

COMMUNICATIVE ACTS OF IDENTITY:  
NON-BINARY INDIVIDUALS, IDENTITY, AND THE INTERNET

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By  
Dee (Daniel) Shull  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis looks at the way that people whose gender identities do not fit into a binary male or female framework communicate those identities in internet spaces that they control. The available literature lacks any thorough examination of non-binary gender individuals, whether in terms of their identity or presentation; this absence is also clear in queer theory. By using a virtual ethnographic framework and selecting sites that focus primarily on non-binary gender identities, certain critical themes come up: identity; visibility; and acceptance. Additionally, these major themes are based both on self-determination and acknowledgement by others. These themes also represent a challenge to the dominant narratives around gender, in the queer theory sense of challenging categories. This research opens up multiple new avenues for researchers to examine the different ways that non-binary individuals communicate their identity, and clearly shows that communication of gender identity is an ongoing process.

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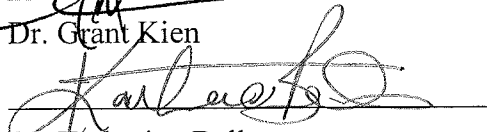
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Dee (Daniel) Shull

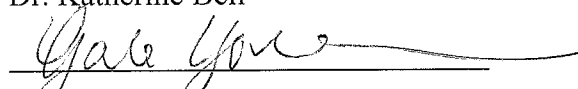
Approved:

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Grant Kien

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Katherine Bell

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Gale Young

Date:

6/10/15

6/10/15

6/10/15

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	v
List of Figures .....	ix
List of Tables .....	x
Chapter 1. Introduction .....	1
Some Notes About Terminology .....	2
Research Question .....	6
Purpose .....	8
Chapter 2. Literature Review .....	10
The Boundaries of Gender Discourse .....	11
The First Boundary: Invisibility of Non-Binary Gender Identities .....	16
The limits of “man” and “woman” .....	17
When “trans” is centered .....	21
Identity construction in virtual spaces .....	28
References to non-binary identities .....	31
The Second Boundary: Gender as Performance .....	34
Gender is performative only .....	36
Gender is more than performative .....	39
Performing for whom? .....	46
The Third Boundary: Queer Theory .....	51
Defining the undefinable .....	51
Critiques of queer theory .....	55
What about feminism? .....	58
Summary .....	60
Chapter 3. Methodology & Research .....	63
Methodology .....	64
Ethnography .....	64
Virtual Ethnography .....	68
The Evolution of My Research .....	71
Applying Queer Theory to Virtual Ethnography .....	74
Potential Issues with Ethnography as Methodology .....	76
Research .....	78
Selected Sources and Background Information .....	80
Chapter 4. Analysis .....	84
Methods of analysis .....	84

Constraints on analysis .....	86
Analysis.....	87
We Are Genderfluid.....	87
queer kenosis.....	91
Radically Queer .....	93
Seadresa YouTube Channel.....	95
Common themes .....	99
Identity .....	100
Visibility .....	106
Acceptance.....	111
Education .....	116
Misogyny .....	118
Chapter 5. Conclusion.....	121
Summary and Analysis of Results .....	121
Personal Impact.....	127
Further Research .....	128
Conclusion .....	131
References.....	132
Appendix.....	143



## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Questions Regarding Assumptions Made by Butler.....	48
Table 2: Themes and Subthemes of Identity.....	105
Table 3: Themes and Subthemes of Visibility .....	110
Table 4: Themes and Subthemes of Acceptance .....	115
Table 5: Themes and Subthemes of Education.....	117
Table 6: Themes and Subthemes of Misogyny.....	120

## **LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1: Visual Representation of Major Themes in this Research .....	123
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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When Judith Butler (1988, 1990) wrote that gender was a performance, discussions of gender identity in associated academic circles shifted from an essentialist position to a performative position. For over two decades, her groundbreaking work has had a major impact in studies of gender, gender roles, and gender expression.

In 2011, I came out as genderfluid. For years, I knew that I wasn't like the other men I encountered in my daily life, but attributed it to a variety of explanations centered in things like not adhering to stereotypical gender roles, being a sensitive male, or not being socialized properly in the way that other men seemed to have been. It was only through personal exploration, exposure to trans individuals, and searching on the Internet that I began to wonder if my gender identity might be different from what I had been taught and assumed.

These two things came together in my first encounters with Butler's work late in my undergraduate career. I read Butler's work, fascinated by the idea of gender as a performance, but with an edge of uncertainty. From what I was reading both in Butler's work, as well as that of other gender theorists, it seemed as though they took the position that gender was entirely a performance, that it was "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" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). And while I absolutely agreed that people learned from their culture and from the dominant narratives in each culture about how to perform gender, and the specific ways in which gender was supposed to be performed, I had some trouble with the idea that my slowly growing

understanding of my own gender was somehow incorrect, that I was responding not to any internal sense of gender, but to the “regulatory frame” described by Butler.

In my last quarter as an undergraduate, I was working on an examination of how Facebook excludes non-binary gender identities [this was prior to Facebook allowing over 50 gender identity options, which went live on February 13, 2014 (Griggs, 2014)], and centered at least part of my research in my own gender identity and how I was affected by those limitations. As I was writing that paper, I realized something fairly fundamental: people who do not identify in the gender binary must be more deliberate with communicating their gender identity to others, and that spaces on the Internet could provide ways for those individuals to communicate their identity more clearly and more accurately than they might in physical spaces.

Over the course of my graduate career, I delved further into non-binary gender identities as well as into how individuals might communicate those identities on the Internet.

### **Some Notes About Terminology**

The language around people who do not identify with the gender binary is constantly in flux, constantly evolving according to the needs of the people most affected by the terminology. The most recent term I have encountered is “gender diverse,” though I have also seen “gender variant,” “non-binary,” “trans\*” or “trans,” among other ways of

expressing the concept of experiencing gender in ways that do not match the dominant U.S. culture's<sup>1</sup> narratives around gender.

The terminology has expanded greatly over time; some of this is because the people involved are looking for better and better ways to identify and categorize themselves, and some of this is in reaction to how these individuals experience othering by the dominant culture.

As an example, the term “trans” is the result of an evolution in thought and language over several decades of etic descriptions of the experience of people not identifying as the gender which they were assigned at birth. Even now, the discussion about the term “trans” and whether to include an asterisk—as in “trans\*”—is ongoing, both by people who identify as binary transgender individuals (either male to female or female to male) as well as people who consider themselves trans but not in a binary gender category.

Specifically, the term “trans\*” (with the asterisk) appears to be somewhat problematic. Some argue that it functions as a way to differentiate between “trans” as describing trans men and trans women, and “trans\*” as an inclusive term that encompasses non-binary and non-conforming gender identities (Killermann, 2012), while others say that the term “trans” is already inclusive, and that including the asterisk creates a misleading sense of inclusiveness not always present in trans communities (Kai, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> I know that limiting my research to one culture and the dominant group within the culture is reductionist in certain problematic ways, but given the scope of my research, I needed to impose some limits.

In a separate example, I have seen the term “gender variant” used, but the use of that term could be seen as othering, in the sense that the term “variant” has a connoted meaning that there is a norm of gender—cisgender as the default gender identity—and then there are people who, by being variant, are therefore not normal. The term “cisgender” is generally taken to mean that a person identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth; this can lead to arguments about the term, since people who are cisgender see themselves as the norm, and therefore they do not require a special term to differentiate them from trans people. A counter argument to this is that using the term cisgender is not derogatory or special, but that it redefines the debate about gender such that while cisgender people are common, their gender is not the default state (Reed, 2012).

Even the use of the term “non-binary” can be problematic, as it is still a reference to a gender binary and thus excludes agender individuals. Additionally, these terms tend to be very centered in European experiences; non-European cultures in the past and present have had and continue to have an awareness and identification of genders different from male and female, and use specific terminology to identify people who are not male or female in their cultural definitions of those genders.

For the purposes of this work, and because the terminology seems to be constantly evolving, I will use the term “non-binary” to refer to the individuals in my research, and to people who do not identify as male or female only. I understand that this term is relatively problematic (European centered; dismissive of agender individuals by assuming that people have gender), but there is no singular term in use by a broad

majority of individuals whose gender identity is not “male” or “female” only. And from this point forward, I will abbreviate non-binary as NB, primarily when referring to non-binary (NB) genders or non-binary (NB) individuals.

Additionally, I need to define certain terms within the larger categorization of NB identities. The following definitions are drawn from the UC Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center (2013) and these definitions match my understanding of the terms:

- Genderqueer is a term for a “person whose gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders” and can be related to the social construction of gender;
- Bigender is a term for someone “whose gender identity is a combination of man and woman;”
- Pangender refers to people “whose gender identity is comprised of all or many gender expressions;”
- Genderfluid is a term for someone “whose gender identification and presentation shifts, whether within or outside of societal, gender-based expectations;” and
- Agender is a term for “a person who is internally ungendered or does not have a felt sense of gender identity.”

Another term that has come up, whether in my research or in other personal communication with NB individuals is “third gender” or “metagender;” these terms are used by people who identify as having a gender that is neither male nor female. I base this definition off of personal experience with two people who identify as metagender,

my own experiences when my fluid gender shifts to a third gender, and other encounters with third gender people.

I must also note that use of pronouns can be extremely problematic. For the authors/moderators of these sites, they state their pronouns clearly and in locations that are relatively simple to locate. But with those people who sent in questions to the Ask based site I examined, most did not declare their pronouns. Given that some of them are still in a questioning phase, this makes sense; at the same time, it is disrespectful to that group to assume a pronoun which may not match their identity. Unfortunately, there is *no* default non-binary pronoun in use at this time; with full awareness that this choice is problematic, I will use singular “they” pronouns for the individuals who have not declared their pronouns, as this seems to be gaining some traction as of this work.

### **Research Question**

I wanted to focus on NB individuals primarily because I myself am genderfluid, and have been curious about how other NB individuals communicate their gender identity. While I am out in most places in my life, my presentation of self takes place more in physical spaces than virtual ones, mostly because I am very cautious about what I put onto the Internet. But I do recognize that there is a risk in presenting appropriate to my gender identity in physical spaces which is minimized (but not eliminated) in virtual spaces. I thought that perhaps it might be easier for NB individuals to communicate their identity on the Internet, or at the very least somewhat safer to do so, and began with that as a basic assumption.



I suspected that NB individuals might communicate their gender identity on the Internet in specific ways, but I did not have a solid sense of what specifics I might be looking for. As I address in my literature review, there is very little in the way of research on NB individuals, and nothing I was able to find about how they use the Internet. Authors like Robinson (2007) discuss identity construction in virtual spaces, but do not do specifically address NB individuals, or how they might communicate their identities in those spaces.

I knew that I could look at how other people with marginalized gender identities or sexual orientations communicate their identities; however, sexual orientation tends to be an unseen characteristic when compared with NB gender identities. Parallels may well exist between how bisexual individuals and NB individuals are treated by the dominant U.S. culture, due to their existence as marginalized groups in a structure that generally presumes a binary classification (heterosexuals and homosexuals as compared with bisexuals; cisgender and binary transgender individuals as compared with NB individuals), but without any solid research comparing these groups, I can only suggest loose parallels. And even with these parallels, this does not answer the question of whether NB individuals communicate their identity on the Internet in specific ways.

Another issue to take into account is that the Internet allows for multiple sites where an NB individual can communicate their identity. Not all sites are created equal, however, even when accounting for sites that allow an individual to communicate their identity in a variety of ways. As I detail in Chapter 3, I initially thought Facebook would be a good choice due to its size and connectedness; however, I found very good reasons

to not use Facebook, and instead focus on other sites where an NB individual would have more control over the content they posted, the better to communicate their identity. This suggests my research question:

**RQ1:** In what specific ways do non-binary gender individuals communicate their gender identity in spaces they control on the Internet?

### **Purpose**

As I began work on my thesis, I knew that I wanted to address those communicative acts of identity. I thought that it was critical to examine whether a marginalized population, especially one that existed on the margins of another marginalized population (binary trans individuals), might choose different ways of communicating that identity, and if they were in fact doing so, how they might accomplish that.

However, this goes well beyond one specific group of marginalized individuals. The communication of identity on the Internet has been a subject of much fascination since the advent of multi-user dungeons (or MUDs), and has shifted from being perceived as an entirely open space for gender exploration and experimentation to a space where individuals can mirror their physical selves in virtual spaces (Robinson, 2007). If a person with a marginalized aspect of their identity, or even intersectionally marginalized aspects, has a space that is entirely their own, *would* they engage in communication of their identity? Is their identity important enough to them to engage in and with that kind of communication? And how would they go about doing this? Is there a common thread

of actions, specific things that people do to communicate their identity? Or is there a more general way that people might engage in these communicative acts of identity? And if there are specific or general ways that people communicate their identity, can those be applied not just to their marginalized group, but others?

As my focus is on individuals whose gender identity does not fit with the dominant U.S. narrative around binary genders, I can only address that particular group. But marginalization does have an effect of erasing people, making them invisible, making them unheard (Orbe, 1998). And while Orbe (1998) details a number of practices that muted groups can engage in (p. 8-9), they may not be as applicable or possibly differently applicable in virtual spaces. So at least part of my research is to find out whether there are specific practices that my research subjects *do* engage in, and whether those practices mirror the practices Orbe identifies.

Finally, this research is meant to address a lack of research centered on individuals whose gender identities do not fit the binary. As gay and lesbian rights become more and more accepted, and as more and more trans individuals become visible to the public, non-binary gendered individuals may well represent the next wave of marginalized LGBT people who need awareness and recognition by a wider public as well as academia.

I will now address the research (or lack thereof) that has been done around gender.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the key starting points for doing this kind of research is finding what has been written about a given topic. Sometimes the work that already exists provides a frame for the research to come; sometimes it highlights areas that need attention. And sometimes, the research describes the edges of an idea, without ever acknowledging the idea.

I knew, going in, that there wouldn't be much research about non-binary genders. I knew that even with transgender visibility on the rise in the past several years in the United States, e.g., the publicity surrounding people like Janet Mock (Mock, 2014), Laverne Cox (Steinmetz, 2014), and very recently, Caitlyn Jenner (Vanity Fair, 2015)—who began using that name in June 2015, the idea that there could be genders other than “man” and “woman” would be a generally unfamiliar one outside of the circles of people who identify as, or are familiar with, the range of non-binary genders. I knew that with the work of Judith Butler (1988, 1990) around gender as performance, the concept of non-binary genders might well have been swept into a category of non-normative performance, and left there, save for some people who might be interested in challenges to the dominant cultural narrative of the United States around gender (such as queer theorists).

I also knew that research into identity in virtual spaces had initially begun with a sense of the limitless possibilities available for identity construction (van Doorn, Wyatt, & van Zoonen, 2008), and that it had by the present shifted into recognizing that people generally used virtual spaces more for identity maintenance than new construction

(Robinson, 2007). I also knew that while there had been research done on sites like Facebook (Cooper & Dzara, 2010), blogging, YouTube, and Tumblr were far less represented in research.

### **The Boundaries of Gender Discourse**

What I did not know until I began my literature review was that not only were non-binary gender identities not being researched, they weren't even being acknowledged. Time after time, I found work that referenced male and female, man and woman, sometimes conflating the two as many have conflated the notions of sex and gender. References to gender went as far as transgender individuals, but did not acknowledge any potential for genders that were not part of a binary system of classification, whether as part of the binary itself or some spectrum that included a binary system of endpoints (Bem, 1993; Lucal, 1999; Johnson, 2001; van Zoonen, 2002; Tauchert, 2001). Monro (2001) mentions the possibility of non-binary gender identities, at the very least, but does so at least in part in reference to how certain forms of feminisms are centered on a male-female binary.

What I found was that the available research centers primarily on gender as performance by way of Butler (1988, 1990), while any instances that dealt with gender as anything other than performance often took an essentialist turn, aligning gender identity with biological sex with gender roles and performance (Bettcher, 2014). And even though Butler herself said that she didn't intend for her research to be taken as a way of erasing trans identities (Williams, 2014), the impact of her work over the past two decades and

more is clearly visible in the apparent tentativeness of researchers within certain fields to suggest any possibility of innate gender identity. Meanwhile, research in anthropology (D. M. Atkins, personal communication, April 21, 2015) and child development (Hidalgo et al., 2013), as well as common narratives of trans experiences, suggest that an innate sense of gender exists both within and outside of the cultural contexts and narratives to reify gender roles as part of the binary.

These two issues—of the invisibility of non-binary genders and of gender as performance—describe a lacuna, almost a negative space, in thought around this subject. What is most troublesome about this is that it is not clear from the research that has been done whether this is simply an unconscious blind spot as created by the dominant cultural discourse in the U.S. around gender, or if it is a deliberate way of *not seeing* what is present because it runs counter to those discourses, even for people who are clearly working on challenging those discourses. It is entirely possible that this blind spot is unconscious, and calling it out will, in fact, reveal that there is a great deal of work to do in this area.

This is one of the primary reasons I have chosen queer theory as my lens through which to view this work. Despite the multiplicity of definitions for queer theory and the almost deliberate imprecision that accompanies any efforts to define queer theory (Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2014; Yep, 2014; Smith, 2014), there seems to be a focus on how this critical approach to culture can be used in ways that other critical theories are not. Specifically, in the introduction to the section on research, Yep, Lovaas, and Elia (2014) write that “queer theory is characterized by its definitional indeterminacy, conceptual

elasticity, and political commitment” (p. 9, footnote 1). The very idea of queer theory’s elasticity suggests that while it seems centered in sexual orientation, it would be reasonably simple to apply it to an examination of gender, especially gender that queers the way gender is typically regarded.

However, even queer theory has some glaring issues that make up the third side of this lacuna of thought. Queer theory is centered almost exclusively on sexuality (Yep, 2014), and seems to have a tendency to see gender as something for feminist theory, that it is potentially “indentured to heteronormative conceptual models,” and therefore fixed in relation to sexuality, which “can seem strategically flexible and mobile” (Jagose, 2009, p. 165). Even when Yep (2014) specifically cites that queer theory “is also guilty of transgender erasure” (p. 42), and that it is “a positionality, a framework, and a toolkit that can be used to interrogate, examine, and unpack regimes of the normal (Halperin, 1995)” (p. 45), he almost immediately reverts to referring to queer theory again as related to the “homo/heterosexual binary as the basic foundation of social life” (p. 45). Again, it is very difficult to tell whether this is an issue of a simple blind spot of cultural construction—that feminisms address issues of gender, while queer theory addresses issues of sexuality—or whether it is a deliberate turning away from concepts that themselves challenge (in true queer fashion!) the binary assumptions around gender.

In Sedgwick’s (1999) words:

And the fact that silence is rendered as pointed and performative as speech, in relations around the closet, depends on and highlights more broadly the fact that ignorance is as potent and as multiple a thing there is as knowledge. (p.323)

This clearly suggests that bringing the discussion of non-binary genders into the discourse is a way of counteracting the silence.

There are actually a number of issues around the construction of identities that I want to clarify before I begin. The first is that different people have different points of view about whether identities can be attached to people by external forces (whether individuals, groups, or cultures). For example, Green (2001) holds an idealistic view:

I believe gender belongs to each individual, to do with as he or she pleases: it is not possible for an “objective” observer to paste gender on another person by labelling them with a gender that the person does not feel, whether or not that gender is expressed. (p. 62)

Aside from issues around the reification of binary genders, I would point out that unfortunately, our culture does, in fact, do this precise thing. Lucal (1999) states:

Even if a person does not want to do gender or would like to do a gender other than the two recognized by our society, other people will, in effect, do gender for that person by placing her or him in one and only one of the two available categories. (p. 785)

Part of the communicative acts of identity that NB individuals engage in, then, is negotiating the space between Green’s idealism and their own need to express their gender as correctly as possible for them, and Lucal’s understanding that the surrounding culture will apply a gender, whether the NB individual wants it or not.

The second issue around the construction of identities is that acknowledgement of identities outside the dominant narrative of “male” and “female” is often a problem, even for those people who theoretically should be more aware of this as an issue. For example, J. R. Butler (2014) described an experience he had when he was working to get the city of DeKalb, IL to add sexual orientation as a protected category (p. 283). While the initial



effort was a victory, it ended up (because of non-specific language and Butler's own lack of awareness) being criticized very heavily for excluding transgender people (p. 283-284). Butler writes about his own awakening to the idea that—all unknowingly—he had excluded trans people because he thought that the way the amendment was written would cover them because, “Some felt that discrimination against transgender people was, for all practical purposes, motivated by *perceived homosexuality*, which was enough to capture the population. Others thought that the combination of ‘sex’ and ‘sexual orientation’ would cover transgender people” (p. 283). It was only when the error was brought to his attention that he realized he had made an error: “Silence can be both a lack of discourse where it is needed, and a *message* understood by those harmed by its implications” (p. 287, emphasis in original).

Butler (2014) additionally realized that excluding trans people from public policies that are supposed to provide rights and privileges was deeply problematic, writing that, “This erasure is multiplied when one considers the operation of issues in a climate that does not recognize transgender people in any way. For example, because there is no category for transgender discrimination, transgender discrimination cannot be acknowledged” (p. 289). Ultimately, the lack of discourse prevents the discourse from occurring, especially in public policy.

It is only through his activism in addressing the rights of trans people that he comes to this awareness:

The way to arrest the process of erasure is not only to challenge the scenario of discrimination that exists in the mind of the perpetrator, but also to attend to the “invisible functions of discourse and rhetoric” found in policies that either provide no protection against discrimination based

on gender, or limit protection beyond biological sex to “sexual orientation” (p. 287).

Johnson (2001) offers some suggestions about construction of identities that at least address the issues that Butler encountered. “If language is the place where identities are built and maintained, then poststructuralist theory sees language as the major site where oppressive identities can be challenged or changed” (p. 147). Additionally, she writes:

Therefore, it is important to be aware that the discursive constitution of subjectivity is more than the individual consciously identifying with particular subject positions within a discourse. Rather, it has been argued that we need to move beyond discourse by attending to the psychic level as well as symbolic marking and social and material conditions, if we are to conceptualize a persuasive theory of identity (Segal, 1990, 1994; Woodward, 1997). (p. 152)

What this suggests is that identity is very much a function of language, which can be challenged, and is inclusive of more than just the symbolic and the social and material realms.

With these concerns in mind, I will address each of these boundaries in turn as a way to situate my research: the invisibility of non-binary gender identities; gender as performativity; and queer theory. (For a visual representation of these boundaries, please see Appendix.)

### **The First Boundary: Invisibility of Non-Binary Gender Identities**

This idea is one of the most fundamental issues in this research, and represents one of the first sites of contestation. Much of the research that exists does not address any genders aside from “man” and “woman;” in some cases an author will note the existence

of genders that are not part of the binary, but do not seem to actually attempt to name any of those genders. Even when trans people are brought up, in almost every circumstance they are seen in terms of transitioning within a binary set of genders (female to male or male to female). The research that actually deals with NB individuals is very limited, and often represents an afterthought by the author(s). There has also been work done on the issue of creating identities in online spaces, but again non-binary gender identities tend to be left out, whether out of a lack of awareness of said identities, a deliberate lack of recognition of them, or some other reason.

**The limits of “man” and “woman”:** I begin with Bem (1993), who writes about how gender is seen through multiple lenses. On the surface, this would seem to be a perfect theoretical framework to begin examining how individuals might identify, especially in light of the discourses that were taking place at that time around gender. She even writes:

But as profound as the transformation of America’s consciousness has been during the past 150 years, hidden assumptions about sex and gender remain embedded in cultural discourses, social institutions, and individual psyches that invisibly and systemically reproduce male power in generation after generation (p. 1-2)

She then identifies those lenses as: androcentrism (centering men and making them the norm), gender polarization (reifying the binary), and biological essentialism (that the binary exists because of biology) (p. 2-3). And when she discusses gender polarization, she says that even if androcentrism and biological essentialism were eliminated, the “ubiquitous organization of social life around the distinction between male and female” (p. 80) would still exist. Bem (1993) states that “Gender polarization operates in two

related ways. First, it defines mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female. Second, it defines any person or behavior that deviates from these scripts as problematic” (p. 80-1).

These points certainly highlight at least one of the basic issues with perceptions of gender in terms of “man” and “woman”: that U. S. culture has a gender binary built into the very fabric of that culture in the form of that lens. Unfortunately, Bem almost immediately falls back into the binary and follows Butler’s *apparent* lead (more on this later) in associating gender entirely with performance by saying that if gender polarization wasn’t as strong in this culture, that transgender people (though she uses the term transsexual) would be less likely to be “desperately unhappy with the particular sex they happened to be born with” (p. 111). That is, if the strict binaries were relaxed, then transsexuals would feel more comfortable performing in gender roles that did not match their assigned at birth sex.

Bem (1993) appears to shift gears when she writes about about gender nonconformists [including, in her estimation, everyone from transgender individuals to people who reverse “some critical aspect of the male or female script” (p. 167)] in a way that suggests that she might have some understanding of how NB individuals experience the dominant U. S. culture: “because they fail to follow the gender scripts of the culture, they must find a way to construct a viable identity in a society that insistently denies them any legitimacy” (p. 167). She challenges the question that something is wrong with gender nonconforming people by saying, “Nothing went wrong, and they exist, in one form or another, because gender diversity is natural” (p. 168). And finally, “Put

somewhat differently, their experience highlights the need of every othered group to articulate a perspective that challenges the meaning assigned to them by the dominant culture and, further, challenges the very neutrality of the dominant perspective” (p. 169).

Unfortunately again, Bem (1993) once again reduces transsexuals to people who are that way because they start with “extremely gender-nonconforming preferences,” “that the sexes are defined by these cultural gender markers,” and that transsexuals “attach the ‘wrong’ sex label to the self” (p. 171). She appears to be absolutely accepting of homosexuality throughout her book, as well as acts of not conforming to the gender polarized markers, but it is entirely the trans person’s fault for absorbing the “wrong” cultural markers.

van Doorn, Wyatt, and van Zoonen (2009) discuss the reification of binary genders in a more recent work:

The fact that the position of women continually described in relation to the position of men has reified the gender binary system, which functions as a normative mechanism that categorizes individuals as either male or female and subsequently decides which identities are both culturally legible and legitimate. (p. 358)

This is especially relevant, as they note that people on the Internet connect their bodies to their “self” online, even when that body isn’t present in the virtual spaces “where communication is taking place” (p. 359). They then write that “Conventional gender norms are thus transported online through the classification schemes people rely on both off- and online” (p. 359).

This would seem an ideal point to make about NB individuals and their experiences in virtual space, but van Doorn, Wyatt, and van Zoonen’s (2009) research

into IRC channels shows that even in a channel labeled #Queer, theoretically a place where NB individuals might congregate and converse, gender is still limited to “man,” in that most of the people in that channel perform as gay males, and generally “chase off” people who might challenge gender norms (p. 365-366). This particular homogeneity in the #Queer channel actually echoes a concern Yep (2014) raises about “queer” as a term being absorbed as yet another term for homosexual males (thereby erasing lesbians, trans people, and other gender and sexual nonconforming people) (p. 42).

This binary reification has certain consequences, as Butler (1988) points out: “Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (p. 522). She also writes:

As feminists, we have been less eager, I think, to consider the status of the category itself and, indeed, to discern the conditions of oppression which issue from an unexamined reproduction of gender identities which sustain discrete and binary categories of man and woman. (p. 523)

And Butler (1990) continues this idea in the book which most cite as one of the foundational texts about gender as a performative act: “Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the “congealing” is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means” (p. 33). This is very clear: gender in our culture must adhere to the reified binary; there is no room for alternatives.

Lucal (1999) writes about her experiences being a gender nonconformist, and unfortunately does so repeatedly by reifying a binary of “man” and “woman” even when pointing out that we assume there are rules and attributes that help us decide how to categorize individuals into binary genders (p. 783). In what is perhaps the clearest

indication that Lucal (1999) is repeating the reification of the gender binary, she writes, “We do not, in fact, know what gender would look like if it were not constructed around heterosexuality in the context of the patriarchy” (p. 794). I would suggest, in contrast, that many NB individuals are finding ways to challenge that concept *and* doing so in ways that are not constructed around heterosexuality; I know that my research has clearly pointed in this direction.

Goffman’s (1963) work on what he calls spoiled identities is also relevant to this discussion, especially as being trans or non-binary would very definitely fit into that category. He writes, “Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” (p. 2). And while his work rests primarily on the visibility of a stigmatic attribute, defined as “how well or how badly the stigma is adapted to provide means of communicating that the individual possesses it” (p. 48), this characteristic is about immediate impressions, as differentiated from “known-about-ness,” which is prior knowledge about the person (p. 49), “obtrusiveness,” which is how intrusive the difference is for others (p. 49), and “perceived focus,” which is mostly about whether and how the stigma will affect the different areas of the person’s life (p. 49-50).

And even though trans people are slowly being centered in the discourse, in both mass media and research, there are still issues with the available research.

**When “trans” is centered:** Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) write about transgender people in an attempt to analyze them “within a social system that proclaims males to be men and females to be women” (p. 59). As part of the grounding of their

material, they discuss different sources of knowledge: individual experience, the media, and popular wisdom (citing Gamson, 1992); they then add science, subcultural (or what I would call co-cultural) knowledge, and language as other sources of knowledge (p. 62-63). They then use these six sources of knowledge to define how gender is discussed; one of the points that they make in their research into transgender people that “In the hegemonic discourse of contemporary Western society and according to science, popular wisdom, and the media, the populace is made up of two, and only two, sexes” (p. 63)<sup>1</sup>.

When they talk about language as one of the sources of knowledge, they write, “Language not only makes it possible to know, it limits what we can understand and shapes the way we experience the world, ourselves, and our bodies” (Gagné and Tewksbury, 1999, p. 63). Something about this phrase bothered me, and in private conversation, cognitive linguist S. Narayan observed that language limits “what we are aware of, so in practice what we base our understanding on” (personal communication, April 16, 2015). Specifically, this means that access (or the lack of it) to words, labels, or terminology can affect our awareness of particular concepts, and therefore affect our understanding of those concepts. As a personal anecdote, until I found the term “genderfluid” through online sources, I had no way to explain my sense of gender as something that did not mesh with the cultural ideas around male identity. S. Narayan also cited a classic example of absolute direction reasoning as compared with relative

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<sup>1</sup> This does bring up the concern of not differentiating between “sex” and “gender,” which is a problematic issue that is unfortunately not limited to these authors. For example, Talbot (2010) does differentiate between sex and gender, but takes the position that sex is biological and gender is socially constructed.



direction reasoning (Tversky, 2005, p. 221) to differentiate between awareness of and ability to understand concepts.

They are very clear in their research that trans people [their research centers exclusively on AMAB or assigned-male-at-birth people, “from several points along the transgender spectrum” (p. 64)] often begin acquiring knowledge about the possibility of trans-ness from different sources, including media and subcultural sources, but that prior to that they often struggle with the way that society frames gender. Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) also write that “One’s identity, as a schema outlining the relationship of self, body, and society, then, is based upon internalized acquired information” (p. 62). They use this idea to frame their research into the various ways that trans people create their identity: by rooting it in the information which comes from the culture that surrounds them. For example, Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) identify various categories of knowledge that intersect with each other, and how their respondents then respond in interactions with those intersections of knowledge. So when experiential knowledge meets popular wisdom, for example, many of the respondents reported being told that they were supposed to conform to the rigid gender binaries already in place around them (p. 68-71); then, when they were exposed to trans people through mass media, the respondents generally realized they weren’t alone.

Another point that Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) make is that “Individuals are purported to engage in communicative acts (Habermas 1984) or acts of resistance (Collins 1990), in part, based on their knowledge of dominant belief systems and their consciousness of how discursive systems oppress them” (p. 60). They also make the point

that “In contemporary Western societies, however, they [individuals who transcend the gender binary] tend to be stigmatized and highly marginalized, insofar as their alternatively gendered presentations are publicly recognized” (p. 63). Taken together, along with the fact that of the 65 respondents to their research, five were described as gender radicals [they “referred to themselves in more politically oriented terms” (p. 65), and “have used transgenderism to actively challenge binary assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality” (p. 65)], this would suggest that NB individuals *were* present in research that was being done before the beginning of this century.

One of the more problematic things in Gagné and Tewksbury’s (1999) research, however, is that they tend to prioritize the exposure to multiple forms of external knowledge over any internal sense of gender. Despite the fact that “our respondents repeatedly attested to the presence of a priori authentic selves,” (p. 72) and that “despite such messages [that to be feminine was wrong], every member of our sample felt compelled to enact a feminine self” (p. 80), the researchers still seem to focus more on how both mass mediated and subcultural knowledge have informed their respondents about trans-ness, and how to “be” trans. The fact that all of their respondents felt it necessary to somehow enact femininity was left to the very end, almost as an afterthought, despite several comments throughout their research that suggest that their respondents did, in fact, have some internal sense of innate gender. Some of this may come from the fact that the authors are basing their work in symbolic interactionism and the construction of identity through interaction with others; some of it may be that these results don’t quite mesh well with the idea of symbolic interactionism (how can a person

really have an identity that precedes the culture that tells them what their identity is, and how to do it?); and some of it may come from the authors' awareness that "it is impossible for social actors to escape the effect of knowledge systems and the hegemonic discourse" (p. 72).

To this last point, I would respond that of course it is impossible for any actor to escape the effects of the hegemonic (or dominant) discourse/narrative, but that this applies to anyone—cisgender, transgender, or gender diverse. The dominant discourse is always already present, from the moment when a baby's sex is announced by the doctor, nurse, or technician performing the sonogram (or even as late as the child's birth!), but the respondents in this research clearly demonstrate a variety of modes of resistance to that discourse—most especially the ones identified by Gagné and Tewksbury as gender radicals! They even note that "Aside from the five gender radicals in the sample, our informal observations of the transgender community suggest that a vocal minority within the nationwide (trans)gender movement advocate rejecting binary systems of sex, gender, and sexuality" (p. 77).

And it isn't just Gagné and Tewksbury's research that reveals that trans-ness is often framed in terms of repeating a binary, both in the sense of transitioning to the "other" gender, but also in the sense of a binary between cisgender and transgender individuals. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on feminist perspectives on trans issues (Bettcher, 2014) states:

In this type of transphobia [what Bettcher refers to as reality enforcement], the identity invalidation of trans men and trans women is situated in discourses about appearance, reality, exposure, discovery, and deception.

For example, a trans woman may be viewed as “really a man disguised as a woman.”

While this is an accurate statement about how identity can be erased, I will note that the article makes no reference to NB individuals, and only one reference to gender-variant individuals (in the context of “a more inclusive LGBT politics” (Bettcher, 2014)).

However, The Stanford Encyclopedia (Bettcher, 2014) does contain some useful points that do put trans people into the center of consideration:

Three major features of what might be called the transgender paradigm paralleled the ideas of Stone: 1) the recognition of gender-based oppression, usually targeting trans people, as distinct from and non-reducible to sexist oppression; 2) the positioning of trans people as problematically situated with respect to the binary categories man and woman; and 3) the endorsement of a politics of visibility.

In many ways, this can be applied to NB individuals and how they exist in the world (and specifically in the dominant cultural paradigm of the U.S.); a recentering of the paradigm would allow for NB individuals to be seen and not made invisible by a culture that still has problems with and erases many trans people.

In fact, one of the key pieces of this erasure is, once again, a matter of language. In the textbook *Language and Gender*, Talbot (2010) suggests that the study of language is important for feminism because the relationship between language and gender occupies a space between language reflecting society and language actively creating and sustaining inequality (p. 15-16). And, as if to demonstrate this very flaw, Talbot (2010) makes no mention of transgender, non-binary, or gender variant/diverse language terms.

Tauchert (2001) continues this pattern of erasure in an attempt to recontextualize gender in terms of a continuum, rather than a spectrum or a binary set of opposing

concepts. The author uses a diagram which is a circle, with male and female on opposing sides outside the circle, MtF and FtM at opposing angles inside the circle, and “herm” and “ferm” on opposing sides outside the circle midway between male and female.

Tauchert writes that:

Gender is not only a theoretical term, it is also a political term; that is, what we make of gender determines what is possible in the social and material world, for, after all, in the present cultural economy we are all either male or female or excluded from normative humanity altogether. (p. 183)

Again, this is entirely relevant to the discussion of non-binary identities—which *are* excluded—and yet Tauchert’s (2001) model excludes individuals who identify as third gender or agender (p. 185). This is problematic, because even when Tauchert (2001) writes this, she is simultaneously identifying a problem with the way the dominant narrative reifies the binary *and* engaging in that reification:

the degree to which masculinity and femininity are culturally defined as oppositional—and evidence of this is available in any newspaper on any given day—indicates and emphasizes the degree to which our culture finds it necessary to enforce and police a boundary between points on a continuum. (p. 185)

In contrast, Monro (2001), in her research into understanding the concept of trans, focuses primarily on “people who challenged the traditional notions of gender and transgender activists” (p. 157), though her sample did not include anyone whose demographic information identified them as non-binary. Two relevant main ideas come up throughout her research: that trans people do experience a sense of self that is neither performative nor traditionally gendered (p. 161), and that “pluralist forms of feminism are more useful to trans politics. Feminists such as bell hooks (1984, in Judith Lorber,

1994) have argued that feminist research based on the male-female binary is flawed; race and class produce many categories” (p. 159). Taken together, this does suggest that feminisms which are centered more in third wave thought may well be better theoretical models to examine genders that prior feminisms would have had trouble acknowledging, but also that identity construction is not strictly centered in how it is performed.

**Identity construction in virtual spaces:** Some of the work that I found around the use of virtual spaces to create identities was a mix of idealistic and realistic. I will treat references to non-binary identities in virtual spaces in the next section, but I think it is important enough for my purposes that this particular subject should be discussed before that section.

In a more realistic direction, Karl’s (2007) work explores the connections between a set of dualistic concepts: “between gender and sexuality, between feminist and queer perspectives on gender and sexuality, between identity and technological practice, new and old media as well as on-/offline experiences of everyday life” (p. 45-46). Karl is primarily interested in arguing that gendered consumption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) would benefit from the application of queer theory (primarily to shift focus to sexuality rather than gender), and that the use of online media does not happen in isolation (p. 46). Karl focuses exclusively on women (though she only notes their sexual orientation and says nothing about any details on gender) in her study, so her work is more centered on identity formation in relation to ICTs and practices of consumption (p. 46).

Ferreday and Lock (2007) take a different angle on identity formation in virtual spaces, discussing how cross-dressers (labeled in their article as transvestites) express their identities in online spaces—and specifically focusing on cross-dressers, as opposed to people who play with gender or other kinds of identity in virtual spaces. In fact, they argue “that online sites make *visible* the processes through which all identities are constructed (p. 160, emphasis in original). As part of their work, they find that cross-dressers are simultaneously constructing and performing their particular mode of gender, that it is a continual process that also involves engagement with others who visit the spaces they create. In fact, “This hints at an interesting functional use of blogs and personal websites as a safe ‘thinking space’ where identity can be constructed and reconstructed in an attempt to explore personal gender” (p. 172). And in their conclusion, Ferreday and Lock (2007) state:

It is only as a consequence of the explicit and observable nature of online gender identities that the processes involved in their construction are rendered visible. By considering such constructions, it becomes possible for these transient gender identities to become visible in a way that challenges boundaries, not only of normative gendered identities, but also of what it means to be a virtual subject. (p. 173)

Even though they focus exclusively on cross-dressers, this is still entirely applicable to NB individuals.

van Zoonen (2002) is primarily interested in how the Internet and gender shape each other, especially in more everyday use and primarily in the household. In her discussion specifically about mutual shaping, she writes:

In these everyday lives gender appears in its three dimensions simultaneously; whereas social structures, individual identities and symbolic representations of gender may be analytically distinguished, in

the concrete social practices of the everyday they work inextricably together in their interpellation and positioning of women and men. (p. 16)

While this once again reifies a gender binary, I would suggest that is just as applicable to NB individuals: they do create identity in those three dimensions, which does take place in a dominant narrative that centers women and men as the only two gender identities.

Cooper and Dzara (2010) write exclusively about Facebook (I will address in Chapter 3 why I did not elect to use Facebook as the site of my research), but they make an excellent point when they write, “As we create our identities online, constructing ourselves as we wish others to perceive us, we clarify to ourselves who we are and what matters most to us” (p. 109). Construction of identity in virtual spaces affects both the person creating their identity and the person encountering them.

Gray’s (2010) work is centered on rural LGBT youth, and how they construct and perform gender both in physical and virtual spaces. However, her discussion of boundary publics is very useful, especially in the construction of identity:

Rather than thinking of boundary publics as tangible buildings, specific streets, or solitary websites, I suggest that we imagine boundary publics as strategies for space making and constitutive processes for the queering of identity that increasingly, though not exclusively, incorporate new media use. (p. 292)

So from this I would point out that boundary publics are locations *in context* with each other, which includes the interaction of people in those boundary publics (such as blogs and the comments on YouTube videos).

Wakeford (2000) is possibly one of the most appropriate theorists to link both queer identities and the construction of those identities in virtual spaces in a more idealistic vein. Her focus—as with many of the other theorists and authors I found—is on



queer as a synonym for sexual orientation; despite this, her work is quite useful when applied to non-binary gender identities. She writes that, “Cyberqueer spaces are constantly reconstituted as points of resistance against the dominant assumption of the normality of heterosexuality in ways which are familiar to activists engaged in other struggles against heterosexism” (p. 408). As I noted, this argument centers on sexual orientation, but can very easily be reframed in terms resisting the dominant narrative of the gender binary. She also writes:

The construction of identity is the key thematic which unites almost all cyberqueer studies. The importance of a new space is viewed not as an end in itself, but rather as a contextual feature for the creation of new versions of the self. (p. 411)

This idea can also be applied to the construction of non-binary identities, especially given that this “new space” can be seen in today’s virtual spaces such as blogs, Tumblr, and YouTube (all sites of my research). The spaces are important, yes, but as sites where people can construct identities that do not fit in with the dominant narratives around gender.

**References to non-binary identities:** What happens when non-binary identities are actually made visible? Unfortunately, this seems to be incredibly rare. In my researches, I found only three sources that specifically addressed NB individuals, and in those sources, NB individuals were framed in terms of either a subgroup variation within research done on trans people (Monro, 2001; Harrison, Grant, & Herman, 2012), or child development (Hidalgo, et al., 2013).

Monro (2001) finds that “transgender individuals and transsexual people who envisaged going beyond the gender binary system to allow for longer-term fluidity, third

sex or androgynous identities formed a significant minority within the wider trans communities” (p. 159). At the very least, Monro allows for the existence of NB individuals in her research, based on their self-reporting. And this suggests that even as early as 2001, NB individuals were self-identifying as such, and were a small but significant part of the larger trans community.

Harrison, Grant, and Herman (2012) reanalyzed the survey data from the 2008 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, looking specifically for “those respondents who chose to write in their own gender” (p. 13). Question 3 on the survey asked, “What is your primary gender identity today?” (p. 13), and allowed for a self-specified response (“a gender not listed here,” abbreviated as GNL)—which had a response rate of 13 percent (p. 14), echoing Monro’s findings. According to Harrison, Grant, and Herman (2012), “The majority of these respondents wrote in genderqueer, or some variation thereof, such as pangender, third gender, or hybrid. Still others chose terms that refer to third gender or genderqueers within specific cultural traditions” (p. 14); I understand that the *authors* grouped several different non-binary genders under the term genderqueer, and while I appreciate it as a shorthand term, it does somewhat erase the existence of other non-binary categories. As an example of this, genderqueer as a term can be said to assume that a person has a gender, while an agender individual would likely argue that point. The authors do report that at least some individuals responded with terms such as non-binary, non-gendered (presumably another way of saying agendered), fluid, bi-gender, and third gender (p. 20).

Several surprising results came about from the clarification of the original survey. Individuals who responded to question 3 with GNL (abbreviated by the authors as Q3GNLs) “have significantly higher educational attainment than their peers who did not write in their gender”; however:

Q3GNLs are living in the lowest household income category (under \$10,000 annually) at a much higher rate (21 percent) than those who did not write in their gender (14 percent), which may be partially attributable to the high percentage of young people among Q3GNLs in the study. (p. 20)

The authors also identify that Q3GNLs often face a higher rate of problems than those who did not write in their gender, ranging from discrimination in employment and health and health care, harassment by police, and a higher rate of physical and sexual assaults (p. 22-23). These results point out that Q3GNLs are a small population within an already small population (of trans people), and that they are generally at greater risk than gender conforming people in a variety of ways. While this does not relate specifically to my research about communication of non-binary identities, it does suggest that a more conscious effort is sometimes needed to bring this particular marginalized population into visibility as an at-risk population in this culture.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Hidalgo et al (2013), who are members of a “four-site child gender clinic group” (p. 285) and work with children they identify as gender-nonconforming, have five major premises that inform their practice in regard to children who are persistent in their gender identification, two of which are important here:

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<sup>2</sup> The issue of societal visibility of trans and NB individuals is entirely too complex to delve into in this work; while visibility of trans and NB individuals could help make the public aware of the problems they experience, that same visibility may also contribute to more prejudice and discrimination against those individuals.

(c) to the best of our knowledge at present, gender involves an interweaving of biology, development and socialization, and culture and context, with all three bearing on any individual's gender self; (d) gender may be fluid, and is not binary, both at a particular time and if and when it changes within an individual across time. (p. 285).

They are very clear in this work that these children are a vulnerable population, especially when they are not allowed to express their gender identity, and that this can lead to “harmful psychological trauma” (p. 286). Additionally, they state that “Children with nonconforming gender expression (whether or not they exhibit gender dysphoria) are at odds with prevailing gender norms” (p. 288), and that because the children whose behavior persists even in the face of the normative narrative of gender, it “suggests a strong constitutional component for gender-nonconforming children, albeit one never exempt from environmental forces” (p. 288). This specific idea—of an innate sense of gender—is repeated in a number of different sources, and seems to run counter to the next boundary I must address.

### **The Second Boundary: Gender as Performance**

When researchers, theorists, and authors describe gender as a performance, they are drawing primarily from Judith Butler's (1988, 1990) work on that concept. Unfortunately, there does seem to be a split in how academics understand Butler's perspective: some take the idea that gender is a performance to mean that gender is entirely a performance, that there is no such thing as innate gender; others appear to acknowledge the point but take the position that gender is performance in addition to

other factors. Based on my research and personal experience, I would suggest that gender is an identity that we perform through the social constructs available to us.

Cooper and Dzara (2010) represent one example of researchers who identify performance as a concept, especially in the virtual space that is Facebook, without necessarily coming down on one side or the other. “In addition, LGBT users may actively seek to construct an ‘out’ identity by presenting news on gay and lesbian events, information about social or political activities, or news stories relating to some topic of interest to the LGBT audience” (p. 102). This both addresses issues of the construction of identity (covered in the previous section) as well as how that identity would be performed in virtual spaces beyond just describing the self. The construction and performance of identity is therefore a much wider phenomenon that encompasses both physicality (descriptions of self) and mentality (attitudes, beliefs, and values).

Talbot (2010) makes a critical point that invokes Carey’s (2009) work on communication as ritual: “From the perspective of performativity, gender is a ritual act and everyday gender performances are policed” (p. 205). The first part of this statement, that gender is a ritual act, is in some ways a revolutionary statement. The ritual view of communication, according to Carey (2009) is “directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (p. 15). If gender is indeed a ritual act, then it is decidedly about maintaining the idea of gender, about representing shared beliefs of what gender means. From this, I would suggest that gender is most certainly performative (even though I will argue that it is not entirely performative), and that

performance of gender by NB individuals is very clearly ritual as communication, even though it is more centered in resistance to the dominant narrative. Part of my work involves finding out if there are any commonalities in how NB individuals communicate their identity; gender as ritual act certainly qualifies as a mode of communication. As for the statement that everyday gender performances are policed, there are enough references in this work and in the wider culture that I feel confident in simply agreeing with Talbot's point and moving on to discussing the theorists who identify gender as solely rooted in performance.

**Gender is performative only:** Lucal (1999) is probably the author whose academic and lived experiences make for the most valid argument in favor of this concept. She identifies as female, but her presentation often causes her to be mistaken for a man (p. 786-787). She even writes that "I understood the concept of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987) long before I became a sociologist" (p. 781).

I believe it is from this place of authority that she feels comfortable writing that "It is now widely accepted that gender is a social construction, that sex and gender are distinct, and that gender is something all of us 'do'" (p. 782). She also writes, "Because gender is a social construction, there may be differences among one's sex, gender self-identity (the gender the individual identifies as), presented identity (the gender the person is presenting), and perceived identity (the gender others attribute to the person)" (p. 784). In comparison, I would describe differences between sex (the biological aspects of self), gender identity (the individual's sense of their own gender), gender presentation (how that person is performing gender in the world around them), and gender role (the cultural

ideas of how gender should be performed). There is some overlap, obviously, though my description does leave out how others would see me, and Lucal's description leaves out the roles we are expected to play that do still figure into our gender identity.

Additionally, Lucal (1999) does discuss the possibility that by doing gender differently, she can subvert it (p. 795). This suggests that anyone who is gender diverse and who is "doing gender differently" from the cultural norms is engaged in resistance to the dominant narrative, regardless of whether gender is centered entirely in performance or not.

However, even though Lucal (1999) and I appear to have found some common ground, she writes, "If gender is a product of interaction, and if it is produced in a particular context, then it can be changed if we change our performances" (p. 795). This statement makes it seem as though changing gender might be as simple as changing how we communicate it.

I would also point out that even when Lucal appears to challenge the gender binary, she is, in fact, reifying it throughout her work. The subtitle of her work is "Life on the Boundaries of a Dichotomous Gender System;" she consistently refers to that dichotomy/binary in her work, and even when she talks about challenging the system of dichotomous gender, that challenge comes in the form of calling into question the "naturalness of gender" (p. 795), and not that the binary construction of gender identity itself might be a false dichotomy. Her challenge appears to be directed toward performance of gender *roles*, but not gender *identities*.

Wajcman (2009) approaches performativity from a technological perspective, which is at least somewhat more understandable. But at the same time, she moves the sites of performance into technology as one result of combining feminism with science and technology studies:

Similarly, the concept of gender itself is now understood as a performance or social achievement, constructed in interaction (Butler 1990). Rather than conceiving of gender as fixed and existing independently of technology, the notion of performativity, or ‘gender as doing’, sees the construction of gender identities as shaped together with the technology in the making. Thus, both technology and gender are products of a moving relational process, emerging from collective and individual acts of interpretation. (p. 8)

Her rationale is that technology is no longer seen as a neutral result of progress, but that technological “objects and artifacts” are part of society (p. 7). And she is most certainly correct; it is most likely safe to say that the construction of artifacts takes place within the context of a culture, and that culture is certainly not value-neutral, most especially the dominant U.S. culture and how it perceives gender. She adds that “gender relations can be thought of as materialized in technology, and masculinity and femininity in turn acquire their meaning and character through their enrolment and embeddedness in working machines” (p. 7). Her logic is clear, though I would point out that while gender is certainly performative in virtual spaces, gender is not strictly limited to those virtual spaces.

I will end with Butler (1988), as she is the primary person to whom this idea can be attributed. In this work, she examines the idea that “the meaning of women’s social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology” (p. 520), and proceeds to challenge this assumption by deconstructing how gender is constructed. She offers a



solution to the dilemma of gender essentialism by writing, “My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (p. 523). This seems very clear: gender is a performance, and it is one that creates the gender of the body. She continues, “When this conception of social performance is applied to gender, it is clear that although there are individual bodies that enact these significations by becoming stylized into gendered modes, this ‘action’ is immediately public as well” (p. 526). Gender is performed in relation to others, and is therefore contextual. And Butler locates this idea of performance within the context of culture:

Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives. (p. 526)

Taken together, the argument seems very solid—gender is a performance, dictated by the bounded rules embedded in culture, precisely because we are embedded in culture.

I do have a rebuttal to this, but I will save it for the next section, because it is Butler herself who rebuts the idea.

**Gender is more than performative:** In an interview with Cristan Williams (2014), who is herself a transwoman, Butler says:

One problem with that view of social construction is that it suggests that what trans people feel about what their gender is, and should be, is itself “constructed” and, therefore, not real. And then the feminist police comes along to expose the construction and dispute a trans person’s sense of their lived reality. I oppose this use of social construction absolutely, and consider it to be a false, misleading, and oppressive use of the theory.

Butler also responds to questions about people who have used her theory of gender as performance (such as Sheila Jeffreys and Janice Raymond) to deny the existence of trans women, and clearly states that she has “been on quite the contrasting side of feminist debates” about transsexual surgery being a harmful practice based on constructed ideas about gender. Butler continues by saying that Jeffreys “offers a kind of feminist policing of trans lives and trans choices” (Williams, 2014).

Butler does raise a concern when asked whether “humans have an innate and subjective experience of having a body.” She responds that she has some concerns about using the term “innate” due to prior association with some scientists asserting the “‘innate’ inferiority of women or Blacks” and that “sometimes we do need a language that refers to a basic, fundamental, enduring, and necessary dimension of who we are, and the sense of sexed embodiment can be precisely that” (Williams, 2014).

Butler responds to another question about some people asserting “that transwomen are merely mutilated men” by saying, “I would say that the greatest risk of mutilation that trans people have comes directly from transphobia” (Williams, 2014).

Finally, Williams asks Butler what she’d like trans people to take from her work, and Butler responds:

Gender Trouble was written about 24 years ago, and at that time I did not think well enough about trans issues. Some trans people thought that in claiming that gender is performative that I was saying that it is all a fiction, and that a person’s felt sense of gender was therefore “unreal.” That was never my intention. I sought to expand our sense of what gender realities could be. But I think I needed to pay more attention to what people feel, how the primary experience of the body is registered, and the quite urgent and legitimate demand to have those aspects of sex recognized and supported. (Williams, 2014)

Following this clear rebuttal by Butler of the “gender is performative only” interpretation seems almost unnecessary; yet I would point out that Butler (1990) herself in *Gender Trouble* does address the issue of binary genders:

Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of ‘men’ will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that ‘women’ will interpret only female bodies. Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. (p. 6).

Though Butler at the time may not have known about non-binary genders, it seems clear that she was challenging the idea of a gender binary, especially an essentialist view of the relation of sex to gender.

I want to make my position clear: I do agree with Butler that we are performing gender in terms of what we have learned from social constructs (hegemonic discourse/dominant narrative). I would also agree with Butler that there is more to identity, especially gender identity, than just the dominant narrative that forms the ways people generally perform their gender.

Other theorists and authors have similar things to say about the performance of gender. D. M. Atkins, who was trained as a physical and cultural anthropologist (including training in medical anthropology), and who edited a book called “*Looking Queer: Body Image and Identity in Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender Communities*” (Atkins, 1998), granted me an interview about the subject of gender and the performance of it. I will note that while Atkins identifies primarily as “alternatively

gendered,” she is okay with me using “she/her” pronouns (personal communication, April 21, 2015).

When I asked Atkins about her take on gender identity, she responded that she does not see “our embodiment as separate from our biology and culture.” She said that from her perspective and training, culture is our biological adaptation to the environment, and that we are “essentially hardwired to create connection, communities, and meaning.” The phrase that she used was, “birds have wings, tigers have claws, and humans have culture.” She challenged the notion of performativity by saying that “yes, everybody is performing gender, but for who and why?” and pointing out that people who are performing differently aren’t doing it to be contrary, but that the performance is related to their sense of self and embodiment. She also related a story about a personal experience of her “performing” gender unconsciously during an anthropology class in the 1970s: she was in the front row of the class, “stretched out (one leg out to the left, another out to the right, arms behind my head), and other students when they came in started to laugh”—because the assignment was about body language, and Atkins was unconsciously “performing hypermasculine body language” (personal communication, April 21, 2015).

Atkins also discussed her research into gender identity through a lens of medical anthropology, and found some fascinating things about the performance of gender among trans individuals in San Francisco and Amsterdam in 1997. I consider this important because it highlights a *conscious* performance of gender in contrast with an innate sense of gender, especially among trans individuals in Amsterdam, who were required to “do” gender in very specific ways if they wanted to be accepted for gender reassignment by

the medical community there. So for example, the doctors in Amsterdam challenged an FtM (female-to-male trans individual) because he cried when he was getting his hormone shots; they also challenged an MtF (male-to-female trans individual) for wearing slacks instead of a dress to her appointment. Whereas in San Francisco, because the medical establishment at that time wasn't supportive of people getting surgeries, the trans people there had "an ongoing narrative of 'I can be a man without a dick/I can be a woman without a cunt'." (personal communication, April 21, 2015).

Her research also points out the ways in which people (especially in Amsterdam) would resist the dominant medical narrative, which in both San Francisco and Amsterdam was embedded within a larger dominant cultural narrative around gender (personal communication, April 21, 2015). Resistance in both locations involved finding ways to challenge the narrative, whether creating new ways of addressing the self as gendered in a specific way, or by adhering to the dominant narrative to the extent that it was useful, with the intent to challenge it at an appropriate moment. Atkins related to me an anecdote about someone who had planned on following the program in Amsterdam only up to the point where that person's body would match their sense of identity, and then dropping out of the program (personal communication, April 21, 2015). This also points toward conscious acts of resistance, of performing a counternarrative of gender.

When I read Johnson (2001) for other reasons, I did not realize that she would identify the same issues regarding clinical gatekeepers as Atkins had. She writes that by the 1970s, clinicians became concerned about "the lack of variation in prospective reassignment candidates' personal accounts (Stoller, 1973; Billings and Urban,

1982/1990)” (p. 150). It turns out that the candidates, in order to access the services in question, had simply researched the information available and then “presented themselves as ‘textbook’ cases” (p. 150). I would strongly suspect that this was information that Atkins had available at the time of her research, but what I find most interesting is not the parallel, but that the clinicians—by positioning transsexual individuals “within specific discourses” (p. 150)—encountered transsexuals who performed according to those discourses “when presenting themselves for reassignment” (p. 150-151).

Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) also write about the relation of self to social forces: “As we see it, the self is capable of taking in and assimilating new information. But, while the self is an active agent in society, it is also subject to powerful social forces, specifically to hegemonic systems of knowledge” (p. 61). They are also working in terms of symbolic interactionism; therefore while there is an embodied self, apparently with some agency, it is still “a social creation, formed in interaction with others but dependent upon and resistant to social meanings attached to the body” (p. 61). This raises a question about those social meanings, but I will address that in my next section, because it is too critical to my work to give it less space than it deserves.

But my research does not occupy physical spaces, though my subjects undoubtedly do. In Wakeford’s (2000) critical examination of cyberqueer, she writes that, “certain theoretical assumptions underpin most cyberqueer studies” (p. 411). These assumptions are: (1) the assumption of identity as performative is accepted in an unproblematic fashion; (2) the postmodern connection to queer leads to

fluid/performative identities (in virtual spaces); (3) identity as relative to the “body” that is not online; and (4) economic barriers to participation in cyberspace; she also raises concerns that economic and political conditions are intertwined with the social and cultural factors that play into construction of identity (Wakeford, p., 411-413). I have already addressed point (1) in this section, but it bears repeating that identity is definitely performative, especially in virtual spaces, but that it is not *only* performative. I find her point (2) about fluid and performative identities to be quite fascinating, given that at least one of my research subjects literally performs a fluid identity in virtual spaces—except that this is not out of a sense of experimentation, but out of a sense of constructing an identity that, as Robinson (2007) writes, “is an extension of the offline masterself” (p. 103). This also applies to point (3), because no matter how virtual the space, we still come back to an embodied self, as noted by Atkins (personal communication, April 21, 2015). Point (4) and the follow up about the economic/political being intertwined with social/cultural are areas that need more attention and unfortunately fall outside the scope of this research.

Robinson (2007) is also useful in this research, because she locates the construction and performance of identity both in virtual and physical spaces:

I find that in creating online selves, users do not seek to transcend the most fundamental aspects of their online selves. Rather, users bring into being bodies, personas, and personalities framed according to the same categories that exist in the offline world. (p. 94)

This is not just applicable to sexual orientations, either. Gender identity that exists in the offline/physical world can be performed in online/virtual spaces. I will also note that in Robinson’s research, she finds that “Given the shift in user populations and types of

internet activities, for most users the online self is an extension of the offline masterself” (p. 103).

**Performing for whom?** Robinson (2007) approaches the cyberself through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism [that “the self is the product of interaction rather than an immutable entity” (p. 94)]; Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) also write through that lens. This raises an interesting point, that there is a chain of theoretical reasoning here that can be connected like a circle: we can link Butler’s theory (gender as performance) through Talbot’s definition of the performativity of gender (performance as ritual) to Carey’s writings (ritual as communication) through symbolic interactionism as defined by Robinson and made specific to this work (communication as interaction produces self in the form of gender) and back to Butler again.

It seems rather easy to make these connections, but if this is indeed a circular relationship, where is the center? In each case, the theory hinges on these interactions taking place between a “self” and “others”—which is the backbone of all communication. But each of these theories relies on centering the “other” as the focal point of interaction:

- Butler (1988, 1990) states that gender is performative, but implies that we are performing for an external other, rather than ourselves;
- Talbot (2010), by way of Carey (2009), states that gender is a ritual act (p. 205), and from Carey’s discussion of ritual as communication, we do it in relation to others (and not necessarily ourselves);



- Symbolic interactionism, according to Robinson's (2007) definition, defines the self in terms of interaction with the other—that is, there is no self without other; Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) also rely on symbolic interactionism.

This leads to the question of who fills the role of the “other,” however. Just because these theorists have identified a general other, does not mean they have actually identified specific instances of that other. Butler (1988) comes the closest when she writes:

Just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives. (p. 526)

In this, Butler identifies culture (and presumably the dominant culture, which for her is the U.S., which is also the culture I'm primarily focused on) as the “other” for whom we perform gender. Except that even this statement has a number of assumptions that remain unquestioned:

- The gendered body: who is it, for whom does it act, for what purpose, with what intent, with and from what viewpoint, in what context?
- The culturally restricted corporeal space: which culture? (I would presume that Butler is operating on the assumption that her culture is that restricted space.)
- Enacting interpretations: whose interpretation, for whom/for what gaze, for what purpose, with what intent, for what viewpoint, in what context?
- The already existing directives: from whom, enforced how and by whom, for what purpose, with what intent, from which viewpoint, in what context?

Almost all the questions I've asked can be located in one of six categories: the self; the “other” in whatever form; purpose (performing for others); intent (performing for self);

viewpoint; and context. This table of the assumptions Butler makes is, perhaps, a better way of breaking down how each of these questions come about:

**Table 1**

*Questions Regarding Assumptions Made by Butler*

	The gendered body	The culturally restricted corporeal space	Enacting interpretations	The already existing directives
Self	Who is it?	With regard to which culture?	Whose interpretation?	For whom?
Other	For whom does it act?		Whose interpretation? For what gaze?	Enforced how, and by whom?
Purpose (performing for others)	For what purpose?		For what purpose?	For what purpose?
Intent (performing for self)	With what intent?		With what intent?	With what intent?
Viewpoint	With/from what viewpoint?		For what viewpoint?	From which viewpoint?
Context	In what context?		In what context?	In what context?

If we assume that the dominant culture is U.S. white, cisgender, heteronormative culture (as Butler appears to), then many of these questions have relatively simple answers, especially with regard to enacting interpretations and already existing directives, because that particular dominant culture has *all of these rules already in place*. But what Butler misses is that these rules are different for different sets of people, based on how acceptable those people are, and what their accepted roles are, within the dominant culture. The less acceptable the group, that is to say, the more marginalized that group is, the more difficulties they experience because the rule sets become increasingly

restrictive. Often this is in contradictory ways that make following those rules difficult, if not impossible—as in the case of the trans people in Amsterdam who needed medical care and had to follow an extremely prescriptive narrative in order to get that care.

Another way of looking at the question of who we perform for comes from Althusser (2012) who writes that “*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*” (p. 84, emphasis in original). The dominant narrative of U.S. culture for gender is the ideology of both what gender is and how we are supposed to “do” it. This narrative is how individuals are hailed and thusly how they respond—by “doing” gender in the way that they have learned is correct and which matches the idea they have of what gender is (in the case of the dominant narrative of U.S. culture, the binary formation of “male” and “female”). As with other ideological formations, this interpellation is always-already present (Althusser, 2012, p. 84-85); it is enforced on individuals not just from the time that their parents determine their sex but prior to that because of the dominant narrative of the U.S. culture about what gender is and how to “do” it.

This particular instance of interpellation also gives us the answer of who we are performing for: we are always-already performing for an *internalized* “other.” That is to say, when a person performs gender, that person is performing not only for an external “other” (whether individual, group, or culture) but also for an internalized “other” that represents an internalized acceptance of the dominant narrative. I would draw a parallel here with research that shows how homosexual individuals can have an internalized “acceptance of and agreement with society’s negative evaluation of homosexuality”

(Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009, p. 33). Both are groups of marginalized individuals who have learned from the dominant narrative what is “acceptable” (binary gender, heterosexuality), and both can experience an internalized “other” that is the representation of the dominant narrative.

This does bring up a question, however. Althusser (2012) writes that “*individuals are always-already subjects*” (p. 85, emphasis in original), which seems to eliminate the potential for the existence of a concrete individual or (relative to this specific work) a concrete gender. Even if Althusser was not erasing the existence of a concrete self, he still seems to assert that this concrete self is encased within ideology, thus existing as a subject. So how do trans and NB individuals fit in to this framework? Butler (Williams, 2014), Atkins (personal communication, April 21, 2015), Johnson (2001), and Hidalgo et al. (2013) all point toward an innate sense of gender that can lead to resistance to the dominant narratives and ideology around gender. If a concrete self did not exist, why would trans and NB individuals even exist? Their sense of gender would have been erased in the process of interpellation. If a concrete self still exists beneath the layers of ideology, then how does resistance against the ideology of gender take place, considering how ubiquitous the ideology of gender is?<sup>3</sup> And finally, when this resistance takes place (because it does, as my research will show), what forms does it take? Is the resistance to specifics, that gender is binary/“male” and “female,” compared with non-binary genders/non-male or non-female genders, or more generally to the assumptions underlying cultural notions of gender?

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault has investigated these issues in more depth throughout his work.

And this is where queer theory would come in, to help answer these questions; only queer theory has its own set of problems when it comes to addressing non-binary genders.

### **The Third Boundary: Queer Theory**

Unfortunately, in quite deliberate ways, queer theory resists definition. As I mentioned previously, Yep, Lovaas, and Elia (2014) do provide a very loose definition of queer theory, but its “definitional indeterminacy” (p. 9, footnote 1) means that any attempt to pin it down for the purposes of this work means that I must decide on a reasonably concrete definition that allows me to apply it to the work I am doing here. At the same time, I find that one of the things that is most clearly defined about queer theory is the one that I most want to shift—its focus (seemingly) exclusively on sexual orientation.

**Defining the undefinable:** Several theorists have several different takes on queer theory, and each of them identifies specific characteristics that form the core of their definition of queer theory. For example, O’Riordan (2007) provides one of the more expansive definitions I found:

I understand queer to be a subjectless critique (Butler 1998) and a political and theoretical force, as well as an intersection of identities. Simultaneously, queer adheres to and is produced through bodies, experiences and practices. These two levels—critique and embodiment—also intersect (O’Riordan, p. 17).

One of the elements of O’Riordan’s definition that intersects with other definitions is identity; Karl (2007) mentions the intersection of identities as well, but primarily through

the lens of cyberqueer as a set of approaches that “mostly locate their emphasis in the non-normative with regard to identities, social groups, and cultural locations” (p. 48-9). On the other hand, Yep (2014) suggests that one of the conceptual spaces occupied by queer theory is “contesting identity” (p 38), in the sense of challenging heteronormative discourses around identity [given that Yep’s discussion of that space locates queer theory primarily as addressing sexual identity (p. 39-41)]. Smith’s (2014) statement that “all categories are falsifications, especially if they are binary and descriptive of sexuality” (p. 346) can be read as parallel to Yep’s definition, including the focus on sexual orientation.

The only other element of O’Riordan’s (2007) definition that intersects with any other definition is the political element. Both O’Riordan (2007) and Yep, Lovaas, and Elia (2014) give space to naming this idea, but do not spend much effort beyond that to be more precise about *what* that entails, such as political activism in public spaces, e.g. Butler’s (2014) involvement in advocacy for trans people in DeKalb, IL. It could simply mean that this is in contrast with the elements of queer theory that focus on text/discourse in a primarily theoretical fashion, which is an element of Smith’s (2014) definition (p. 346)—so “political” in this instance could be a synonym for applying theory in practice, again, much as Butler (2014) does.

One piece that I did *not* find in other definitions of queer was the aspect of embodiment that O’Riordan references (2007, p. 17). If critique is in fact intersectional with embodiment, shouldn’t this be more present in other definitions of queer theory? This is a critique I want to return to in the next section.

Yep's (2014) definition is broader, given that he identifies that queer theory is "more about an open system of discursive and conceptual possibilities than a rigid and fixed theoretical model" (p. 38). In fact, his definition is an "attempt to map its conceptual mobility and sketch some of its evolving conceptual spaces: (1) Contesting categories; (2) contesting identity; and (3) contesting liberalism" (p. 38). I include this here because while it is not a specific definition (as O'Riordan's (2007) above, and Smith's (2014) to follow), its very breadth makes it possible for me to make links between multiple definitions of queer theory. That same breadth, however, does make it more difficult to be clear about what queer theory is for in my work.

In contrast with Yep's breadth and lack of specificity, Smith (2014) provides a fairly specific definition of queer theory:

The core tenets of queer theory are that: (1) all categories are falsifications, especially if they are binary and descriptive of sexuality; (2) all assertions about reality are socially constructed; (3) all human behavior can be read as textual signification; (4) texts form discourses that are exercises in power/knowledge and which, properly analyzed, reveal relations of dominance within historically-situated systems of regulation; (5) deconstruction of all categories of normality and deviance can best be accomplished by queer readings of performative texts ranging from literature (fictional, professional, popular) to other cultural expressions (geographic distribution, body piercing, sit-coms, sadomasochistic paraphernalia). (p. 346)

This definition is quite exacting, and also contains at least some overlap with other definitions: for example, both Karl (2007) and Smith (2014) refer to queer theory as being textual in focus, though Karl does point out that queer theory seems to favor the textual over the sociological (p. 60). O'Riordan's (2007) reference to critique, as well as

Yep's (2014) use of "contesting" in his broad sketch of queer theory's conceptual spaces, suggest similarities with Smith's approach of deconstruction.

Karl (2007) does discuss queer theory throughout her piece, but never with a specific definition; this may well be because of the indeterminacy that Yep, Lovaas, and Elia (2014, p. 9, footnote 1) cite as a key feature of queer theory. Instead, she discusses ways in which queer theory can be applied to everyday life, such as, "Taking the queer lens to everyday life allows us to make connections between the intersections of gender and sexual identities" (p. 53). Karl also notes that while there was "a categorical split, designating gender as a concern of feminists and feminism and sexuality to the field of lesbian and gay studies and queer theory" (p. 49), that feminists and queer feminist theorists have been trying to change that "since the mid-to late 1990s" (p. 49).

Monro (2001) suggests that, "Another area of theory that could be used to understand trans is queer theory, in the sense that queer involves the scrambling of binaries and gender as performative rather than innate" (p. 160). On the one hand, this suggests that queer theory might be entirely appropriate for use in addressing non-cisgender people; on the other, Monro herself argues the point by stating, "To argue that experience of an essential self is simply internalized discourse is to risk accusing others of false consciousness. Moreover, the discrepancies between people's experiences and the discourses surrounding them render a totally constructionist account untenable" (p. 161). This does raise a point of concern about queer theory's links with performativity of gender that none of the theorists I've examined this far do anything to address.

However, there are some critiques of queer theory that I will need to address.



**Critiques of queer theory:** Even with these broad and/or specific definitions of queer theory, there are some elements missing. For example, Talbot (2010) writes, “Critical perspectives on gender identity also have an emancipatory aim” (p. 117). This could be included in the political element, or even the critique element, that other authors have written about, but Talbot doesn’t specify this.

This raises a critical issue almost immediately: the “categorical split” (Karl, 2007, p. 49) identified. On the queer side of things, however, there is a fair amount of evidence that queer theorists—even though they are aware their work focuses on sexuality/sexual orientation—do not give much focus to issues of gender identity, or that gender identity is assumed to fit into a more limited framework.

In Yep’s (2014) work on heteronormativity in communication studies, for example, he repeatedly mentions that transgender people are erased in queer theory and study:

Women, people of color, transgenders, working-class individuals became increasingly alienated [from a unitary gay identity] and started interrogating the viability of a gay identity that marginalized, and, in some cases, erased their subjectivities and excluded their participation (Anzaldúa, 2000; Combahee River Collective, 1979/1998; Lorde, 1984; Seidman, 1997). (p. 40)

I must digress briefly in order to make a point: the term “transgenders” can be seen as disrespectful because the term transgender is correctly used as an adjective, not as a noun (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2014). By using a term for trans people that is seen as disrespectful, the author potentially alienates trans people who might be interested in engaging with his work—doing the exact thing he seems to be trying to call attention to in the first place!

Additionally, Yep (2014) writes that, “Queer theory is also guilty of transgender erasure” (p. 42), based primarily on how researchers have overlooked the context and lived experiences of trans people (p. 42-3). Unfortunately, he uses the term “transgenderist”—which seems to also be a term for a specific category of trans individuals who identify as male-to-female, live as women, but do not undergo genital surgery (Molay, 2011). Other Internet searches do return results that identify the term as another way of saying transgender but this is not a term in common use.

Yep (2014) concludes his section on trans erasure by writing:

Queer theory is committed to the deconstruction of gender and sexual categories. Engagement with the social context and the material realities associated with gender performance under heteropatriarchy would diminish the danger of excluding, erasing, and othering genders that are not male. (p. 43)

I do have some concern that he positions identity as a performance, but the thing that concerns me most is that shortly after this, Yep specifically writes, “In short, queer theorists and activists call for the deconstruction of the homo/heterosexual binary as the basic foundation of social life” (p. 45). Even after he has made the effort to make trans issues visible, and potentially even acknowledge the existence of NB individuals, he immediately centers queer theory in sexual orientation.

Smith (2014) also connects queer theory with gender (p. 346), but then identifies the “important benefits to gay politics that have accrued as a result of queer theory” (p. 346). He does identify certain criticisms of queer theory, but nowhere in that list are trans or NB individuals (p. 346-347). Instead, he primarily focuses on gay and lesbian individuals, once again centering the narrative on sexual orientation.

Gamson (2014) writes about his difficulties with queer theory—contesting the discourse, as other queer theorists might say—including why queer theory seems so intent on identity as “multiple, contradictory, fragmented, incoherent, disciplinary, unstable, fluid” (p. 386). But he, too, identifies queer theory as focused on sexuality and sexual orientation, even when he points out that “There seemed to be a gap between such theoretical insights and the lived experiences of most individuals I know and respect, who almost always insisted that their desires and identities felt quite stable indeed” (p. 386-387).

Heinz (2014) identifies another key issue in regard to queer theory in her critique of how queer theory is “done”:

Most queer theory work dichotomizes, in its effort to de-dichotomize perceptions of realities, itself into existence. For queer to exist, unqueer has to preexist. The result is a queer theory as fixed as the identities, its proponents argue, do not exist. (p. 372)

I find this a more creditable argument, especially as the author writes about her own experiences with queer (both in the sense of the theory as well as in her own lived experiences), and how queer is not just an academic but a lived experience (p. 371-372). She writes, “Rather than applauding its own performativity, it needs to be tested and measured in terms of its applicability to the dilemmas from which it arose” (p. 372-373).

In fact, this highlights the issue I mentioned previously, that despite the centering of queer theory in questioning, contesting, and deconstructing, it seems almost to miss that being queer is a matter of embodiment, and not just an issue of theory and subjectivity. Heinz (2014) describes encountering queerness in her “local small-town America grocery store and fast-food chain” (p. 371) and how by being themselves, they

“are the people who contribute to social and political change,” (p. 371). Perhaps they represent the unexplained political dimension of queer theory: political action is about embodying change in the world, not just theorizing about it.

**What about feminism?** Therefore, is feminism perhaps a more appropriate theoretical lens to work through, because of the aforementioned split, queer theory’s focus on sexuality and sexual orientation, and seeming emphasis on theorizing over action? Butler (1988) certainly seems to be more aware of the dynamics of gender when she writes, “But the more mundane reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence” (p. 524). And Butler demonstrates that as recently as 2014, she has refined her ideas around gender such that feminism could be a valuable approach to this subject (Williams, 2014).

In Jagose’s (2009) work on feminism and queer theory, she is very clear that while there have been splits between feminism and queer theory, that:

However different their projects—the flashpoints of their inauguration; their historical relation to institutionalization; their critical failures and their potentialities—feminist theory and queer theory together have a stake in both desiring and articulating the complexities of the traffic between gender and sexuality. (p. 172)

Jagose is very clear that both theories are entwined, that both draw on each other in many ways that counter claims of a categorical split (p. 172). She also states that, “Feminist theory, no less than queer theory, is a broad and heterogeneous project of social critique” (p. 172), which suggests a commonality between the two that could be used to my advantage.

Monro (2001) does make an argument about feminism, however, that suggests it might not be the best choice. Earlier, I cited that she discussed “pluralist forms of feminism” (p. 159), but even with that she still cautions us:

Any form of feminism is problematic as a basis for analyzing trans in that its locus rests on male-female categorization. The traditional feminist analysis of trans, where transsexuals are seen as reinforcing stereotypes and appropriating female bodies and space, was strongly criticized by participants. (p. 159)

So I would note that any feminism that relies on that binary categorization will be insufficient to address the existence of NB individuals. And it would be problematic, quite honestly, to appropriate more pluralist forms of feminism because they grew out of other categories of identity such as race and class (Monro, 2001, p. 159). I need a theoretical lens for NB individuals, not just a lens from another category of marginalized and intersectional people, repurposed entirely out of context. Even though Green (2001) writes, “But gender, like race, is not a power system in itself; gender, like race or like language, is a physical trait that some people use to gain or distribute power” (p. 65), race and gender are not equivalent in terms of their marginalizations despite being used as markers for marginalizing others.

Halberstam (2003) provides a reason to use queer theory for this particular work. (I will note that Halberstam identifies as male, and so I will be using he/him pronouns as needed, even though this work was published as Judith Halberstam.) Halberstam writes that as queer studies “makes sexuality a central category of analysis in the study of racialization, transnationalism and globalization” (p. 361), it defines new fields, including “transgender studies” (p. 361). He also writes that even though transgender issues have

been absorbed and “overlooked by LGB studies” (p. 363), that lesbian and transgender stories may overlap but aren’t identical (p. 363). Halberstam is of the opinion that queer studies must move “beyond the university and into public arenas” (p. 363). Finally, he is enthusiastic about the potential for new technology to play a role in queer studies and how it can influence the classroom (p. 364). I would suggest that it isn’t only a matter of how technology can bring queer studies into the classroom, but of how technology has an influence on the spaces that queer studies investigates.

And Gamson (2014) provides, for me, possibly the most important reason to use queer theory in my work. “It took me a while, but when I started to see ‘queer’ itself as an identity *communication* as much as a theory of identity, things started to fall into place” (p. 387, emphasis in the original). Given that my work is centered on the communication of identity, this seems particularly appropriate. If queer is a mode of identity communication, then it most certainly applies to communication of non-binary gender identities. If queer is a way of examining *both* the need to gain institutional access *and* reframing the discourse to examine heteronormativity (as compared with normalizing homosexuality) (p. 387), then it makes complete sense to reframe this dialogue not in terms of sexual orientation but in terms of gender identity.

### Summary

It is not as though the boundaries I encountered—the invisibility of NB individuals, gender as based entirely in performance, and the limits of queer theory—are insurmountable. Theorists such as Monro (2001), Butler (1988, 1990; Williams (2014)),

and Halberstam (2003) use their work to identify holes in these boundaries that allow for the possibility of acknowledging NB individuals.

These are only a few voices in the larger context that limits genders to a reified binary (or occasionally includes MtF and FtM trans people), that despite Butler's words still describes gender as entirely performative, and that centers queer theory almost entirely on sexual orientation. As I've mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is not entirely clear whether these omissions are unconscious or conscious, blind spots or deliberate avoidance.

However, this is what queer theory is for—for “contesting categories” (Yep, 2014, p. 38). I choose to contest the category of sexual orientation that others link with queer theory (Yep, 2014; Karl, 2007; Smith, 2014; Gamson, 2014), and shift the analysis of discourse that queer theory is known for toward the examination of non-binary genders. In a sense, NB individuals themselves contest the binary categories of gender and identity as created and maintained by the dominant culture of the U.S.; therefore this reorientation of viewpoint is not just correct but necessary.

By doing this, I am also challenging the boundary of visibility of non-binary genders, especially as that is the focus of my work. Even though trans people are becoming more and more visible in popular media, genders other than “man,” “woman,” and “trans” are still not represented in almost any form, and most especially seem to be missing in serious academic research.

I have already contested the idea that gender is entirely performative, and although my research centers on virtual spaces where gender must be performed, that

performance is rooted in the context of the lives people live and the cultural frameworks in which they formed their identities.

With all of this in mind, I now turn to my methodology.



### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH

Since the research on NB individuals is so lacking, and what research that does exist seems incomplete, included as an afterthought, or framed in terms of performativity, my research must therefore center those individuals so that they can be examined more clearly *as* people, and not just exceptions to a given set of assumptions.

This suggests qualitative analysis as a way of centering my research, and specifically the voices and experiences of the people who are part of my research (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). NB individuals exist in multiple cultures, but in the dominant U.S. cultural model—which is centered on white, heterosexual, cisgender males—they are quite likely to occupy marginalized spaces, which allows me to propose that NB individuals belong to a co-culture (though I will address this issue specifically in the section on ethnographies later in the chapter).

If I make this particular assumption, that suggests a more ethnographic approach to my research; additionally, I am more suited to this particular method as well due to my own non-binary gender identity, which situates me inside the group of individuals I am researching. The fact that my work is centered exclusively in Internet spaces directs me toward a virtual ethnographic approach. As I am focused on people who are by their very existence challenging dominant narratives of gender, this suggests queer theory as a theoretical approach; at the same time, the textual analysis that is one of the hallmarks of queer theory will provide additional means of analysis that ethnography alone might not.

## **Methodology**

One of the most critical pieces of this research is my orientation toward the ways in which NB individuals communicate their identities. This is best addressed through a primarily ethnographic approach, given my assumption that belonging to a marginalized group can be represented as being part of a co-culture.

### **Ethnography**

The first step is to establish the legitimacy of an ethnographic approach. Creswell (2013) defines ethnography in part by writing that “shared patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language” of a culture-sharing group (p. 90) are key elements of ethnographic research. He also says that an ethnography “focuses on an entire culture-sharing group. Granted, sometimes this cultural group may be small (a few teachers, a few social workers) but typically it is large, involving many people who interact over time” (p. 90). These two elements of Creswell’s definition suggest that ethnography is properly conducted on a co-cultural group, including elements of interaction between members of that group.

Another definitional element of ethnographic research comes from Tracy (2013), who writes that “Long-term immersion into a culture is a hallmark of ethnography” (p. 29). This suggests that a researcher who is part of the culture or co-culture can more accurately label their work as ethnographic, or can at least say that their work makes use of ethnographic methods (Tracy, 2013, p. 29).

Though my identity as an NB individual is not in question, I do need to address the concern about whether NB individuals represent enough of a co-culture, with the “shared patterns” that Creswell identifies, to make ethnographic research the right approach. These definitions suggest a single co-culture as the site of research, and that presents some difficulties.

While NB individuals exist in the dominant U.S. culture, there is no such thing as a monoculture when it comes to the types of experiences they have and how they express their identity. First, each NB individual experiences gender in a different way; with a range of identities that includes genderqueer, metagender, bigender, genderfluid, agender, and others not listed here, attempting to characterize a unifying internal experience of identity, much less shared patterns, seems difficult at best.

I do need to note that I have specifically not engaged with any sources from cultures who are not white and western and who use culture specific terms for gender identity and/or roles. For example, some Native American peoples use the term “two-spirit” as a category term for individuals who “take on multiple gender roles” (Lauryn, 2015), while *hijra* is a term used for individuals in India who occupy a gender role that is neither male nor female (Pettis, 2004). This is important because I cannot assign my definition of non-binary genders to other cultures, because it is *at best* inaccurate from a research standpoint to collect multiple cultural understandings of gender into one framework (which in my case is a predominantly western one); at worst it is oppressive, representative of a colonialist mindset, and reifies the erasure of those cultures.

Second, even though these NB individuals are likely engaged with the dominant U.S. culture (given that I focused on English speaking sources), that is no guarantee that they are only affected by that culture. Even for people who are directly engaged with that dominant culture (that is, they live in the United States), I cannot assume that they are marginalized *only* along the axis of their gender, especially because the dominant U.S. culture defines sexual orientation in terms of being cisgendered. In much the same way that white gay and lesbian individuals who live in the United States do not have the same experiences or the same cultural framework as gay and lesbian people of color (PoC) also living in the U.S., it is not safe to assume that all NB individuals have the same cultural framework and experiences, even if they are living in the U.S.

Even though these are valid and important concerns, I would suggest that NB individuals do belong to a enough of a co-culture within our dominant culture to make them a good candidate for ethnographic research. The first reason for this is the distinct form of marginalization that NB individuals experience based on their gender identity. As I've discussed in my literature review, NB individuals are very much erased even when trans issues and individuals are brought to the forefront; this erasure from even a marginalized group pushes NB individuals to the fringes of the margins. The invisibility of NB individuals in mainstream news and entertainment media further contributes to this marginalization. Even when the experiences of NB individuals are different from each other, the fact that many NB individuals are dealing with a dominant culture (in this particular research, the dominant U.S. culture) suggests that there is a shared culture based in part on their interactions with our dominant culture.

In much the same way that bisexuality is categorized by both heterosexual and homosexual individuals as “not a real identity” in certain ways (Fox, 2003; Greene, 2003), NB individuals may be seen similarly by cisgender and transgender people. As a personal example, I came out as genderfluid to a transwoman friend of mine back in 2011; at that time, she responded that she and her partner (also a transwoman) were wondering when I’d come out as a transwoman myself. While this is not a subject that appears to have been researched, I suspect it is an experience that other NB individuals have had.

A second reason for considering NB individuals as part of a co-culture is that they have a number of shared issues, including issues of identity and identification. The website Everyday Feminism has a number of articles that specifically address non-binary issues, such as specifically identifying NB identities (Jakubowski, 2014), debunking myths about non-binary people (Ballou, 2014), coming out to other queer individuals (Jones, 2015), and fears of violence, both verbal and physical (Finch, 2015). If the number of “shares” on Facebook (ranging from approximately six thousand to nearly twenty thousand between these three articles) is any indication, these articles provide information that people have found worth sharing with others. At the very least, the Ballou (2014) article addresses issues such as denial of identity in multiple ways: accusing NB individuals of seeking attention, stating that they are “confused,” or that being NB is necessarily a political act. And the Jones (2015) article points out that even in what they identify as queer spaces that “internalized gender roles and dynamics within queer communities...were reflective of values held by greater, heteronormative society.”

These articles strongly suggest that NB individuals can be considered part of a co-culture, even if that co-culture is based on membership in a marginalized category.

Another reason to use ethnography in my research comes from J. R. Butler's (2014) article about his transgender advocacy efforts in DeKalb, IL:

Second, ethnographic approaches are well-suited for the study of transgender activism, due to growing concern among transgender theorists that post-structural theory and mainstream sociological study are failing to offer analyses that provide useful knowledge about the lives of transgender people. (p. 280)

While this is specifically about transgender individuals and activism, I would draw a parallel between this need for "useful knowledge" and a similar need for NB individuals.

Ethnography can fill that need.

### **Virtual Ethnography**

However, my research centers on the Internet and interactions that take place there. How does this affect ethnographic work? What kinds of sites would be appropriate for this research, and how would my status as an observer (but a member of the co-culture regardless) affect my efforts?

Communication in virtual spaces is different from communication in physical spaces. The primary difference is that communication in virtual spaces is potentially both asynchronous and not bounded by spatial/proximity limits; that is, communication can take place over a much greater span of time than communication in physical spaces, and it can happen across the world, rather than being limited to direct physical interaction.

Another key difference is that communication in virtual spaces may be missing certain

elements typically associated with physical communication, e.g. non-verbal cues.

However, this is also not strictly true: the availability of still images, audio, and video, as well as the use of emoticons/emojis in text and other overt statements of non-verbal cues, does facilitate a broader range of communication, similar to what takes place in physical spaces.

As Robinson (2007) states, however, the online self is often a reflection of the offline self (p. 103). This suggests that despite the seeming differences between communication in physical and virtual spaces, they are intertwined in ways that make examining communication of identity in virtual spaces just as fruitful as examining communication of identity in physical spaces. Additionally, there are some possible benefits for NB individuals using virtual spaces for communication of their identity: text based communication can allow an NB individual to communicate things about their identity they might not ordinarily share in physical spaces; images may provide a way for an NB individual to express a concept in a more compact fashion than a wall of text, e.g. the webcomic Robot Hugs has a comic about pronoun etiquette (Hugs, 2014) that includes both text and drawn images; and videos can allow NB individuals to perform their specific gender in ways that can be viewed by other NB individuals in different locations.

But since both Creswell (2013) and Tracy (2013) identify ethnography as directed at a culture, at first glance the dispersed spatial network that is the Internet would seem to interfere with this as a location for research. However, as Hine (2008) writes in her work, online communities do exist (p. 258), and as such, they can represent spaces in which co-

cultures can come to exist and thrive. Markham's research identified the multiple nature of the Internet—as a place, as a tool, and as a way of being (as cited in Hine, 2008, p. 259). These characteristics certainly mirror the possible uses of the Internet by NB individuals: the place aspect is represented in the sites that NB individuals use; the tool aspect is represented in how they use those spaces; and the way of being is represented in the uses to which they put those spaces.

Hine (2008) concludes her work on virtual ethnography by writing, “In particular, the experiences of virtual ethnography suggest that there is much to be gained by a more intensive focus on mediated communication” (p. 267-268) and suggesting that “The creative approach to field sites that has resulted from some attempts to engage with the virtual could be more widely deployed” (p. 268). This suggests that virtual ethnography is both a useful approach to ethnography and an approach that would benefit from examining a number of different sites, rather than only pursuing one specific kind of site.

Other authors, such as Karl (2007), Kahn and Kellner (2012), and Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) address the multiple ways in which the Internet can be employed as a location for the communication of identity and connection with community. For example, Karl (2007) writes that

New ICTs [information communication technologies], by way of their articulation as texts and technologies, offer means of expressing, rearticulating, and reinscribing these identities (between private and public spheres, work and leisure spaces) and are being reconfigured themselves during these processes. (p. 55)

Kahn and Kellner (2012) write about the ways in which the Internet can facilitate “oppositional cultural and political movements and provided possibilities for the sort of



progressive sociopolitical change and struggle that is an important dimension of contemporary cultural politics” (p. 598), and note that “Communities of color, gay and lesbian groups, and many other underrepresented or marginal political communities have set up their own email lists, websites, blogs and are now a thriving and self-empowered force online” (p. 601). And Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) write that in their study, one of the individuals “first made contact with the transgender community through an on-line computer service” (p. 75).

The question then becomes: what sites would serve best for this research?

### **The Evolution of My Research**

When I first decided to pursue this course of research, my first thought was to focus on Facebook. After all, it is a large social media hub, full of people who use it to describe their lives and share their thoughts. It would seem to be the ideal space for virtual ethnographic research, based on the interactions that take place between people. But at the time, Facebook only allowed for binary gender identification, both when creating an account and as an identifying marker when using the site. I decided that even with the immense connectivity afforded by the site, it was not a “friendly” place for people who identify as non-binary, and therefore would be of limited use in my research.

In the past year, two important things related to gender identity have happened to Facebook. First, they changed their internal methods of gender identification to allow for a much wider range of gender identities. This included an expansion of available pronouns to include the singular “they.” While this was seen as rather progressive for the

social network, in the last three months of 2014, Facebook also began more strictly enforcing their “real name” policy; this seems to have been the result of efforts by a small group of people with an ideological agenda related to enforcing their sense of gender identity on people in that particular virtual space (while I have not confirmed this directly, some people who have been affected by this policy have said that a Tumblr site called Real Name Police is responsible). This caught a number of drag performers and non-binary individuals who were using names in their everyday life which did not match their legal names. Although Facebook has said several times that they will be relaxing their rules on the “real name” policy, this does not seem to have been put into effect in a way that allows non-binary people to return to their generally used names. (Though not directly related to my interest in research, I would also note that individuals belonging to other marginalized groups—pagans and Native Americans/First Nations people—were also affected by the enforcement of this policy.)

Although the first change of policy might make Facebook an appealing source for research, especially because of their open acknowledgement of a variety of gender identities including several I have already identified, the second issue is of much greater concern. If a virtual communal space does not allow their members to maintain their identity, is that space no longer a useful space for communication of an identity that can potentially be erased at any time? Whatever the reasoning at Facebook for the continued “real name” policy, I found it to be a less-than-ideal space to pursue my research.

Instead, I elected to examine online blogs as another avenue for my research. I thought that the reduced limitations imposed on bloggers would give them the

opportunity to express themselves more accurately, or at least create a favorable environment for non-binary individuals to communicate about their gender identity.

As I was investigating blogs maintained by NB individuals, I discovered Tumblr, a form of social media that seemed to attract younger NB individuals. Tumblr is different from other kinds of blogs and social media sites in that it tends to promote reblogging items (essentially repeating what someone else has added to the site), and does not create the same kind of space for commentary as blogging platforms. Specifically, users are allowed to reblog posts and may include a comment on the original post; this can lead to chains of reblogged posts that include large numbers of different individuals. Tumblr also allows users to post images, videos, and animated GIFs, so that on any one user's Tumblr, posts might include one or more of those elements. Tumblr also has a feature that differentiates it from other social media sites, in that it allows individuals, both Tumblr users and visitors to the site, to ask questions of the Tumblr user, who can then respond in their Tumblr space—in essence, creating new content as compared to reposting content.

Robinson (2007) writes about how homepages have interactional spaces which aid in the selfing process (p. 104). While she seems to mean this as any site at which the online self encounters online others, this suggests Tumblr as a medium allows for ways of creating the self, primarily through reposting/reblogging content from other users (both in the interaction of the Tumblr user with the original content by reposting it, as well as the interaction with people who encounter that reposted content) and through the Ask mechanism which allows for a greater level of interaction between Tumblr users.

Finally, I identified YouTube as another site of research. The nature of YouTube—the user created content, videos that added visual and audio channels of communication along with text, and the likelihood of seeing NB individuals speaking about the subject of their gender—seemed a natural extension of both the blog as a storytelling platform, and Tumblr as a text and visual medium. Additionally, videos posted to YouTube could demonstrate NB individuals performing their gender for a larger public who might not have any other models for a non-binary gender performance.

### **Applying Queer Theory to Virtual Ethnography**

Both Karl (2007) and Smith (2014) identify textual analysis as a key part of queer theory. In particular, Smith (2014) says that human behavior can be read as text, and that these texts form discourses which can be analyzed (p. 346). Smith also notes as part of his definition that this can “reveal relations of dominance” (p. 346), which is critical when looking at how a marginalized group interacts with a more dominant culture.

This makes queer theory especially appropriate to apply as a theoretical lens to virtual ethnography. Blogs, Tumblr posts, and videos all represent elements of human behavior translated onto the Internet, where their textual nature is clear and legible; in the case of texts created by NB people, these may well form a discourse that can be analyzed in terms of power and relations to the dominant U.S. culture. These discourses, especially if they are directly about NB identities, represent a challenge to the dominant narratives around gender. And while dedicated spaces on the Internet such as blogs, Tumblrs, and YouTube videos may represent limited forms of interaction with a dominant culture (in

the sense that these interactions can only happen when someone goes into those spaces), it is still interaction with that culture in terms of the people likely to view the content. The medium itself represents an encounter with the dominant U.S. culture's ideas of how the Internet is structured and functions, and therefore also creates a space where a shared culture can take shape.

Queer theory is also defined by Yep (2014) and Smith (2014) as challenging or contesting identities, though their focus is on identities of sexual orientation rather than gender. But since I have taken the position that queer theory can be applied to contesting gender identities, the blogs, Tumblrs, and YouTube channels that I sought to include in my research (as well as the individuals themselves) represent queer praxis—challenging the dominant U.S. narrative around gender and contesting the categories of gender as defined by that narrative.

I want to make one thing clear, however: the self that exists online does not exist in a vacuum. That self—as Robinson (2007) states—is connected to an offline self (p. 103), and that offline self is embedded in culture and lived experiences. It would be problematic to read the texts presented online as existing solely online, as outside of the contexts from which they arose, and not acknowledge that NB individuals who are expressing themselves online are doing so because they are NB offline. I would suggest that this would be an area for further research, to examine both online and offline expressions of NB identities and find areas of correlation.

### **Potential Issues with Ethnography as Methodology**

A potential issue with employing ethnography as my methodology in my work is that I am biased in the ways I approach these sites. Since I identify as an NB individual, I am more likely to be sympathetic to the people who create or reblog content, which is one of the issues that Tracy (2013) cites as a problem for ethnographers—the idea that ethnographers are supposed to be objective but are in fact biased (p. 247). Creswell (2013) also identifies a challenge where the researcher might “go native” and therefore be unable to complete their research or be somehow compromised (p. 96).

While I have done my best to be at least somewhat distant from the individuals I am researching, their experiences and mine are quite similar; I cannot be a detached researcher. I also would point out that Creswell’s concern about going native perpetuates a stereotype of a colonialist researcher from outside a culture looking in, somehow detached from the culture with which they are interacting, and somehow superior to that culture. These concerns—of a lack of objectivity and strong identification with a culture being studied—seem to me to be hallmarks of prioritizing an etic (outsider) approach to ethnography and qualitative research in general.

As I said before, I cannot be a detached researcher. I am too involved with the co-culture I am researching to be completely separate from it; in Creswell’s terms, I have already gone native, though it does not appear to interfere with my ability to complete this research. Given the nature of this work, however, I would maintain that my involvement in this co-culture has more benefits than issues; I have at least some better

awareness of the issues these authors and moderators deal with on a day to day basis than a researcher who is not at home with these concepts.

Tracy (2013) raises another issue with ethnography, which is that an ethnographer may consider themselves precise and observant while being anything but—specifically, that ethnographers are interpreting the events they study rather than accurately reflecting the events as they “‘really’ happened” (Tracy, 2013, p. 247), and that they cannot record everything that takes place.

The use of virtual ethnography answers these issues at least in part: by taking screen captures and copying blog information, I can go back and review my selected posts repeatedly, rather than relying on notes I was taking in a limited amount of time under uncertain conditions, or running the risk that these posts will disappear before my research is completed. However, I will say that I cannot write my research as though I am simply recording everything that took place in these virtual spaces. I chose to limit the number of posts I would review, according to criteria I will discuss in the next section; that automatically prevents me from observing everything that takes place on any of those sites. I did read other posts in the process of selecting my research sample, so at the very least I can say that I have a broad sense of the approach of each author or moderator.

Therefore, this research is centered in a virtual ethnographic examination of communication of gender identity based around a shared culture of interaction within the framework of dedicated virtual spaces such as blogs, Tumblr, and YouTube.

Additionally, queer theory represents the most appropriate lens through which to do this research, given that it includes the analysis of texts and the challenging of dominant

categories. I have also identified and addressed some limitations on the use of ethnography, even virtual ethnography, in this work.

### **Research**

In order to locate candidates for research, I searched for blogs, Tumblrs, and YouTube channels that were oriented on NB gender identity; some of this I accomplished through using search engines, and then followed linked content from my initial searches. In other cases, I asked on social networks I use for recommendations; unfortunately, while some people did respond in a positive manner, those recommended blogs did not meet certain criteria, e.g. focus on gender identity, or the individuals were engaged in male-to-female or female-to-male transitioning, and therefore did not meet the non-binary criterion for my research.

I chose specific criteria for sites of research based around the communication of NB identities. First, the author or moderator(s) of the site needed to identify as non-binary, whether on the site itself or through another site they maintained. This particular criterion originates from my awareness that individuals who identify as cisgender will generally *not* have an internal sense of gender that does not match the sex they were assigned at birth; binary transgender individuals (FtM or MtF) do have that internal sense, but their identity is generally centered in a binary sense of gender. Since my research focuses on NB individuals, I needed people who were both aware that their gender identity did not match their assigned sex, *and* that their gender identity did not fit within the binary narrative of gender.



Second, the author or moderator(s) of the site needed to create or reblog content that specifically addressed NB identities and not just presentation. I found any number of sites that focused on fashion, makeup, and other performances of NB gender, but none of them did any deeper work than this. It was as if they were engaging in discourse around presentation alone, and ignoring or erasing other aspects of NB identity. This criterion could be labeled political, in the sense that discussion of NB identities is inherently a political act, as Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) express in their research.

Third, the author or the moderator(s) of the site needed to create or reblog enough content that I could examine multiple posts as part of my analysis. Since I would not be engaging in ongoing communication with the author or moderator(s) of those sites, I needed some depth to their communication of NB identities to get a sense of how and what they communicated. I decided to go with a minimum of five posts with a specific emphasis on NB identity, as that would likely provide enough “text” to analyze for commonalities in the author/moderator(s) discourse.

I did not limit myself to any one specific time frame, although I did not select any posts more recent than the middle of March 2015. I also did not eliminate authors or moderators who did not post frequently (since several of my potentials posted once every few months or so). I determined that the previous criteria were more important to my research, and that a limited time frame or frequent posting actually reduced the number of candidates available for my research.

I chose four sites where the author of content was an NB individual, created or reblogged content specifically addressing NB identities, and had at least five posts

directly related to this content. This collection of multiple sites that are all centered in different modes of communication—text, picture/image, and video—also fits well with the idea of bricolage as a way of connecting all these elements together into more useful research (Tracy, 2013, p.26).

### **Selected Sources and Background Information**

The first site is called We Are Genderfluid (We Are Genderfluid, n.d.), and represents one of the “Ask” based Tumblrs I mentioned above. The two people who moderate the site, Key and Riam, identify themselves as queer, specifically because one of the moderators raises an issue on their personal blog in regard to using predominantly western terminology for gender. Presumably using the term “queer” does not fall into that category for the moderators in question, which is why I use that term to identify the gender of the moderators. Each moderator also uses the “they” set of pronouns.

The site is described as “a safe space for questions from all gender variant or questioning people;” additionally, the site moderators say they try “to approach gender from a perspective that does not implicitly uphold the western gender paradigm.” Based on my readings of the Tumblr posts, I would say that the moderators hold true to those statements. The longer responses are generally thoughtful and sensitive to the issues raised by the person asking the question; the shorter responses can sometimes be a call for other people to contribute, especially on topics where the moderators do not have answers.

I selected ten Ask-based posts where the moderator spent more than a few lines answering the asker's question; I also sorted for questions about gender identity specifically, rather than presentation (e.g., questions about binders, a piece of clothing that allows assigned female at birth individuals to make their breasts less obvious). Most of the Asks were submitted by anonymous users, and do not directly identify a gender or pronoun; when a pronoun is not available, I have elected to use "they" to identify the anonymous user *only* if necessary.

The second site is called queer kenosis (queer kenosis, n.d.), and the author identifies femself as genderqueer, using fae/fem/xer pronouns. The author also includes other identity elements in xer description; those include "mixed race," "settler," and "m div student in toronto." In the author's section of the Tumblr titled "User Instructions," fae discusses xer pronouns and makes a point of asking that if a person wants to use similar pronouns that they should contact fem; fae makes the point that since fae is "a mixed race genderqueer," fae does not feel good about "white people coming along and taking stuff as it suits them (which perpetuates White supremacist behaviors)." As with We Are Genderfluid, the author demonstrates a clear sense of intersectional issues around both race and gender.

Since this Tumblr is not Ask-centered, but the author does use tags on xer posts, I used the "gender" tag as a way to search posts, and then selected six posts that I confirmed were related in some way to NB identities. The author does have tags for original content, such as personal writing, but within the timeframe of posts I specifically examined, the #gender tag was not present with the tags for original content.

The third site is called Radically Queer (Faucette, n.d.b), and in certain ways, this blog represents a very close match to what I was originally looking for in terms of research candidates. The author, Avory Faucette, identifies herself as a “queer feminist,” and states that hir preferred pronouns are “zie” and “hir.” Zie also states that zie has “a JD from the University of Iowa,” which locates hir’s identity in academia as well. Additionally, zie says that “hir current work focuses on queer identity, policy, and marginalized identities under the queer umbrella” and that “As a genderqueer person, zie comments frequently on non-binary identity, transgender and genderqueer issues, and media coverage of these populations” (Faucette, n.d.a).

From reading through Faucette’s posts, zie is very definitely aware of issues experienced by NB individuals, though zie does not address issues of race/ethnicity intersectionality the same way that the moderators of We Are Genderfluid and the author of queer kenosis do. However, hir blog has several sections, focused on gender, sexuality, activism, identity, and culture, which suggests that zie is at the very least aware of issues around intersectionality; the section on identity has sub-sections for body, class, race, and religion.

Although Faucette does use a “gender” tag in hir posts, two out of five posts were not tagged as “gender” but were still included in this research, primarily due to references to related issues.

The fourth site is a YouTube channel named Seadresa (Seadresa, n.d.), for the author of the videos in the channel. This is one of the names they use on the Internet [in their video, they use the name Grace when presenting female, and use that name on their

Tumblr (Days, n.d.) and Facebook (Robertson, n.d.) sites; they also use Seadresa on their Google+ site]. This site offers additional information for my research, especially because Seadresa's videos add a visual element lacking in the purely text-based sites, and demonstrate another avenue of presentation of gender. Seadresa identifies as genderfluid, and prefers pronouns based on their gender presentation, though according to one of their Tumblr posts, the pronoun "they" is acceptable to use.

Seadresa posts irregularly and many of their posts focus more on presentation than identity, so I selected videos that were primarily centered on Seadresa talking about their identity in some way. I selected six of their videos for analysis; one video was split into two parts, but for this research I counted it as one "post."

Seadresa does not address any issues of intersectionality in their videos, even though they are going to a university and may have encountered the term. Without any direct information about their race or ethnicity, it is very difficult to tell whether this is an issue they've experienced. However, they do seem to be very aware of issues around gender identity, and while some of their videos contain humorous elements, they also have serious parts to them.

In the next chapter, I will analyze each of these sites in terms of content and discourse, and then address some of the results of my analysis.

## **CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS**

These four sites represent four different approaches to discussing NB gender identity; as such, my analysis must take these differences into account, as well as identifying similarities in the ways in which each author or moderator communicates NB gender identities. As my research question is centered on how NB individuals might communicate their identity as NB individuals, I made the communication of identity the focus of my analysis.

### **Methods of analysis**

As I stated in the previous chapter, I used specific criteria to choose my research sites; since one of those criterion was based on the communication of NB content (whether created or reblogged), I chose to focus on the content of the selected posts, while also considering the context of the site from which I selected individual posts. As an example, the We Are Genderfluid site is primarily Ask based, with occasional reblogs from other Tumblrs; therefore, while my focus was on the specific posts I identified, I also did my best to locate those posts in the wider context of a site focused on genderfluid people but open to other “gender variant or questioning” (We Are Genderfluid, n.d.) individuals. Additionally, each site focuses somewhat on different forms of NB gender identity, whether queer, genderqueer, or genderfluid, which results in a different focus for each set of selected posts.

I read or viewed each post for their content, in terms of what each author or moderator wrote/reblogged/recorded, and made notes on each post, paraphrasing what was said and/or done. So for Seadresa's YouTube channel, I not only noted down what they said, but what they were wearing (if visible), described their body language (such as brushing back long hair out of her eyes), and similar pieces of information.

In the case of queer kenosis, this proved to be an interesting challenge, primarily because fem has nothing that is originally her own in the posts I selected. I made an assumption, however, that each post was important enough in some way to fem for fem to reblog those posts, and therefore represented something about fem's attitudes toward gender and gender identity. This would have been the case with almost any Tumblr site I examined, aside from Ask-based sites, and I knew that going into my analysis.

Once I had my notes from each post, I went back through those notes to identify specific characteristics of each post. These characteristics were drawn from the words and/or images used by the content creator/reblogger in each post to identify codes for further analysis. These codes included terms such as "categorization" and "erasure" from *Radically Queer*; "political activism," "misogyny," and "identity more important than perception" from queer kenosis; "uncertainty about gender identity," "support," "visibility of identity," and "self-identification" from *We Are Genderfluid*; and "gender identity," "coming out/acceptance," and "presentation/clothes/make-up," for Seadresa's YouTube videos.

Finally, I evaluated the specific codes for themes common to more than one site, which led to the identification of identity, visibility, and acceptance as major themes (that

is, those themes were present in three out of four sites), and education and misogyny as minor themes (which were present in two out of four sites).

### **Constraints on analysis**

The largest constraint on my analysis in this situation is that I have had no direct communication with the individuals responsible for these sites. I have no way to know for certain if they are non-binary or if they have lived experiences that are mirrored in their content. I also have no way to examine their physical world experiences from interviews with them to see if there are further parallels to their work in virtual spaces. This means that this work represents a purely virtual ethnography, and is therefore limited in those ways.

Creswell (2013) raises the issue that for ethnography, extensive time for collecting data is necessary (p. 96). While he primarily frames this in terms of being out in the field, whereas for a virtual ethnography the process of being out in the field is somewhat simpler. I would note, however, that my time frame to collect and analyze data was constrained by several factors, and while I was able to collect data for analysis from multiple sites across a significant range of time (over two years' worth of available data), the collection process itself was shorter than I would have considered optimal. This suggests that in future research, it might be beneficial to allocate more time to collecting the data, so as to get a broader range of responses.



## **Analysis**

These four sites represent different forms of approach to the idea of non-binary gender identity, and therefore my analysis begins by addressing each site individually. I examine each site in terms of the posts made by the author or moderator. I then identify and discuss the major and minor themes in terms of how each site expresses those themes, and include queer theory in my analysis of those themes.

### **We Are Genderfluid**

On the surface, this site is simply a clearinghouse for questions about gender identity, centered on genderfluidity as an identity. Questions come in (often from anonymous posters) about aspects of gender identity, and the site moderators answer questions and post their responses. In many cases, there are responses which direct the asker to the FAQ pages (or provide a link to a tagged post) where the question has already been asked or answered; the moderator will occasionally say that they don't know anything, and ask for commenters to respond to that question (presumably so that answers can be collated under a tag). There are also instances of particularly short responses (no more than a sentence or two) that, while not providing much information, tend to still be supportive of the asker. For the purposes of this research, the anonymous Tumblr users were assigned identification numbers according to the chronological order of the posts (AT1 is the earliest chronologically, AT12 is the most recent); in the case of the one named Tumblr user, I have abbreviated their Tumblr name to AR to provide them with some anonymity.

In the ten samples chosen for this analysis, each of the askers is in some way expressing an uncertainty in their lives, whether related to identity, presentation, or support. The first two askers (AT1 and AT2) ask questions about their gender identity and questioning their identity. The next post addresses multiple askers (AT3, AT4, AT5, and AT6) who have similar questions about how a person would know their gender identity. AT7 has a question about pronoun use, and AT8 has a terminology question (whether someone can be transgender and genderfluid). The next asker (AT9) came out as genderfluid, and experiences support from their friends but not from their parents. The next three askers' (AT10, AT11, and AT12) posts express some uncertainty about their identity as related to how people around them perceive them. The final asker (AR) asks about romantic relationships because they are genderfluid.

In each case, the responding moderator expresses support for the individuals, often times telling them that they are the only appropriate people who can determine their gender identity. In the specific answer to askers AT3 through AT6, the moderator (who does not identify themselves) identifies gender as a “feeling inside you” and that it can affect “what gender you want people to see you as, what pronouns feel comfortable, and sometimes your feelings about your body and presentation.” This response parallels my awareness of gender as well information from the interview with D. M. Atkins (personal communication, April 21, 2015) and from Hidalgo et al. (2013).

AT8 asks specifically about terminology: whether someone can be transgender and genderfluid, because they had heard from other people that a person cannot be both. Riam responds by saying that yes, a person can be both trans and genderfluid, defines

trans as not exclusively identifying with the gender a person was assigned at birth, and says that genderfluid people fit into the category of trans (presumably by that definition). Riam then goes on to address binary transgender people as a specific category of transness but is inclusive of people who identify with being a trans man or trans woman “although their gender sometimes changes, but not either dramatically or often enough that they feel it stops the label ‘trans man’ or ‘trans woman’ from being useful or something they identify with.”

When an asker has a question about whether they are genderfluid, the responding moderator does their best to examine the question and provide some clarity about the issues raised. For example, when another anonymous Tumblr user (identified here as AT10) asks about whether they are genderfluid based on perceptions of others, Riam responds that those feelings could mean that AT10 is genderfluid, but that they should explore “changes and activities” that will help AT10 “feel good about your body/presentation.” At no point does Riam engage in any disconfirming speech about AT10’s gender, even though AT10 is themselves uncertain about their gender. AT2 poses a very similar question, and states that they’re not sure if they’re gender-fluid or tricking themselves “into thinking I am so that I feel like I’m something special.” Riam responds that this is “a very, very, *very* common feeling” and that it is difficult to avoid that fear because society gives out messages “about certain marginalized and erased categories like transness.” Again, Riam does not disconfirm either the asker’s question or their concern, but instead addresses external factors that could affect AT2.

Another example of the discussion of identity comes from the first Ask (chronologically) in my research. The asker (AT1) says that AT1 has been introduced to the idea of gender fluidity but is also an academic “who is having trouble looking at gender as anything /but/ a social construct.” Key responds by agreeing that social constructs exist, but that the way people interpret and function with them “is not universal, is not fixed, is not absolute,” and continues by providing examples of other social constructs, such as weekends and money, which still have an impact, but says that gender still matters beyond labels. Key makes a point later in their response that queer theory has been groundbreaking but that it lags behind praxis; they further says that “academic ideas involve separation of concepts that in real life are never isolated, and more importantly, are never free from ramifications.” Key is supportive throughout, but is very clear in addressing academic issues with gender identity, presumably because AT1 framed the question that way. Key is very clear that social constructs and socialization do have an impact on how people perform their gender, while still stating that those constructs are restrictive for people who do not fit comfortably within them. I find this an important post to address because it simultaneously addresses the issue of the asker’s gender identity *and* academic thought around the subject, including elements of queer theory.

The moderators are also good about emphasizing communication with others throughout these posts. For example, when AT7 asks a question related to how their best friend continues to refer to them as “woman,” Riam responds, “Sounds like this is a

situation that needs communication,” and goes on to provide a specifically worded example of how AT7 can broach the subject with their friend.

In another example, AT9 writes that while their friends are “totally fine with the idea” of using two different names and pronouns, their parents and aunt are “more challenging” as far as their acceptance. Riam says that it is common for families to start out not being supportive, but get better, and suggests that AT9 continue to have conversations with AT9’s family about this, including what it means to AT9, what AT9 needs from them, and helping AT9’s family understand and providing them with resources to understand AT9’s identity.

AR also has a question about family support; however in this Ask, the asker’s mother said “no one will like me if my gender keeps changing all the time.” Riam supports AR by saying that AR could date people who like AR for themselves, or possibly dating other trans people, but that AR should not date people who would reject AR for their gender identity. Riam then states that the comment from AR’s mother is not helpful and could lower AR’s self-esteem and make AR “feel anxious, insecure, and unloveable”; Riam then suggests asking AR’s mother not to say those kinds of things.

### **queer kenosis**

This particular site represents a “classic” use of Tumblr: reblogs and reposts, with occasional original content or commentary. This also makes it, in some ways, the sparsest of the four sources for analysis. Each of the posts chosen is a reblog of another post; as I

noted previously, the intersection of original content and the #gender tag had no entries within the time frame of my research, and very few entries outside of it.

These reposts range in content from questions about assigned male at birth (AMAB) women breastfeeding, all the way to references to murders of black transwomen (making up two separate entries). These reposts give the Tumblr a more political/activist feel, which I confirmed by examining posts that were not tagged #gender but gave space to political and activist issues (usually around race/ethnicity). This flavor comes through clearly in a post about a bill in the parliament of Canada. The reblog content talks about how the Prime Minister's Office seems to be involved in an attempt to prevent a bill—an amendment to the Canadian human rights act and criminal code to be inclusive of gender identity—from continuing forward. The original post also mentions that conservatives are making an argument about trans people using bathrooms, an argument that is used even now by conservatives in the United States. The core of the argument is that women in bathrooms are threatened by trans women using those same bathrooms, primarily because the trans women are just pretending to be women in order to gain unrestricted access to women in private spaces. I will note that this is an argument popular among both trans-exclusionary feminists as well as conservative politicians here in the United States; I have not gathered enough data to know whether the same parallels exist in Canada.

I would also note that two other reblogs are not explicitly political or activist, but do carry a similar idea to them. In one reblog, the original poster has an image of a Twitter post that says, “‘feminists’ who exclude trans women basically admit to seeing women as walking vaginas. you know, like misogynists.” This is a reference to trans

exclusionary feminists who maintain a gender essentialist point of view that says that only women who were assigned female at birth are women (and even then, the language I have just used is far more sensitive than the language the trans exclusionary feminists often use). In the second reblog, identity once again is an issue, but this time the original post is a comic that states that presentation (clothing or appearance) “doesn’t define your gender!” The characters in the comic seem to include a range of ethnicities and body shapes/sizes, as well as modes of dress, and each character identifies their gender in a way that does not mirror their appearance, e.g., someone who is drawn to appear as a plus-size female identifies himself as a “boy.” This supports the idea of identity as something more than surface presentation, and functions in a similar way to the answers given on the We Are Genderfluid Tumblr.

### **Radically Queer**

This site represents the only text-based blog in this sample set. This means that posts by the author tend to be longer and almost exclusively text-based, are generally made up of original material, and are likely to represent more clearly the author’s self and point of view. Interestingly enough, the author has several categories for hir blog. These include gender, sexuality, activism, identity, and culture. All but the culture category also include more specific subcategories, e.g. the gender category includes gender roles, trans, feminism, rape, and reproductive rights.

On the whole, the author directly addresses issues with gender identity from multiple directions. Some of the posts are distinctly personal, including references to hir

identity as a genderqueer person, and how that identity impacts hir in the world as zie interacts with the world. Some of the posts discuss gender identity as seen by others, both in the post about a bigender individual in a podcast episode of a show called *Invisibilia* (NPR, 2015) as well another post which references trans exclusionary feminists. Generally, trans exclusionary feminists are more often referred to as TERFs, or trans exclusionary radical feminists. As a side note, I have encountered radical feminists who are trans inclusive, and who do not want to be associated with TERFs; at least one person of my acquaintance has referred to trans exclusionary feminists as “trans exclusionary separatist feminists” to differentiate them from more inclusive radical feminists. Since the term TERF is more widely known, I will adhere to that usage, though I also am concerned about the potential for mistaken association with trans inclusive radical feminists.

The author also discusses categorization of individuals, whether self-categorization or categorization by others. In hir post on the bigender individual, zie finds it troublesome that the entire point of the story was that it focused on a scientific approach, and put the bigender person’s experiences into the realm of “look at this weird medical curiosity.” The podcast also ended with the bigender individual finding a category and how that categorization was a relief for her. While this may be the authentic lived experience of this specific bigender individual, according to the blog author the story as told on *Invisibilia* frames this individual’s experience as a narrative of all non-binary gendered individuals. And while the blog author did not explicitly point out the irony of a podcast named *Invisibilia* erasing non-binary gendered individuals who



identify as non-binary, I most certainly noticed this! But as part of hir discussion of this podcast, the author talks about categories of this kind being cultural, rather than the way the story frames them as being medical, scientific, and/or psychological. As another example, an earlier post by the blog author discusses hir identity as non-binary, trans, queer, geek, femme, and poly, but notes that zie has certain privileges that come from being white and educated—and that people often categorize hir in ways that are not correct but still make important points about the author.

Finally, the author does make a post discussing trans exclusionary feminists; zie asserts that feminism must include trans people, and that trans exclusionary feminists are “toxic to feminist communities and set the entire movement back.” This post does fit in with the discussion of categorization, by both the author categorizing trans exclusionary feminists in this specific way, and that trans exclusionary feminists regularly categorize trans women as both dangerous and as not being women. At the same time, this is clearly a statement by the author that trans women are badly affected by a system “built on gender based oppression” and describes some of the ways this happens in the dominant culture. Zie also talks about trans exclusionary feminists often being white, cisgender women who only recognize their own axes of oppression and generally discount or ignore other forms of oppression.

### **Seadresa YouTube Channel**

This site represents a different avenue of approach for my research, in that it is primarily a video and audio blog by the author (rather than based on text or still images).

I would still suggest that it is similar to a text-based blog, in that the author talks about a variety of subjects that are mostly focused on themselves. Seadresa (who identifies as genderfluid, and who refers to herself as Grace in several of their videos where she is presenting female) has more videos that I did not include in this analysis; most of them are either about clothing, hair, or makeup, or do not reference gender at all (as with a video post about Seadresa moving, from April 4, 2015). These videos are very definitely about gender presentation (most frequently as Grace, but some with Seadresa in a male mode), but unlike the videos I selected, they do not have extensive discussions about Grace/Seadresa's life, experiences, or identity. Due to Seadresa/Grace's fluid gender, I will attempt to follow their preferences and use pronouns appropriate to their presentation when discussing specific videos. When I am discussing Seadresa/Grace in general, I will use "they" pronouns; Seadresa/Grace accepts this pronoun usage for themselves, as they mentioned in a Tumblr post from early May of 2015 (Days, 2015).

In the six videos I examined, Seadresa/Grace covers a wide variety of subjects. For example, Seadresa/Grace mentions being a "uni" student in several videos (some were part of this analysis and some were not). In a video not included in this analysis (the video where he talks about moving out), Seadresa identifies himself as getting a degree in journalism, with an interest in video journalism. In two videos, they mention that they are living in New Zealand. And in at least two videos, Seadresa/Grace mentions that they has a girlfriend who is okay with Seadresa/Grace being genderfluid.

Seadresa/Grace tends to favor some subjects over others throughout their videos. The first main subject is how "out" Seadresa/Grace is, both to her family and out in the

world. In the earliest video in my analysis (Seadresa, 2014a), Grace is out to her friends, and while her parents know, they apparently do not know all of it. In the second to last video (Seadresa, 2014e), however, Grace has come out “fully dressed” to her mother, and to her grandmother and grandfather, who she describes as “super supportive.” The videos in between do reference various stages of them being out to their parents, with the question and answer video specifically saying that Seadresa’s/Grace’s parents are averse to Grace presenting female; however, they describe what sounds like a decreasing level of discomfort from their parents with their gender identity over the course of the videos in analysis. In the question and answer videos, Grace describes what her female friends think of her genderfluidity/crossdressing, and says that they are all supportive of her. In another video, Grace says that she’s out to her co-workers, though she came out accidentally to them and describes the experience as “terrifying.”

Seadresa’s/Grace’s gender identity is also a frequent topic. Their first video in my analysis (Seadresa, 2014a) addresses this: Grace states that she was “up until relatively recently a closet crossdresser” but likes the term genderfluid more because it “suits my identity a bit more” because her gender identity changes “quite a lot.” In another video (Seadresa, 2014b), Grace mentions that she wants to be a boy sometimes and a girl sometimes as part of being genderfluid; she also says that living at home with parents who are not accepting hampers her ability to present as female at home. There is one video in the series (Seadresa, 2014c) where Grace mentions that she is housesitting, which allows her to present more comfortable to match her gender identity; she mentions housesitting another time in a video that is not in my analysis set. In another video

(Seadresa, 2014d), he (as Seadresa) talks specifically about genderfluidity and defines it in his terms; the final video in my set is a list of things that are “awesome” about genderfluidity.

Even in their videos about gender identity and being out, Seadresa/Grace does discuss presentation, mostly around the subjects of clothing, make-up, and hair. In the majority of the videos, Grace models her clothing for the camera, and these outfits are stereotypically feminine in looks (dresses, skinny jeans, heels, and so on). In the question and answer video, Grace mentions that her longer hair is actually extensions; they has another video outside of this sample set which shows the process of them putting in the extensions.

Seadresa/Grace does demonstrate a sense of humor throughout their videos as well. In two of the videos in my sample set, they references the science fiction show Doctor Who<sup>1</sup> (Moffat & Macdonald, 2007) as part of their explanations of genderfluidity; in one of those videos, she claims that genderfluid people “have the uncanny ability to manipulate fire” (and appears to have edited a live flame into her hand in the video), and that genderfluid people can summon “ancient Egyptian weaponry at will” (while pulling a distinctive sword from off-screen). In their question and answer video, Seadresa begins the video presenting male, and in the middle of a sentence appears to sneeze—and edits the video such that when *his* head drops, it becomes *her* head (with longer hair, and when she looks up, she is wearing different clothing and has make-up on). Her sole explanation

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<sup>1</sup> Of the two mentions, the first is a reference to a specific and very famous quote from one episode of the program, while the other is a more generic reference to the central character belonging to a species called Time Lords.

for this change is that she is genderfluid. And when she answers the first question, which is a request for her location, she says that she is “right here” and waves at the camera, presumably so as not to provide an exact location beyond the general statement that she lives in New Zealand.

### **Common Themes**

While these sites all represent different approaches to NB identities, from support to activism to simply existing as an NB individual, I identified three major themes running through each site: identity, visibility, and acceptance. While only Seadresa’s YouTube channel contains each of these three themes, each of these themes is present in three out of four of my research sites.

I identified another theme—education—which is not explicitly stated in any of the sites or by any of the authors, but shows up in both the We Are Genderfluid Tumblr, and Seadresa’s YouTube channel. While the education that takes place is primarily oriented toward the concept of identity, I determined that it was worth examining separately.

Finally, I identified a theme of addressing misogyny present in both the queer kenosis Tumblr and the Radically Queer blog; while this could be grouped into the theme of acceptance, I felt it was more correct to address it separately, since the posts specifically address what could be labeled as “non-acceptance” of trans and NB individuals by certain groups of people.

I classified these themes through analysis of the text/content of each post or video, by identifying specific statements that were made by or specific images used by the author or moderator(s), and associating them with concepts and ideas. For example, the We Are Genderfluid moderators frequently use the term “gender identity” in reference to how someone perceives or understands their gender; these statements were associated with the theme of identity (and because of other statements in each reply, these were then identified with subthemes such as self-identification, self-exploration, and self-discovery). The queer kenosis Tumblr data set includes posts with images of trans women of color (TWOc) as well as biographical information about them, and usually in reference to their murders being underreported; this was associated with the theme of visibility. And in Seadresa’s YouTube videos, they would often discuss whether their friends and family were okay with them being genderfluid; this was associated with the theme of acceptance.

### **Identity**

From this research, identity means both that the NB individual is the one best qualified to define their identity *and* that this identity should be acknowledged by others, rather than others overriding the NB individual’s stated identity.

In We Are Genderfluid, there is a pattern of suggesting self-exploration and self-discovery as a means to clarify the asker’s gender identity. Presumably, this is because gender fluidity *as an identity* is an identity that could look like other identities, or like the stages a person goes through as they explore their gender. But at no point does Riam

disconfirm their identity, even when that identity is stated as uncertain by the asker themselves. In fact, for both AT2 and AT10, Riam states that insecurity about one's gender identity is normal and common.

The primary example of this is AT11's Ask, which is about how they think they are genderfluid but aren't sure; Riam suggests that AT11 keep exploring and thinking about their gender identity, and that it could take some time, but that AT11 may want to explore "changes and activities" to help with AT11's dysphoria or help AT11 "feel good about your body/presentation." As another example, in Key's response to AT1's Ask, they offers only suggestions about AT1's gender identity based on AT1's question; Key is more critical (in the sense of queer theory) of the academic approach to gender identity brought up by AT1.

The moderators are also very supportive of each askers' stated gender identity. For example, AT12 tentatively identifies as non-binary, but has a transwoman girlfriend who challenges AT12's identity by accusing AT12 of "putting it on/being impressionable." Riam is entirely supportive of AT12 identifying as non-binary, and says that it is "very common" for people who are trans to realize they are by associating with other trans people. Riam states that AT12 knows better who she is than her girlfriend, thus supporting AT12's self-identification over the identification by her girlfriend.

Radically Queer demonstrates a focus on identity and categorization, both by self and others. Of the five samples for analysis, these themes come up four times. For example, in the chronologically earliest post in the sample set (dated June 5, 2012), Faucette discusses hir gender identity and hir privilege based on how zie is perceived

(based on the post, the author has a “femme appearance”). The author uses a phrase in this post which I found fascinating: “legible identity privilege.” I understood this to mean that while Faucette could experience privilege based on a misperception of hir gender, zie did not have privilege *based on an accurate reading of hir perceived gender*.

This statement can be defined in terms of queer theory as a challenge to perceptions of gender identity, and especially NB gender identity. In particular, queer theory says that “all human behavior can be read as textual signification” (Smith, 2014, p. 346); when Faucette discusses “legible gender identity,” zie says that when others read hir performance of genderqueerness, those others do not read the signification of hir gender correctly—they do not read the blogger as genderqueer. Cisgender people in the U.S., by contrast, would generally have the privilege of having their performance of gender identity read correctly, because they are likely to be performing that identity according to the way the dominant U.S. narrative codes performance of gender. The dominant U.S. narrative does not include instructions (for lack of a better term) on how to correctly read NB gender identity presentation. So while Faucette has a clear sense of hir gender identity, other people may have difficulty reading the discourse of performance in the way zie intends, and have categorized hir differently. This is especially clear in the June 5, 2012 blog post, when Faucette states that, “When I disclose that I’m trans, I sometimes am asked, based on my femme appearance, whether I’m a trans woman or a trans man who hasn’t yet transitioned.”

Based on the sample posts and the above analysis, I suspect that Faucette differentiates between the term “identity” as a self-derived marker, and “categories” as



other-derived markers; in essence, a non-binary person self-identifies, while those around them categorize that non-binary person in ways that might or might not be accurate. This is especially telling as Faucette does not at any point express any uncertainty about hir self-identification, while zie reports that other people attempt to put hir into categories of identity based on their perceptions of hir– that is, their attempted readings of the text (NB gender identity presentation) that Faucette presents. I would also point out that Butler (1990) does ask:

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? To what extent is “identity” a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? (p. 16, emphasis in original)

Faucette’s blog offers an answer to this question: categorization-by-other constitutes identity as that “normative ideal,” while self-identification is more the “descriptive feature of experience.”

Faucette discusses across several posts the differences between hir identity and other people’s categorizations of hir, suggesting that the blog is a platform for zie to challenge these discourses around performance of gender identity. Faucette identifies hirself as “pretty heavily ‘out’ online and in the world in general,” which suggests another way in which zie discursively takes the dominant paradigm of binary gender and works to deconstruct it. The blog is essentially a form of queer praxis by Faucette, centered on hir gender identity and how zie exists in the world.

Seadresa’s channel also focuses on self-identification. They express throughout their videos that they identify as genderfluid, even though they were “up until relatively

recently a closet crossdresser.” This self-identification is present throughout all their videos in one way or another, sometimes explicitly stated and sometimes alluded to in terms of being out or coming out to people (usually their family). Seadresa does have a moment in one of their videos when they say that it might have been easier on her parents if she was trans, because then she would be shifting to one gender and staying in that gender. However, this represents the only instance in the sample set where they give the impression of questioning their gender identity, and only in terms of their relation to their parents.

When they speak about cross-dressing, they are clear in their question and answer video that dressing in female clothing was more about how it felt right to her than it was anything to do with a fetish. This mirrors both the work of others about gender identity awareness (Atkins, 2015; Hidalgo, et al., 2013) as well as the way that *We Are Genderfluid* addresses gender identity.

His video defining genderfluidity also includes an explanation of his gender identity: specifically that his gender can change from day to day or week to week, and “sometimes voluntarily, sometimes it just happens.” He says that this is how he and others in the community (presumably of other genderfluid individuals) define themselves; in my experience, this is very much how I experience my genderfluidity, although my shifts have sometimes happened during a day rather than over several days. The emphasis here, however, is that this is self-definition by people who are also genderfluid, rather than how others would define genderfluidity.

Knous (2005) writes about the coming out experience for bisexuals, “Those who have embraced their identity are working to correctly label themselves and change the derogatory language that oppresses them” (p. 52). While Seadresa is not dealing with derogatory language, they is establishing their identity through these videos by using the correct language of self-identification.

A common element of these three sites is that each person centers the definition of identity in the person who experiences the identity, rather than the definitions of others. Gagné and Tewksbury (1999) support this definition when they write, “Social actors are active agents in their creation of themselves. Individuals engage in an interactive, self-reflexive process in which the self is formed, transformed, and maintained over time” (p. 80). The key piece of this is “self-reflexive”: while this may be formed in interaction with others, as Gagné and Tewksbury would argue, it is still an active effort by the individual.

**Table 2**

*Themes and Subthemes of Identity*

Site	We Are Genderfluid	queer kenosis	Radically Queer	Seadresa’s YouTube
Themes and subthemes	Self-identification; self-exploration and self-discovery	N/A	Identity, self-identification, and categorization	Gender identity (genderfluidity) as distinct from cross-dressing; identity in terms of “outness”

Table 2 illustrates the relevant themes and subthemes for the three sites which deal with identity; queer kenosis does not directly address issues of identity or self-identification, perhaps due to the limits of the platform, or possibly due to the limitations imposed by the selection of the posts for analysis.

## Visibility

This research demonstrates that visibility means that the NB individual wants to be perceived accurately as non-binary, to have what Faucette described as “legible identity privilege,” rather than having others perceive them through their own understanding of gender (which is usually through the dominant U.S. narrative of gender).

queer kenosis’ Tumblr addresses visibility, and speaking out about visibility issues. Reblogs about the Canadian bill and the deaths of multiple trans women of color point out that trans people often experience violence based on their identity as trans people, and how that violence is invisible until it becomes visible. Reposts about the trans women of color also point out that these incidents are political in certain ways, because a doubly marginalized population (ethnicity and gender) does not receive legal protection for their identity. This is specifically addressed in the reblog about 24 black transgender women who were killed. The original poster also says that trans people in general experience greater difficulties with employment and police interactions; this is confirmed in Grant et al.’s (2011) survey of discrimination against transgender people. One of the other reblogs (dated March 4, 2015) points to two trans individuals who committed suicide recently, and contrasts how they had received more media coverage than the five trans women of color identified in the post who were murdered in the early part of 2015.

Queer theory suggests that this issue of visibility is a critical point: if issues are invisible, if the texts of human behavior cannot be read because they are not visible, it is

next to impossible to challenge the structures that produce those issues. While Smith's (2014) definition of queer theory does address the "relations of dominance within historically-situated systems of regulation" (p. 346), it assumes that those texts are perceptible/visible. By making these issues visible (through reblogging them from other Tumblr users), queer kenosis is engaging in queer praxis—directly challenging the narratives that would frame these issues as outside the norm, and therefore not important enough to be visible to a wider public.

Radically Queer also addresses issues of visibility. The idea that a non-binary individual should be visible, and acknowledged as such, runs strongly in the background of nearly all the posts in this sample set. The author wrote a post about creating a space on Facebook's "smartphone-based social platform" and discussed making this space available for trans people about their lives and intersectionality; specifically, the author states this would be space for people who identify "as outside the compulsory white mainstream gender system, whether trans, non-conforming, non-binary, or something else entirely." This suggests that the author is well aware that people who identify as non-binary can be unseen, and that creating a space where they are visible is a valuable resource. The idea of visibility carries over into other posts by the author, including the one about trans exclusionary feminists and how they erase the existence of trans women.

Another example of this is that Faucette discusses how the *Invisibilia* podcast tells the story of a bigender individual, focuses on a scientific approach to gender, which "put the tone of the show firmly in the realm of 'look at this weird medical curiosity,' rather than talking about bigender people (or non-binary people more broadly) as a large and

diverse group” and how that story ends with the bigender individual feeling relief when she “ultimately settles into a female identity.” Zie writes that this story erases NB gender individuals by telling a story of someone who fits into the gender binary; zie does not note the irony of a show called *Invisibilia* erasing NB individuals (making them invisible), but I most definitely noticed this. Faucette does point out that the media had an opportunity to recognize NB individuals—in effect, to give them visibility, because the “lack of recognition can literally be deadly.”

In terms of queer theory, this theme and how the author uses it mirrors the way that the queer kenosis Tumblr addresses visibility: it is only through making the existence of non-binary people visible that the dominant narrative around gender can begin to be challenged, much less changed. The author herself directly challenges the invisibility of non-binary people by being “out” in public spaces, as well as through hir blog. I will also note that on AvoryFaucette.com, zie says that zie “has given workshops and presentations on topics ranging from sexual orientation in international human rights law to polyamory and new media to incorporating ambiguous identities in queer movements” (Faucette, n.d.a).

Gray (2010) also writes about this form of public expression: “But, when they create and post to their own websites as AJ does to document his physical transition through hormones and reconstructive surgery, they are creating a sense of public recognition through the expression of their experiences” (p.293). This seems to be Faucette’s goal—zie is expressing hir experiences and doing it in a way to increase the visibility of NB individuals.

In some ways, Seadresa's entire channel is about visibility. I would suggest that since Seadresa/Grace is appearing visually, they is performing their genderfluidity in a more readable way than even queer kenosis and Faucette. In what may be a perfect example of this form of visibility in this medium, at the beginning of their question and answer video Seadresa is presenting male. He begins to introduce his topic, appears to sneeze (though this is likely a narrative device), and as *his* head goes down, the video has been edited such that you are looking at the top of *Grace's* head. When *she* raises her head, she explains the change simply by saying that she's genderfluid. This is not simply a statement of their gender identity (though that occurs frequently throughout their videos); this is a very visible performance of that identity in a way that would be difficult either through a purely text based medium or in physical spaces. Seadresa/Grace also shows off their outfit in several videos, usually when presenting female. When Goffman (1963) addresses the visibility of a stigma, or "how well or badly the stigma is adapted to provide means of communicating that the individual possesses it" (p. 48), he was discussing the negative effects of the visible stigma; in this instance, however, Seadresa/Grace is making the "stigma" visible as a positive thing.

In Seadresa's/Grace's video on what is awesome about genderfluidity, she includes several humorous reasons but also some very serious reasons. Two of these are related to presentation (around having access to a wider range of clothing) and the final reason is that genderfluid people "exist—we are real, and we can express ourselves however we want, whenever we want, whenever we feel we need to." The visibility theme in this specific video is both based on appearance characteristics (being seen in

appropriate clothing) and on the fact that genderfluid people do exist. The two layers of being able to see Grace and her stating that genderfluid people exist work together to reinforce the idea of her visibility and by extension, the visibility of other genderfluid and NB people.

Grace acknowledges the importance of her visibility in a relatively short video (2:18, shorter than any other video in my sample set) that is her apology for not uploading videos more frequently. She specifically says at the end of the video that she wanted to put on some make-up and talk to her viewers. At the time of the posting of this video she does not mention how many followers she has, but prior to the final video in my sample set she posted a video about having 5,000 subscribers, and as of this writing has over 8,700 subscribers. Even without an accurate way of estimating the number of viewers/subscribers at the time of the short video (dated November 25, 2014), this still suggests that Grace knows she has people who watch her videos, and that she is aware of how important it is for her to be seen by the people who subscribe to her channel.

**Table 3**

*Themes and Subthemes of Visibility*

Site	We Are Genderfluid	queer kenosis	Radically Queer	Seadresa's YouTube
Themes and subthemes	N/A	Visibility of trans and NB people, especially trans directed violence; speaking out	Visibility and acknowledgment of NB identity	Visual nature of medium centered on visibility; presentation of gender identity

Table 3 shows the relevant themes and subthemes from queer kenosis, Faucette, and Seadresa. Both in and outside of my sample set, We Are Genderfluid seems to only



peripherally speak to issues of visibility, mostly in terms of presentation of gender identity by use of equipment such as binders for AFAB individuals. While this does address an element of visibility—being seen as the correct gender—it seems fairly limited in addressing wider issues of visibility, in contrast with the other three sites.

### **Acceptance**

Acceptance is, at the core, about other people accepting the NB individual as they are, rather than trying to change them to be more acceptable to society. Goffman (1963) discusses stigmatized identities and loosely defines acceptance as “respect and regard” (p. 8); he also writes about when people come to know the stigmatized individual “this categoric approach [stereotyping] recedes and gradually sympathy, understanding, and a realistic assessment of personal qualities takes its place” (p. 51). Knous (2005) also includes the idea of support and understanding as parallel to acceptance (p. 50-51).

Acceptance and support is a common theme in We Are Genderfluid. Each person who sent in an Ask is treated with respect, their struggles with gender acknowledged, and their identity confirmed, even when this contrasts with how the asker describes their personal relationships. For example, AT12 described how her girlfriend (a binary trans woman) accused her of “putting it on” (taken in this context to mean faking or pretending) in regard to tentatively identifying as non-binary. Riam, in response, says that it is “unhelpful, hurtful, and damaging” for AT12’s girlfriend to react in that fashion, as AT12 is allowed to experience gender in different ways than other people. I would

suggest that in this case, Riam is making the point that AT12's girlfriend would help AT12 more by being accepting of AT12.

This expression of acceptance and support occurs in other Asks in my sample set. AR states that their mother said "no one will like me if my gender keeps changing all the time"; Riam responds that whatever the reason for the comment, it is not helpful and could lower AR's self-esteem and make AR "feel anxious, insecure, and unloveable." Riam suggests that AR could ask their mother to not say those kinds of things.

As another example, AT9 asks a question about a lack of acceptance by their parents and aunt, and writes that their mother has made statements such as "Great, now I don't know the name of my own kid or her gender." In response, Riam says that it took Riam's mother a year to use correct pronouns, and suggests that AT9 continue to have conversations with their family about this, including what it means to AT9, what AT9 needs from them, and helping AT9's family understand and providing them resources. Riam is definitely supportive of AT9, however, and makes the point that AT9 also needs to take care of themselves, and spend time with people "who validate and accept you and your gender, do things that make you feel good, remind yourself you're awesome."

queer kenosis also addresses the theme of acceptance and inclusion of trans experiences and lives in the narratives around gender. The reblog about breastfeeding and the reblog about presentation not being equivalent to gender identity both make the point that gender identity is much larger and more complex than people generally expect. In the case of the breastfeeding article, AMAB people have successfully breastfed infants, and this is treated as something completely within the range of human experience. In the case

of the comic about gender and presentation, these cartoon individuals are portrayed as normal even when their presentations may not match societal expectations for their identified gender. By showing that an AMAB person is able to breastfeed and that multiple gender identities (including non-binary ones) are presented as just as important as cisgender identities, the narrative of acceptance and inclusion becomes an available alternative, especially for individuals who may previously not have had access to those narratives.

Seadresa's videos also have a strong theme of acceptance, given that they spend some time in all their videos talking about how their friends and coworkers have been very accepting of their genderfluidity, and—over the course of the videos in my sample set—the slowly growing acceptance of their family. In the first video in my sample set (dated January 26, 2014), Grace mentions that her workmates and her friends are all very supportive; this contrasts with her parents wanting her to be a boy all the time at home. She also talks about how she likes the term genderfluid more because it “suits my identity a bit more” because her gender identity changes quite a lot. This suggests an additional layer to acceptance, that of self-acceptance. This mirrors the way that the moderators of We Are Genderfluid promote acceptance both by others and self-acceptance by the individual posing the question.

Another parallel between Seadresa's videos and the We Are Genderfluid site is that the moderators for the We Are Genderfluid site talk about how acceptance can come over time, as with Riam's response to AT9; the progression of Seadresa's videos demonstrate this shift in their family. This is not to say that the narrative of family

acceptance is a universal one, but it is presented as another kind of acceptance of the NB individual's identity. Knous (2005) suggests that "it appears that the most influential factor in achieving identity acceptance and moving forward to tertiary deviance for bisexual-identified individuals is having an adequate support network" (p. 42). The reference to tertiary deviance means that bisexual individuals develop an internal acceptance of their identity and tend to resist the label of deviant (Kitsuse, 1980, cited in Knous, 2005, p. 41). Again, while this is specifically about bisexual individuals, it can apply to other individuals whose identities do not fall into specific binary-only categories.

Knous (2005) also writes about acceptance for bisexual individuals, and writes, "Support, in the participants' own words, varies, but in general involves acceptance and understanding. Ana stated, 'The support that I get is simply acceptance. That is all I ask for and that is all I need'" (p. 51). This suggests that acceptance can be framed as understanding that, along with the acceptance, leads to support. In Seadresa's January 26, 2014 video, their friends were "totally amazing" with her, and Grace describes how the various people in her life (a good friend, her partner, her sister, and her best friend) all got her things that were specifically for Grace to present as Grace; this suggests a level of support similar to what Knous (2005) was writing about.

Finally, Knous (2005) offers a possible reason for *why* these NB individuals might be public about their identity:

Deviance disclosure [managing the stigma of bisexuality through interaction with an audience] occurs when one discloses their identity to an audience. For example, Cori wanted to tell others as a way to be honest and visible with her true identity. Ana wanted to tell others in the hopes that support and acceptance would be found. (p. 50)

Disclosure to an audience, whether by the anonymous Askers to the moderators or the moderators to the readers of an Ask-based Tumblr, a queer Tumblr user, or a genderfluid YouTuber, represents a way of managing the stigmas associated with NB identities, and could lead (as Ana hopes for herself) to greater support and acceptance. This also connects with the themes of identity and visibility: disclosure (especially of this sort) creates visibility of the NB individual's identity and supports both identity and visibility.

Queer theory is potentially problematic as a framework for analyzing this theme. Queer theory is primarily focused on contesting identities and categories (Yep, 2014; Smith, 2014), rather than creating spaces for support and acceptance. However, the political elements of queer theory (O'Riordan, 2007; Yep, Lovaas, Elia, 2014) may be relevant here, especially if a drive for acceptance is framed in terms of activism for the purpose of creating support for NB individuals. Once again, however, this takes the form of queer praxis rather than theory, and perhaps these sites represent ways in which that activism can be applied.

**Table 4**

*Themes and Subthemes of Acceptance*

Site	We Are Genderfluid	queer kenosis	Radically Queer	Seadresa's YouTube
Themes and subthemes	Acceptance (usually of self-identification) and support for the Asker	Acceptance of NB identities; inclusion in cultural narratives	N/A	Coming out narratives, and approval/disapproval; acceptance of self-identification

Table 4 illustrates how We Are Genderfluid, queer kenosis, and Seadresa each express the themes and subthemes of acceptance. Faucette does not seem to spend much

time on acceptance in hir blog, perhaps because hir activism in physical spaces addresses this theme.

## **Education**

Education as a theme seems centered on providing others with information about and understanding of concepts around NB identities. I will note that the education theme is derived from the fact that both the We Are Genderfluid Tumblr and Seadresa's YouTube videos spend time defining terms, especially around genderfluidity, explaining concepts related to gender identity, and covering information that is not strictly introductory but presumes at least a familiarity with NB identities. Even though the homepage of We Are Genderfluid announces that they are not a "trans 101" site (We Are Genderfluid, n.d.), there is at least some basic information about NB gender identities included in some of the posts. Seadresa's video about genderfluidity is more introductory, in contrast, and he explicitly states that the video is for people who are questioning their identity, people who are interested, or people who have someone in their life who is genderfluid.

Another aspect of education is represented in We Are Genderfluid, when Key takes some time with AT1's question about gender identity as a social construct, and compares it to weekends or money, both of which are social constructs; Key also points out that society makes social constructs real, and that "boxes we make aren't any less oppressive for it, aren't any less comforting for it, aren't any less present for it." Key and Riam both state that gender identity is embodied in the individual's experiences, whether

in Key’s response to AT1, the unnamed moderator’s responses to AT3, AT4, AT5, and AT6 (specifically around gender being a “feeling inside you”), or Riam’s discussion of dysphoria in their responses to AT11 and AT12.

Both of these forms of education (gender identity in specific, embodied experiences, as well as gender identity in theoretical frameworks) are similar to issues I have addressed in this work. I find an interesting parallel in the fact that Key, Riam, Seadresa, and myself all identify as genderfluid; it may be that genderfluidity is different enough from other NB identities to warrant some level of education for people who are unfamiliar with this concept. And since Yep’s (2014) definition of queer theory includes the concept of contesting identities (p. 38), this suggests that for genderfluid people—whose gender is not fixed/static, as compared with cisgender, binary transgender, and many other NB individuals—education is a form of queer praxis.

**Table 5**

*Themes and Subthemes of Education*

Site	We Are Genderfluid	queer kenosis	Radically Queer	Seadresa’s YouTube
Themes and subthemes	Discussion of social construct of gender; defines gender identity as embodied in experiences	N/A	N/A	Defines “genderfluidity”; addresses gender identity

Table 5 shows the specific subthemes of education from both We Are Genderfluid and Seadresa’s YouTube channel. Because queer kenosis’ Tumblr is primarily a reblogging platform, fae may not focus much of xer attention on educating other Tumblr

users about NB identities, instead choosing to focus on forms of visibility and acceptance through xer reblogs. As I noted under the acceptance theme, Faucette of Radically Queer may use hir activism in physical spaces as a platform for education.

### **Misogyny**

Based on my research, this theme is about the devaluation of women, and specifically trans women. Both authors perceive misogyny as problematic and in need of correction.

queer kenosis addresses misogyny in xer Tumblr and calls it out. In each reblog that addresses some element of misogyny, the original poster in some way makes it clear that trans people are also affected by misogyny, e.g. the violence done to trans women of color and the likely failure of the amendment in Canada. Fae also reblogged an image of a Twitter post which says, “‘feminists’ who exclude trans women basically admit to seeing women as walking vaginas. you know, like misogynists.” Together these suggest very clearly that fae considers trans women to be women, and is using these posts as a form of argument with people who would say that trans women are not women.

In Radically Queer, Faucette writes about TERFs in order to educate “the broader feminist community” about the things that TERFs have done which are anti-trans, such as “arguing that trans women in the women’s room or in lesbian groups or at MichFest are dangerous,” or “outing trans women on the Internet (including previous names, arrest records, employer info, and home addresses)” which are all pieces of information that could cause serious harm to trans women. Faucette writes that TERFs are very



hypocritical because while they focus on oppression by the patriarchy, they are themselves enforcing “rigid gender norms and a hierarchical binary gender system!”—which are characteristics of patriarchy. This also mirrors the Twitter picture posted by queer kenosis, in that both identify hypocrisy on the part of feminists who argue that trans women are not women.

Both queer kenosis and *Radically Queer* are very clear about both identifying misogyny, primarily around trans women and the perception of them as somehow not being women; they both are also very clear that they consider trans women to be women. This common theme may be connected to the more activist focus of both individuals on their sites; some people argue that trans women are not women at all, e.g., Sheila Jeffreys or Janice Raymond (Williams, 2014), and both authors clearly disagree with that concept. This also fits well with O’Riordan’s (2007) definition that queer theory is a political force (p. 17), and suggests that these efforts represent a contestation of the categories (Yep, 2014, p. 38) of feminisms that exclude trans people.

**Table 6***Themes and Subthemes of Misogyny*

Site	We Are Genderfluid	queer kenosis	Radically Queer	Seadresa's YouTube
Themes and subthemes	N/A	References to violence done to trans women of color; calls out feminists who exclude trans women as misogynists	Specific discussion of TERFs (trans exclusionary radical feminists) and acceptance of trans women in feminism	N/A

Table 6 shows the common themes and subthemes about misogyny from both queer kenosis and Radically Queer. While the sample set for We Are Genderfluid does not include any questions about misogyny or trans-directed misogyny, a review of the site reveals that as of this writing, there were two reblogs about trans-misogyny in May 2015. This suggests that while We Are Genderfluid does address issues of misogyny, this is not directly linked with the Ask based elements of this Tumblr. Seadresa does not address any issues of misogyny or trans-misogyny in their YouTube channel; none of their content is strongly political or activist, which may suggest that it isn't an issue they want to address.

Overall, these four sites share certain common themes around NB identities, with identity, visibility, and acceptance being major themes (present in three of four sites), and education and misogyny being minor themes (present in two of the sites). I will address these results in my final chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

### Summary and Analysis of Results

What seems clear from my research is that there are specific ways that NB individuals communicate their identity, but that these are more properly grouped into themes than specific acts.

The common major themes of identity, visibility, and acceptance across my four research sites suggests that communication of NB identities is not solely a matter of the overt ways in which a person would go about communicating their non-binary identity in internet spaces, e.g., being out in text, showing pictures of themselves presenting in non-binary ways, and/or making videos which include non-binary aspects of identity such as shifting genders. Even though there are differences in the specific ways that each author/creator or moderator communicates these themes, the themes themselves remain constant.

These themes are such a constant that I would suggest that communicating non-binary identities may well hinge on these three themes. Identity is presented in these sites as something that an individual becomes aware of and determines for themselves; awareness seems to be rooted in some internal sense of self that does not fit with the dominant U.S. narrative of binary genders. Visibility is partially about presentation of that self-identity, and partially about how that self-identity can be made legible to, or about how it can be misread by, others. And acceptance is about NB individuals being understood and supported for who they are, even when that aspect of their identity does not fit within the dominant U.S. narrative of binary genders.

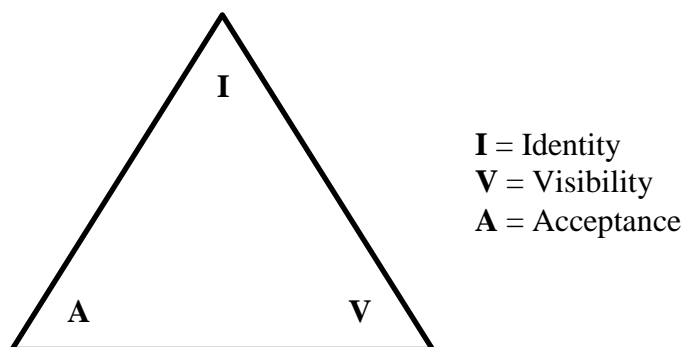
Orbe (1998) writes about different communicative behaviors employed by marginalized groups when they deal with dominant group members, and identifies certain practices that members of marginalized groups engage in to achieve a preferred outcome, whether those members intend to fit in with dominant groups (assimilation), want to change the structures and/or rules of the dominant groups to be more inclusive of marginalized groups (accommodation), or resist connection with those dominant groups (separation) (p. 8-10). When I look at the primary themes that have emerged from my research, those themes seem to fit quite well with the outcome of accommodation as defined by Orbe: none of the individuals in my research seem inclined to simply fit in, nor to do they seem interested in being separate from the dominant culture.

Additionally, Orbe (1998) discusses communication approaches that marginalized groups might engage in: nonassertive, which is generally nonconfrontational and centers others' needs; aggressive, which "would describe actions more hurtfully expressive, self-promoting, and controlling;" and assertive, which both enhances the self and takes the needs of self and others into account (p. 13-14). When I look at the themes that emerged from my research, they tend toward the nonassertive (visibility, which Orbe calls "increasing visibility") or the assertive (identity, which Orbe calls "communicating self," and education, which Orbe calls "educating others") (p. 9). Interestingly enough, the theme of acceptance—that is, that NB individuals should be taken as they are, with respect, understanding, and support—does *not* have a parallel with Orbe's identified practices, though it does mesh well with how Orbe defines accommodation as a preferred outcome (1998, p. 10).

However, there is an additional layer to take into account with regard to these themes. There is significant overlap of the major themes between the sites—in each theme, only one site does not explicitly address the theme, and this may be a result of those themes being addressed outside of the research sample (whether in person, as with Avory Faucette and Radically Queer, or in other posts on the site, as with We Are Genderfluid and addressing issues of gender presentation). This suggests that these themes are also interconnected:

**Figure 1**

*Visual Representation of Major Themes in this Research*



This triangle represents the links between the three major themes in each site. The Identity point (represented by the **I**) is emphasized in We Are Genderfluid, Radically Queer, and Seadresa's YouTube channel; the Visibility point (represented by the **V**) is emphasized queer kenosis, Radically Queer, and Seadresa's YouTube channel; and the Acceptance point (represented by the **A**) is emphasized in We Are Genderfluid, queer kenosis, and Seadresa's YouTube channel. (For further discussion of this figure in relation to the boundaries of research as I discussed in my literature review, please see Appendix.)

In a sense, these three themes are critical pieces representing intra- and inter-group communication from within the marginalized group of NB individuals and between that group and the larger culture with which they interact. These themes represent elements of a larger pattern of communication that again, despite the cultural differences between the authors/moderators, their geographic diversity, and how they add or create content, links all the individuals in my research.

Identity is self-determined, supported by exploration, and cannot be determined by people who are not the individual (or at least, others do not have the final say on a non-binary individual's identity); Orbe (1998) defines this as interactions that are authentic (presumably meaning accurate to the identity of the individual involved, since he does not define it in his paper) and open (p. 9).

Visibility is being both seen by others and acknowledged as non-binary by them, as well as being seen by the dominant culture as being non-binary and not just "confused" or needing to settle into a binary identity [in much the same way that bisexual individuals tend to be seen as either confused or needing to settle into either a heterosexual or homosexual identity (Fox, 2003, p. 94)]. Orbe (1998) defines the practice as "covertly, yet strategically, maintaining a co-cultural presence within dominant structures" (p. 9); I would suggest that these sites are not necessarily covert, in that they are publicly accessible, but that the authors/moderators are maintaining a presence on the Internet.

Acceptance is not only the acceptance of non-binary individuals as real, but changing the dominant narrative to be inclusive of non-binary genders. This is also

inclusive of a non-binary individual accepting *themselves* as non-binary, something that is made very difficult by the dominant narrative around gender. This is the only practice that has no parallel in Orbe's work, but *is* represented in Knous's (2005), at least in terms of the experiences of bisexuals who have come out.

I would also point out a parallel between identity and visibility as themes: both are specifically about the individual determining how they identify and how they are seen, as compared with the way they would be identified and read/perceived by the dominant U.S. narratives around gender identity. Bettcher (2014) addresses this as well when she cautions that "Since many forms of transphobia involve categorizing individuals contrary to their own sense of self, caution is required in applying terms to individuals who may not self-identify with them." I would also point to parallels between this and Faucette's writings in his blog about categorization by others. This strongly suggests that the most critical piece for both identity and visibility as themes is that the NB individual is the one who must determine how they are identified and how they are perceived.

Carey (2009) provides another angle from which to view these themes and how they come about. In his ritual view of communication, he states that it is directed "toward the maintenance of society in time" and "the representation of shared beliefs" (p. 15). Therefore, if these themes represent a ritual form of communication by NB individuals, then they are directed toward maintaining the "society" (co-culture) of NB individuals and representing their shared beliefs: the importance of being true to oneself (identity),

being acknowledged correctly by others (visibility), and receiving support and understanding from others (acceptance).

When I employ queer theory, and specifically the elements of contesting identities and categories as defined by both Yep (2014) and Smith (2014), what comes clear is this: challenging the dominant U.S. narrative of gender is a continuous work of claiming self-identity in contrast with the dominant narrative, then becoming visible to people as a way of countering the dominant narrative, and then working toward acceptance (both by self and others) to change the dominant narrative. Each theme in this triad is a way of both examining and deconstructing that narrative, but together all three create conditions in which the narrative about binary gender is proven to be false.

And each site represents a way of challenging the dominant narrative: We Are Genderfluid works to challenge the narrative on an individual level by responding to questions from individuals who are uncertain about their identity (precisely because the dominant narrative erases the possibility of non-binary genders); queer kenosis works to challenge the narrative on a more global level by signal boosting information that reinforces the visibility of non-binary genders; Radically Queer works to challenge the narrative on both levels, by simultaneously positioning an individual as non-binary, but also discussing issues which are generally made invisible by the dominant narrative; and Seadresa's YouTube channel also challenges the narrative on both the individual and global level, by presenting an NB individual *visibly* being who they are to a global audience.



### **Personal Impact**

This research has been both a frustration for me and an education. I went into it as an NB individual interested in how other NB individuals might communicate their gender identities in virtual spaces and what forms that might take, with the full understanding that I was exploring territory that had seen little to no academic exploration even when NB identities have been slowly becoming more visible in Internet spaces such as Tumblr.

My main source of frustration lies not with the work itself, but with the impact of the work in my life. I have been out as genderfluid for over three years now, and while I am aware that “coming out” is a process and not a singular event, I did not expect the multitude of issues that would come up while doing this work. I have found myself trying to define and redefine what it means to me to be male or female, man or woman, what it means when my gender shifts in ways I did not anticipate or even know were possible, and how this facet of my identity as a complete individual extends beyond myself, in my circle of friends, my work at the university, and my existence in the larger world.

If an activist is someone who goes out and protests in the streets and runs the risk of arrest or worse, I am not that person. I am painfully aware of my privilege, and how that impacts my experiences as an NB person. While I am out as genderfluid at my university, it is a bubble within a bubble within a bubble: the university, which is already a liberal environment, is located in a liberal metropolitan region in a state known for being liberal. And while I have NB individuals in my life, I still experience isolation from a community of people *just like me*. These also have contributed to my frustration over the course of this work.

At the same time, this has been one of the most educational things I have ever done. Without this work, I might have been relatively comfortable being non-binary in a rather isolated way, or at least willing to settle for interacting only with people inside my friend group. I might not have started paying as close and careful attention to the way my culture treats people who do not exist easily within the binary set of gender roles and expectations that my culture demands. And I might not have internalized so profoundly the sense of what it means to communicate a gender identity that is clearly different from the norms of my culture. Even the psychological impact of my work has revealed things about myself and the attitudes and ideas I absorbed from my culture across my entire life. If nothing else, this research has led me to understand that I must continue this work to engage with community, and that by me being me, I am engaged in acts of radical resistance to the dominant U.S. narratives around gender.

### **Further Research**

Based on the scarcity of available research into NB individuals in general, this seems to be a very wide open subject for research. Possible studies could focus on specific NB identities, such as genderqueer, genderfluid, bigender, third gender, or agender, and if there are any commonalities to the way each NB identity communicates that identity. For example, there is a website dedicated to asexual and agender identities (The Asexual Visibility & Education Network, 2001-2012), and there were genderfluid specific sites from my research; this suggests that each NB gender identity may need to be addressed separately, rather than as a collective group.

Intersectionality is another issue that absolutely must be taken into account in research as well, given that I have only addressed the one marginalized category of NB genders. Research could address other aspects of marginalization, whether race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, or ability/disability. Given that queer kenosis frequently reblogs issues around race/ethnicity and identifies as mixed race on xer blog, this suggests another fruitful area for research.

My research focused exclusively on the Internet in terms of communication of identity; the communication of NB identities in physical spaces as well as the interaction between physical and virtual spaces and communication of self should also be addressed in research. Ivory Faucette of Radically Queer states that zie has spoken in public about a variety of topics of interest to hir, and that zie is available for speaking engagements. Faucette may be atypical of people who use the Internet to communicate their identity (in terms of being very publicly out in physical spaces as well), but Seadresa is also out as genderfluid to the people around them. And as Robinson (2007) points out, the online self exists as an extension of the offline self. Research in this area could be extremely productive.

I would also point out that I centered my research on individuals who spent more time talking about their NB identity than not, and who found NB identities important enough that they needed to create their own spaces on the Internet; this necessarily eliminates individuals who are NB but are not open or public about their gender identity. I suspect that a fertile area for research would be to engage with people who are not as

public about their NB identities, and find out if they communicate about their gender identity, and how they do so.

I would strongly recommend, however, that anyone who is interested in doing this research establish connections with non-binary people first, and maintain those connections before, during, and after their research. In effect, I am challenging Creswell's (2013) idea that it is a bad thing to "go native" (p. 96)—it may, in fact, be essential to become as thoroughly involved as possible with the lives and experiences of NB people, to the extent that it is possible for a potentially cisgender researcher to do so. J. R. Butler (2014) became deeply involved in the campaign for transgender rights in DeKalb, IL, and even though he is a gay man, he was still able to learn a great deal, not just about his subject, but about himself.

I would also argue that queer theory is due for some discussion around its focus on sexual orientation. If queer theory is about contesting categories (Yep, 2014, p. 38), then the category of the gender binary and its invisibility in queer theory is certainly one that could use contesting! NB individuals, especially third gender and agender individuals, contest the gender binary by their very existence, but queer theory appears to ignore them entirely. Genderfluid individuals contest the categorization of gender as a static system as well, and addressing this could open further doors for work on queer theory.

Finally, I would strongly recommend that researchers who are investigating trans individuals and trans experiences change their assumptions about gender identity to be more inclusive of NB individuals. When producing quantitative research about trans

individuals, how many NB individuals are erased by simple questions that limit gender to the expected male/female binary? As Harrison, Grant, and Herman (2012) discovered, there are going to be people for whom that particular binary is not accurate for their gender identity.

### **Conclusion**

When I began my research, I had originally hoped to find some commonalities between NB individuals in how they used the Internet to communicate their identity. While my research has demonstrated clear, common themes for these communicative acts of identity, I found myself surprised in certain ways by *how* those common themes are expressed. When the themes of identity, visibility, and acceptance became clear in my research, it was as though I had simply uncovered a fundamental truth, rather than found something brand new—primarily because I found a strong resonance in myself with those themes.

This work was intended to examine the experiences of people who use the Internet as a way to communicate their identity in regard to gender. In the process, it has illuminated my experiences of communicating gender identity, and made it clear to me that this is not a static act, but as with all communication, it is an ongoing process.

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## APPENDIX:

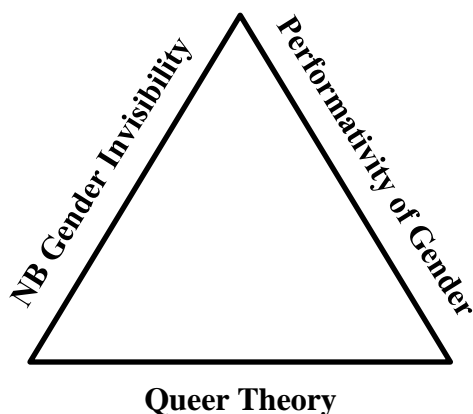
### Visual Representation of Key Ideas

This appendix is an effort to provide a better visual representation of the key ideas in my research, specifically around the boundaries of research and how those boundaries connect with the three primary themes I uncovered in my research.

### Representation of The Boundaries of Research

As I noted in my literature review, the three key boundaries of research into NB identities are the invisibility of non-binary gender identities, gender as performativity, and queer theory. This can be presented in a visual format, as shown here:

**Figure 1**



In this figure, the first boundary—that of the invisibility of non-binary genders—is represented by the first side of the triangle. On the outside is all the research that has been done about gender as an identity that does *not* acknowledge the existence of NB

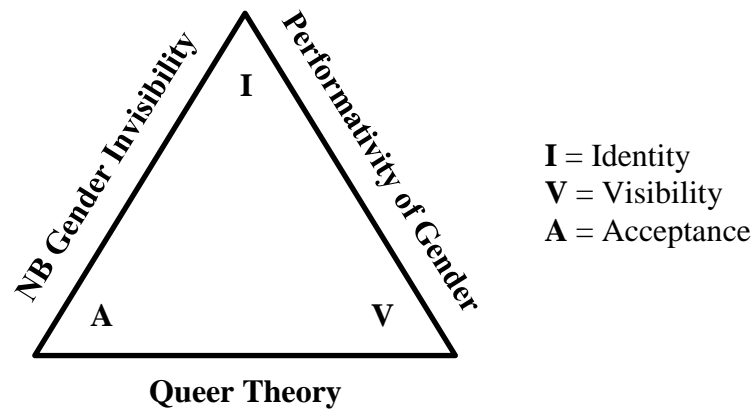
individuals. This erases the existence of NB individuals, thus placing them on the other side of that boundary (and inside the triangle in this representation).

The second boundary is the performativity of gender, and the assumption by many researchers that gender is entirely performative. The outside of the boundary represents all the research that has been done where this particular assumption is so fundamental that it is axiomatic. This erases the possibility that NB individuals might have an experience of gender that is not centered in performance, and places them again inside the triangle in this image.

The third boundary is that queer theory, while ostensibly about challenging boundaries, is focused nearly entirely on sexual orientation while barely acknowledging the existence of individuals who challenge the boundaries of gender identity. Queer theory seems to acknowledge gender issues, but usually waves them away as belonging to feminisms regardless of whether feminisms even address NB identities. This erases any representation of NB individuals within queer theory, and places them on the other side of that boundary (and again within the triangle in this image).

### **Connecting The Boundaries With The Themes**

The similarity in my images of both the boundaries and the themes I encountered in my research is not coincidental, and suggests the following figure:

**Figure 2**

The theme of identity exists just inside the boundaries of the invisibility of NB gender identities and the assumption of the performativity of gender. The theme of identity is all about self-determination and self-definition, and these two boundaries represent definition by others around what gender identity is: that gender is either a binary identity or it is purely a performance. It is only inside these boundaries that this particular theme emerges.

The theme of visibility exists just inside the boundaries of the assumption of the performativity of gender and the focus of queer theory on sexual orientation. The theme of visibility is about being seen and acknowledged as non-binary, and these two boundaries create an erasure of NB gender identities either by framing those identities as simply a matter of performing them or by limiting the field of view to sexual orientation and not including gender identities that also contest categorization.

The theme of acceptance exists just inside the boundaries of the invisibility of gender identities and the focus of queer theory on sexual orientation. The theme of acceptance is about accepting NB gender identities as real identities, and giving NB

individuals understanding and support. These boundaries block the acceptance of NB individuals either by erasing them from categories of existing gender identities or by not acknowledging that NB identities are worth examining.

Finally, Figure 2 makes it possible to see that each theme is connected with the boundary directly opposite it. Self-identification as an NB individual is ignored by queer theory by that theory's focus on sexual orientation. The visibility of NB gender identities and individuals disappears when those identities are made invisible. And the acceptance of NB identities as real is erased by the idea that gender identity is purely a matter of performance, thus framing gender expression as being equivalent to gender identity.

The visual representation of these boundaries and themes, and their interactions, should make the connections between them clearer to the reader.