

“I EXIST”: (TRANSCENDING) EMBODIMENTS AND EXPRESSIONS OF QUEER
AND NON-BINARY IDENTITIES

by

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DEDICATION

To the beautiful group of self-identified queer and non-binary individuals who participated in this study, and to the entire LGBTQIA+ community – we are in this fight of resistance and resilience together. ¡Adelante!

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which non-binary and self-identified queer people negotiate embodiments and expressions of their gender and sexual identities. How do people embody and/or express their queer identity? How/why (not) is a queer self-expression important? Is there a connection between self-expression of a queer identity and coming out? This thesis utilizes an intersectional approach to queer theory in order to challenge and destabilize binary assumptions of gender and sexuality. Fifteen self-identified queer people share their lived experiences and discuss the negotiation of their self-presentations and behavior in different spaces. Results show inclusive and affirming language is needed in order to help with visibility, knowledge, and understanding because queer gender and sexual embodiments, identities and experiences are multifaceted, complex and fluid.

I. INTRODUCTION

The recent Supreme Court ruling for marriage equality and Caitlyn Jenner's public announcement that she is a transgender woman have amplified the ongoing dialogue about diverse (and privileged) gender and sexual identities. The Marriage Equality Act and Caitlyn's public transition are evidence of a pivotal time to be studying gender and sexuality not only because these events challenge traditional ideas of "innate" gender categories and normative White (hetero)sexual identities, but because these occasions cater to a very narrow group of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual or a-romantic (and/or people who identify with other sexual and gender identities) (LGBTQIA+) people.

While on the surface it appears that the LGBTQIA+ community has made notable advancement, our current political administration under President Trump has taken significant steps back (and to the Conservative right) in regard to gender and sexual (in)justices. For example, several states have proposed new "bathroom bills" that legally require people to use the restroom that matches their biological sex. Several researchers argue that the current American political climate is a reflection of the racism, homophobia, transphobia and classism that are still alive in society. In order to grasp the social significance of gender and sexuality, particularly from an intersectional perspective, it is important to first understand how these concepts and identities are socially constructed and challenged.

What does it mean to identify as queer? A sociological perspective relies on social processes, as opposed to biology, to understand the creation and reproduction of gender and sexuality (Richardson 2007; Westbrook and Schilt 2014). West and

Zimmerman (1987) describe “doing gender” as the daily adoption of stylistic behaviors and mannerisms to present oneself as either male/masculine or female/feminine.

Sexuality refers to the attractions and desires one feels toward other persons, which have traditionally been categorized as heterosexuality and homosexuality (Lucal 2008).

Butler’s (1990) critique of the “sex” and “gender” distinction splits biological aspects that distinguish bodies into male and female from cultural cues that those bodies are naturally assumed to be. However, individuals who identify as queer reject these dominant binary categorizations (Better 2014). Queer gender and sexual identities are dissident and transgressive in nature, depending on time and space. In other words, queer identities are not easily categorized as masculine or feminine, and/or heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual.

Gender and sexual categories are thought to be binary, or polar, from one another. However, this binary would not exist if social divisions did not exist (Richardson 2007). Richardson’s analysis of relationships that connect gender and sexuality is evidence of the complexities between them and explores their ability to coexist as a result of one another, and to exist independently from one another. Richardson suggests that gender and sexuality can be better comprehended when we think about gender being prioritized over sexuality, gender as an effect of sexuality, and sexuality and gender as separate. For example, when gender is prioritized over sexuality the binary dividing heterosexuality and homosexuality is seen to be derived from gender (p.461). Defining gender as a result of sexuality suggests that to become “properly gendered” is to become heterosexual, where homosexuality is perceived as a sign of “improper gender” (p.462). Conceptualizing gender and sexuality as separate assumes that sexual desires, practices

and identities do not depend on a person's gender for their meaning (p.464). Critically thinking about gender and sexuality acknowledges the many patterned fluidities that exist among them. The emergence of queer identities challenges the dominant binary system because sexual identity does not constitute gender identity and vice versa. People who identify as queer recognize their agency as a way to challenge dominant gender and sexual scripts. They understand that both gender and sexuality are fluid, and acknowledge that existing categories are non-inclusive to their identities that exist outside of the dominant discourse.

In line with previous research (Better 2014; Connell 2010; Rupp 2014), I refer to people who identify under the umbrella term "queer" as queer (self-identified), variant, non-conforming, or non-binary interchangeably. Although previous studies have examined experiences of self-identified queer individuals, no sociological study has explored what it means to be queer, and "doing queer" from the perspective of queer people. My research empirically examines the subjective experiences of people who identify as queer to explore the ways in which they alter their appearance to portray a queer gender and/or sexual identity. Utilizing qualitative face-to-face in-depth interviews with individuals who self-identify as queer, I explore the following research questions: How do people embody and/or express their queer identity? How/why (not) is a queer self-expression important? Is there a connection between self-expression of a queer identity and coming out (what Orne (2011) refers to as "strategic outness")? Answering these questions will contribute to emerging sociological literature that discusses queer performances, embodiments, expressions and identities, making it worth social inquiry.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Historical traces of the term “queer” can be found as early as the 16th century, when it was first introduced to the English language through art and literature. Queer originated as a descriptor for something that appeared to be peculiar and/or odd. However, by the early 1900s, implications the term queer evoked were derogatory in nature and targeted people who were perceived to belong within the LGBTQIA+ community. Queer was (and is still sometimes) used maliciously to harass, discriminate and victimize people whose gender identity/expression or sexual orientation was perceived as non-normative, or conforming, to societal expectations (Meyer 2015). By the 1980s, the term queer was reclaimed by people within the LGBTQIA+ community and symbolizes a sociopolitical position that claims power and ownership over a word that was once used to harm gender and sexually marginalized people. Queer has also evolved to encompass an umbrella of identities that is radically more inclusive to people within the LGBT community who do not identify with the L, G, B or T categories. Because in general normativity is systemic power, anti-normativity, as a result, becomes the sphere of queer.

Individuals who do not conform to our dominant binary gender and sexual categories, for example, trans*¹ and queer people, face a number of negative social consequences (Westbrook and Schilt 2014; Ingrey 2013; Connell 2010; Pfeffer 2014). According to Connell (2010), trans* individuals identify with a gender different from the one they were ascribed at birth, whereas queer-identified individuals find the binary to be

¹ According to Killerman (2017), trans* is an umbrella that encompasses all gender variant identities. Trans (without the asterisk) can be deliberately used to refer to transmen and transwomen, while the asterisk makes a special effort to include all transgender and non-binary identities.

restricting and exclusionary. Queer-identified individuals have a gender/sexual identity that is outside, not included within, or beyond the binary of male/female, heterosexual/homosexual (Stein and Plummer 1994). Trans* and queer identities are similar in a sense because they disrupt cis(hetero)normative assumptions about the gender/sexual binary. For example, a genderqueer person may also identify under the trans* umbrella because their gender identity is different from the one they were socialized to identify with. However, they differ because not all trans* people identify as queer. The distinction between trans* and queer is that queer is an umbrella term that accommodates and encompasses a wider range of gender *and* sexual identities that are more fluid and inclusive.

People who embrace non-binary identities challenge our understandings of gender and sexuality because they embody a more fluid identity. However, as a social consequence for deviating from dominant expectations of “culturally proper” gender and sexual performance, the literature points out inequalities and discriminations faced by non-conforming individuals. Sociologists of gender tend to agree that binary systems of gender and sexuality are problematic, in part because these systems are heteronormative and non-inclusive (Butler 1990; Lucal 2008; Pfeffer 2014). As an alternative, queer theory can better account for fluidity and non-binary embodiments.

Binary Systems of Gender and Sexuality

Gender and sexuality are constructs that have been thought of in binary terms and carry significant historical, social and political significance. The dichotomies include, male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, which rely on the notion that these categories are complementary and polar to one another (Richardson 2007).

Society assumes congruency between gender and sexual categories because we learn that heterosexuals can be identified as masculine men and feminine women, while homosexuals are recognized as feminine men and masculine women (Lucal 2008). Additionally, there are issues with binary gender and sexual categories because they are non-inclusive to the many people who do not identify within these categories; therefore, labeling queer-identified people as “other.” The existence of these gender/sexual categories results in the policing of boundaries to maintain the status quo (Ingrey 2013). Historically, masculinity has been associated with maleness in our society and has maintained a dominant status in the gender hierarchy. According to Butler (1990), belonging to a sex other than male positions the body as the lesser of any binary. Any deviation from our conceptualization of gender and sexual systems, such as female masculinity, threatens the social hierarchy and men’s position at the top (Kazyak 2012).

Sociologists suggest that people often try make sense of atypical self-expressions in binary terms (Westbrook and Schilt 2014; see also Connell 2015). If individuals encounter someone whose identity seems ambiguous, they may react in “panic,” resulting in immediate investigation. Being uncertain of how to “determine,” or categorize, one’s gender or sexuality may prompt feelings of anxiety. Martino and Cumming-Potvin’s (2014) case study of a homosexual elementary schoolteacher, Tom, discusses his resistance to teaching queer gender and sexual identities in the classroom. For Tom, a gay elementary schoolteacher, talking about variant genders and sexualities in the classroom is too controversial and threatening (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014). Tom does not believe that his students are mature enough to understand identities that are

non-heteronormative. Tom experiences an internal struggle because he is faced with making these non-normative identities visible.

Queer theory provides a space for these rigid binary systems to be challenged because it rejects binary categorizations (Butler 1990; Lucal 2008; Pfeffer 2014). Critiquing the dichotomous categories of gender and sexuality from a queer perspective demonstrates the possibilities of moving in a new direction toward gender and sexual justice, that are otherwise constrained by our binary systems (Richardson 2007). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) indicate that queer theory problematizes more conventional identity politics because queer theorists assert that identity is historically and socially constructed rather than fixed. Butler (1990) suggests that queer depends on resisting queer as a conclusive thing. From a social justice perspective, society needs to replace binary language with a discourse that better explains our lived experiences as changing and fluid, if we want to progress into a society that recognizes all gender and consensual sexual identities/behaviors as legitimate and equal (Better 2014). Talking candidly about lived experiences would better capture “queered” genders and sexualities, instead of restricting these assumptions and expectations. Utilizing a queer approach expands categorical boundaries, making them radically more inclusive.

Heteronormativity

Gender, sexual, and racial binary categories are the foundation that reinforce heteronormativity. According to Martin (2009), heteronormativity privileges White heterosexuality and encourages traditional gender norms. As Butler (1990) puts it, the production of the binary categorization of sex hides the strategic goals of the production of “sex” as “a cause” of sexual experience, behavior and desire. Additionally, Westbrook

and Schilt (2014) state that all bodies are assumed to be heterosexual, meaning they are either physiologically male or female (an assumption that renders all sexual variant or intersex individuals invisible). Persons who conceal transgressive identities support and contribute to dominant societal understandings of (hetero)normativity. For instance, teachers interviewed for *School's Out* negotiate queer identities at work as a means of professionalism (Connell 2015). Many gender and sexual variant identified people may be hesitant to disclose their queer identities for a fear of being perceived as deviant. According to Ingrey (2013), heteronormativity privileges maleness/masculinity and oppresses all other gender and sexual identities. Ingrey (2013) provides an illustration of a self-ascribed “manly man” and his ability to occasionally cross-dress. This example demonstrates how enactments of hegemonic forms of masculinity can equate to the privilege of periodically being able to deviate from ideal types of masculinity. Masculine men may face little social consequence when they occasionally perform gender differently because they are at the top of our gendered system. However, it is important to note that social perception varies according to context.

Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2014) argue that heteronormativity sustains the hegemonic social order. Shapiro’s (2007) study of drag kings also supports the maintenance of hegemonic gendered structures and reinforces normative identities because the masculinity performed by drag kings is presumed to be superior to drag queening. Because White hetero- is “normative,” and masculinity is privileged and “normal,” White heterosexual masculinity continues to benefit from gendered and sexual hierarchical structures. Heteronormativity marginalizes non-White femininity and gender variant individuals (Kazyak 2012). A boy with a subordinate status interviewed for

Ingrey's (2013) study is evidence of the consequences faced by marginalized groups. His gendered performance was not suitable as masculine enough because it did not align with cultural ideologies of hegemonic masculinity. As a result, this boy was stigmatized as different and unworthy. Hegemonic forms of masculinity do not leave room for transgression, therefore expectations for boys and men does not include anything remotely feminine.

Although there are negative social consequences for boys and men who transgress from masculinity, consequences are different when girls and womxn² transgress from femininity. According to McGuffey and Rich (1999), girls who fit hegemonic criteria of masculinity are marginalized and degendered. This is especially problematic because “masculinity is not only maintaining and defining itself, but it is also defining femininity,” (1999: 621). For example, Westbrook and Schilt argue that transmen are perceived as non-threatening, as evident by the fact that, “while no athlete with a penis can compete as a woman, athletes are not required to have a penis to compete as men” (2014: 45). Transmen may be recognized as non-threatening because they are sexed by others as female, meaning that their bodies may lack a natural penis; thus, transmen are oppressed and can be determined as not “fully,” or authentically male. This finding demonstrates that assumptions associated with heteronormativity are not definite. While heteronormativity maintains the status quo, gender and sexual identities are a lot more complex than they are presumed to be.

² I refer to “woman” and “women” as “womxn” because it decentralizes men as the focus in reference to womxn. Re-spelling serves as sociolinguistic activism because it is symbolic and a statement that refuses to be defined by men. The use of the letter “x” is inclusive of trans* identities.

Heteronormativity reinforces the gendered inequalities experienced by embodiments of femininity. Transmen may be characterized as non-threatening, but according to Kazyak (2012), female masculinity threatens men's dominance in the larger society. American culture tightly links masculinity with maleness, so masculinity performed by cisgender female identified individuals is met with much anxiety. However, it is important to remember that the threatening nature of female masculinity depends on social context. For example, Kazyak's (2012) study of women in rural areas highlights the normativity and acceptance of embodied masculinity. Men and womxn are assimilated into rural areas by "doing" masculinity, regardless of their sexual orientation. A rural context challenges mainstream perceptions of appropriate femininity. Nevertheless, differences in prevailing gendered policing reinforce ideas of male-female oppositeness, while simultaneously reproducing gender inequality and White heteronormativity.

Coming Out

Traditionally, coming out for LGBTQIA+ individuals has been conceptualized as a linear process from "closeted" to "out" (Klein, Holtby, Cook, Travers 2015). However, coming out is actually a complicated and dynamic process that can possess multiple meanings. Several sociological studies have documented the coming out process for gay men and lesbians, and has more recently emphasized the process and context of coming out (Bates 2010; Klein et. al 2015). However, queer and non-binary individuals have been left out of this research.

According to Orne (2011), people use "strategic outness" to disclose their non-heteronormative identities, instead of focusing on direct disclosure. He notes (2011:

698), “Strategic outness is the contextual and continual management of identity in which people are never fully ‘out’ or ‘closeted.’” Strategic outness defies the traditional coming out narrative because it acknowledges how individuals manage their identity, including the strategies that are used, and the social distances amongst social relationships, rather than limiting coming out as the actual declarative statement. Similarly, Klein et. al (2015) debunk the cultural perception that coming out only happens once in one’s life, especially for people who identified as queer or trans*. Klein et. al (2015) found that non-conforming gender and sexual identities could be communicated nonverbally. For instance, participants in their study mention the appeal of queer signifiers (such as gender transgression) especially in spaces that were not queer because they attach special meaning that bring value (and visibility) to their lives.

Despite the fact that participants in Klein et. al’s research found value in non-traditional gender and sexual signifiers, once-married African-American lesbians and bisexual womxn preferred to only disclose their sexual identity when needed (Bates 2010). Some respondents in Bates’ (2010) research reported actively practicing the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, while most womxn agreed that their sexual identities were only a fraction of them and did not want others to judge them solely for that. The hesitation to come out is also rooted in the historically rigid gender and sexual scripts tied to the Black community. Not only is being anything other than heteronormative perceived to be bad, but being Black on top of that adds another layer of marginalization. However, if the coming out narrative is shifted and reconsidered as strategic, coming out becomes more than identity development; alternatively, coming out becomes a collection

of motivations, strategies, and goals that people use to manage their identities (Orne 2011).

The Fluidity of Gender and Sexual Identities

An increase in fluidity of self-expression among people of all gender and sexual identities is evidence of gendered and sexual links as dynamic, complex and non-determinant (Better 2014; Richardson 2007). Therefore, traditional gender and sexual categories are problematic because these labels are non-inclusive to individuals who fall within the queer spectrum, so a new language is needed to encompass all identities (Pfeffer 2014).

Post-structuralism is associated with the development of new articulations of identity (Richardson 2007). In some contexts, there has been societal shift that allows us to redefine meanings surrounding gender and sexuality. For example, a college hookup scene provides an opportunity for womxn to explore same-sex attractions which can affirm non-normative sexual identities (Rupp 2014). The acceptability of kissing other womxn in hookup culture enabled sexual behavior with womxn that was rooted in attraction which helped womxn acknowledge their non-heterosexual desires. However, female non-normative sexual behaviors occur and are regulated in male spaces, for example, fraternity parties. Female same-sex sexual behaviors in male dominated spaces feed into heteronormative ideology for the benefit of men. Nevertheless, the “male gaze” has proven to provide womxn a safe space to practice same-sex sexual behaviors without being labeled as deviant. This study draws attention to the fact that, for at least some womxn, the gendered and heteronormative sphere of the hookup scene extends

heteronormative norms far enough to explore same-sex attractions and new sexual identities.

Rupp's (2014) research emphasizes women's fluid identities in opposition to men's "fixed" identities in male spaces. Unlike women, men who try to engage in same-sex behaviors in college are immediately labeled "gay." The gay label is detrimental to a man's masculinity because it is stereotypically associated with femininity. I argue that men's sexual desires may be seen as "fixed" because in order to maintain a dominant status, one must uphold a masculine demeanor, resulting in limiting and policing men's desires to engage in same-sex sexual behaviors.

However, there has been more acceptance of a person's self-identity in spaces that are perceived as non-threatening (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). A safe environment for self-exploration may yield new identities (Shapiro 2007). Kazyak (2012) argues that masculinity cannot be reduced to the male body, as femininity cannot be reduced to the female body. I extend this argument by asserting that sexuality too cannot be limited to binary categories. Examples from the literature demonstrate how some womxn found themselves exploring same-sex sexual activity with no previous recollection of same-sex sexual desires (Rupp 2014). Same-sex sexual behavior in hookup culture can alter and complicate a heteronormative identity. When we begin to have agency over the definitions of our experiences, we take ownership of our identities (Better 2014) and their embodiment.

Embodiment

Gender and sexuality are embodied and can be easily identified as acceptable or insufficient within our social identity categories (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014;

Ingrey 2013). The body remains important to our understandings of the self because it is an integral part of our identity (Better 2014). However, Butler (1990) questions to what extent the body plays into being through the marks of gender. According to Shapiro (2007), transgressive performance and embodiment can mold people's own sense of identity. When we are able to break down the barriers that police gender/sexual performance, we can start to look and feel how we aim.

Social context, for example, urban and rural areas, influences the conceptualization and attitudes of female masculinity discourse (Kazyak 2012). Female discourses associated with masculinity can be thought of as troublesome in suburban communities, or normative in small towns. Kazyak (2012) discusses how womxn in rural America challenge culturally dominant ideas of appropriate embodied gender, but reproduce White (hetero)normative embodiment found in the Midwest. Female masculinity can be perceived as a type of non-traditional gender expression, especially for heterosexual womxn, because people assume a non-heterosexual identity when gender is performed atypically. In other words, female masculinity is more uncommon among heterosexual womxn in mainstream America. Contrary to Lucal's (2008) assertion of gender/sexual congruency, female masculinity is not read as non-normative sexuality in a rural context, since both straight and lesbian womxn enact female masculinity. According to Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2014), a more strategic reflection on the constraints of binary gender and sexual systems could work to productively loosen normative embodiments of masculinities and femininities. Shapiro (2007) describes how drag king performances provide a safe place to practice masculine embodied expressions before translating this genderqueer identity into the real world.

Individuals classify others into gender/sexuality categories based on how they embody their gender and sexual expressions. According to Valocchi (2005: 753), binary gender and sexual categories incompletely represent a wide range of complicated social processes surrounding the meaning of bodies.

Determining Gender

Westbrook and Schilt (2014: 33) term the social process of legitimizing another person's gender identity as "determining gender." I argue that the concept of determination is also applicable to sexuality; however, this conceptualization is complicated by queerness because people who identify as queer do not fit into dominant gender/sexual categories. When people engage in face-to-face interaction, they perform in ways that present information about their identities. Others decode this information and place them in (dominant and binary) identity categories they see fit, regardless of queer status.

Depending on the social context, determination of gender is especially problematic for trans* and non-binary people because they are more prone to being misgendered and scrutinized in gender segregated spaces (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). For example, if a transgender person wants to use a public restroom, others may emphasize their "sexual gender" and overlook their "social gender." Gender segregated public spaces, such as a restroom, are important to examine because non-conforming individuals are subject to discrimination. Connell (2010) illustrates an example of two transmen who were perceived as masculine womxn before their transition and describes how they would routinely be asked to leave womxn's restrooms because other womxn

felt threatened. The assumption is that female spaces need to be protected because they are vulnerable to the dominance of men.

Pfeffer's (2014) study on queer-identified womxn demonstrates the difficulties and discomfort faced when their queer identities go unrecognized, or are determined as normative. According to Pfeffer, people in public spaces did not recognize respondents as queer because they were romantically coupled with transmen, appearing heteronormative. Queer womxn discuss the importance and visibility of their identities because their queer embodiments are deeply rooted in challenging existing social norms. It is important that others recognize their queer identities as legitimate because it offers a sense of validation.

Validation of a queer identity is often left in the hands of a queer "expert" (Better 2014). In other words, newly identified queer individuals look to others to "determine" their identities (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). However, Connell (2010) also suggests that non-conforming identities can be policed by heteronormative others. In the eyes of cisgender individuals (those whose sex matches their gender identity), people who identify as queer should prove their non-normative identities and are held to a higher standard in doing so. Connell (2010) describes instances of transmen in the workplace who were policed into performing masculinity properly. The emergence of new identities for queer individuals may lead them to negotiate their performances in public.

According to Better (2014), one's queer identity should be legitimized simply because one ascribes themselves as such. However, this is often not the case for individuals with variant identities. For instance, a respondent in Better's (2014) study expressed fear of exclusion from the lesbian community because she was interested in

both men and womxn. The existence of our binary gender and sexual systems makes it difficult for others to accept a queer identity as legitimate, depicting this non-conforming identity as invisible.

(In)visibility

The mainstream conceptualization of gender and sexuality does not fully encompass all gender and sexual identities, nor does it account for variation in the lived experiences of gender variant people (Better 2014; Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014). Thus, binary discourses render non-conforming identities (in)visible. Queer individuals themselves may even experience difficulty determining their own identities because our heteronormative gender/sexual structures do not account for variation (Rupp 2014). The normalization of invisibility has even been adopted by non-heterosexual people in their daily lives. For example, Tom, the elementary schoolteacher described earlier, does not address issues pertaining to gender and sexual minorities because such individuals are “outside the common or everyday lived experience” (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014: 87). Failing to mention variant identities essentially erases non-conforming gendered and sexual identities from the public’s attention. Pfeffer (2014) conducted a study which analyzed cisgender female partners of transmen. This group is particularly likely to be invisible in society because they may “pass” as heteronormative, hence, reproducing the hegemonic structure of sexuality discourse. Social privilege is a result of “passing” as a heterosexual couple but can be extremely uncomfortable for the couple themselves because it camouflages their queer identities. Queer womxn in this study expressed the invisibility of their identities to be invalidating. (In)visibility reveals more

about normativity and privilege than it does about people who have gender and sexual variant identities (Pfeffer 2014).

Sociological knowledge on queer identities is still relatively new, especially when focusing on queer gender and sexual identities that lie outside the dominant binary categories. Sociological literature shows that individuals who self-identify as queer present/perform/embody a fluidity to their gender and/or sexual identities (Bates 2010; Better 2014; Connell 2010; Ingrey 2013). In other words, gender and sexual identities have the ability to change according to time, space, and/or situation. Gender and sexual identities are embodiments of qualities and expressions that are lived and experienced (Connell 2009, 2015; Kazyak 2012; Lucal 2008; Pfeffer 2014). However, no research has analyzed relationships between queer identities and their stylistic embodiments and expressions. More specifically, no research has looked at connections between what I refer to as “doing queer” and strategic outness. My research seeks to explore how individuals who self-identify as “queer” strategically alter their appearances and behaviors to let others know of their queer identity.

Theoretical Frameworks

My thesis seeks to make connections between presentation of self, “doing gender,” embodiment, and queer theories. My rationale for selecting to analyze and apply these theories to gender and sexual non-normativity is because they provide a solid foundation to understanding why transgender and queer identified individuals are often misunderstood in society. Utilizing aspects of Erving Goffman’s (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, “doing gender,” embodiment and queer theory are

supplementary to one another because they outline the social structures in which gender/sexual norms and attitudes are framed.

Studying gender and sexual minorities is important because it exposes unique challenges faced by people who do not conform to (hetero)normative standards. The application of the selected theories reveals the rigid boundaries that police gender and sexual expression. Transgression from traditional gender and sexual scripts stigmatizes queer identified individuals as “other” (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014; Westbrook and Schilt 2014). By applying and analyzing classic and contemporary theories, I push their theoretical frameworks to the limit and pose unanswered questions.

Erving Goffman (1959) states that people seek to define social situations through presentations of self. In other words, individuals read and express embodied signs through impression management to determine what is expected in face-to-face interactions. According to Goffman, individuals practice impression management in social interactions just as an actor would on a stage (theatre production is used as a metaphor to describe the ways people present themselves in everyday life). To try and control how others see us, we adhere to social scripts in attempts to stay in character in front of others. Commonly, individuals want to portray the best versions of themselves so they alter their actions to fit certain social situations. People engage in presentations of self they want others to see.

Goffman (1959) explains that people make sense of their social environment through shared definitions of a situation. If one does not conform to expected behaviors in a social interaction, they are subject to social punishment. He describes social presentations of self to be framed around a dramaturgical model, which is constructed

around performance, setting, appearance, manner, front, front stage, back stage and off stage. Performance depends and varies on the setting. Goffman says that individuals perform presentations of self differently, depending on the audience and social context. He adds that appearance portrays the actor's social statuses as symbols to the audience. Other symbols perceived by the audience are social behaviors, or manners. Manner is used to explain how the performer will act in a given role. In other words, manner is the actor's demeanor accomplished through their front. Front can be defined as the impressions and scripts we adopt to interpret social situations. Individuals alter their front depending on the stage they occupy. Goffman (1959) refers to these different stages as front stage (where the performer knows the audience is watching and practices impression management), back stage (where individuals do not have to worry about an audience), and off stage (where actors adopt certain scripts based upon the individuals they interact with, instead of performing for a mass audience).

In addition to Goffman's theorizing on performances, I utilize the now classic "doing gender" framework in this proposed study. "Doing gender" is a theoretical concept that means people constantly (re)produce masculine and/or feminine scripts in interaction (West and Zimmerman 1987). In our society, it is expected for one to "do gender" properly, which is achieved by managing conduct so that it is congruent to normative expectations appropriate to one's sex category. West and Zimmerman adopt Goffman's presentation of self as the theoretical foundation to create "doing gender," except it is modified in a way so it is specific to gender expression.

According to West and Zimmerman, gender cannot be avoided and is taught in early childhood to distinguish between boys/girls and men/women. Because gender is

taught from an early age, individuals evaluate others presentations and are held accountable for their own gender performances. “Doing gender” correctly reinforces gender difference. If one performs gender “incorrectly” they are vulnerable to experiencing discrimination.

I argue that “doing gender” can be extended and applied to sexual identity because gender and sexuality are so tightly connected in most Western societies. While sexual identifiers can be more subtle, people share parts of their identity through signs of embodied self-expression. Similar to gender, sexuality is thought of in binary terms – privileging heterosexuality over homosexuality, just as masculinity is privileged over femininity (Lucal 2008). Traditionally, gender and sexual spheres have been structured around one another, so it is reasonable to say that individuals “do sexuality.” As a consequence, if one veers from “normative” gender and sexual expressions, they are perceived as deviant in society. *The Body & Social Theory* by Chris Shilling (2012) provides an overview of the body as a central reference point in sociology. Shilling (2012) indicates that sociologists have taken the body more seriously as a result of different social shifts. Sociology recognizes the body as an active and essential part of identity since performance is enacted through the body.

Embodiment theory makes connections between the body and the “self.” According to Connell (2009: 67), “bodies are both *objects* of social practice and *agents* in social practice,” better known as social embodiment. Bodily processes and social structures are connected to one another and change according to time and space. Connell (2009) further explains that social embodiment involves individual agency, but may also involve a group or institutions. Gender is a distinct form of social embodiment because

individuals look to the body for particular features and bodily performances.

Performance is vital to embodiment because people attach meaning to symbols (Shilling 2012).

Finally, my analysis will be shaped by queer theory. Queer theory is a social-justice oriented, interdisciplinary perspective that seeks equality for marginalized groups (Butler 1990). Clearly defining queer theory is challenging because a description would serve as a form of closure that is fixed, which is exactly what queer theory aims to push against. According to Butler (1990), queer theory rejects dominant binary categorizations of gender and sexuality because they polarize difference and reinforce hierarchy. Stein and Plummer (1994) add that heterosexuality is normalized in different spheres, therefore researchers must study sexual discourses in these diverse arenas.

A sociological approach to queer theory complicates traditional comprehensions of identity because it pushes our understandings of identity in a direction that deals with materiality of sex, gender, sexuality and the role of institutional power (Valocchi 2005). Valocchi (2005) states that understandings of power are captured by heteronormativity. However, Valocchi also suggests that we can rethink the essence of power and resistance by further examining the gendered nature of sexuality, and the sexualized nature of gender. Queer theorists argue that identity is not fixed, but rather socially constructed and fluid.

III. METHODS

I utilized a qualitative approach for my research because it allowed me to focus on detailed experiences of queer self-identified individuals and how they negotiate and navigate through the world around them. Because the purpose of queer theory and queer identities is to reject categorizations, it would be difficult to study queer identities employing a quantitative approach. I conducted semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews with 15 self-identified queer individuals in order to gain an understanding of the ways in which they alter their appearance to let others know of their identity. My semi-structured interviews included questions that were probing and open-ended which served as a strength of the study because each interview added interesting insight specific to their experiences. My interview guide served as a blueprint for the interviews (See Appendix 1). I asked for information about participants' background, what it means to be queer, and different ways in which people make connections between their self-presentation and identity. The questions provided in the interview guide are designed so each respondent is asked the same types of questions, though it is not exhaustive.

Sampling and Recruitment

I recruited individuals who I knew self-identified as queer in a southern state. At the end of our interview, I asked each respondent to refer me to others who also identified as queer, utilizing snowball sampling. According to Dattalo (2008: 6), "Snowball sampling is used to identify participants when appropriate candidates for a study are difficult to locate." Because marginalized identities can be difficult to discuss, some respondents did not feel comfortable sharing personal information about other queer-identified individuals. I also contacted various LGBTQIA+ organization leaders at a

university in a southern state. I asked organization leaders to share my study with members in their organization and had two respondents contact me expressing their interest in participating in my study. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 35, with the mean age being 23. Seven of the respondents were White. Three respondents self-identified as mixed ethnicity with Latinx heritage, and one identified as an Asian Pacific background. One participant was multiethnic. Two participants were Latinx, and one respondent was Black (refer to Table 1 for demographics). Latinx, a relatively new and more inclusive term that seeks to affirm non-binary gender identities.

While my study focuses on queer non-binary (and non-normative) identities, some participants in my study had more specific language for their gender/sexual identities. Each respondent acknowledged their identities to be under the queer umbrella, however, some participants were more particular about their identities because the specificity of them felt more accurate and assisted with visibility. My research aims to capture lived experiences of people who do not identify with (hetero)normative labels, from their own perspective. It was up to my participants to decide for themselves whether they self-identified as "queer."

Analytical Strategy

Each interview took place in a coffee shop and was recorded using a digital recording device. All interviews were transcribed word for word using word processing software called ExpressScribe. In order to keep each respondent's identity anonymous, I asked each respondent to choose the pseudonym they wanted in place of their name. At the end of each interview, I noted what my participant looked like and described their clothing at the time interviews took place. I analyzed data using inductive coding

techniques and made note of emergent themes (and contradictions) as they appeared (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011).

A grounded approach was used for analyzing my data. This means I simultaneously collected data via interviews, transcribed and engaged in the open coding process, which in turn, led to analysis and interpretation (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011). I read transcripts line by line and made descriptive memos about codes that generated key concepts and themes. This coding method helps create a systemic way to keep data organized while maintaining reflexivity and an openness to the descriptions and their interpretations.

While many studies have been conducted on individuals who identify as queer, there is no sociological research that focuses specifically on queer/non-binary identities, embodiments and their connections to strategic outness (Orne 2011). Additionally, sociological scholarship fails to examine queer-identified racial/ethnic minorities as an added layer of oppression. My research helps to fill the gaps within an existing body of knowledge and provides rich descriptions of non-conforming identities.

There is debate among sociologists about the pros and cons that are associated with having “insider” or “outsider” status among the social group and individuals being studied (Adler and Adler 1996). My social position as a femme presenting queer Latinx womxn likely shaped how participants responded to my questions. For example, I wore a plaid flannel to one of my interviews and the respondent joked and commented on it being a queer marker. However, I believe having insider status was an advantage to my study because I understand LGBTQIA+ culture and values within the context of a

southern state so I was able to build rapport with my participants which got them to open up, yielding information I may not have been able to otherwise.

In the findings, I use the pronouns that are preferred by the respondents. In particular, I use they/them/their pronouns for those whose gender identity are queer and/or non-binary. According to Chase and Ressler (2009:23), the use of neutral pronouns like they/their/them is “relatively new... and [is] used to replace gendered pronouns when referring to transgender and gender queer people who do not identify as either female or male.” While the use of gender-neutral pronouns is still quite new in everyday language, they are even newer, as a matter of fact absent, in gender sociological scholarship.

The use of they/their/them can be difficult to get adjusted to, especially when introduced to gender-neutral pronouns for the first time, because the perception is that their use is grammatically incorrect. The argument suggests that they/their/them is plural and should only be used when referring to multiple people. However, people commonly forget that they also use they/their/them pronouns in a singular tense, especially when they reference an unknown person. One of my participants gives an example of “the mailman scenario”:

If you ask, “Did the mailman drop by? Did they drop off the mail?” You don’t say, “Did he or she drop off the mail?” you say, “Did *they* drop off the mail?” And obviously you know that they’re referencing *one* person, not like multiple people.

Therefore, out of respect for my participants, and to further validate their identities, I use their preferred pronouns throughout my research.

IV. FINDINGS

What does it mean to be queer according to self-identified queer individuals? How does being queer influence everyday lives and experiences? I identified six main themes in the interviews: (1) queer as fluid; (2) queering bodies; (3) passing and covering as part of queerness; (4) fear and violence as a part of queerness; (5) negotiating pronouns and language as part of identifying as queer; and (6) queer as resistance. Queer self-identified and non-binary individuals' lived experiences are multifaceted, complex and fluid. In spite of the complexities associated to their queerness, a characteristic of their identities that was central to the ways they negotiate and navigate different spaces were respondents' bodies. Participants' bodies, and their expressions, were crucial to my research because they influenced the ways they may want to be read (or perceived by others), and in turn, the ways which others perceive and interacted with them. Specific aspects of the body that were often mentioned include race/ethnicity, size (including both height and body weight), hair and body art. However, participants of color also described how their race/ethnicity, and even complexion, played a major role in how they are perceived, the stereotypes attached to them, and how they interact with the world around them. Bodies served as materialized interpretations for their identities.

The data suggest that bodies were not the only medium which respondents used to express their queerness. Respondents utilized creative outlets including art, creative writing, attitude and advocacy. Their queer identities and expressions transcended the body and manifested in different forms. Participants explained their queerness as unapologetically existing on their own terms. Being authentic to who they are is crucial

because it puts them in a position where they are vulnerable, yet resilient. Their resilience in the face of adversity strengthens their unique voices.

Queering Queer Identities: Moving from “Normal” to “Fluid”

We are socialized to believe gender and sexuality (as well as many other topics) are dichotomies – either or – good or bad. This gender and sexual distinction assumes that one is more natural, hence superior, to the other; therefore, oppressing the “other.” For example, maleness and masculinity are assumed to be superior to femaleness and femininity, as Whiteness is perceived to be superior, or “more civilized,” than Blackness (Meyer 2015; Lucal 2008). As evident in my research, respondents, by default, used the word “normal,” in reference to their contrasting identities, embodiments, expressions and experiences. According to Meyer (2015), “normal” can be conceptualized as White, heterosexual, middle-class and male. Normal is a term and identity that carries a lot of power and privilege, and is used to exercise dominance over people that are “other” (Butler 1990).

Because gender and sexuality are talked about using words that imply either or, good or bad, language, participants in my research once conceptualized their identities as “normal” because they did not have any other vocabulary to accurately describe how they identified. For example, Felix, a 35-year-old White pansexual gender fluid person, did not realize she was queer until recently. Before, she told people she identified as male and heterosexual, though she says neither of those labels ever “felt right.” When I asked why either label did not feel right, Felix responded:

It just didn’t – I don’t know – didn’t feel – it wasn’t honest. I knew I wasn’t being honest – just didn’t necessarily know why I didn’t feel

comfortable expressing what was honest. And I think part of that too was because the false dichotomy. So it's the assumption that because you're not A, then you're B by default. This goes with gender identity, so male or female, as well sexuality. You're either hetero- or homo- and it's like I don't fit in either category of gender or sexuality, so that was, yeah. It was hard cause like, I'm not A but I'm not B either, so it wasn't until I started going through the process and meeting other people, sociology helped a lot too, and opened my mind to no, it's a spectrum.

Felix illustrates the "false dichotomy" by explaining how gender and sexual categories are assumed. She emphasizes labeling, by default, is the product of appropriate gender and sexual expectations. As theorized by Westbrook and Schilt (2014), others "determine" gender and sexuality. Similarly, Ku, an ethnically mixed Asian Pacific 24-year-old asexual gay non-binary male, did not feel like existing binary gender and sexual categories fit. As an alternative, Ku says, "I chose to not identify because I didn't have a label, I didn't know what was going on. All I knew was that I wasn't straight so that was it." When asked about his gender identity, Ku responded:

My clause was just like, "I'm a girl, I guess" but then that was always the issue, "I guess. I suppose." If you have to put a label on it, I guess it's a girl but that changed when I realized there are other genders, so then I started identifying as non-binary, and then now I just identify as non-binary male, specifically. Cause at first I was very neutral, and now I'm more on the masculine spectrum.

Like Felix, Ku expresses the reluctance to identify as his presumed gender. However, by default, he chose the gender that he was “supposed” to identify with. Not only do others use social cues to determine our gender/sexuality, but respondents do the same when they do not have the knowledge and resources about variant identities (Ingrey 2013).

Furthermore, L, a 24-year-old White cisgender bisexual female, did not realize she was bisexual until after she started college. Like Felix and Ku, she thought the categories for sexual desire as binary and considered herself to be heterosexual even after kissing girls in high school:

When I was in high school, I had this huge crush on my best friend. Like biggest crush in the world. She was adorable, still is, oh my God, and of course I would drunk make out with all my girlfriends all the time. And I remember I was in my gender studies class and [professor at university] comes in and was like, “I want to interview straight womxn and find out why they’re straight,” and I was like, “I wanna volunteer! I’m straight,” and she started interviewing me and was like, “So have you ever had an interaction with a girl?” “Oh, yeah,” “Have you ever had feelings for a girl?” “Oh, yeah,” and probably ten or fifteen minutes in I was like, “I don’t know if I’m qualified for this” [laughs] and that is kind of like how I found out that I was [bisexual].

Felix, Ku and L opted to choose “normal” gender and/or sexual identities before they understood gender and sexual identities as a lot more complex and fluid than presumed to be. However, it is interesting to note that they used “normal” binary gender and sexual categories as a reference to what they are *not*. Though the goal of queer to deconstruct

dominant identity categories, queer self-identified people use those categories to make sense of who they are (not). Once they realized that there are infinite ways to contextualize their identities, they shaped and created their own definition of queer.

Queer gender and sexual identities can be best understood as fluid and changing from individual to individual. Not only is the identity itself fluid, but the language respondents used to specifically describe their queer gender and sexual identities varied. For example, respondents used words such as gender fluid (a person who does not identify as having a fixed gender), demigender (a gender identity that involves feeling partial, but not full, connection to a particular gender), non-binary male (an identity that is outside the male/female dichotomy, though on a masculine spectrum), polysexual (an attraction to multiple genders) and transmasculine (a trans* identity that is not exclusively male, though is more masculine than feminine) as more accurate terms for their identities. While the language was more specific, participants acknowledged that their identities were still queer because they identified outside dominant categorizations of gender and sexuality. All participants mentioned being queer self-identified was unique to each person and their level of comfort. For instance, five respondents only considered their sexual identities as queer (i.e. identifying as bisexual, asexual), seven respondents preferred neutral pronouns (they/them/their), and two others did not mind what pronouns were used in reference to them. Cumulatively, all respondents agreed and emphasized the notion that queer identities are unique to each individual – queer looks and feels different for everyone. Alix, a 20-year-old Latinx and White gender fluid transmasculine person, being queer is about breaking gender norms:

I think [being queer is just] like being yourself because, like, queer can look like or be anything, y'know? There are some people that are like trans* but are cis- passing and there's other people that aren't. I feel like for me, um, it's just like constantly trying to do anything I can to like break gender norms. Like, 'cause I identify as transmasculine, but I'm still really feminine. I call myself a flowerboi cause, like, flowers are the epitome of femininity and softness and I love flowers, but, like, I also like being called he, or a boy, or doing other masculine things, so I feel like for me, that's my embodiment of being queer.

Flowerboi is how Alix describes themselves because the word implies a feminine masculinity. Furthermore, Alix describes how they purposely try and break gender norms through their appearance and body language.

I really like my closet. It's like organized to like the girls side and boys side, so I like mixing it up. I like wearing dresses sometimes and like I like wearing man clothes and man pants, and it's really important to me to have my sense of weird, artistic style that's also like, y'know breaking gender norms...My hair plays a big part too. I have a pretty good relationship with my barber and like I'll make jokes with him. He'll be like, "How do you want your haircut?" and I'll just be like, "Just give me whatever looks manly-er," [chuckles] and he's like, "Okay, I got you," and he'll cut my hair like that, so I think hair is definitely big. Um, jewelry too. Sometimes I'll go with no jewelry, and sometimes I'll put one earring on my right ear so people know that I'm queer [laughs]. And, I think body

language as well. Like I think body language is a big one. I've been told before that I can have like a more masculine presenting body language, by like the way I sit and like the way I hold myself.

Alix explains how they purposely take up more space now than they did before identifying as queer because it is more masculine and makes them feel a lot stronger and confident. Similarly, trans* participants in Schilt's (2006) study explain gaining "body privilege" after transitioning to be more masculine. When I met Alix for the interview, they had buzzed (very short) hair that is longer up top, retro bowline glasses with a black frame, a hoop nose ring on their nostril, a diamond pink and white earring on their *right* ear, bright patchy (what appeared to be inspired by Hispanic culture) baggy coat, plaid brown and beige flannel, a white graphic T-shirt, khaki straight fit pants, and brown winter/hiking boots. Alix appeared to mix articles of clothing that are masculine and feminine in order to code themselves as queer.

In addition, Felix describes being queer, or non-binary as:

... not ascribing to labels and having the creative flexibility to express myself in whatever way I feel like at any time... you're not going from A to B. You're really following that middle path and recognizing that, not only is there a middle way, but [being non-binary] is a spectrum as well. So like think of it as a bowling lane. One gutter's masculine and the other gutter is feminine. Non-binary is the lane itself, and just like a bowling ball, you can go to the left, to the right, straight down the middle, and I think it's important because, one, self-expression, and two, it helps

challenge the social norm and the idea that there should be a social norm at all, 'cause ideally, who cares?

In her description, Felix acknowledges that there is not one way to be queer. Instead, being queer disrupts traditional ideas about who should (and can) be masculine and feminine. For Felix, being queer means recognizing that social structures, and their constructs, are “bad programming over countless of generations, so the way to challenge it is to be different... to break expectations.” Felix says being queer means that she is able to define herself, rather than letting others define her. Felix’s ability to take ownership of her identity is profound because she is not letting anyone’s opinion influence the way she perceives her own pansexual and gender fluid identity.

As for G, a 26-year-old Latinx and White non-binary pansexual identified person, being queer means breaking expectations and being authentic:

To me, queer means something that exists outside the heteronormative, cisgendered, monogamous expectation for people... for me, specifically, I can only speak for my own queer experience, it means that I’m pansexual, it means that I stepped outside the gender binary and just kind of decided to be a more authentic person to myself instead of being like – I keep going back to expectation because that’s really what guides our behavior and our life courses sometimes, but we don’t know the options that are available to us, we don’t. We are trapped instead of being something that is very organic.

However, being authentic does not mean G's identity and presentation are unchanging. G reveals the multiplicity of their masculinity that was brought to their attention after a romantic encounter with a professor at a university:

She was like, "Sometimes you come off as a very much a gay man and sometimes you come off as a very sweet/cute non-binary" ... It's not just someone who's like, "You say, 'hey sista' a lot – you come off as a gay guy." No, it was like she understood subtle nonverbal cues and means of interaction and I gave her that kind of impression.

This finding demonstrates that self-identifying as queer is not only variant from person to person, but it is also fluid, and layered, within queer-identified individuals. Richardson (2007) describes instances where gender and sexuality are closely knit, specifically, where others' perceptions of sexuality are based off behavior and gender identity. For instance, the professor was using specific language to describe G's perceived gender and sexual identities based off their behavior. For G, being queer-identified means stepping outside the gender binary and expressing multiple masculinities nonverbally.

Queer-identified individuals construct and express their queer identities in ways that feel comfortable to them, regardless of the status quo. According to Sasnett (2015: 215), structural elements initially dictate how meanings are assigned to the self, however agency provides the freedom to seek out alternative meanings, which adds value to identities. Queer identities result from the realization of the agency to determine their own gender and sexual identities. Not only are queer identities themselves fluid, but their embodiments as well.

Queering Bodies

Not only is a queer identity fluid in itself, but the manifestations of expressions also change depending on time and space (Better 2014; Connell 2015; Pfeffer 2014). In other words, overt queer expressions can be situational for different reasons (specifically, comfort and safety). Most respondents indicated that queer does not look or feel the same for everyone. Additionally, queer politics and theory seek to deconstruct gendered and sexual power that exist within dominant and binary identity categories. The mere fact that identity categories prevail demonstrates the inherent power, inequality and difference they possess. Butler (1993) insists that the want and need to dismantle institutional power lies at the heart of queerness. For queer self-identified individuals existing within a White heteronormative world, gender and sexual performativity is a continuous requirement to escape identity categories by which bodies are made readable. In a society where heterosexual identities and bodies are privileged and considered normal, disrupting existing categories can be disadvantageous because normative politics cannot contain the possibilities of what bodies can do (Brady and Schirato 2011). As Sedgwick describes, queer can also refer to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (1993:8).

For the respondents in this study, their queer bodies ranged from cis-passing, meaning that their bodies traditional masculine and feminine physique (and physiology) aligned with performance, while others purposely altered their bodies’ appearance to seem non-traditional. A non-traditional body narrative disrupts expected behaviors and

expressions, resulting in confusion. Many of my queer-identified respondents mentioned they did not intentionally express their queerness. Instead, participants who exhibited both masculine and feminine characteristics explained that others could pick up on, or read them as different.

According to a couple of my participants, a common misconception about queer and non-binary identified people is that they embody androgyny. However, two of my respondents identify as “fat,” which does not fit with a typical queer identity from their perspective. E, a “fat” 27-year-old Asian Pacific and White queer, demigender polysexual identified person, specifically mentions how this misconception is problematic and sustained in the queer community:

I go through the world as a fat person, right? And I don't think of fat as a dirty word, like it's a descriptor, you know, just like thin and like I do a lot of activism around that... like a lot of my experiences being fat directly affect my experiences in the queer community, like where image is very important and stuff... Like in my experience in the queer community, there's not a lot of like acceptance or even actively participating in viewing people who are fat as like desirable. So I think that's a huge and problematic aspect in the queer community. Like regardless of gender, right? And then I also feel like presentation in terms of like androgyny and like femme or butch or whatever, like there are these relatively strict guidelines unless you fall into this like pre-ordained, “you're an attractive queer” then you can like do whatever you want... But like that isn't afforded to people aren't already societally attractive or people who are

like thin... I just feel like the queer community has all of the same problematic stuff as society and that needs to get worked on, but like a ton of people in the queer community feel like it doesn't have those kinds of things but like we aren't immune, right?

Just as the rigidity in binary thought is normalized in a cisgender heterosexist society, strict boundaries also regulate what defines proper sexualized gender expressions in the queer community (i.e. femme, butch, androgynous), especially for those who do not benefit from an attractiveness privilege. According to E, being conventionally attractive grants a level of privilege that is not accessible to those who are not. E says that being fat affects the way people perceive them both inside and outside the queer community. They mention how they are continuously assumed to be female upon meeting new people because they “enjoy dresses and skirts and shit” and have “big boobs.” However, the sign that is a stereotypical marker of a queer identity, especially on someone who is presumed to be female, is body hair. E does not participate in hair removal practices, except the hair on their head – it is buzzed all around. This demonstrates how symbols are associated with the body and its presumed narrative.

Because the body is investigated and used to determine someone's assumed gender, Axel, a 22-year-old Latinx gay non-binary identified person, uses a binder to hide their breasts, which helps with their body dysphoria:

I have dysphoria but that's not anything that can be fixed right now, and that's something that's really hard to fix, and it's just like that's your normal body... For a while I did feel like I was transgender, but right now I think the binder was like kinda a Band-Aid on that and it's like I'll assess

this later in my life because right now it doesn't feel 100% like really what

I want, but this right now, is helping me so it's like this is good for now.

In our interview, Axel admitted to not knowing much about queer identities, although they identify as non-binary. Unlike other participants, Axel is not interested in learning more about variant gender identities and has no preferred gender pronouns. If Axel decided they were in fact transgender, they would not need to undergo top-surgery or use he/him/his pronouns to legitimize their identity because identifying as trans* or non-binary is valid enough, regardless of the adoption of different pronouns (Better 2014). However, this shows that Axel is a product of the heteronormative society we live in. Axel does not realize that they would not need to use he/him/his pronouns, nor would they need gender-confirmation surgery to legitimize their trans* identity. Simply identifying as such is the only requirement.

Identity politics are largely tied to the body; however, for these respondents, being queer also transcends their physical bodies and is reflected in art, activism and attitude. For many respondents, self-identifying as non-binary or queer was more meaningful than the relationship with their bodies and the performances they accomplished. Being queer was an identity outside appearance that is reflected in different aspects of social life. For Steve, a 23-year-old White non-binary/transmasculine identified person, queer is community.

Steve says being queer is not limited to their gender and sexual orientation.

Instead, queer includes culture:

Previously, gay or queer only referred to a sexual orientation and now queer is also a gender identity, but it's also this cultural life of being, the

style, the aesthetic of being gay, being queer. It's going to drag races or like drag shows, it's going to the queer establishment in the community, it's hanging out with other queer people, it's a way of talking and communicating, of being a family with people, so there's a lot of different cultures that we have, and there's queer culture, there's gay culture, and so to me I'm, you know, my gender, my sexuality and my community are all queer... I can't think of any other ways to say that it's a lot of drag shows [laughs], and just the manner of speaking and being aware of people's pronouns, gender identity and sexual orientation and being very accepting of all those things.

In Steve's statement, communication is important to queer culture. Steve adds how speaking with a higher pitch and "drag slang" is also key for them in their queer expression:

I prefer talking in a higher pitch tone, even though I can talk lower cause of testosterone that I'm taking 'cause of the transition... but [I also express my queer identity] in the words I use. So there's a lot of drag slang that comes into my speech when I'm talking, so a lot of things that drag queens might say like, "shade" or "beating your face." Different drag slang terms. I use that everyday and I purposely put that into my vocabulary because it's a verbal representation of the community I belong with.

Steve explains that queer expressions can be found in community and communication – specifically, through the use of pronouns, "drag slang," and vocal pitch. Similarly, QR, a 20-year-old White queer identified person, expresses their queerness through the use of

language. However, for QR queer language is a little more literal and is depicted in their creative writing:

I had the opportunity to share a story I had written with an academic symposium and I was surprised only a few people from my creative writing group were chosen and I could see the conservative parents shaking their heads like, “Why did you write this?”

I asked what their piece was about, to which they replied, “A queer relationship post World War II in Germany.” QR uses their writing as a platform for queer visibility. G adds:

[I express my queerness] in my clothing, in my art, in my words, in my writing, in my activism, in my interactions with people – I do not mind like telling people in certain scenarios, like if they say, “You’re a really pretty girl,” I’ll accept the compliment, but I’m like, “I’m the prettiest non-binary in the room.”

G later explains that another form of their queer expression is indicated in their new name because it is traditionally masculine and serves as a marker of non-heteronormativity (Lucal 2008; Pfeffer 2014). For Steve, QR and G, expressing queerness is closely linked to language.

Similar to Steve, Alix claims their queerness as a lifestyle. Alix says expressing queerness is keeping queer company:

[Being queer] is just an everyday lifestyle y’know? You walk into [local grocery store] and you just stunt it [chuckle]. I just feel like the way I hold myself and the way that I dress, the way that I make art, the way I make

friends, I just kinda like seek out queer interactions, like I'll see someone who kinda looks like they're breaking gender norms and I'm like, "Hey, what's up? My name's Alix" [laughs]. I just kinda try to stay like surrounded by other queer people, and keep meeting other queer people 'cause like the more we stick together, y'know, the queerer we can be.

For Alix, community is important because it offers a sense of comfort and safety (Shapiro 2007). Alix then goes into more detail about their queerness as an expression of art:

I was dating a girl that identified as girl at the time, so I made like some drawings of just us, two girls kissing and like drawings of her a lot 'cause I was like really into her. And I like put it out there for people to see and I had never really done anything like that before. My art before was just always like flowers, and like nature and things that kinda are just already there.

Alix is more literal with their queer expression because they created images that depicted a same-sex romantic relationship. Alix continuously comes out through their art, which complicates the coming out narrative (Klien et. al 2015). Comparable to Alix, Traci, a 23-year-old Black queer trans* person, expresses their queer identity via body art. However, Traci's queer expression is deeply meaningful because they got a tattoo to commemorate the victims that were brutally killed in the Pulse shooting.

According to respondents, embodying and expressing queerness is inherently political because they challenge structural oppressive systems. Challenging dominant social structure through their attitude, art, writing and language is critical to their advocate spirit. It requires placing emphasis on the power language has in constructing

oppressive social structures if we truly want to queer and destabilize dominant discourse (Butler 1990).

Respondents also perceive queer bodies to be in all shapes and sizes, and existing on a spectrum of infinite possibilities – a spectrum that can intersect with race, ethnicity, body size, and other factors. Some stated that how a queer-identified person chooses to express themselves is up to them and their comfort. For some of those interviewed, it may mean hiding their curves by binding their breasts, and for others it may mean embracing their feminine curves, while utilizing body hair as a queer marker. Being queer can encompass anything from stereotypically flamboyant and queer to cisgender, heterosexual passing.

Passing and Covering

Respondents reported expressing their non-binary identities by engaging in self-presentation strategies that made them feel most comfortable. For some participants this meant they wore clothes strictly for functionality (which sometimes helped cover their queer identities and pass as heteronormative), while others communicated wanting to consciously disrupt traditional gender norms. Those who did not pay much regard to their appearance, and their symbolic communication, suggested that clothing is not inherently gendered. According to G, “[clothes] only have the meanings we attach to them.” However, in some cases, self-presentation and clothing helped protect respondents that that “covered” their queerness because it made them feel more safe, and in other instances, stereotypical queer appearance made respondents a target and vulnerable to violence.

Passing as heteronormative, or homonormative for that matter, affords a level of privilege for queer-identified individuals. They benefit from passing because they are seen as “normal” by people in the larger society, and even in LGBTQIA+ spaces. For example, Mike, a Latinx and White 23-year-old cisgender bisexual male, passes, or is (mis)recognized, as straight daily (Pfeffer 2014). He embodies traditionally masculine characteristics, and engages in heterosexual behavior in the presence of others. Mike shared that he is very selective about the people he comes out to because he does not want their “normal” perception of him to change:

People make assumptions that I’m heterosexual because that’s what I publicly am... I engage in romantic activity with womxn in the presence of people who are around me, and friends and family, and it’s just a normal thing, you know? In society the normal thing to be is heterosexual.

Mike uses his cisgender masculinity to cover his bisexuality; therefore, socially benefitting (the most) from being White-passing, cisgender male, and perceived heterosexual identity. In other words, Mike benefits from all social hierarchies. In a similar fashion, Steve experiences privilege because they are White and male-passing. Steve mentions the shift of being referred to as bossy pre medical transition, to being called a leader post medical transition (Schilt 2006):

[Now] my voice is more likely to be heard. People are more likely to recognize my leadership. There was a while where I was working on things and someone called me out for being bossy because I was telling people what to do, but things needed to get done and we were on a time crunch and somebody has to step up, but since transitioning and being

male-passing, I've never been called bossy again. I am just called a leader – it's like aw snaps. Like I knew it was an issue, but now I am like first hand recognizing because it's happened for me where I went from being “bossy,” and that was the word, they didn't use a much ruder word, to a “leader” and so that's one of the big things that I've really noticed.

Steve has experienced the misogyny that womxn face when their work ethic is assertive. Their experience demonstrates the double standard womxn encounter when they engage in behaviors that are traditionally masculine, when people who are male-passing receive praise and get called a “leader” when they partake in the same behaviors (Schilt 2006). The shift from “bossy” to “leader” is new and beneficial to Steve, yet also challenging and uncomfortable because they have lived the majority of their life as a “girl,” so they know what it is like to have to prove their knowledge and capability. Steve expresses getting hurt when people assume they don't know what it's like to be female. Therefore, it is important for Steve to identify as a feminist because they can empathize with the struggles womxn face (Connell 2010).

Further, L is femme presenting and is assumed to be heterosexual by others, even after spending quite a bit of time in the same restroom stall with another cisgender female at an LGBTQIA+ bar: “I would be in the bathroom for like 10 minutes with this girl at [local gay bar] and like we would come out of the stall and my friends would still think I'm straight [chuckle].” I asked her why she thought her friends would still assume that she was straight to which she replied, “Cause for some reason girls are supposed to make-out with girls and it's always like a phase, or just one night, but it's not their identity. It's not their preference, you know?” Similar to Rupp et al. (2014), L suggests

that girl-on-girl make-outs are presumed to be for the male gaze when that may not at all be the case. L utilized the male gaze in high school as a “safe” way to explore her sexuality.

When I was in high school and was going to parties, [kissing other girls] started as [the male gaze], but I would be so happy and relieved if it happened when we were in a bedroom alone and like nobody was there like, “Oh my God, what’s gonna happen next?” like [breathes heavily, almost nervous] that was way hotter and like way less fake to me. I don’t know, but yeah that’s where it started and I started becoming comfortable making out with girls and being physically intimate.

In a way, L experiences straight-passing privilege in all spaces. However, the consequence is that her bisexuality is erased. Similarly, in Rupp et. al’s (2014) study, straight-passing womxn experience heteronormative passing privilege because college hookup culture fosters an opportunity structure for womxn to explore same-sex desire.

Cindy, also a 24-year-old White cisgender bisexual female, encounters straight-passing privilege, especially since her partner is a cisgender Latinx male. Cindy mentioned that she does not typically come out about her sexual identity unless the topic is brought up. Until then, Cindy believes that she is perceived as heterosexual:

Being bi is weird. Especially because it’s such a hidden sexuality because when you’re single and bi, you have like a world of opportunity, right? But if you’re dating someone of the opposite sex, people assume I’m straight because I pass them when I’m with my partner, and that’s fine. I mean, you know, if people assume that I’m straight in conversation, I’ll

correct them, but I think that if I'm just walking in public with him, I'm not gonna be like, "Hey, I'm bi, don't get the wrong idea." [chuckles] But then if I were with a girl, they would assume I'm a lesbian. I feel like if I were dating a girl, I would feel more offended if people assumed I was a lesbian because there's a stigma in the lesbian community where you're tainted if you've been with a guy.

Cindy upholds a heteronormative attitude because she is not offended when people think she is straight, yet gets upset when others assume she is a lesbian. This finding suggests that some respondents have internalized homophobia, or biphobia (Martino and Cumming-Potvin 2014). It exposes the deep rooted perspective that heterosexuality is "better than" any other sexual identity. Additionally, she refers to the stigma within the lesbian community for those who are not "gold stars" (lesbians who have never slept men). This stereotype insinuates that lesbians think someone is not "truly gay" or "gay enough" if she has slept with a man. In order to avoid this stigma, Cindy appears to utilize her straight-passing privilege.

These respondents benefit from heteronormative privilege because they are not targeted or harassed for being recognized as queer. Instead, their identities are erased and they pass as heteronormative. However, L, Steve and Cindy's queer identities are very important to them, so erasure, or (mis)recognition, is a negative consequence of being hetero-passing because that means they are not being truly seen (Pfeffer 2014).

While some respondents describe passing as part of negotiating their queer identity, others engaged in "covering." According to Kenji Yoshino (2007), "covering" refers to downplaying a marginalized identity to avoid stigmatization. Yoshino

distinguishes passing from covering. Passing is when one is able to get away with being perceived as “normative,” where covering refers to muted marginalized identities. Several participants alluded to covering their non-conforming identities in order to avoid conflict. For example, Cas, an 18-year-old White queer asexual identified person, explains that her gender presentation used to be a lot more masculine when she was younger. Cas said she was more “carefree” and did things that made her happy. At that time being happy meant having short hair and wearing “boy’s clothes” because she received messages about masculinity being equated with capability and strength as a child. Cas describes how she has opted to looking more feminine because she places more importance on others’ opinions now that she is older:

I think [looking more feminine] has to do with like people around me. I let their opinions affect me a lot more than I used to. When I was a kid, I think I would hear like a lot of things, and I would just take them at face value, as “that is an insult.” It was said with malicious intent and I wouldn’t really care that someone called me a slur, whereas now, I like got the vocabulary, I know that’s a slur, so when I hear someone call me a dyke, it’s like, “I’m gonna go wear a dress” because I won’t get called that anymore... I also don’t like the idea of making other people uncomfortable.

For Cas, conforming to stereotypical cisgender heterosexist femininity draws less attention to her questioning gender identity because she is “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987). Doing proper gender prevents Cas from being subjected to gendered

and sexualized slurs because her identity is read as “normative” (Westbrook and Schilt 2014).

In contrast to Cas, Banks, a 20-year-old Latinx queer cisgender bisexual male, had a difficult time covering his non-heterosexual identity from the peers in his middle and high school. Banks talked about how kids used to pick on him and call him gay before he was even aware of his bisexual identity. In lines with Pascoe (2005), Banks attributes the bullying to the feminine mannerisms he says that he “inherited” from the Latina womxn who raised him in his immediate family. However, he met a bisexual cisgender boy in junior high and only then did he start to question his non-heterosexual identity:

In 7th grade I made the mistake of coming out and saying that I was bi. But like actually, once I got into high school, I went back into the closet and like because that information transfers over. People asked me about it and I was like, “No I’m straight, I’m straight.”

Banks is now more careful about sharing his bisexual identity. For instance, he chooses not to share his sexual identity with womxn he is interested in dating. He said: “If there is a girl that I like, that I’m interested in, I don’t say [I’m bisexual] ‘cause like girls don’t really like bi guys, or queer guys.” He adds, “I think its super interesting how like if a girl doesn’t know you’re bi, she’s more willing to talk and get to know you, but once she finds out, it’s kinda like they don’t see you as a dating option anymore, they only see you as a friend.”

Banks especially conceals his bisexuality around his mom after she caught him talking on phone with a man, and on another occasion, found a man sleeping with him in

his bed. Banks has come out to his mother twice, but now avoids the topic because he had “horrible” experiences:

The second time I came out to my mom was because one of my guy friends, like who’s straight, he slept over at my house, and I have a twin bed and we both slept on the bed and my mom found out and so she like went crazy. She was like, “How could you sleep in the same bed with him? Blah blah blah.” She was very upset. And so like that kind of brought on a lot of issues in the house. I’d be like, “Mom I don’t wanna talk about this with you,” and she’d be like, “Imagine if your dad had seen you?” All this stuff. And I was like, “Mom there’s nothing wrong with just sleeping,” and she was like, “No but in the same bed? It’s a small bed Banks, blah blah blah.” Like at the end like I was just like, “Well I don’t wanna talk about this,” and she was like, “Talk about what? Tell me,” but like forceful. I didn’t wanna tell her and I tried to leave the house actually, and she took away my keys. I wanted to leave the situation like I really didn’t wanna have a conversation with her and was like, “I don’t wanna have this conversation with you, like at all” and she was like, “No we’re gonna talk,” and she took away my keys, and I sat in the couch across from her and eventually I was like, “Honestly mom, yeah.” She’s like, “Do you think you may like men?” and I was like, “Yeah I do Mom, I do. I’m not saying that I don’t like girls anymore, but I do like men. I’m sorry.” And she’s just like, she didn’t say anything. She was very serious and was like, “I think you need to like just look for someone that can

guide you in the right direction. I think that maybe you need to go talk to somebody that can put you on the right path.”

Banks mentions considering conversion therapy after his encounter with his mom, but sought out a therapist instead. However, Banks stopped visiting the therapist after they told him they could not help with conversion therapy. Banks’ case is extreme relative to the rest, but depicts the difficulties of coming out as queer to family members. However, others’ disapproval is not uncommon for people who identify as queer (Orne 2011; Meyers 2015; Connell 2015). Because people have strict ideas about appropriate racialized gender and sexual expression/behavior, queer-identified people of color can be left fearing physical, verbal and/or emotional violence.

Passing and Covering for Queer Folx of Color

Mainstream media, academic scholarship and non-profit initiatives have an immense influence on the way we contextualize (and sometimes generalize) people within the LGBT(QIA+) community. These mediums frequently portray gay men, lesbians and, most recently, transgender people by adopting many of the same characteristics that continuously prevail in normative narratives (i.e. White, middle-class, masculine), erasing the visibility of queer folx of color. Often times self-identifying as queer is not the only marginalized identity held by people of color; however, LGBTQIA+ issues are constantly portrayed and discussed through a White homonormative lens (Meyer 2015). Like heteronormativity, homonormativity address assimilation to dominant ideas about race, gender expression and class, oppressing all other marginalized identities. According to Connell (2015), homonormativity emphasizes similarities with the norms of heterosexuality including Whiteness, gender roles, marriage and

monogamy. However, to no surprise, countless folx of color in the LGBTQIA+ community do not qualify for the (taken for granted) privileges that are guaranteed to those who are homonormative; so, it is necessary to take an intersectional approach in order to give influence to the voices that are too often silenced.

As stated by Guess (2006: 654), “race” is informed by historical, social, cultural and political values. Regardless of scientific validity, “race” is a social fact in which whiteness plays a critical role in its social and political significance. Race is designed as a hierarchical structure where whiteness fills the space of racial superiority. The social significance placed on whiteness is important to point out because issues pertaining to gender and sexual non-conformity are addressed through a White lens. Therefore, not only does homonormativity reinforce ideas about heteronormativity, but it also reproduces the notion that White is better than non-White. Therefore, queer folx of color who challenge traditional notions of gender and sexual expectations experience layered and multifaceted forms of oppression.

Some respondents who identify as White, or who are White-passing, acknowledge their privilege and social position relative to others. When White participants were asked about other identities that were important to them, none mentioned their race. The silence White participants revealed demonstrates the ingrained privilege they benefit from (Meyer 2015). Perhaps racial identity is not as important as their queer identities because their racial embodiment is perceived as “normal,” so it is not a marginalized identity that affects them negatively. Conversely, it is an identity that provides privileges in their everyday lives. However, for E, being White-passing is a point of conflict

because their racial/ethnic identity is a daily physical reminder of the dominance of White privilege:

...Being mixed-indigenous and like white-passing ... is really important for me because like I am the biological proof of like colonization of like my ancestors. Like homeland and Hawaii and like how pale I am and like how far removed and everything. That's why it's really important to me because I know that – I always have to be aware of my own complacency in White supremacist institutions, and like benefiting from White privilege and stuff like that. And also like really feeling torn about like feeling pride in [my ethnicity and culture]. People like feeling that pride, and also that like deep grief, like a *deep grief*, so that's something that I'm always thinking about and carrying with me.

E struggles with the fact that they are White-passing and benefit from White privilege.

Steve first recognized their privilege as a White male-passing person after they started their medical transition about a year and a half ago. Steve also describes how their racial and gender identity is directly linked to their interracial relationship with their queer-identified cisgender Black girlfriend:

When we first started dating, it was a White girl and a Black girl dating each other... so there's interracial, and there was the lesbian aspect, and so it was a little interesting... When we first started dating, I wasn't very aware of the racial issues within the Black community... so when we would go out places, people would look at us and my first thought was, "They're looking at us because we're two girls," and her first thought was,

“They’re looking at us because we’re Black and White” so it was a very kind of eye-opening that there’s different ways to perceive that... Now that I’m male-passing – appearing White male with a Black female, I feel like it’ll seep into “more feels” because like there’s a lot of these, um, essentially like fetishes that are behind the idea of certain people of certain colors being with other people and like that ain’t right and that’s definitely not the reason we’re together or anything like that... When we go out, now I’m like, “People are staring at me because they know I’m trans*” and like she’s like, “Nah, they’re staring at us because I’m still Black,” and I’m just like, “You right, you right.” And so it’s been very interesting and having that White male privilege and really kind of trying to uplift her more as a Black womxn.

Steve appears to use their gender and racial privilege to uplift their Black girlfriend – a strategy that is argued to be problematic by intersectional feminists, in part because it reinforces the institutional and structural power of White masculinity (Meyer 2015). However, Steve is reflexive about social inequality and acknowledges the advantage and privilege that comes with being male-passing. When they first started their medical transition, Steve started exhibiting hypermasculinity. Steve’s girlfriend mentioned that Steve wasn’t acting like themselves anymore and immediately Steve realized that being transmasculine did not necessarily mean they needed to also engage in toxic masculinity. Instead, they use their male-passing privilege to try and uplift marginalized voices.

Experiences informed by folx of color added critical and rich descriptions because their racial/ethnic identities are essential to how they are perceived by others and how

they perceive themselves. Not only are their identities stigmatized for being queer, but they are also presumably confined to racial/ethnic, gender and sexual stereotypes by those outside, and sometimes even within, their racial/ethnic group (Meyer 2015; Bates 2010). For instance, many communities of color maintain very rigid ideas about binary gender scripts. Femininity is submissive and passive, while masculinity is assertive and dominant (Lucal 2008). For respondents of color, their racialized experiences added a layer of marginalization, which motivated them to negotiate expressions of their racial/ethnic, gender and sexual identities in different spaces. For instance, Traci says being Black is very important to their identity. They are active in Black Lives Matter initiatives and advocate for Black womxn, a social position that is among the most marginalized in America, especially because people perceive them as a Black cisgender lesbian:

Being Black is very important to me. Obviously there is a very long history full of negativity added on to being Black, and there is such a stigma and stereotype that you have to carry, but I like to think that I'm a part of promoting that "we are just as equal as everybody else is" like we just want to do the same things everybody else wants to do. I am a firm activist within Black Lives Matter and I strongly advocate for them... The lowest person on the totem pole in America is the Black womxn, and I mean, technically I still am a part of that demographic, everybody sees me as a part of that demographic, and that's why it's important to me that there is more awareness raised in America that racism is still alive and well.

To Traci, being queer is not only an embodiment (and attitude) of gender identity, but it is also racialized. Because Traci is Black and does not “pass” as a masculine gender very well, they experience racist misogyny in their daily life. For example, Traci described an instance where they got called a “White wannabe bitch” at their retail job. Traci shares how they always get misgendered at work, but their gender expression and presentation could be described as masculine. Traci said people automatically assume they are a lesbian. At the time of the interview, Traci wore an oversized T-shirt that referenced them as “Dad,” shorts that rest right above the knee, tube socks and skateboarding shoes. The top part of their head was in dreadlocks to about shoulder length and the rest of their head was shaved. Their small stature may also have been the reason they get misgendered. Nevertheless, they navigate through the world with others perceiving them as a Black lesbian.

Conversely, Ku was brought up in a household that was mostly influenced by Hawaiian and Japanese culture, where various expressions of gender and sexuality are encouraged, though binary systems are still considered the norm:

I don’t think that I could ever like not take into account my ethnicity when it comes to sexuality and gender because like growing up, I was raised in a very particular way. And why was I raised that way? Because I’m from a particular culture, so you know, it’s okay to be gay and it’s okay to like not conform to gender norms, and I hoped it was okay to truly be who I am, which is trans* and gay... my ethnicity’s really important to me because it ties into just how I carry myself, how I see myself, you know,

how I am. I can't dissociate myself from my ethnicity so it's really important to me.

Ku's culture and upbringing play a part in the way he perceives and conceptualizes his identity. His mother refuses to acknowledge his gender identity/pronouns and has stopped all form of communication with him. Ku's mother may not be as accepting because heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality still prevail (Bates 2010; Ingrey 2013).

Ku goes on to describe an instance where he experienced discrimination in a "machismo" space. Ku attended a "Mexican wedding" and tried to cover his queer identity because he knew it would be "cis-het," (cisgender and heterosexual), however the people in attendance were still able to pick up on his queerness. He said, "I went to a very traditional Mexican wedding and I tried to tone it down a little bit because it's a wedding and I wanted to dress up nice and not like, I suppose, excited and extravagant or whatever, but, you know, I was still pointed at and called 'fag.'" This demonstrates machismo culture that is present in Latinx spaces. In Mexican culture, men (or the masculine gender) are expected to conform to machismo which is macho and heterosexual (Meyer 2015). In our interview, Ku confesses that he will never pass as straight.

E, Steve's girlfriend, Traci and Ku's lived experiences are examples of their everyday reality. E's physical body is symbolic of colonization and the destruction that was sprung upon Native Hawaiians. Steve's girlfriend went from being in an interracial lesbian relationship to a straight-passing one. She experienced the shift in expected gender scripts, thus, power dynamic, after her partner started medically transitioning.

Traci is regularly identified as a Black lesbian and is not seen as the queer trans* person they are, and Ku is immediately spotted as gay or trans*, even when he is trying to cover his queerness. E, Steve's girlfriend, Traci and Ku experience the world as queer folx of color, which adds another dimension to their "queerness" because being anything other than White is not the "norm." In a White dominated world, being a person of color literally adds another layer of queer to their racial/ethnic identities, further marginalizing them.

Fear and Violence: Negotiating Identities in Different Spaces

Violence against queer people (of color) is considerably more complex than simply homophobia (Meyer 2015: 143). Counter to the dominant homophobic narrative, the fabric of violence places emphasis on racism, sexism, non-traditional gender expression, and sexual orientation. Also contrary to popular belief, violence against queer people is rarely stranger-based, though does occur. G, for example, experiences a lot of stranger-based anxiety and says it is safer to sometimes pretend they are "just a weird person instead of a non-binary person," because they are very fearful of physical danger:

There are people who don't believe [being queer] is okay and they think that there are a lot of painful uncomfortable ways to solve it like corrective rape... I mean being a femme presenting human in general is like, it's dangerous. I was just talking about how I don't go to the park by my house after dark, like I've gone once, with a guy. So I don't feel safe, and then to add, you know, it's very obvious, I stand out and attract attention. Maybe it's just my anxiety that I think I'm constantly in danger or something.

This illustrates how regardless of a queer identity, being sexed female puts femme presenting people at a higher risk of danger (i.e. corrective rape, which is rape with the intention of turning someone heterosexual). G is strategic and negotiates their identity in different spaces, even if that means avoiding certain places at certain times:

Certain scenarios have certain underling sense of danger, like maybe at a bar or nightclub, or I mean like a truck stop in the middle of nowhere. Like maybe I don't wanna look super gay. Like when I went to Mexico with a friend, like this platonic life partner kind of person, like we hold hands. We're very affectionate and we didn't feel comfortable holding hands when we went to [Mexican border town], but when we crossed the bridge [back to the United States], we were back to holding hands. It's just scenarios like that. I'm kind of a chicken shit honestly so I fear physical danger very much, but because I've experienced it a lot of it in my life, but one of the reasons why I don't change my name legally right now is because then that would mean that I would have to leave my female gender marker and a traditionally masculine name. They don't have non-binary legal identification at this time and state, it is in Oregon, and I don't want to change my ID to male because I'm not a male - it's just safer for this right now - I can pass if I need to... I wanna be able to pull out my ID and get the fuck out of the country if I need to.

For G, context is important because being openly "gay" is more dangerous in Mexico than in the United States, so they keep from engaging in same-sex affection on the Mexican side of the border, then revert back after crossing over to the U.S. Additionally,

this quote demonstrates that G is not only fearful of stranger-based violence, but also fears institutional protections from the state and federal government because LGBT laws are set up to benefit White homonormative individuals (Meyer 2015).

Several respondents experienced harassment and violence. E describes instances where they were harassed by strangers for being visibly queer:

Recently, I was like harassed online. And like you know, like I've been shouted at at protests and like booed and cat called and followed... I remember my family went to this like small town kind of like North of [Central Texas] and we like went to this waffle house, and everyone in this damn waffle house was just staring at me. Um, just kinda being really fuckin' suspicious. Or like when, my ex girlfriend and I, we went to [small town in Texas] one time, and people were crossing the street, like to the opposite side of the street, they were like staring at us, they were covering their kids' eyes. Like we went out to this nice fancy restaurant and like the table right next to us was like carrying loud conversation about us right next to them and stuff. And like, so yeah, you get treated differently. Like that marginalization and hatred is very real.

Here E describes the discrimination they experience from strangers regularly. As mentioned earlier, E identifies as a fat person, is femme presenting, has a shaved head, and visible body hair. While the violence E experiences is not physical in nature, it is overt enough that E internalizes the "hatred."

Accounts like the ones mentioned above are painful. However, the most painful offenses targeted at queer-identified individuals are often committed by those who are

within family and friend groups because as Ku mentions, “All anyone wants is to be accepted, especially by those who are close to you.” QR fears losing college funding which is paid for by their grandmother. QR experiences economic and emotional abuse because they are at risk for losing one of their most valuable assets, and says, “I don’t think a visits gone by where [my grandmother] doesn’t tell me that fags go to hell and all that shit. It’s frustrating.” QR said:

I came out to my grandparents through a letter and they kept – they’re paying for quite a bit of my college and they threatened to cut my funding completely so that was a bit stressful... My grandmother’s a very strong, very conservative Baptist womxn. I mean she’s on her fourth husband and he’s a Baptist preacher and so she’s not comfortable with me being queer and she – that’s not going to ever change, so [my dad] just wants to try to keep me safe. He doesn’t want me to end up out of work and out of school because my grandmother basically pays for my education.

QR’s “very conservative” grandmother has economic and heterosexist power over them. QR is told to downplay their queerness when they are around their grandmother so the interaction is less strenuous for everyone; otherwise, QR is very openly queer. This example emphasizes the magnitude of social consequences faced for identifying as queer.

Additionally, Cas experienced emotional abuse in her romantic relationship with her former boyfriend from high school after she told him she was also interested in relationships with womxn:

My first boyfriend was a really rough relationship. It started okay and then kind of changed to be abusive... I think part of that had to do with figuring

out my sexual identity because I did go to him and say, “Hey, I think I like girls,” and he took that as like an invitation to kind of be like, “Oh well there’s this other girl in our class - like if you guys could, you know, hook me up, like that would be great,” and I didn’t like that, I felt really weird about that. And then figuring out I was asexual and telling him like, “You keep asking me for sex or sexual favors and I don’t feel that way, so I’m literally just doing this for you and you’re constantly pushing out of my comfort zone.” So that wasn’t good.

Cas then goes into more detail about the types of things he would ask her to do.

He said, “I know for a fact that [girl in our class] likes you and so if you guys could just like talk dirty to each other in like a group message [with me], that would be great. I would love that. That would, you know, make me really happy,” and it was weird cause I was like, “I don’t wanna do that.” But he would make it a point that, “If you don’t do it, I’m gonna be very upset. You have to do this to make me happy,” and I was like, “I do?”

Cas’ ex-boyfriend fetishized her non-het-romantic identity, which is not uncommon for queer people because their gender, romantic, and sexual identities are not the norm (Shapiro 2007; Rupp et. al 2014). Cas’ former boyfriend tried to control her sexuality, reinforcing the idea that men are entitled to feminine bodies (Rupp et al. 2014).

G, E, QR and Cas express the anxiety, fear and violence they face at the macro and micro levels. These participants encountered anti-queer violence among strangers, within their families, and romantic relationships. Their stories support the notion that

violence manifests in different ways in difference spaces; therefore, encouraging queer-identified people to negotiate and protect their identities from harm.

Queering Language: Negotiating Pronouns and Language

Language shapes the way we understand and experience the world. However, a lack of inclusive language creates a lack of [ac]knowledge[ment] of variant and fluid identities, erasing queer and non-binary identified people and making them physically and emotionally vulnerable. Language makes queer-identified people of color vulnerable because words shape our understandings of social life – race, gender roles and sexual scripts being no exception. Gender and sexual expectations are typically shared by adopting a dominant dichotomous narrative, often racially coded, placing non-normative identities at a higher risk for danger and violence (Meyer 2015). Therefore, individuals who do not ascribe to racial and traditional presentations of their gender and sexual identity are more vulnerable to verbal and physical violence because their identities challenge and destabilize social systems that are central to how we navigate through the world – rendering them as “other” (Bates 2010; Meyer 2015). Shifting everyday language to be affirming and inclusive could be beneficial because it would change the way we conceptualize identity politics (Butler 2004; Richardson 2007). Inclusive language would help to destabilize existing identity categories, ideally, resulting in heightened awareness and tolerance toward non-binary people (of color).

Language is a powerful tool because it is *the* weapon that constructs our understanding of the world around us, which affirms and legitimizes, but also negates and invalidates identities. Language is inherently powerful because it is necessary in constructing social structures, while at the same time, is a necessary weapon needed to

deconstruct and destabilize dominant dividing social hierarchies (Butler 1990; Better 2014; Pfeffer 2014). Therefore, affirming and inclusive language is needed to help with the knowledge, understanding and visibility of queer people (of color); unfortunately, the majority of people are not there yet, so self-identified queer people are subjected to their identities being invalidated. For instance, QR confided in a close cousin about their gender identity but their identity was instantly rejected:

I told a cousin I was close to [about my gender identity] but he just brushed it off and was like, “Oh you’re always gonna be who I think you’re gonna be. You’re not gonna be anything else.” He was basically the most open of my family so that kinda stung, and it’s like frustrating so I kept off Facebook for a long time because of it. I shut down my Facebook around the 9th grade, just due to bullying issues from the school, so I tried to stay off of it because I didn’t want anyone to really know I was queer in my extended family.

In this scenario, QR’s cousin not only delegitimizes their identity, but he aggressively erases their queerness even though he is the most open-minded in their family. Their cousins’ negative reaction gave QR a taste (on the better end) of what could happen if they decide to come out to their family. So in order to avoid any more negative situations, QR covers their identity when they are with family, especially because their grandmother has the power to take away their college education. QR’s cousin demonstrates a lack of knowledge surrounding queer issues, probably because gendered language is dichotomous. He then determines QR’s gender as female and refuses to budge, which in effect reinforces the discursive power of language and its ability to

(in)validate and erase identities that are not the norm (Westbrook and Schilt 2014).

Jordan, a 19-year-old White pansexual queer non-binary identified person, supports this notion by stating, “I think a lot of [the problem with understanding non-conforming genders] is people just aren’t aware that like that’s even a possibility. And so people wanna see you how they wanna see you.” Banks experienced the same invalidation with his mother:

[My mom told me] “I would know if you were gay. I would’ve known if you were anything, but you’re not. I remember all the girls you had crushes on in elementary and the letters that you would write to them and the gifts you would make for them, like you’re not, you can’t be. If you were and I knew like from the very beginning, then I would say ‘okay fine,’ you know? Like fine but you’re not.”

Banks’ mother invalidates his sexual identity and tries to justify her point by mentioning the crushes he had on different girls at a very young age. She suggests that she “would have known” if he was not heterosexual, indicating he does fit the “gay” stereotype kids growing up perceived him to be (Martin 2009). As mentioned in previous sections, queer is fluid and unique to each individual, including their presentation (Richardson 2007; Better 2014). However, Banks’ mother believes he is heterosexual because he does not ascribe to queer stereotypes, rendering his bisexuality invisible.

LGBTQIA+ invisibility is problematic because it eliminates the possibility that cisgender and heterosexual passing people can be queer (Pfeffer 2014). Therefore, an expanded vocabulary is needed because cisgender heterosexual passing people *do* identify as queer so inclusive everyday language would help prompt people to not be so

quick to assume (Richardson 2007). While they may still have some preconceived notion about one's identity, inclusive language would help expand consciousness and could aid others to be mindful about fluid and complex identities (Westbrook and Schilt 2014). Elaborate language could also change the way people conceptualize and understand gender and sexuality because they would have the vocabulary to recognize non-conforming identities as (in)visible and legitimate. An example of the visibility and legitimization of non-binary identities would be through the use of preferred, therefore proper, name and pronouns.

It is important to non-binary and trans* respondents that their chosen name and correct pronouns be used, especially by their friends and family, because it validates their gender identities. Chosen names and pronouns are important because they are markers that represent queer identities, beyond the boundaries of their bodies. Names are one of the first pieces of information given to others upon first meeting them, so for some non-binary and trans* participants, changing their name was important because it hints at their gender identity. However, friends and families of some participants refuse to acknowledge their correct pronouns and chosen name because it is difficult for them to understand. When the people close to my respondents do not use the right name or pronouns, it invalidates the perceived worthiness of their identities and inflicts a lot of emotional pain on participants. In more extreme cases, respondents completely lost relationships with people in their families because they could not tolerate the disrespect they endured. Steve explains how their older sister's silence in regard to their gender is hurtful:

[My older sister] won't refer to me by any name at all. Both of us were supposed to go home for Christmas and what she wanted to do was write – instead of writing my name on my Christmas present, she was gonna put a symbol so that I would know that it was mine. Instead of referring to me by any name or pronouns she was just going to look at me and I was supposed to know that she was addressing me. And so I felt like that was very rude because it just wasn't giving me the basic decency of recognizing me as a person essentially, so for that Christmas I did not go home. Since then she's continued not referring to me by name, pronouns, anything like that.

Steve's sister fails to acknowledge Steve's pronouns and gender identity. Instead, she dehumanizes Steve by reducing their identity to a nameless and genderless symbol. She stigmatizes and passive aggressively asserts her power onto Steve because they do not adhere to what she believes to be "true" gender. Her refusal to acknowledge Steve distinctly demonstrates her attempt to "other" them and exposes her deep-rooted belief in dichotomous and proper gender and sexual identity categories (Lucal 2008).

Similarly, Ku was very frustrated with his mother after she refused to recognize his identity and ceased all communication with her:

[My mom] refuses to call me the right name and has a problem using the correct pronouns and so it's been like two years, so there's really no reconciling with her because I'm not going to put myself through that, and you know, if I'm not gonna be respected I don't wanna have to have a relationship with you... I was really frustrated and sad at first because like

all I wanted – all anyone wants is to be accepted, especially by those who are close to you, and so it helped me realize that maybe my mom's not a great person, so maybe she doesn't deserve me in her life.

For Ku, his self-worth is more important to him than having a relationship with his mother. Ku explains having gone through a lot of physical and emotional pain because others have tried to delegitimize his identity. "People try and just disregard you, or like make your identity unreal to them because it's 'fake' or whatever to them." So as a safety measure, he does not keep people in his life that are not going to respect him. Ku expresses pain in losing relationships with people who were close to him, but notes it "was definitely worth it."

Similar to Ku, Jordan chooses not to associate with people who are judgmental. However, in contrast to Ku, Jordan's family is "accepting" and has changed the way they perceive their gender identity, though it has been difficult for their parents to truly understand:

[My parents are] very accepting of [my queer identity], they're just very confused. Especially with the gender part of it. Like I identify as non-binary so I think that really confuses my mom especially... She's like, "I wanna accept you and love you for who you are." She's like, "Can I still call you my little girl?" and I'm like, "No cause I'm not your little girl." ... My sister is very respectful about it. She uses the right pronouns and tells all her friends. She's like really open to all of that and is into understanding that too so it's awesome. And my dad is also kinda the same. He doesn't really use they/them pronouns with me but he calls me a

person instead of a girl and kind of shifts how he thinks of me which is really interesting cause he didn't grow up in a family that would've accepted that at all.

The difference in Jordan's response from Steve and Ku's is apparent in the dialogue, and tone of their voice. Jordan's family is accepting and respectful even though they still have learning to do. Their willingness to learn and adapt their language has better informed their understanding which has been "awesome" for Jordan to experience because their family acknowledges their self-identified queerness. Instead of pretending Jordan's queerness doesn't exist, they have embraced it and are working to better understand their non-binary identities.

The respondents described their identities as existing authentically – they stated they simply "just want to exist." However, if others are to truly understand and see them for who they are, an expanded vocabulary is necessary (Valocchi 2005). Until then, participants are resilient even when others made them feel like it is more difficult to understand their queer identities than it is for self-identified queer people to live with marginalized identities. In particular, Alix says,

[My family] do[es] not [use my preferred pronouns] and they like don't use, like, my new name either, 'cause I changed my name, and I'll tell them, "This is my new name," and they just kinda make excuses for it like they'll be like, "This is so hard for us," and I'll be like, "Okay imagine how hard it is for me," like you know?

Occasions like this are not new for queer and trans* people. However, my respondents continue to advocate and work toward visibility in hope of raising awareness in cisgender

heterosexual populations. Increasing visibility via body modifications and/or language is crucial because it changes the way we understand and conceptualize gender and sexuality (Shapiro 2007; Westbrook and Schilt 2014).

Queer as Resistance and Empowerment

Participants in my research commented on their queerness as “not intentional,” – it “just is.” For my respondents, being queer is “just existing,” which just so happens to challenge racial, gender and sexual norms and expectations. However, they are vulnerable to fear and violence because their embodiments and identities are non-conforming. According to Brené Brown (2012), vulnerability is underpinned by shame and fear, however, vulnerability is also necessary to feel a sense of love and belonging. What this means is people have to be willing to be vulnerable and allow themselves to truly be seen if consciousness is to be expanded. The downfall of vulnerability is being susceptible to unwanted violence, but embodying and embracing their authentic selves allows them to uplift themselves and live on their own terms. Living your truth is inherently political because it challenges social structures and stereotypes, and serves as a tool to uplift and empower, yielding endless possibilities.

Felix indicates realizing the freedom of choice and flexibility opened her up to be more comfortable and confident with herself wherever she is because she is not affected by people’s opinions. Instead, she is most comfortable when people question her gender and sexual identities because it shows that she challenges the status quo:

I think being your authentic self is that you’re doing what makes you happy, what makes you feel comfortable, and that you’re able to express that wherever you are, regardless of the environment you’re in... We

wouldn't even know what a self is unless we had others to have as a contrast... Who we are is defined by who we're not... There's so many different [social] influences, they all combine in unique ways for each person. And so, you expressing whatever that unique combination of influences are, that's your authentic self.

Felix goes on to mention that her authenticity is by definition political because she is making a statement, especially when it comes to gender identity because she "stands out." However, Felix allows herself to be vulnerable because she exists on her own terms and is more concerned about doing and being what makes her happiest. Even though people misgender Felix daily because she passes as male, she is resilient because she states that it does not change her perception of herself. She understands the gender binary and acknowledges that is how people see her in their reality, however, she does not let their opinions alter her own reality.

According to G, "I express my queerness by just being, existing." Likewise, Mike says, "I would rather just exist in whatever it is I believe that my identity is." For G, self-identifying as queer is also conscious and political. They have politicized their existence and take themselves very seriously. I asked G to elaborate and they said,

Your ability to wake up everyday and be happy and productive and healthy is an act of resistance. I talk about paths, I talk about molds and expectations, I feel like it's so much bigger than what was allowed to me initially and so that was what I mean by politicizing my existence... I am part of a movement about defiance, sort of like authentic humanity, I guess- and it's not just trans*, it's not just queer, it's a radical

inclusiveness. It's intentional communities... [Being queer] leads back to authentic self-expression. It means to live proudly, honorably and authentically regardless of people's expectations or fears of being judged or hurt. I'm still working on the fear of being hurt, but like that's what it means to me and like I did wanna mention that in a lot of different cultures and time periods, queer people were a little bit special and I think that there is a spiritual heritage of reclamation of that holiness of like authentic living that we need to get back into and I think it is very important for overcoming that sort of internalized transphobia and like self loathing.

For G, being queer is an act of resistance in order to live authentically and proud without paying regard to what others may think. G also mentions how perceptions of queer people are a lot different depending on social context. In some contexts, queerness is celebrated because they embody and live their truth, whereas in others, they face stigma and social consequence for not conforming to societal expectations (Shapiro 2007). Nevertheless, vulnerability is present because being authentic and true to oneself requires resilience, even when all odds are against you. G states resilience "is a means of survival in a lot of ways and it is a means of self-affirmation and empowerment." For G, resisting and resilience is the spirit of queerness.

Similarly, Alix says, "queer is invincible." When I asked them to elaborate, they said,

My friend made a really big banner and it says, "Queer is invincible," and I've been thinking about it for the past couple of days because it like inspires me. Like, honestly, I think that like together we are invincible

because we aren't ashamed of being who we are. The problem is straight people who are like grossed out and like when we're together we know who we are, and y'all can accept it or y'all can screw off.

Cisgender heterosexual individuals play a significant role in constructing queerness because gender/sexual queerness is anything that is non-heteronormative. Here, "queer is invincible" suggests that queer is unapologetically authentic and has the power overcome heteronormativity. For Alix, the union and bond of self-identified queer people is unbreakable because queerness will always exist. It is up to cisgender and heterosexual people to try and gain a better understanding of variant identities because people who self-identify as queer are resistant and resilient.

Additionally, a deeper understanding of gender and sexuality empowers and gives voice to marginalized groups that are commonly silenced. Empowerment is critical for marginalized groups because it raises consciousness and places the oppressed in a position that is a little more evened out than before (Butler 2004). For example, Traci says,

Embodying queerness to me is very empowering because it's like, I feel outside normal gender roles and gender identities, and that's not to say that I feel *special* but I feel empowered that I could be both and neither at the same time, if that makes any sense. It's just like a cool feeling.

For Traci, having options outside the gender binary is empowering because they have autonomy over their identity (Sasnett 2015). They do not *have* to categorize their gender or sexual identity in any way other than what fits them. Although others may assume

their gender or sexuality, they ultimately have the power to identify as they please. Ku mentions,

I just think queerness is really cool and I'm glad that I can be a part of it. I think it's really powerful, especially for people who fit into queer in more than one way... You can be more than one of the acronyms, or you can be none of them at all, and still somehow fit into, you know, the LGBTQIA community under the label "queer" and I think it's very empowering and I'm very happy to live in a time where we have the words, where we have the resources to educate yourself on that.

Being queer is empowering because it is an umbrella term that is inclusive and all encompassing (Butler 1990). Ku makes an interesting point and mentions that being queer self-identified is more complex than identifying with one identity category. Rather, being queer is multifaceted. One can identify with more than one of the letters in the LGBTQIA+ acronym, or none, and be queer. Similarly, Steve says,

As someone who advocates for the trans* and non-binary community, one of the biggest things about queer and all of its aspects is that it's incredibly ambiguous. So, it really depends on the person themselves, it depends on how you're feeling that day, how you're feeling that year, it's open to so many interpretations, that it can fit for anyone. And so it's like my biggest draw to it is that even if my identity shifts, I can still be queer. That I can still belong to this identity.

Steve implies being queer is shape shifting, accommodating and ambiguous. Because queerness is so inclusive, it changes and manifests in different forms as the person's

identity shifts. For example, prior to identifying as transmasculine, Steve identified as a cisgender “tomboy” lesbian. Since their gender identity has shifted, so has their sexual identity. However, Steve still acknowledges their queerness in both scenarios which is inspiring and empowering.

When asked what their ideal expressions of queer would be, participants responses were split pretty evenly. They either communicated wanting to be more vocal and/or flamboyant about their identities, for example, via body modification, or they felt their queer expressions were already ideal. For example, if L was not in a relationship with her cisgender White boyfriend, she would be more vocal about being bisexual. However, their relationship is very serious so she does not feel the need to let everyone know of her bisexuality:

Depending on if I was single or in this relationship, ideally, I would tell people that I was bi, or that I like boys and girls and it wouldn't get this [high pitched], “Ooohhhh okay” kinda reaction. I wish it was just like, “Oh yeah my hair is red,” “Oh yeah cool! Okay” like, you know? I guess I would just want people to hear it and let it roll off their shoulders, be blunt. I prefer being blunt about that kind of stuff and like not beat around the bush. And obviously, acceptance from the people I tell about it. And whatever partner I'm with, I would want them to acknowledge it, not be intimidated by it, accept it, understand it, like be able to talk about it casually and keep up, and not have a hiccup in the conversation, which I'm lucky because I have that now. But yeah, if I was single, yeah, I would

just mention it as I go. I want to do a massive coming out on Facebook so bad, in an ideal world.

In an ideal world, L would be more vocal and public about her bisexuality. So public in fact that ideally she would want to come out on Facebook. Being more vocal would help with bi-visibility as well as demonstrate the fluidity that is encompassed among queer identities.

For Axel, getting top surgery might be ideal for them because they experience quite a bit of body dysphoria. However, they are not one-hundred percent sure that is what they want, so for now, the binder is a good solution:

I have those transgender thoughts and it's like – [top surgery] would be ideal in an ideal world, but this is not an ideal world for me and that's why it doesn't seem – but like I guess like if there were no limits then it would be that, that would probably be it but money - and it's more than just money honestly. Like that's a commitment and it's like am I acting on feelings or do I really just know this? Like have I felt this the entire time?

If there were no limits to their queer expression, money being no exception, Axel would explore top surgery. However, they mention that this world is not ideal, so it may never happen. Similarly, Felix would want to get a breast augmentation in an ideal world to see if it felt right. Like Axel, that is not ideal in the “real world” because it is a big commitment. Other than wanting “tits,” Felix feels like her queer identities *are* ideal because they exist on her own terms:

There's nothing that I wish I could do that I'm not doing currently. I mean if I could snap my fingers and be female overnight, I would definitely do

it, but part of it would just be to see how I felt, to see if I was more comfortable that way, so like making a permanent change would be harder for me to do, but it would be nice if that wasn't necessary. I take that back – I'd love to have tits [laughs] so there's one thing I wouldn't mind doing [continues laughing].

Having breasts would make Felix's identity even more "ideal" because the materialization of her body would reflect a feminine non-heterosexist identity. Butler (2004: 76) acknowledges the complexities and contradictions trans* (and non-binary) people face when they opt into "elective" or "gender affirming" surgery to achieve one's need and/or desire to surgically transform signs of gender. Hierarchies of gender intervention illustrate contradictions inherent in the material notion of sex. It can be argued that choosing to not go through with surgery could be intrinsically "more queer" because their embodiment would counter their expected gender identities and presentation, rather than conform to the binary.

In contrast, some respondents suggested they already live their ideal queerness. For them, ideal expressions of their queer identities is a reality, however, it's the context within which people understand the message that is problematic. For example, Mike mentions that more people would know he's not exclusively heterosexual if others were accepting:

People would know about [my sexuality] if everybody was perfectly accepting but I don't think that I would personally feel different about myself and the importance that I'd attach to my sexual identity. I'm not saying that it's not important to me, but it's not something that I stress

over, it's not a point of contention for me. I don't have an internal issue or an internal conflict about how I feel about having sex with particular people so in an ideal world I would feel the same way. I mean for me right now, this is ideal, you know? I think yeah it would be different in the sense that maybe more people would know about it and I might have some validation that way, more people knowing and being accepting about it, but that validation isn't the kicker for me. Like I don't need it, it would be nice to have it but its not something that I feel that I need.

Mike states that the benefits of coming out to everyone does not outweigh passing as heterosexual. He does not want others perceptions of him to change because he experiences privilege from passing. Similar to E, Mike's identity expression is ideal; however, it's others perceptions of gender and sexuality that needs to change. E states,

I kinda feel like I've found my ideal 'cause I just feel like I'm mostly myself and like I feel like conveying queerness has a lot more to do who's receiving the message versus who's sending the message and so I think like ideally, right? Society would stop assuming sexual orientation for people and then it would be ideal because then people wouldn't be like making wrong assumptions.

Mike and E allude that deconstructing and destabilizing White binary heteronormative structures is necessary because the majority of people understand gender and sexuality as dichotomous and stagnant (Lucal 2008). When there is a lack of awareness and understanding of the variation within gender and sexuality, queer identities are stigmatized. However, if inclusive language is adopted, people like Mike and E would be

able to be more open about self-identifying as queer which would aid others to stop assuming people's identities, helping with legitimacy and visibility of non-binary identities. Ideally, people would not assume and would put more effort into respecting each other's identities. However, because we don't live in an ideal society or world, queer people (of color) have to keep striving to make their voices heard and their bodies/identities visible. As a society, we need to listen to and share queer voices because they are authentic, vulnerable, resilient, empowering and inspiring.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of my research was to examine the embodiments and expressions of self-identified queer people [of color] to explore the relationship, if any, between queer self-expression and coming out non-verbally – also known as strategic outness (Orne 2011). Self-identifying as queer is fluid, complex and multifaceted, so queerness is embodied and expressed differently from individual to individual. Additionally, queerness possesses a fluidity that is malleable within one's own identity. According to my research, some self-identified queer people use their bodies as platforms of expression which lets others know of their non-cisgender and/or non-heterosexual identities. Embodiments and expressions of queer and non-binary identities are critical because they serve as a tool for negotiating and navigating through different spaces. In a sense, bodies are a means of survival because they send messages to others about their racial, gender and sexual identities.

Many respondents reluctantly identified as “normal” gender and/or sexual category before they had knowledge of variant identities. However, after adopting an expanded understanding and implemented inclusive language, they were able to use binary gender and/or sexual categories to reference what they are not. While the goal of queer is to destabilize dominant gender and sexual identity categories, participants in my study use those “normal” categories to make sense of their identities.

Contrary to popular belief, queer bodies are not always androgynous. Queer and non-binary bodies come in all shapes, sizes and expressions, and exist on a spectrum of infinite possibilities that are often unidentifiable. For example, some respondents in my research pass as cisgender and heteronormative which is double-edged because it renders

their queer and non-binary identities invisible while simultaneously granting them heteronormative privilege. Further, some respondents covered their identities as a compromise to avoid conflict which is also harmful because they fear physical, verbal and/or emotional violence and abuse so they negotiate different identities in different spaces. Participants in my research experienced violence and abuse from strangers, family and romantic partners.

According to Meyers (2015), self-identified queer folx of color experience an added layer of marginalization, and are targeted more harshly, because their embodied identities are also racially/ethnically oppressed. Though interestingly, most White participants in my research acknowledged their racial privilege and in some instances used their privilege to try and uplift others. I find this especially compelling because White participants use their racial status to try and uplift others, when in fact they are (well-meaningly) engaging in the same oppressive behavior they are trying to challenge by speaking for queer-identified folx of color. Homonormativity, which is characterized by White, heterosexist, cisgender, and middle-class, prevails and the voices of queer-identified folx of color are missing from the dominant LGBTQIA+ discourse, maintaining White dominance and oppressing all other marginalized identities. This is dangerous because White homonormativity protects a very narrow group of LGBTQIA+ people and excludes the stories of many folx of color. Everyone has an authentic voice; however, we risk critical misunderstanding if we only hear a single story. Therefore, sharing more self-identified queer voices of color is necessary to deconstruct layered systems of oppression queer folx of color experience and negotiate daily.

While the body can be closely tied to queer identities, respondents expressed how their queerness transcended their embodiments. Rather, queerness is expressed in their attitudes, art, advocacy and language. Language is imperative, and *the most* compelling finding, to this paradigm because words shape the ways in which we understand the world around us; therefore, shaping the way we presume, understand and perceive others racial, gender and sexual identities. People rely on dichotomous racial, gendered and sexualized language to communicate their identities as well as others. Acknowledging that language is power as structure, but also as structuring, demonstrates the power inclusive language has in affirming and legitimizing non-binary identities. Yet, language also has the same power to (in)validate queer identities, rendering them (in)visible. For example, participants state the importance placed on using chosen names and [preferred] pronouns for trans* and non-binary identified people because it legitimizes their gender and sexual identities.

Further, queer self-identified people in my research state they “just exist.” They exist and live life as their authentic selves which makes them vulnerable and resilient while serving as a tool for empowerment because they embody and express their identities on their own terms. According to respondents, being authentic and queer [folk of color] is inherently political (though not intentional) because their existence resists dominant [White] heteronormative social structures. Being authentic and queer-identified is also empowering because queerness is inclusive and all-encompassing. One can still proclaim a queer identity even when their own identities shift.

I asked my respondents what their ideal expressions of their queerness would be if they weren’t judged by others, and the response was being more open and vocal about

their queer identities. The ways in which they would express their queerness varied, for some, their expressions were already ideal, however, they would want to be more comfortable and confident sharing that part of themselves with others. Nonetheless, society is not ideal so queer voices [of color] have to keep advocating for themselves by making them visible.

The goal of this study was to explore how queer self-identified individuals “do queer.” However, what I came to find was that it is not up to queer-identified people to prove their queerness. Instead, it is up to cisgender and heterosexual people (but really, everyone for that matter) to not make assumptions about anyone’s identity because someone can *be* queer without expressing any stereotypical queer markers. One can *be* queer without actually *doing* queer. After all, a queer identity is fluid, unique to each individual, transcends the body and is internalized. Policing queer gender and sexual identities to embody and perform [proper] queerness oppresses their identities and emphasizes difference (Lucal 2008; Pascoe 2005).

Although my study is among the first of its kind in sociology, it is important to mention the limitations of my research. My sample size of 15 does not invalidate my participant’s experiences, though the findings cannot be generalized to all queer and non-binary individuals, in part because my research was not very regionally or racially/ethnically diverse. While about half of my respondents had some variation of racial/ethnic minority status, many participants still identified as White. Furthermore, the experiences of my 15 respondents could reflect a different reality than for those who live in more progressive states.

My research contributes to the sociology of gender and sexuality because it is one of the first studies to examine non-binary and queer-identified genders and sexualities empirically and theoretically, and explores how self-identified queer people negotiate their identities in different spaces and how they are expressed in different ways. Additionally, my study adds to sociological scholarship because my analytical approach was intersectional, whereas most studies are predominately focused on the White middle-class experience. Therefore, my research helps pave the way for future research that will focus on non-binary and queer identities of color.

Queer-identified and non-binary [people of color] are one of the most stigmatized groups outside and within the LGBTQIA+ community because their identities and expressions do not conform to dominant ideas of [proper] gender and sexuality. Therefore, I want to reiterate the importance and emphasis that needs to be placed on inclusive language because it has direct influence on the (de)construction of identity politics. All the participants in my research want is to exist in their truth, be acknowledged and be treated with respect. In order to achieve this, a better understanding of fluid gender and sexual identities is necessary, along with visibility through storytelling and activism. So, what does all this mean? What does it mean to *be* and *do* queer? I would answer those questions by stating that being and doing queer is simply existing authentically.

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX I: DEMOGRAPHICS

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Identities</u>	<u>Pronouns</u>
Traci	23	Black	Queer, Trans*	They/them/their; He/him/his
Alix	20	Latinx and White	Transmasculine, Gender Fluid, Bi-, Pansexual	They/them/their
Axel	22	Latinx	Non-Binary, Gay	Anything goes
G	26	Latinx and White	Queer, Non-Binary, Pansexual, Poly	They/them/their
Mike	23	Latinx and White	Cisgender male, Bisexual	He/him/his
E	27	Asian Pacific and White	Demigender, Queer, Polysexual	They/them/their
Steve	23	White	Non-Binary, Transmasculine	They/them/their; He/him/his
Ku	24	Asian Pacific, Latinx and White	Non-Binary Male, Gay, Asexual	He/him/his
Jordan	19	White	Queer, Non-Binary, Pansexual	They/them/their
Banks	20	Latinx	Cisgender male, Bisexual, Queer	He/him/his
QR	20	White	Queer	They/them/their; He/him/his
Cas	18	White	Queer, Asexual	She/her/hers
Felix	35	White	Gender Fluid, Pansexual	He/him/his; She/her/hers
L	24	White	Cisgender female, Bisexual	She/her/hers
Cindy	24	White	Cisgender female, Bisexual	She/her/hers

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

BACKGROUND

1. What does being queer mean to you?
2. When did your queer identity first emerge?
3. When did you start embracing/using queer identity?
4. Prior, how did you identify?

EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

5. Are you open about your queer identity in all interactions? Why/why not?
6. How did your family and friends react when you disclosed your identity?
7. How are you treated in instances when people know of your identity?
8. Do others ever make assumptions about your gender/sexual identity? [If so, describe a scenario].
9. What are other identities that are also important to you?

SELF PRESENTATION

10. What does it mean to embody a queer identity?
11. Is your self presentation important to you? Why or why not?
12. Do you consciously alter your appearance/dress?
13. How do you express queerness?
14. How would you describe your style?
15. Are there any scenarios in which you downplay your queer identity? Why/why not?

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

16. Ideally, how would you convey your queer identity?
17. Any further observations or comments you might have about queerness and presentation, etc.?

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