies. Butler, a social constructionist, considers gender “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender* 45). A “typical” gendered body – “a natural sort of being” – emerges from the regulating forces of the external social world. These forces manifest as gender norms, the ideals that delineate socially acceptable gendered presentations and behaviors. Gender norms are not just laws but ways of knowing, modes of truth that forcibly define intelligibility (Butler, *Undoing* 57). The nonbinary self visibly flouts regulatory norms, so generating their unintelligible gender identity and their apparent challenging of the binary and the power it represents.

⁴ Gender essentialism could be said to allow for transsexuals, provided the body is surgically altered to become the “right” sex. Even so, individuals whose identity presentation includes physical alteration subvert the idea of an intrinsic relationship between gender and sex.

Compliance with and enforcement of the norms that define “normal” is always in the service of an established power structure: for example, compulsory gendering within the male/female dynamic perpetuates the apparent supremacy of men over women (Whittle 210). As a binary system, Western society is built on such sets of either/or dynamics, the construction of which implies that the first value possesses a “primary” status. The efficacy of this hierarchal system cannot withstand a third – or fourth, or fifth – quantity; a social trinary would not have the legitimate organizational power inherent in a binary because the supremacy marking the higher value would necessarily lose its potency as more values are added to the equation. This means nonbinary identities cannot be recognized by a system that acquires its authority from a binary hierarchy.

Thus binary norms are strictly enforced. Individuals who do not perform a gender according to socially sanctioned norms are punished, psychically and/or physically. Butler believes that those who violently reinforce the binary have some stake in the immutability of gender categories: “If a person opposes norms of binary gender not just by having a critical point of view about them, but by incorporating norms critically, and that stylized opposition is legible, then it seems that violence emerges precisely as the demand to undo that legibility” (35). In other words, if the nonbinary performance is in fact legible – if the binary other recognizes it as a gender identity – then that very legibility signals the fictitiousness of a stable gender system. Again, the revelation of that fictitious nature threatens the security that an immutable truth affords – policing and violence serve as tools for maintaining the “truth.”

The essentialist and constructionist approaches to gender, however, do not accurately define the origins of gender on their own. If gender essentialism were the rule, transgender identities of any kind would not exist; likewise, if gender proceeded solely from social

construction, the only genders would be those that adhered to sanctioned norms. As biologist Julia Serano asks, “[If] socialization artificially brainwashes all of us into becoming heterosexual masculine men and feminine women, then how do you explain the existence of fabulous bisexual femme-tomboy transsexual women such as myself?” (qtd. in Jakubowski). The answer must then be that gender is a product of both an inborn essence *and* external social forces. While the degree of each influence depends on the individual, both contribute to the gendering of the self (ibid.). Nonbinary identities exemplify this model: they arise independently of biological sex and, as Serano quips, social construction clearly cannot and does not condition all gendered selves. As the paragon of this gendering process, nonbinary serves as evidence that both essentialism and constructionism limit the reality of gender experiences.

Regulatory norms, proceeding from gender essentialism or constructionism, impose “a model of coherent gendered life that demeans the complex ways in which gendered lives are crafted and lived” (Butler, *Undoing* 5). Gendered beings do not possess a “core” gender identity that directs their existence; nor do they exist only in terms of social regulation. Both possibilities ignore the reality of complex gender experiences: despite the efforts of the binary matrix, non-normative gender identities abound. Due to compulsive adherence to hegemonic expectations and performance of heteronormative gendered acts, the full breadth of human experience remains unexplored. The repetition of socially sanctioned, regulatory gender acts – which are then legible as either female or male – legitimizes those acts as normative; thus exact repetition of those acts is required for a self to be granted personhood. However, because acts are repeated across time and contexts, gender necessarily becomes an unstable identity, subject to resignification and non-normative repetitions (Butler, *Trouble* 188). The non-normative repetitions of the nonbinary self reveal the “truth” represented by the gender binary to be

baseless: by merely having the ability to challenge the “truth” of the binary, the nonbinary self demonstrates the legitimacy of their gender identity.

II. Binary Perception and Nonbinary Illegibility

I experience the world with a sensual awareness: my body encounters sights, sounds, and smells that construct it as a perceiving and perceived being. The accumulation of such encounters brings together a world that begins to define my self. I cannot deliberately construct this world as an extension of myself; instead, it serves as a permanent background against which I perceive objects and am perceived (Merleau-Ponty xvii). The perceptive act is not merely the sensual awareness of the world around me, but also the product of the unconscious acquisition and synthesis of meaning based on my direct experience with that world in the very moment that I experience it. Through sight, sounds, and spatial and temporal experiences, lived as I move throughout the world, my consciousness assembles meanings that reconstruct my objective body into a subjective being.

The meanings I draw upon for perception stem from two basic sources. First, from my individual meanings, which are subjective and acquired from my direct experience of the world. Although some experiences, and therefore their meanings, are in some way universal, the self’s consciousness interprets them in a way that renders them unique to the individual. For example, when I experience a color called “red,” my consciousness perceives that color and assigns a meaning to the phenomenon of redness; these meanings will be associated with my visual perception of the color itself, but may also include the (socially-informed) feelings of red (e.g. love, anger, heat, etc.). Thereafter, I will experience redness as a product of the meanings I already possess. However, although redness is a universal experience, my meanings will be

vastly different from those of, say, a blind individual: “red” is still experienced by both our consciousnesses, but I cannot say that the other shares my meaning.

Alternately, imposed meanings (as by a regulatory apparatus) dictate the meaning one should read in a given sign; this establishes the conditions under which a given experience of a sign is considered “correct.” For most, such prescribed meanings come naturally and so their perception of the world meets the expectations of the regulatory apparatus. In this context meanings are understood as universally shared, such that deviations are obvious. Nonconforming meanings, then, inform perceptions and experiences of the world that threaten “truth” and its promise of stability. For example, using the binary matrix as a benchmark, meanings that deviate from this norm – i.e. those that define the nonbinary self – produce an experience of the world that reveals a precarious binary reality. The rejection of these socially imposed meanings marks the nonbinary self and its experience of the world as delinquent.

The above forms of meaning render the world as I perceive and experience it subject to my existence as a discrete self. The discreteness of my self – and thereby of the other, who possesses their own discrete self – complicates the perceptive act. The distinction between self and other constitutes the asymmetry that characterizes the intersubjectivity of perception. While the possibility of a common ground is essential in perceiving accurate meaning in the other’s language, it is also crucial in perceiving an intelligible being in the other’s performance of self. The other comes into being for me in the attribution of my “ready-made” meanings; just as the other can only speak to me in a language I already understand, so too can the other only physically articulate their self with a body I find legible. This legibility depends on commensurate meanings. Because of the inherent individuality of the subjective self, comparable meanings shared with the other cannot be guaranteed. However, when experiences and meanings

originate in a regulatory apparatus – the gender binary, for example – bodies are more likely to be legible.

In terms of an indeterminate phenomenology, achieving legibility may be complicated by the perpetual perceptive act. The indeterminate being presupposed by Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of ambiguity is composed of infinite profiles, and the other that is immediately available for me is always only seen *in the act of seeing them*. There are always unseen aspects of the other and to attempt to perceive them as a whole is a futile task; thus my perception of the other is never accurate. However, the other does not appear to me as a complete unknown: I perceive the other as a coherent whole through a synthesis of retained and anticipated profiles (Detmer 103). The very coherence of these profiles confirms the legibility of the other. This process, though, only succeeds when the anticipated profiles align with what is already known: the binary other cannot anticipate the unseen profiles of the nonbinary self – including gender identity and gender history – because that anticipation presupposes a universal binary experience. Thus the various aspects of the nonbinary self cannot cohere in the binary other's perception, revealing an unintelligible being.

As a result of this binary perception, the nonbinary self experiences the world as an apparently incoherent being. They understand that the binary other cannot find meaning in their existence – or, to be more precise, the meaning the binary other does find creates the image of a delinquent binary self. The other's perception of the self is the foundational act in constituting a social being. In intersubjective encounters, the initial impulse is to look for information in the body of the other, or bring into play information already possessed. This information “helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to

call forth a desired response from him” (Goffman 1).⁵ My appearance, attitude, and language will become meaningful for the other based on their past experiences. The self they perceive in my performance is therefore subject to the meanings they already possess, which may or may not produce an accurate representation.

The information the other finds in their initial perception of my body determines how our encounter will unfold. Sociologist Erving Goffman’s model shows the significance of that first image: every aspect of my interaction with the other will be defined according to their perception of me. In a split second and a cursory glance, I have become a self in the eyes of the other. Whether that self is an accurate representation of my identity depends on the origin of their individual meanings. The other’s subsequent behavior toward me will demonstrate not only the signs they read on my body but also the meanings that have already been ascribed to them. The body I present for the other’s perception is an embodied articulation of the self I understand myself to be. As this embodied self, I learn how to interact with the world around me in a way that is authentic to my identity. The other’s response to my performance relays a second image of my self: I see in their behavior toward me my self as they perceive it. Confronted with the image, I am dislocated from my solipsistic existence and the coherent perception I had of my self must be adjusted. The legibility of my social self is always contingent on the other’s gaze.

Intelligibility derived from the perceptive process depends on established meanings, especially those that have been set by a regulatory apparatus. The nonbinary self upsets this framework: operating from outside these limiting boundaries, the nonbinary self presents a body that defies binary readings. The resulting perception is an amalgamation of nonbinary identity and binary meanings. This incoherent being – and the reality of its existence – demonstrates the

⁵ These are the pronouns used in Dr Goffman’s original text.

extent of the constricting perceptive apparatus set by the binary. Thus perceptions from within the matrix threaten the nonbinary self: if their social performance is always read according to binary meanings, can a nonbinary self be considered legitimate? In order to encourage an accurate reading of their self, the nonbinary individual must take up the task of self-articulation.

III. Articulating the Nonbinary Self

Self-articulation is the visual or verbal building-up of oneself with the aim of directing the other's perception. Wearing a certain band t-shirt or claiming an identity label (e.g. queer, punk, athlete) are modes of self-articulation: each is meant to underscore parts of an individual's identity in the eyes of the other. Articulation assumes that the self the other reads in my performance is inaccurate, such that I must provide additional signs in the hope that the other will attribute a meaning that meets my intention. The project of self-articulation aims to present a self's truth in a way that the other understands it as true-for-me. Making the truth understandable depends on *how you tell the truth*. The truth needs to be communicated or performed in such a way that the culture can hear it (Bornstein 95). When the culture cannot hear the truth – when the culture's sanctioned vocabulary limits reality – self-articulation struggles for validation.

Articulation is especially important for nonbinary individuals seeking understanding within the binary matrix. The limiting binary framework the nonbinary self comes up against affords little space for an articulation of an atypical existence. Butler's assessment of this framework suggests that it not only limits reality but also the imagined reality:

The limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. [...]
These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse

predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender. (*Gender* 12)

Thus nonbinary as a category has neither the space nor even the vocabulary to articulate itself as a viable style of existence. Because the hegemonic discourse is “predicated on binary structures,” the available tools for nonbinary articulation are always already imbued with binary meanings. When established by fixed meanings, language, as the system for delimiting conceptual categories, constricts feasible reality: as an unimaginable identity category, nonbinary struggles to be articulated in a way that demonstrates its legitimacy.

Meant to be an act of agency, articulation challenges the nonbinary self to forcibly make space for their existence. The visual and verbal articulation directs the other to perceive the presented self according to the self’s intentions. In doing so, the other is expected to attribute meanings to the body toward an accurate perception of the self. Although the self has greater influence over the other in the project of articulation, they still cannot dictate the meanings that the other reads in the body. For the nonbinary self, the visual and verbal signs available for articulation already contain meaning for the binary other. This puts the nonbinary self in the position of speaking from a non-space, using a language that belongs to someone else.

Validation of personhood proceeds from self-articulation; consequently the nonbinary self has a lot at stake in a successful articulation. The other’s perception determines how the nonbinary self is perceived as a social being; but the intersubjective constitution of self means that the other also has a role in determining how one perceives their selfhood and therefore how they experience the world: the binary other’s perception influences both the self-as-perceived and the self-as-lived. Thus a successful articulation of self – and the subsequent validation of

personhood – depends on the other: the social self cannot exist without external input. If they cannot persuade the other towards an accurate reading of their performance, the nonbinary self faces unviability.

The nonbinary self has two means for self-articulation: the presentation of their body, and their use of language. As the initial site of perceptive contact, the body serves as the principal mode of self-articulation. The body is the means for performing the self, and we perform the self we believe ourselves to be; however, that is not always the self that the other perceives (Salamon 3). The fundamental image of the self produces signs onto which the other will assign their own meanings: these meanings, unique to the other, almost never afford an accurate representation of the self. In a social setting, the immediately visible gender presentation – as opposed to the reality of chromosomal makeup, anatomical sex, or gender history – is impossible to ignore (Kessler and McKenna). Gendering the other always precedes the perception of a unified being. The normative behaviors that delineate the binary identity seem to be “natural” as a result of social construction; thus the constitution of the binary gender performance lacks the self-consciousness that the nonbinary performance requires. The nonbinary self is always aware of the significance of that initial perception: if the body does not appear legible, the validity of the nonbinary identity is already at risk.

Physical articulation is limited by the visible body and marked by normative gender characteristics such as clothing, hairstyle, and body language. Ostensibly, the individual has control over the presentation of these elements; however, as a social object, the perception of the other ultimately delineates the self. Butler calls these conditions a “lively paradox,” an existence where “my body is and is not mine” (*Undoing* 21). For example, a nonbinary individual who presents their body in a certain way – self-consciously constructing its appearance and the way it

moves – intends for it to serve as a visual representation of their self; the binary other, however, will read in that same body a self that is in some way binary, perhaps a woman who presents an androgynous body. Regardless of the self's agency in its bodily articulation, the other will always tend towards its own intentions. Caught between identity and the binary matrix, the nonbinary self struggles toward an accurate projection of that self.

While bodily articulation is a significant element in the establishment of an accurately perceived self, the nonbinary individual also relies on linguistic tools. In verbal communication, “the meaning swallows up the signs”; that is, thought, as expressed by speech, becomes lost in the meanings it represents. These signs, which a consciousness takes in, can only take shape through “already available meanings” (Merleau-Ponty 183-4). In other words, verbal communication is an automatic task in which meanings are uncritically attached to signifying speech. In the project of articulation, the nonbinary self understands that the meaning ascribed to expressed thought always has binary origins. The language the nonbinary self uses to situate their identity is consequently already familiar to the binary other; because that is the case, the other instinctively calls up their ready-made meanings, overwriting those that the nonbinary self intends.

Self-definition as a linguistic act attaches meanings to the verbal expression of thought, defining the self according to the available linguistic context. For the Western world, the context is absolutely binary. As a result, expressed thoughts are always interpreted on the binary's terms. For the nonbinary self, self-definition means defining “that which escapes language through the use of language itself” (Salamon 83). Dialogue with the other establishes a common ground – through the sharing of thoughts and resultant merging of perspectives – that makes communication possible. In conversation between nonbinary self and the binary other, though,

there is always a discrepancy in styles of thought and perception such that any ground reached will necessarily be uneven. The nonbinary self that one articulates cannot materialize if the styles of thought are not shared; in other words, the binary other cannot comprehend the nonbinary self because their consciousness always thinks according to the binary.

Constrained in this way, articulation seems to do little more than invalidate the nonbinary self. The use of binary tools would suggest that, at least linguistically, nonbinary is not a legitimate conceptual category. Without a designated vocabulary, the nonbinary self must rely on the language of a system that seeks to erase its existence. However, the nonbinary use of binary tools does not necessarily represent concession; in fact, this critical recontextualization destabilizes a supposedly immutable framework. Articulation of a gender-displaced existence breaks down the boundaries that limit imaginable genders: the articulation and performance of a gender by one who does not conform to binary expectations deploys and redistributes binary terms, and that redistribution disrupts and proliferates those terms outside the binary itself (Butler *Gender* 32). By proliferating and recontextualizing binary tools, nonbinary articulation reveals the arbitrary construction of the binary system: though the signified meanings belong to a discourse that preempts the reality of non-normative genders, the deliberate shifting of the signs outside the binary as a means for articulation suggests that their meanings have a flexibility not sanctioned by the regulatory binary apparatus.

As a means of building-up the self, articulation has the potential to direct the other toward an accurate perception of a performed identity. For the nonbinary individual, self-articulation allows for agency in the face of the other's gaze. In deliberately constructing their physical appearance, the nonbinary self can control the signs available on their body; by critically utilizing language and the nonbinary self can persuade the other toward an accurate reading of

those signs. Both methods serve as critical measures in the realization of the self. However, operating within a binary world means that there are plenty of opportunities for the nonbinary self to be misunderstood. Recognizing the difficulty in articulating the nonbinary self is crucial for understanding the conceptual incommensurability between nonbinary self and binary other.

IV. Locating the Nonbinary “I”

The project of self-articulation aims to provide an accurate representation of the self; in doing so, the other may be directed toward the self’s performative intentions. The subjective pronoun of self-articulation is “I”: using the linguistic construction “I am,” the self establishes a conceptual image of their identity. Philosopher George Herbert Mead suggests that the “I” cannot be an object of consciousness: although it informs the articulated identity, the nonbinary “I” is not an attainable concept itself. Where, then, does the “I” come from, and how does it translate to a performed self?

In “The Mechanism of Social Consciousness,” Mead differentiates between the “me” and the “I” of the self, where “me” is the social projection and “I” is the essential self. This “me” stands for the embodied consciousness that interacts with the world. Its building-up is intersubjective: the possibility of a verbal gesture affecting the self as it does the other serves as the essential foundation of “me” (140). Mead’s conception of “me” therefore depends on Merleau-Ponty’s common ground. Where common ground cannot be attained – as between nonbinary and binary selves – the viability of “me” becomes threatened. If my “me,” as a social object, cannot be perceived as an intelligible binary being, the other will overwrite the reality of my nonbinary self. “Me” only comes into existence by way of the other’s reading of my performed self: it is always uncertain, subject to the imposition of binary meanings.

Mead's "I," then, is the unseen and unknowable essence that constructs "me." "I" is always out of the reach of my consciousness; instead, the very existence of the "me" implies the existence of an "I." Mead likens the "I" to Kant's transcendental inner self: that is, the "inner sense" which creates a consciousness of "oneself only as one appears to oneself, not as one is" (Mead 141; Brook).⁶ The "I" is what one *is*, the governing essential self that produces "me": thus "me," is always only a near representation of "I." As the embodied consciousness, my "me" (the self I understand myself to be and that I present to the world) is not *me* (my essential self) but rather the constructed image based on the social experiences filtered through that essential self ("I"). Experiences of the world – including the influence of social regulatory practices – inform the "I," which in turn establishes the performance of the "me."

Butler also conceives the "I" as an unconscious entity constructed by external forces, although she does not see a distinction between it and the "me." She suggests that "the possibility of my persistence as an 'I' depends upon my being able to do something with what is done with me" (*Undoing* 3). In order to be a nonbinary "I" the self has to be able to do something with the ways they are done by norms and the other's binary perceptions: the regulating practices evident in perception, self-articulation, and gender not only shape the self, but also the contingency of an "I." In the binary matrix, the nonbinary self comes into being precisely because of what is done to the body. The intersubjective nature of perception constructs an othered self, which then encounters corrective pressures in the act of articulating and performing their self. Threatened by this framework, which seeks to erase the unintelligible, the "I" must "do something" with what has been done to it in the interest of its continuation.

⁶ See Brook for further aspects of Kant's consciousness and understanding of self.

To be an “I,” then, requires that something be done with norms. The nonbinary self, though a product of regulating norms, also depends on norms for its existence; denying the reality of this constituting condition, however, cannot establish the “I.” Rather, the “I” that I am must endeavor “to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to [norms]” (*Undoing* 3). The very nonbinary identity embodies an acute self-consciousness as a result of its relation to the gender binary; thus the nonbinary self has the awareness to critically incorporate norms into their identity. The deliberate nature of this incorporation subverts the purpose of norms: where the binary apparatus seeks to construct homogeneous gendered beings, the critical nonbinary implementation of binary norms in fact represents a commentary on the constructedness and limited reality of sanctioned gender. In other words, the very manipulation of norms destabilizes the fiction of stable gender identities. As a being that cannot “*be* without *doing*,” the nonbinary self becomes an “I” by doing norms critically (ibid).

This nonbinary realization necessarily meets resistance when conducted within the binary matrix. The “I,” Butler concludes, becomes “threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this ‘I’ fully recognizable” (*Undoing* 3). Norms, though done critically, must also preserve familiarity for the binary other: the nonbinary self must take legibility as its goal in order to maintain a viable personhood. Because the constitution of self is intersubjective, nonbinary utilization of norms must accomplish intelligibility for the binary other.

The constrictive nature of the gender binary requires that the self perform an intelligible (binary) gender before personhood can be granted. Constructing such a performance often means the repression or erasure of the authentic identity. For some individuals, these conditions make life unlivable – even more so than not being recognized as human at all. Thus, the nonbinary self

may decide to distance itself from norms altogether rather than gain “a sense of intelligibility by virtue of norms that will only do [the self] in from another direction” (Butler, *Undoing* 3). Doing so may well make a sense of social belonging impossible, but the self will remain intact. This refusal of intelligibility too works as a critical “doing” of gender norms; even as the consequent nonbinary “I” precedes an unintelligible social “me,” the coherent self maintains its reality. Doing norms through incorporation or refusal establishes a nonbinary “I”; if the goal is personhood, though, the self must incorporate the limiting norms into an intelligible social projection.

A cohesive self contains two constituting entities: the “me” and the “I.” As the publically presented social object, “me” serves as the site of contact between nonbinary self and the binary world. The self it performs is an approximation of the identity contained in the “I.” Although always out of the reach on consciousness, “I” is shaped by both an “essential” self as well as the regulating forces of the social world. The difference between “me” and “I” is significant for its distinction between external and internal selves. My self For Others is always in the process of “doing” norms: for example, Butler says that gender is constantly being done for or with the other (*Undoing* 1). Because it is an intersubjectively constructed object, this external self is never completely my own. The internal self – the For Myself – is the locus of my “truth.” Although “I” is always being done by norms, it does not negotiate its own unity for intelligibility. Instead, the “I” – in order to persist as an “I” – must mediate its projected “me” to appear intelligible to the other.

V. Conclusion

The empathetic gap between nonbinary self and binary other does not arise spontaneously, but is actually the product of socially regulated norms that impose a limiting reality. These norms structure and reinforce conceptual categories that determine what is humanly possible (Crawley et al 87). Because the binary world does not allow space for what it considers “inhuman,” the nonbinary self must make the self-conscious effort to perform its identity – its internal “I” – in a way that the other can comprehend. However, without common ground, which Merleau-Ponty requires for meaningful communication, accurate perception may not be a possibility.

The nonbinary “I” has two primary challenges in achieving intelligibility for the binary other. The first is the perceptive act, which is the crucial site of recognition. As the other perceives the body of the self they unconsciously assign meanings to the signs they find there. However, because the meanings the other calls up are already located in the binary, the authentic identity of the perceived coherent self is overwritten, often with a delinquently gendered image. Behavior toward the self reflects this perception: such delinquency is often punished, either verbally or physically, in an effort to assert the immutability of the binary system. As the conceived self is constituted through intersubjectivity, the nonbinary self becomes conscious of its otherness, consequently perceiving and interacting with the world from the outside.

Because of this erasure of the nonbinary intentions, the self endeavors to articulate its identity in order to clearly portray its truth. Even with this act of agency, one cannot direct the binary other toward an accurate perception of the nonbinary self. Without the conceptual foundation afforded by shared meanings, the other is not able to approach the possibility of such a perception. The signs and tools available for self-articulation originate in the gender binary such that any interpretation of the nonbinary self is constrained by that system’s established

meanings. Thus the non-normative gendered performance of the nonbinary self marks it as unintelligible, rendering it inhuman in the eyes of the binary other. In order to be granted personhood, nonbinary must take legibility as its performative goal.

All of this seems to suggest that nonbinary cannot exist as a legitimate social category. Certainly, the very construction of the gender binary preempts the possibility of dislocated identities. The nonbinary individual, as a subject in a binary social system, struggles to be perceived as an accurate representation of their self. Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna condense this dilemma when they wonder:

Could a person with a transgendered identity translate [that identity] into a public transgendered attribution, where the attributor would say ‘That’s neither a woman nor a man,’ rather than ‘I can’t tell if that’s a woman or a man’? To cultivate such an attribution in this third sense of transgender (beyond or through) is extraordinarily difficult and might be impossible.

In its perception and articulation, the nonbinary self is always understood according to the gender binary; thus the “cultivation” of a context in which the other might naturally read a nonbinary body as neither/nor seems an impossibility. However, this does not mean that nonbinary is necessarily an illegitimate gender category. Recontextualizing binary signs and meanings serves as the nonbinary self’s entrance into a social world that denies its very imaginability. Nonbinary becomes a conceptual category precisely through its deliberate efforts to establish itself; for the binary matrix to consider it a legitimate reality, though, may well be impossible, as Kessler and McKenna suggest. The disparate conceptions of a possible reality, then, cement the incommensurable relationship between nonbinary self and binary other.

As Butler suggests, narrowing that conceptual gap is not necessarily always the goal of the nonbinary self. If doing so means a devaluation of its reality, the self may choose to forego intelligibility. Such a performance makes the nonbinary experience one of perpetual negotiation and delegitimization. The experiences narrated in *Gender Failure* illustrate the possibilities of living as nonbinary in a limiting gender structure. Spoon and Coyote's interactions with the world highlight their dislocation from the gender binary but also propose means for authentic nonbinary existence. A close reading of four aspects of their gender experiences – their relationships with their bodies, language, their sexualities, and the social world – suggest that nonbinary individuals perform their selves with a self-consciousness that secures their personhood within a world that marks their reality as an impossibility.

Chapter Two

The Razor Edge of Accommodation: Violent Perception and the Nonbinary Body in *Gender Failure*

In our binary society, assigning a gender to others is an automatic and, ostensibly, necessary process: at first glance of a stranger, we use visual clues to categorize the other as either male or female. Our minds demand this gender categorization in order to perceive intelligibility in the other: because the binary matrix dictates social interactions, establishing gender roles and expectations is essential in relating to the other. Accepted gendered appearances and behaviors create a set of norms that influence our perception of the other and determine which gender to assign and, subsequently, how that gender assignment will affect interactions. This violent perceptive act necessarily superimposes the self's own meanings over the other's reality; potential violence plays out most evidently at the point of contact between the nonbinary self and the binary other. By definition, the nonbinary self lives external to the gender binary, identifying as neither male nor female, nor anywhere in between. Some nonbinary individuals claim the transgender label – one that can include any non-normative gender identity, such as transsexual, cross-dresser, and genderqueer – thereby orienting themselves in opposition to the norm. The nonbinary performance can take any form, but the binary other rarely perceives it accurately.

Nonbinary gender identities challenge the gendered truths and norms that govern the better part of social interactions; situated outside the binary matrix, the nonbinary identity refuses binary meanings, becoming a figure of unintelligibility for binary others. Thus, though the nonbinary gender experience varies by the extent to which individuals decide to socially and physically perform their identity, it has a substantial impact on the nonbinary individual's relationship with the binary world around them. When a binary self perceives a nonbinary other,

binary truths are forcibly applied to make the nonbinary other legible (Butler, *Undoing* 57). Illegibility of the nonbinary gender experience occurs on multiple levels, most notably the physical body, language, and sociality. The struggle for – or resistance to – legibility characterizes the relationship between the nonbinary self and the binary world.

Due to their position within a binary matrix, the nonbinary self destabilizes the predominant experienced worldview and as such poses a threat to the security of binary categories. Binary gender categories define acceptable identities and offer a stable benchmark protected by norms. Established gender norms regulate the perception of gender, rendering the gendered body intelligible (Butler, *Undoing* 42); presumptions regarding the other's perceived gender identity necessarily erase reality: if my experienced gender falls outside the binary and the other judges the perceived gender against a binary standard, my gender will be read as a (delinquent) binary identity.

In a phenomenological approach to social interactions, processes of performance and perception create a system wherein self and other arrive at different and often conflicting conclusions about identity. The observing self perceives the performance of the other and supplements the imperfect impression with anticipated profiles that stem from the self's own modes of truth. The resultant synthesized image of the performing other cannot faithfully represent the reality of their existence, as the observing self cannot know the truths that define the other. Such a disparity necessarily occurs in all social interactions but the disparity is especially pronounced in the perceptive relationship between the nonbinary self and the external binary world.

An insurmountable gap divides the binary perception from the nonbinary experience. In a phenomenological framework, knowledge of the self – nonbinary or otherwise – is always

complete and knowledge of the other is always imperfect: as the self observes, aspects of the other remain hidden as a result of distinct consciousnesses. The self must literally experience the consciousness of the other in order to fully perceive the other's existence (Merleau-Ponty 359). This gap necessarily forces the self to make presumptions about the nature of the other's hidden reality, creating what Edmund Husserl calls a "world," the quotation marks suggesting an imposed reality that is somehow less authentic than the actual reality (138). This causes a distortion between how the self identifies and how the other perceives that identity. The only constant is the experienced world, which exists subjectively to every individual's position within it; thus it lacks conformity in how it affects its subjects. In other words, although the nonbinary self and binary other experience the same objective world, their subjective identities determine the meanings they will derive from it: where the other moves in the binary world with relative ease, the nonbinary self must make space for its identity within a normalizing gender matrix.

In the recent text adaptation of their live show *Gender Failure*, Ivan Coyote and Rae Spoon – two individuals assigned female at birth and who now use the singular pronoun "they" – address the everyday nonbinary experience through personal anecdotes extending from childhood to the present. These stories flesh out a gender narrative that resists categorization and familiarization. The nonbinary gender experience tends to alienate the individual owing to a social system that compulsively seeks to organize and stabilize threats to binary order; Coyote and Spoon expound on such alienation and thereby highlight the illegibility of the nonbinary experience for a binary other.

For individuals with incoherent gender presentations, the public restroom works as a site of contention with the binary world. Here, gender segregation reifies the gender binary and so gender presentations receive stringent scrutiny. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception

proves useful in considering nonbinary gender experiences with regards to the question of public restrooms. Binary perceptions pose a threat to the nonbinary self, who may face persecution based on their gender presentation; likewise, the binary self may feel threatened by the uncategorizable (and therefore dangerous) body of the nonbinary other. Bodily morphology rarely plays a role in public interactions, as it is not on display and therefore the other cannot perceive it; if morphology affects public life in any way, it is in the choice between gendered restrooms.

Coyote – who prefers to perform masculinity – uses public restrooms only as a last resort after having endured countless instances of harassment. Due to their anatomy – or perhaps because the other option presents a greater threat to their safety – Coyote chooses to use the women’s restroom when gender-neutral, single-stall facilities are unavailable (205). They know their gender presentation startles or even frightens women who perceive Coyote through a binary lens; as only two restroom options exist, so too must Coyote’s nonbinary self adhere to one of two accepted gender presentations. Coyote understands the fear their appearance elicits: women who support strictly segregated restrooms express concerns that men will use any leniency as a front for committing sexual violence (Benvenuto). Coyote’s own experiences, however, suggest that the nonbinary self cannot expect safety in the women’s restroom either:

[E]very time a nice lady in her new pantsuit for travelling screams or stares at me, I try to remember that this is maybe her first encounter with someone who doesn’t appear to be much of a lady in the ladies’ room. [...] She doesn’t know I have been verbally harassed in women’s washrooms for years. She doesn’t know I have been hauled out with my pants still undone by security guards and smashed over the head with a giant handbag once. (206-7)

Although in general the nonbinary gender experience resists binary categorization, the use of public restrooms requires compliance. Coyote chooses the restroom based on their anatomical configuration; however, the binary other cannot perceive this aspect of Coyote's existence – perceiving masculine gender attributes – misreads Coyote's presence as a threat.

In the phenomenological framework, the body acts as one of the great sites of friction between the nonbinary self and the binary world. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the body expresses existence at every moment, just as a word signifies thought (166). The nonbinary body, in its incoherence, signifies an existence that cannot be read as human by the binary other (Butler, *Undoing* 28). The inhuman nonbinary self threatens the safety and stability of the binary other, demonstrated by Coyote's experiences in the extreme binary apparatus of the public restroom. Phenomenology provides a useful system for understanding the ways nonbinary identities challenge gender intelligibility.

The stage performance of *Gender Failure* toured internationally in 2012. With minimal staging, Spoon and Coyote occupy the center of the audience's attention. This situation enables a transgression of gender norms at a micro level: the image of their physical bodies reifies the nonbinary experiences portrayed in their narratives, forcing their audience to reconcile Spoon and Coyote's performances with "ready made" binary gendered meanings. The text reproduction transfers that ability, placing photos of the authors alongside personal essays. In both media, Spoon and Coyote control the discourse: the audience cannot escape the embodied reality of the nonbinary narratives they perceive and consequently struggle to overlay their binary truths onto the nonbinary other (James 2-4). The staging of the live performance as well as the creative control in publishing the book affords a significant ability to determine the delivery of their

words; despite the deliberate presentation of their identity, the gap between self and binary other remains insurmountable (Flegg).

A primary source of the illegibility of nonbinary genders stems from linguistic barriers: the binary matrix offers little space for the articulation of nonbinary existence without resorting to the use of binary language. As a result, nonbinary identities necessarily rely on the binary for articulation: even the term ‘nonbinary’ requires the existence of the binary for its meaning. Examining nonbinary genders from within a phenomenological framework reveals the indeterminacy of nonbinary realities that cannot be perceived by those who do not inhabit them: intelligibility may be attempted, but only on the terms of the binary matrix. Throughout *Gender Failure*, Spoon and Coyote strive to elucidate the nonbinary experience; but for an observing audience operating within the binary structure, perceptions of the performers’ gender will always derive intelligibility from binary meanings.

I. Bodies and Embodiment

The body one feels oneself to inhabit is not necessarily the one the other perceives. Mannerisms, body language, dress codes, and any number of cosmetic modifications contribute to bodily performance; however, the meaning of the synthesized whole depends on the observer’s position in relation to the binary. In considering the body of the other the “very first of all cultural objects,” Merleau-Ponty asks how an object in space can render an existence legible (348-9). The body-as-object occupies a place in the field of perception; this field accrues social and cultural contexts that inscribe meaning onto the perceived object. However, the whole of the object can never be perceived in one moment; instead, the perceived whole is the result of the synthesis of retained and anticipated profiles of the object (Detmer 103). The anticipated profiles

are those informed by the perceptive field's social and cultural contexts and the observer's relation to them. Consequently, the meaning of these yet-to-be-seen aspects of the perceived body emerges from the observer's preexisting meanings, overwriting the reality experienced by that body. The public body, therefore, is never quite only our own: through the body "gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings" (Butler, *Undoing* 20). While the self assumes autonomy over how the body is presented for recognition, the social meaning of that performance necessarily depends on external forces.

The nonbinary body resists recognition by the binary other. Perceptions of the nonbinary body that originate from within the binary matrix strip the nonbinary self of the reality of their existence. As a cultural object, the body acts as the initial site of contact between the self and the perceiving other; this contact between the nonbinary body and binary perception creates a friction that destabilizes the gender binary. Judith Butler suggests that for those who depend on the boundaries of the gender binary for stability, the uncategorizable nonbinary body prompts a violent need to restore order (*Undoing* 34). Coyote experiences violent retaliation in public restrooms because of their apparently delinquent body. The violence enacted upon Spoon emerges from external social forces that manifest as self-harm. In both cases, the violence acts as a regulatory mechanism for maintaining the order set by the gender binary. The friction between the body of the nonbinary self and the external world begins for both Coyote and Spoon in childhood. In a set of chapters titled "Girl Failure," the authors describe the ways their bodies resist binary expectations before their nonbinary gender identities are realized.

Coyote's sense of 'girl failure' originates in the demise of a childhood friendship. In Janine, Coyote finds a friend who also loves sports and despises Barbies: a comrade in the

struggle against the traditional narrative of girlhood (22). Around the cataclysmic start of junior high, however, Coyote begins to feel distanced from Janine, who shows a budding interest in home ec and cheerleading. In retrospect, what Coyote sees as the culprit in this estrangement was the interposition of womanhood, which includes Janine's devotion to cheerleading, her interest in boys, and her growing breasts (23). The moment that drives the decisive wedge between the two friends, Coyote says, is the slumber party. Rather than their traditional celebration of Janine's birthday – movies and a bucket of fried chicken shared between the two of them – Janine throws a slumber party and invites her newer, more feminine friends in addition to Coyote. The party is unsurprisingly miserable, but it only gets worse after Coyote and the girls settle in to sleep: curled in the dark on their thin bedroll, Coyote overhears Janine telling her friends about Coyote's genital configuration; although not technically intersexed, Coyote's body is indeterminate enough that these preteen girls knew to categorize it as physically abnormal. They giggle and shriek words like 'sick' while Coyote feigns sleep (24). Rather than attempting to force binary legibility onto Coyote's body, the girls instead create a third category in which Coyote is intelligible only as a deviation from the binary ideal, demonstrating the utility of the normal/abnormal (human/inhuman) binary in policing conformity to the gender binary.

Coyote marks this moment as the beginning of their fear of changing in front of others in public locker rooms: they use toilet stalls and they have "a scar on [their] elbow where [they] split it open on the rough edge of a toilet paper dispenser to prove it" (24). As a result of this first vocalized fear of their physical ambiguity, Coyote learned to accommodate the concerns of binary others in public spaces and experiences their own fear of physical and psychic pain in the process. Binary others perceive the world from within the binary matrix; Coyote's body – both the indeterminate sexual surface and the illegible gendered body – does not adhere to a

sanctioned binary performance, triggering the urge to restore order. In some situations, such as public restrooms and locker rooms, Coyote has to take conscious steps to protect themselves from the violence intended to maintain the gender binary. According to Butler, “the person who threatens violence proceeds from the anxious and rigid belief that a sense of world and a sense of self will be radically undermined if [the nonbinary body], uncategorizable, is permitted to live within the social world” (*Undoing* 34). The binary other’s anxiety stems from the possibility that the strict gender categories on which they depend for social meanings are unstable and, worse, unnatural. Violence toward nonbinary bodies and performances is meant to delineate what can be considered human. Consequently, innocuous tasks in the public world become threats to the nonbinary physical and psychic self.

For Spoon, ‘girl failure’ corresponds with a deep bodily shame. Raised in a Pentecostal household in Calgary, Alberta, Spoon comes of age steeped in conservative notions of appropriate gender roles and behavior. Despite having been socialized as a girl in such an atmosphere, Spoon says, “being a girl is something that never really happened for [them]” (27). This phraseology suggests that ‘being a girl’ is not an innate quality of the female body but rather something that has been imposed upon it, the social construction of the gender-neutral infant into a gendered being. Spoon feels they never went through this gendering process and instead remains – at their core – gender-neutral.

In an attempt to avoid verbal and physical retribution – and thus psychic discomfort – Spoon adopts a performance of binary femininity expected by their parents and peers. The disruption of this disguise occurs in a sex-segregated junior high gym class. One of the first activity units for the girls is dance aerobics; outside, the boys play rugby, which “look[s] violent,” but not as dangerous as what Spoon expects to experience on the dance floor (28).

Although their identity manifests as an uncomfortable and delinquent girlhood, the young Spoon already experiences the danger of the binary regulatory apparatus. Having been taught that dancing is sinful, Spoon finds that their body struggles with the movements that come so easily to the other girls. Spoon wonders whether their body also resists the overt feminine performance prescribed by an external social force (ibid.). The gym teacher, a compliant subject of the binary matrix, expects all of the girls in her class to step easily into the binary femininity that is their birthright. Because the binary other perceives Spoon's body as female, Spoon feels a compulsion to conform; they participate in dance class until "some distant part of [their] psyche" impels them to literally bolt in fear from the gymnasium, escaping the binary expectations the instructor and their peers impose upon them.

This coercive binary conformity instigates a violent relationship between Spoon's internal nonbinary self and their external perceived body. In the locker room of that same gym class, Spoon overhears their classmates talking about shaving their legs; ashamed of not having performed this binary behavior, Spoon ducks into a toilet stall to change (27) – like Coyote, Spoon finds refuge in the only individual space in the public locker room. This 'girl failure' torments Spoon throughout the day. That night in the bathtub, they use their mother's pink razor to shave their legs; unskilled in this particular feminine act, Spoon cuts their legs (28). This first attempt to conform to binary gender expectations literally wounds the self, both at the level of the skin as well as on a psychic level; the blood dripping from Spoon's legs embodies the razor-edged divide between acceptable and delinquent gender performances. Puberty magnifies Spoon's violent relationship with their body: it forces that relationship to become a battle of the internal self against the external self.

Judith Halberstam characterizes puberty as the “persistence of the flesh,” a purely biological process that overrides the gendered identity (“Transgender” 465). As this persistence forces Spoon’s physical body to become categorically female, they believe that their internal self will “stay they same: ambivalent to the confusing expectations that surround [them]” (116). This split between internal and external selves suggests another psychic wounding that is deeply rooted in the negotiation of a nonbinary identity within a binary matrix; as (an unquestionably and visibly female) puberty progresses, Spoon loses control over their part in that negotiation and the split widens. Spoon’s body changes, taking on the anticipated female shape of their sex and as a result Spoon can no longer manipulate how others read their body. In a final bid to gain control over their physical body, Spoon decides to stop eating, to prevent the body they hate from becoming more abhorrent (ibid.).

Again the body suffers the psychic pain of occupying a gender non-space and almost disappears completely; Spoon recognizes that their body signifies a gender that they do not claim, and acts as a barrier to accurate perceptions by binary others. The binary other perceives Spoon’s nonbinary body from within the binary matrix and thus attempts to compel the perceived gender to fit into a binary category. Spoon’s acknowledgement of this process allows them to dismantle the enforced social construction of gender based on the body, thereby separating their gender identity from the appearance of their physical body. Only once this acknowledgement has been made can Spoon heal the division between internal and external selves.

Not all nonbinary individuals feel the need to medically alter their body in order to provide the binary other with an accurate reading of the nonbinary body. For Coyote, the surgical reconstruction of their chest – i.e. a double mastectomy – is necessary for bodily as well as

psychic comfort. In the medical process of physical alteration there is no traditional narrative for nonbinary bodies: bureaucratic gatekeepers familiar with transsexual surgical alterations (those that alter primary and secondary sex characteristics to align with an individual's binary gender identity and are performed in conjunction with hormone therapy) find it difficult to approve a body for surgery when the patient does not intend to emerge on the opposite side of the binary. Coyote finds that, in order to be approved for insurance coverage, they have to perform a familiar binary transsexual narrative.

Coyote does not want to transition from female to male, but there is no narrative available for individuals who identify as Coyote does; of the many forms they had to fill out, Coyote says, "there is no box for not wanting a box at all. No one knows how to fix that" (70). For the bureaucratic gatekeepers, chest reconstruction surgery is ultimately about 'fixing' the patient so that they can accurately perform a binary gender, which, as far as the regulatory matrix is concerned, begins in the body. In fact, the pivotal question in Coyote's initial interview with a therapist is whether or not Coyote wears a prosthetic penis (*ibid.*). Where their disinterest in taking hormones was sure to disqualify Coyote for insurance coverage, their affirmative answer to this question receives the therapist's approval; the success depends wholly on Coyote's adherence to binary norms, signified here by their desire for that immutable sign of maleness. Whether or not Coyote actually packs is irrelevant: what matters is that they must appear to live a binary narrative – written by binary, normatively gendered people – in order to achieve a livable body.

II. Speaking a Language That Can Be Heard

After positioning the physical body in the social world, the next strategy for articulating an existence is the use of language. For the nonbinary self, the articulation of existence inevitably comes up against the barrier of available language; no language for describing the nonbinary gender experience exists: articulation must be attempted via binary language. Gayle Salamon identifies self-definition as a linguistic act, thereby underscoring the power of language; at the same time, she acknowledges the difficulty in using language to articulate nonnormative genders: “gender...must be separated from language in order to be seen clearly, and the labor of elucidating that which escapes language through the use of language itself is a formidable and frustrating task indeed” (82). The nonbinary gender experience already seems unintelligible to the binary other; the use of the established language – in both pronouns as well as the adjectival agreement in romance languages – undermines the project of articulation by situating the nonbinary experience within the confines of binary understanding: the nonbinary self only approaches intelligibility through a reliance on the hegemonic gender system, a means that necessarily strips away the crucial independence from the binary.

The attempt to articulate the nonbinary experience resists Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the social phenomenon of communication. He sees the system of communication as the self’s appropriation of the other’s thought as expressed through speech; this process not only enriches the self’s own thoughts, but also allows for the ability to think the way the perceived other thinks (179). Due to the linguistic and experiential barriers between the nonbinary and the binary, a true taking up of the other’s thoughts can never be achieved. For the binary other to be able to think according to the nonbinary self, a common language must be established, but, as Merleau-Ponty himself points out: “people can speak to us only a language which we already understand” (178); meaning can be ascribed to a signifying word only if we already possess the meaning. The

nonbinary gender identity must be psychically and bodily experienced in order for the meaning to be known. Self-articulation can attempt to define the nonbinary gender experience, but until a specifically nonbinary language exists, binary others will only ever understand the self on their own terms.

When language fails to achieve its goal, binary others cannot perceive the reality of the nonbinary existence; precise language allows the self to take up the other's thoughts, and without it the distance between perception and reality cannot be bridged. Coyote describes this distance between them and the surgeon's staff prior to their chest reconstruction surgery: although the staff has experience working with transgender patients and conducts their task professionally and amiably, Coyote "never quite feels like [the staff] truly [understands them]" (96). Even when the binary other can take in the general sense of the narrative told by the nonbinary self, a grasp of the reality of the nonbinary existence can never be fully reached: the staff do not already possess the meaning of the nonbinary existence. In other words, having not lived in opposition to the hegemonic social structure, the surgical staff cannot empathize with Coyote's gender experience. Their resultant perception overlays Coyote's reality, creating Husserl's phenomenological "world" and discounting the authenticity of Coyote's identity.

Nonbinary gendered individuals know that the language does not exist to accurately define their existence. Merleau-Ponty explains that, when direct perception fails to create an accurate understanding of the other, the self must rely on observed correlations between the experience of the self and the other (352); again, this precludes the authenticity of the reality, as the binary other lacks the experience to perceive actual correlations with the nonbinary self: thus the nonbinary existence is silenced or erased in the act of being perceived. The internal hurts this causes in the nonbinary self reifies the lack of space afforded them in the binary world. Coyote

acknowledges that the nature of communication between the nonbinary self and the binary other makes recognition impossible, and yet:

[The] truth is that every time I am misgendered, a tiny little sliver of me disappears. A tiny little sliver of me is reminded that I do not fit, I am not this, I am not that, I am not seen, I can't be recognized, I have no name. I remember that the truth of me is invisible, and a tiny little sliver of me disappears. Just a sliver, razored from the surface of my very thick skin most days, but other times right from my soul, sometimes felt so deep and other days simply shrugged off, but still. All those slivers add up to something much harder to pretend around. (246)

Like Spoon, Coyote feels the razor-sharp edge of gender conformity. Their gender performance and identity do not line up with binary expectations, and so the reality of the nonbinary self is pared away until only a skeleton of their existence remains. Without the language to correct binary perceptions, Coyote and other nonbinary individuals must resign themselves to a narrative that can be interpreted by binary observers but that does not accurately reflect their identity or experience.

The binary narratives that nonbinary individuals tell must have some measure of familiarity for the binary other; this typically means such narratives fall within the category of transgender. Although many nonbinary people consider their identity to be a form of transgenderism, the transgender narrative still tends to exist within the binary structure: the dominant conception of a transperson is one that identifies with the gender at the opposite end of the spectrum and takes steps to embody that binary gender identity. Coming from a background of strict binary gender expectations, Spoon initially takes up the female-to-male transgender narrative. It “seem[s] to fit” for Spoon, who had never known that gender could be an option

rather than a concrete fact. The move within the gender binary reaches Spoon's deeper feelings of discontent with how their body represents their self; however, their body still poses a barrier for an authentic representation, but Spoon decides that this is due to their decision not to pursue hormones (as a musician by trade, Spoon cannot afford the vocal changes that testosterone would cause) (117).

As this binary transgender identity comes into conflict within the binary system, the fit becomes less accurate: Spoon realizes that even binary transgender people cannot meet the ideal social expectations of transmasculinity – the characteristics of the transman who consciously constructs sanctioned binary masculinity – and so stops attempting to present a body that fits either end of the binary spectrum, at last claiming a nonbinary identity (241). Spoon's efforts to live a legible binary existence by way of a transgender narrative demonstrate the futility of such a feat: conceptions of transgender narratives as binary phenomena erase the reality of the nonbinary gender identity. Taking up this narrative as a person raised within the binary matrix and therefore performing a binary identity, Spoon experiences gender misperceptions and identity erasure; Spoon thus learns that the binary offers no space for their gender identity. The binary language they use to define their identity for themselves creates the same distance between the lived and interior selves that exists between the nonbinary self and the binary other. This conceptual gap invalidates the nonbinary experience as the binary other situates it within a binary context.

In transitioning to a nonbinary gender performance, Spoon comes up against the question of pronouns. As the primary tool for delineating between gendered beings, pronouns pose a significant challenge in navigating the social world as a nonbinary person. Though many options for gender-neutral pronouns are unfamiliar (*ze/zir/zirs*, for example), but many nonbinary

individuals – perhaps in an attempt to remain somewhat legible to binary others – use the singular ‘they’ (“Need”). When Spoon initially learns that people use this pronoun, they think “it would be pretty hard to get people to actually call you that outside the queer community” (200). This concern gets at the issue of legitimacy often tied up in the use of language to articulate a nonbinary gender identity: Western language depends on a binary system for intelligibility, and so the binary world perceives any language that makes room for nonbinary articulation illegitimate. Endeavoring to use ‘they’ for others feels like learning a foreign language for Spoon; still living according to the binary matrix, Spoon themselves struggles to accept this third gender pronoun as legitimate. As their gender identity shifts to nonbinary, however, “they” becomes to feel more accurate: the gender-neutral pronoun gives Spoon space to perform their gender without allowing the perceiving other to rely on language to read Spoon’s gender (201).

Coyote, too, uses “they” because it feels more right than either binary pronoun. That feeling of “rightness” plays a large part in living a livable nonbinary life for Coyote (221). Coyote and Spoon both strive to be recognized as their authentic selves; however, the terms that determine recognition originate in socially constituted binary gender norms. This imposition of conflicting terms, Butler claims, could make the subject’s life unlivable. Unlivability is not the terminus of imposed binary language: rather, Butler sees it as an opportunity for “establishing more inclusive conditions” for determining recognition (*Undoing* 4). The possibility for more inclusive conditions can be found in the acceptance of gender-neutral pronouns as legitimate. Pronouns, Coyote believes, should be used based on what makes a person comfortable. Unfortunately, this line of reasoning does not make sense for most binary-minded individuals, who understand that, even though the binary spectrum includes varying degrees of femininity and masculinity, “she” and “he” cover all possible gender identities.

A linguistic common ground must be established so that the nonbinary existence can be accurately communicated to the binary other, thereby creating space in the lexicon for nonbinary voices. Currently, Coyote finds that they have to use language in such a way that ensures comfort for the binary other rather than expressing Coyote's existence: by, for example, assuring the women in the public restroom that Coyote was also assigned female at birth (208). The common ground, then, is uneven. Because of their daily experience on such uneven ground, Coyote believes that a truly accurate language – binary or otherwise – cannot exist: “These are just words, and words are always imperfect, words are just sounds we make with our mouths that point our minds to think of things that cannot be fully described in words anyway” (247). Acknowledging the truth of this characterization of language – particularly the language meant to define the individual self – could establish a compromise – if not a common ground – where language is accepted as subjective. Such a compromise, while imperfect, would delay if not deny the imposition of the other's meanings.

III. Sexuality and the Gendered Self

The experience and performance of sexuality transforms the body into a means of relating to the external world. Merleau-Ponty considers sexuality the exemplar of transcendence because – via the animation of the body through desire – it establishes an experiential relationship between the self and the world (Salamon 56). Sexual relationships in the binary world force the nonbinary self to negotiate the conflict between the gendered self and the sexed body; the performance of the body does not necessarily result in an accurate portrayal of the self. Thus, a nonbinary individual whose gender identity is illegible at the bodily surface may have to work to earn a socially granted gender so as to receive the attention of the desired object; for

example, Spoon appears, at the surface, feminine, which becomes an obstacle when they try to date men. Often, Spoon's appearance and voice prompts immediate dismissal by gay men and even friends: "You probably don't have what I like in a man," or "Honey, I don't think he dates men like you" (175-6). This tendency to erase the non-normative gender identity and the self-defined sexual orientation to only consider the sexed body demonstrates the serious inability of the binary other to take in all parts of the nonbinary existence in order to create a unified whole.

In response to these immediate dismissals, Spoon turns to Grindr, a dating app they hope will provide "a window into the world of gay male cruising" (176). What Spoon gets instead are cold rejections based entirely on the language they use to describe themselves – i.e. complete candor about their transgender identity – rather than on their appearance and voice. (Although Spoon does include a photo of themselves, because of the context in which it is viewed, others initially perceive Spoon as a younger effeminate man.) While Spoon has complete control in how they present themselves, they still experience dismissal as a valid candidate for gay male sexual partner. Spoon learns that the rules that govern physical bodies in the gay community leaves little space for nonbinary bodies: all of the replies to their profile Spoon receives demand to know whether Spoon has had their genitals surgically altered (ibid.)

Just as in every other aspect of their life, Spoon must work against the norms that determine what gendered bodies are allowable in order to find a partner. Butler underscores the protective power of social norms against the threat of the uncategorizable other (*Undoing* 28): the gay community upholds strict norms for gender and sexual performances, which for many gay men means the presence of a penis; in other words, Spoon's "female" anatomy represents for these men the possibility of being marked as heterosexual. This particular physical absence

causes Spoon to be read as ‘other,’ a threat that many of the men they find on Grindr are not willing to take on.

Eventually, Spoon turns back to their own queer community, meeting partners through friends. When they still identified as transgender, Spoon had to consciously maintain their gender narrative: new binary partners were subject to a vetting period to determine whether they really believed Spoon’s gender narrative. Spoon drew from existing heterosexual and homosexual narratives to establish the story of their relationships: for example, when dating women Spoon sought out women who identified as women and who accepted Spoon as a man, justifying their relationship as heterosexual (240). When they begin to identify as nonbinary, Spoon’s approach to relationships shifts. According to Butler, sexual orientation results from a very specific life history and narrative (*Undoing* 80); the fluidity of Spoon’s gender history has necessarily created a flexible understanding of sexuality and the narratives they tell reflect that. When they date, they have to find partners who understand Spoon as nonbinary (even if they cannot fully comprehend ‘nonbinary’), and they still need to agree on a narrative – one where the relationship is not gendered at all (242). The narratives are important: they provide guidelines for Spoon and their partner for how society will expect the couple to interact with each other and the world.

Coyote’s sexual narrative lacks the fluidity of Spoon’s: their binary gendered partner has remained a constant throughout Coyote’s gender journey. The two do not rely on a narrative (binary or otherwise) to understand their relationship. Consequently, they have achieved a level of intimacy where the binary other comes close to perceiving the reality of the nonbinary self. Coyote’s partner knows how Coyote experiences their nonbinary existence to the best of her ability. However, she cannot perceive Coyote’s existence fully unless she physically and

psychically experiences Coyote's nonbinary gender: despite their intimacy, there will always be that disparity of perception. Their intimacy, though, allows Coyote to relate to the external world – in the form of their partner – with nearly complete authenticity. Laurie Spurling suggests that “[there] are times of almost total integration between consciousness and body, in those moments when we are truly ‘at home’ in our bodies (such as, perhaps, sexual intercourse) and experience our body, not as a screen between us and the world, but as our opening onto the world” (24). Coyote's desire for their partner and the intimacy they share situates Coyote in the world as a sexual being whose gender identity, for the moment, is not relevant in the experience of the body. At the same time, their partner does not need to define Coyote's gender in order to perceive them as a sexual being; Coyote can, as Spurling suggests, experience the world as a physically and psychically unified whole.

IV. The Nonbinary Self as Social Object

The meaning of an individual's existence depends entirely on their interactions with the social world. The binary matrix is a permanent field of existence, and though the self may turn away from it, the meaning of their gendered existence will always be situated in relation to it (Merleau-Ponty 361); the pervasiveness of the binary matrix makes total escape from its constraints impossible. The nonbinary self, then, must negotiate the binary structure of the social world in order to maintain their existence. Friction between the nonbinary self and the external world – caused by binary others, gender norms, and physical spaces – threatens the stability of the nonbinary identity. As a result of their negative experiences with public restrooms, Coyote feels that the conflict arises from the exclusion of nonbinary people from public spaces: “we live in a world that is unable to make room enough for trans people to pee in safety” (205). The

physical and social structures of the binary world are not accessible for nonbinary individuals, causing people – including Coyote – to seek out wheelchair-accessible, gender-neutral restrooms; consequently, the nonbinary gender identity becomes a literal impairment for navigating the external world. Coyote, though, does not see women in public restrooms as adversaries, but rather “the potential for many built-in comrades in the fight for gender-neutral, single-stall locking washrooms in all public places” (208). Sex-segregated restrooms allow gender-normative women to police unintelligible nonbinary bodies; gender-neutral restrooms would not only protect the safety of both groups but also make room for nonbinary people within the physical and social binary architectures.

An individual claims space within the binary social structure in their use of identity labels. The identity labels that nonbinary individuals use can sometimes overlap and conflict with binary notions of identity. Coyote, for example, still identifies as butch; in their usage, however, “butch” does not qualify the noun “woman” (233). Although butch is a binary term used primarily in the lesbian community to signify masculinity, Coyote has claimed it as a gender category for their nonbinary identity; for them, ‘butch’ occupies the non-space outside the gender binary, although others do not always read it as such. In all perceptive acts, the binary other will resist nonbinary readings and will instead project the binary system onto the nonbinary self. Coyote finds that, even in the queer community, others ascribe differing binary gender labels to them in an effort to ‘claim’ Coyote as a spokesperson. After a solo show in Seattle, a woman approaches Coyote and thanks them for speaking up for butch women; Coyote smiles, but does not feel that had been the crux of their show. Shortly after the woman leaves, a young man steps up to Coyote to thank them for representing transgender men; again, Coyote just smiles, knowing that correcting the man will serve no purpose (233-4). Both communities, in

claiming Coyote as their own, perform the binary violence of erasing Coyote's actual identity. Coyote understands that the misinterpretation stems from "limited language and the scarcity of shared meanings of words" (235); as with binary others, the nonbinary self can achieve a linguistic common ground with a queer other only if the other has literally experienced the nonbinary existence. These grateful individuals, though queer, are both subjects of the binary matrix, forming binary interpretations of Coyote's nonbinary narrative.

According to Michel Foucault, all social interactions involve the expectation of surveillance. The nonbinary self, consequently, monitors its behavior to avoid the retribution of binary judges (Crawley et al 89). Like Coyote, Spoon performs on public stages and faces the scrutiny and judgment of binary audiences. As a musician, Spoon has to negotiate their presence as an object onstage with their gender presentation. When they begin to take their music on tour, Spoon is strictly a country singer, a predominantly heteronormative genre. They soon find that the patrons in the venues that book small-time country singers cannot conceive of anything outside the binary; Spoon has to censor themselves in their music to avoid physically violent retribution for straying from accepted binary behavior (136).

By situating their gendered body on a stage, Spoon offers it up to the other's gaze. Merleau-Ponty considers the gaze that runs over the self's body constitutive of a dialectic of the self and other in which the gaze of the other has the ability to steal the body from the self (167). When Spoon performs their music in homophobic and transphobic venues, the patrons' gaze steals Spoon's body as well as the gender identity Spoon inscribes at its surface. To preserve the meaning of their gender performance, Spoon begins to selectively choose venues where patrons allow Spoon to break gender rules; such patrons also seem more accepting of Spoon breaking musical genre rules (164). Spoon's musical career can serve as a microcosm of their nonbinary

gender experience: the hazards Spoon's objective body encounters in the binary social world constructs the performance of their gendered body; binary observers who find some intelligibility in Spoon's performance allow Spoon to bend norms (even slightly) to suit their identity.

Spoon's performing career makes them hyperaware of the violence of the other's perceptive gaze. They understand that in social interactions binary individuals compulsively assign a gender to one another and act out the appropriate script (217). The meaning of gender and gender performances depends on how others external to the self perceive and interpret a gendered existence, despite the self's autonomous quest for recognition; Butler calls this the "lively paradox" of gender presentation (*Undoing* 21). Once a coherent meaning is acquired, the binary other imposes it on the nonbinary self, erasing the actual nonbinary existence. The reality of this erasure disrupts Spoon's performance of their authentic nonbinary self: because the instinct is to assign binary gender narratives to the nonbinary self for intelligibility, Spoon must know how others read their gender in order to know how to behave so they might be recognized as human.

Most of Spoon's public interactions "involve the immediate assignment as a woman, or the slow reveal of people discovering they would rather assign [Spoon] to the category of female" (251). The binary social world seeks to organize and regulate its subjects through social norms: while Spoon's performed self may appear ambiguous, the combination of their appearance and voice (both unaltered by medical intervention) signals to the binary other that Spoon is a woman. Spoon and Coyote – whose identity queer binary others overwrite – experience the perceptive act as one that erases their gender identities. Because the available modes of self-articulation – bodily and verbal – become meaningful only in the other's perception, the nonbinary self must accept a compromise in their gender performance: Coyote,

for example, allows themselves to be viewed as both a butch lesbian and a transgender male because they know those individuals need the validation Coyote provides in their work; they use the feminine pronoun when doing work in public schools because they “want those women and girls to see every kind of she there can be” (222). Coyote’s nonbinary self loses its visibility in these interactions; however, the strategic production of binary intelligibility allows them to encourage gender difference and ambiguity in others, opening up the breadth of accepted gendered realities just a little.

Before any social interaction begins, Spoon wants to ask the other, “what do you think I am” (217)? The binary other’s perception of Spoon’s gender presentation determines the performance expected of Spoon for their gender identity to be considered intelligible. In the construction of that intelligibility, the destructive power of the binary other’s gaze erases the reality of the nonbinary existence in the very moment the nonbinary self is being perceived. Nonbinary individuals like Spoon and Coyote threaten the binary worldview, denaturalize gender categories, and insert themselves into the social world as gendered beings; Spoon and Coyote’s experiences in public spaces and interactions with binary others demonstrate the instability of the binary gender system. The wounding of Spoon’s physical body and the abuse Coyote experiences in public restrooms suggest that the fierce policing of binary boundaries reifies the constraints of accepted gender norms: the apparently delinquent body of the nonbinary self faces violent retribution for refusing binary gender categories.

The phenomenological investigation of nonbinary genders suggests that individuals who do not experience the nonbinary reality cannot fully comprehend that reality. Coyote’s

interactions with their surgeon's staff illustrates this impossibility: although everyone in the surgeon's office has experience working with transgender individuals who need to surgically alter their body to make it livable, Coyote can feel that they are not wholly understood by the binary staff (96). Cognitively, the staff understands the logic that drives Coyote to pursue chest reconstruction surgery, but without having experienced the psychic and physical nonbinary reality, the staff cannot reach complete empathy.

Binary perception of the nonbinary self only ever exists on the terms of the binary matrix: intelligibility of the nonbinary existence originates in binary meanings, necessarily erasing the meanings that determine that nonbinary existence. At the same time, the nonbinary self must rely on the binary framework to inform their gender experience. For example, Spoon and Coyote both situate themselves linguistically in relation to binary constructs: each claims the pronoun 'they' – the existing binary third-person pronoun – as a nonbinary designation. In doing so, Spoon and Coyote resist gender conformity by confounding binary meanings and appropriating space in the binary construct for nonbinary articulation.

If the body is the first cultural object, Merleau-Ponty wonders how that object can produce a legible existence (348). Positioned in a perceptual field grounded in binary contexts, the nonbinary body rejects all of the meanings that make an existence legible to the binary other. Spoon and Coyote frequently manipulate binary constructs to understand their own gender identities – e.g. in their use of pronouns or in constructing narratives of sexuality – but still resist binary legibility. As the site of initial contact between nonbinary self and binary world, the body visually articulates the nonbinary experience; however, any perception formed by the binary other will necessarily overwrite the nonbinary reality with binary meanings. Nonbinary narratives, though constructed from elements and repurposed meanings of the binary gender

construct, oppose the binary worldview; a “limited language and scarcity of shared meanings” makes true empathy with the nonbinary existence impossible for the binary other.

Gender Failure showcases the real life experiences of two nonbinary gendered individuals. Both the original show and the text are intended for an audience of unlimited gender and sexual identities: although only nonbinary audience members will experience the narratives a profound empathy, everyone has the ability to make space for the nonbinary reality in their understanding of gender. Public speakers like Spoon and Coyote put themselves at the mercy of the violence of the perceptive act; although their authentic selves may disappear in the face of binary perception, the candidness of their gendered realities make space for their existence, starting with those who choose to hear their stories.

Conclusion

Making Space

In May 2011, Kathy Witterick published an article in the *Ottawa Citizen* stating that she and her husband planned raise their new baby gender-neutrally. This would mean keeping the baby's sex private from all but a select few and letting them vocalize their own gender identity once that identity took shape. The family received over a hundred interview requests and were the subject of global debate about raising a child without gender; public response ranged from vocal support to accusations of child abuse. Their plan was not to force the child to identify as nonbinary but rather, by not imposing the gender binary, they could gift their child autonomy in defining its gender identity without the influence of social norms (Witterick).

The Wittericks faced opposition in the wake of this article precisely because the reality of nonbinary was made so visible. Ostensibly, the worry was that the child would be the victim of bullying simply because they used different pronouns or did not present a binary gender performance; in fact, the people who cried abuse embodied the fear of the nonbinary: their concern was not for the child as an individual, but as a subject whose mere upbringing would challenge the notion of a stable binary truth. The possibility that parents could give their children freedom from the regulatory binary system proved that the binary is not inherent: stripped of its “natural” status, the binary loses its normative power.

Can a child be raised completely gender-neutrally? In a matrix where everything is defined by its relation to a binary, it seems unlikely that parents could totally avoid the influence of gender norms. Certainly the Wittericks' alternative lifestyle makes their decision feasible: all three of their children are homeschooled, and the family lives off the grid in a remote area in Ontario (Poisson). Removed as they are from society, the child can grow up without oppressive

gender expectations; but not everyone has this luxury. In fact, Halberstam believes that trying to avoid gendering a child is a futile task. Instead he calls for encouraging alternative forms of femininity or masculinity that go against social expectations – for example, encouraging forms of female culture that do not require dolls and makeup, or discouraging the masculine activity of bullying (Danbolt).

Halberstam's work in transgender theory primarily explores the alternatives: alternative genders, alternative sexualities, and alternative ways of being. His response to gender-neutral parenting suggests that authentically living without gender is perhaps *too* alternative within the binary matrix. Spoon's and Coyote's experiences do demonstrate the difficulty of presenting an intelligible nonbinary gender identity – but does this mean that there is no space for an authentic nonbinary existence in the binary matrix?

Nonbinary individuals like Spoon and Coyote make small efforts every day to claim space for themselves: both have chosen gender-neutral pronouns; Spoon establishes gender narratives with romantic partners to maintain their nonbinary identity; Coyote resists traditional medical transition as the binary matrix defines it. While these small acts do not demand a gender revolution, they do make it possible for Spoon and Coyote to live according to their authentic self. Their work as public speakers and entertainers presents the reality of the nonbinary experience; in doing so, nonbinary audience members feel their identity validated, while their binary peers are made aware of the broad spectrum of human experience.

Complete empathetic understanding is impossible between any individual, binary or not: a life would have to be identically experienced in order for two people to totally share meanings. The nature of the nonbinary gender experience – one that goes so completely against the binary hegemony – means there is an unbridgeable gap in empathy between the nonbinary self and

binary other. However, this does not mean that nonbinary is illegitimate and untenable in a binary context; indeed, the existence of *Gender Failure* demonstrates that nonbinary as a category can be presented in such a way that it becomes accessible for even a binary audience. If complete empathy is unattainable, the public lives of Spoon, Coyote, and the Wittericks demonstrate that such unequivocal empathy is not necessary for a valid nonbinary experience.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. Print.
- Bevenuto, Christine. "The Bathroom Question." *Sex Changes*. Mar. 5 2013. Web.
- Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- , *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Brook, Andrew. "Kant's View of the Mind and Consciousness of Self." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. 2013. Web. February 17, 2016
- Cordes, Drew. "Am I a Queer Transgender or a Trans Genderqueer?" *The Bilerco Project*. Nov 28 2012. Web.
- Crawley, Sara L., Lara J. Foley, and Constance L. Shehan. *Gendering Bodies*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008. Print.
- Danbolt, Mathias. "The Eccentric Archive: An Interview With Judith Halberstam." *Trikster*. Web.
- Davidmann, Sara. "Beyond Borders: Lived Experiences of Atypically Gendered Transsexual People." *Transgender Identities: Towards a Social Analysis of Gender Diversity*. Ed. Sally Hines and Tam Sanger. New York: Routledge, 2010. 64-86. Print.
- Detmer, David. *Phenomenology Explained: From Experience to Insight*. Chicago: Open Court, 2013. Print.
- Flegg, Erin. "Beyond the Gender Binary." *Xtra West* April 10 2014: 18. Web.

- Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 1962.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor, 1959. Print.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duker UP, 1998. Print.
- Husserl, Edmund. *The Idea of Phenomenology*. Trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian. The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1973. Print.
- , "Ideas." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Second ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004. 137-41. Print.
- Kessler, Suzanne, and Wendy McKenna. "Who Put the "Trans" in Transgender?: Gender Theory and Everyday Life." *The International Journal of Transgenderism*. 4.3. 2000. Web.
- Jakubowski, Kaylee. "No, The Existence of Trans People Doesn't Validate Gender Essentialism." *Everyday Feminism*. March 9 2015. Web. February 29, 2016
- James, Suzanne. "'[S]traddling the Gender Fence': Trans-Border Crossings in Rae Spoon and Ivan E. Coyote's Gender Failure." 2014. TS. University of British Columbia.
- Marshall, George J. *A Guide to Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 2008. Print.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. New York: Humanities, 1962. Print.
- "The Need for a Gender-Neutral Pronoun." *Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog*. N.p., 24 Jan. 2010. Web. 25 Nov. 2015.
- Poisson, Jayme. "Remember Storm? We check in on the baby being raised gender-neutral." *The Star*. Nov 15 2013. Web.
- Salamon, Gayle. *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.

- Smith, David Woodruff. "Phenomenology." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. 2013. Web. February 29, 2016
- Spoon, Rae and Ivan E. Coyote. *Gender Failure*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014. Print.
- Spurling, Laurie. *Phenomenology and the Social World: The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and Its Relation to the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1977. Print
- Whittle, Stephen. "Gender Fucking Or Fucking Gender?: Current Cultural Contributions to Theories of Gender Blending." *Blending Genders : Social Aspects of Cross-Dressing and Sex-Changing*. Ed. Richard Ekins and Dave King. London: Routledge, 2002. 196-214. Print.
- Witterick, Kathy. "Baby Storm's mother speaks on gender, parenting and media." *Ottawa Citizen*. May 27 2011. Web. October 1, 2015