



## Gender-reveal parties: performing community identity in pink and blue

Carly Gieseler

To cite this article: Carly Gieseler (2017): Gender-reveal parties: performing community identity in pink and blue, Journal of Gender Studies, DOI: [10.1080/09589236.2017.1287066](https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1287066)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1287066>



Published online: 09 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 135



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Gender-reveal parties: performing community identity in pink and blue

Carly Gieseler

Speech and Communication, Department of Performing and Fine Arts, York College, City University of New York, Jamaica, NY, USA

### ABSTRACT

The gender-reveal party has become the latest trend to publicize and commoditize what was once a private, intimate moment in parenthood. As this trend has grown in popularity, it has sparked a divisive discourse and reasserted normative ideals of gender. This article explores the representations and conversations surrounding this trend across newspapers, magazines and Internet sites. Approaching this phenomenon through performance and performativity illustrates how these parties highlight issues of liminality, gender, *communitas* and visibility. The gender-reveal party offers a performative space at the threshold of life, a liminal moment drawing on the power of *communitas* while creating a sense of permanence and security in the categorization of sexual and gendered difference. Uniting a community permits a collective reshaping of the now-sexed/now-gendered baby through rituals linked to binaried perceptions of identity. It allows adults to recuperate what they have learned from their own gendered constructions, reinscribing expectations and assumptions onto the unwritten body of the unborn and propelling these ideals into the digital, social, public world.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 April 2016  
Accepted 16 January 2017

### KEYWORDS

Gender-reveal; performance; community; visibility; liminality

### Introduction

Recently, my close friends found out they were having twins. After an outpouring of congratulations, they mentioned that they would soon learn the sex of the babies. After a few more weeks, the couple visited the doctors' office and came out ... not knowing the sex of the babies. Instead, they sealed the results and took them to a third party who arranged a themed celebration. With close friends and family present, the couple invited everyone outside where a photographer blindfolded them. The party-planning third-party friend then dipped the father-to-be's hands in a vat of paint, asked him to embrace his wife and place his hands on her stomach as the guests gasped in delight. It was still time for the parents-to-be to reveal the big news to each other. Placed back-to-back, they took several dramatic paces, turned, and fired cans of silly string at each other. The blindfolds came off and their faces registered the mess of bright pink silly string, the pink handprints across her belly, and the joy in realizing they were pregnant with twin baby girls. From that moment, all followed suit: gifts turned from neutral colors to multiple shades of pink; advice began pouring in about raising daughters; and the parents themselves began researching and worrying and hoping about the future of two baby girls. While these may seem commonplace for all parents-to-be, this once-private dialogue became public

because of the mother's pregnancy blog, the couple's social media posts, and the sense of community established at that gender-reveal celebration.

My friends are part of a prominent trend: the gender-reveal party. The spectacle described is but one of countless variations on the same theme. Sonogram results go directly from the lab to a third party and are unleashed at the celebration, where expectant parents and guests: pop piñatas unleashing blue or pink candies; bite into cupcakes stuffed with pink or blue filling, or open sealed boxes releasing pink or blue balloons. The event typically engenders sharing on multiple social media sites. Social media has unleashed an era of disclosure and access transforming the intimate phases of pregnancy into public knowledge; the gender-reveal marks one of the more pivotal points in this public process.

Arguably, the gender-reveal trend speaks to deeper needs than an excuse for a party. This need may correlate with our increased capacity for sharing, our competitive consumerism, or our drive to permanently articulate moments so unfathomable or temporal. While causes and effects of cultural trends are not overdetermined, I posit the gender-reveal party as something a part of and apart from these motivations. The gender-reveal party offers the performative space at the threshold of life, a liminal moment that draws on the power of *communitas* while creating a sense of permanence and security in the categorization of sexual and gendered difference. In exploring this phenomenon, I analyse the divisive media discourse surrounding this trend to reveal how these parties act as performative spaces highlighting issues of liminality, gender, *communitas* and visibility.

## Approach

In this essay, I focus on the performative power revealed through the gender-reveal trend. To explore how these public performances reconfigure ideas of gender, parenthood and consumerism, I explore several online articles and texts. Methodologically, this study is rooted in the critical analysis of mediated texts. Gill states that 'media culture should be our critical object' (2007, p. 148). Focusing this media analysis on internet websites and articles illustrates how these issues rhetorically manifest in the instant commentary available in the online world. The online response to the growing trend shapes the constructions of gender, parenting and consumerism; furthermore, these constructions become thematically linked across the selected online websites and articles. Analysing these images and conversations surrounding gender-reveal celebrations provides an indicator of how both mainstream and specialized audiences perceive this trend. This encourages critical analysis focusing on how various vocabularies and performances of liminality, gender, *communitas* and visibility emerge in online discourse.

A qualitatively oriented critical analysis focusing on these performative elements permitted recognition of the consistencies and contradictions in themes across the selected texts. At the time of writing, the top results returned when searching online for discussions and articles about 'gender-reveal parties' and 'gender-reveal' (both with and without hyphenates) focused on ideas for throwing these celebrations through websites like [www.parenting.com](http://www.parenting.com) and [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com). These returns were immediately followed by several articles with subject lines like: 'Narcissism in Pink and Blue' from *The New Yorker* and 'Here's Why Gender-Reveal Parties Are the Worst' from the *Phoenix New Times*. Initial search terms were expanded to include 'gender reveal parties narcissistic' and 'gender reveal parties and cultural despair', suggestions from the Google search engine. Expanding search terms helped ensure the collected texts would fully reflect the tension surrounding this trend in online discourse.

This critical media analysis draws on international, national and local magazines and newspaper articles. These selected articles and commentaries came from feature pages (*The New York Times*; *The Daily Mail*; the *Phoenix New Times*; *The Telegraph*), blogs (*The Society Pages*' open-access 'Girl w/Pen! Bridging Feminist Research and Popular Reality'), news pages (*The Telegraph*), and opinion or commentary pages (*The New Yorker*; WBUR's *Cognoscenti*; *The Washington Post*). These texts were published either in print or online form between the years of 2012 and 2015. The majority of articles were published in 2012, marking the public recognition of this trend. However, two of three UK articles were published in 2015, illustrating the spread of this US-born trend overseas. Further online examples were selected from popular Internet sites, including [pregnantchicken.com](http://pregnantchicken.com), [laybabylay.com](http://laybabylay.com), and *The Stir's* [cafemom.com](http://cafemom.com).

These texts were chosen as representative of the larger dialogue surrounding gender-reveal parties. The articles and websites selected guide the analysis of how discourse and performativity is constituted through gender-reveal parties.

This study focuses on publicly available content for its immediacy, access and global reach. Analysing internet discussions and representations of gender-reveal parties provides an indicator of how this trend is reflected in the international, popular imagination. The selected texts reveal the complicated dynamic between gender, ritual and consumerism across a public discourse and performative stage. While these are not the only discussions regarding gender-reveal parties, these online articles and websites most relevantly reflect the popular imagination and critical implications of this trend. While this research is not intended to systematically document all online discourse or representation of gender-reveal parties, the focus of this critical analysis instead illustrates this trend and its performative strategies. In fostering a critical dialogue surrounding this trend, these texts raise significant questions regarding how gender, parenthood and consumerism are constructed globally. Prior to turning to this analysis, I provide a theoretical context of performance and performativity illustrating the elements of liminality, gender, *communitas* and visibility.

### *Performativity*

Communication and performance merge to create a space encouraging performative strategies, rituals and reproductions of gender, sexuality and the body. Within these performative spaces, we confront fear, confusion, hatred, love, joy, freedom. Surviving these performances allows a 'purging of those emotions ... all drama creates a set of expectations in the audience, and dramatic form deliberately manipulates these expectations' (Bell, 2008, p. 93). The community gathered for the performance works through the cathartic cleansing; the ritual creates new sets of expectations and assumptions at the decisive moment of liminality.

### *Liminality*

Van Gennepp (1960) and Turner (1988) illustrate the significance of ritual transitions in performance. Van Gennepp's notion of the *liminaire* – rites of passage – and Turner's conceptualization of liminality reveal how social drama is marked by a sense of play. These ritual transitions work across the thresholds of being, performing, knowing. Goffman (1958) contributes his dramaturgical perspective to illustrate how performance becomes a 'doing' of socialization which ensures all social interaction leads to achievement and realization. Any disruptions expose the reality of how identity is created and maintained, reinforcing the importance of performance in sustaining social realities. Goffman's concept of social dramas stresses the necessity of collective collaboration in the making of our social worlds, much as the cooperation of those invited to gender-reveal parties normalize the gendered production of a child still in the womb.

Jill Dolan speaks of the power of performance insofar as it allows a space where marginalized individuals can teach and share vocabularies 'performatively and playfully' (1993, p. 32). In keeping with Dolan, there should be acknowledgement that the fluidity permitting the assumption of subject positions in performance theory also allows for shifting those positions to understand how others view the world. Dolan marks this postmodern perception of repositioning as an opportunity 'to keep changing my seat in the theater, and to continually ask, "How does it look from over there?"' (1993, pp. 95, 96). Performance forces us to position ourselves on the edge of our seats, on the edge of identity, splaying open the dialogue regarding exactly where this edge actually lies and how it continuously shifts.

### *Gender*

Even as performance theory draws upon fluid identity, those seeking to fix identity are just as capable of utilizing performance, social drama and ritualization. While parents who can afford to create gender-reveal celebrations may not be considered 'marginalized' in terms of class, perhaps those unsettled by an era more accepting of gender fluidity become motivated to mark their unborn children's sex.

Performance reveals the potential of identity politics through issues of materiality, representation, subjectivity, language and spectatorship. Butler (1988) takes up the idea of performativity to spotlight the ways in which the body may cure, dramatize and replicate our historical contexts. As Butler suggests, 'if the personal is a category which expands to include the wider political and social structures, then the acts of the gendered subject would be similarly expansive' (1988, p. 523). Butler posits that gender is akin to clothing or costume, something we don on a daily basis under the constraints and confines of facing the world. When this act becomes repetitive, it often becomes taken for granted as an essential fact of language.

Butler also contributes to an untangling of the essentialism/constructionism knot, a bind that often halts feminist discourse. As Pellegrini states, "sex" is a regulatory ideal or commandment, to whose perfect measure gendered subjects must always hopelessly approximate themselves' (1997, p. 5). Advancing the idea of sex as an essential truth and gender as its interpretation, the relationship instead becomes one of performance. When we mistake sex as bound to nature and gender as borne of culture, there is a tendency to make assumptions that sex is the basic, the natural, the real at the core of any gendered performances. Performance enables thinking beyond the sex/gender binary and undermines attempts in which cultural productions of gender conceal or costume themselves as basic, natural or real.

As Pellegrini argues, the body becomes 'posed as the last and first best hope of holding the line between nature and culture, "sex" and gender' (1997, p. 6). Sexual difference permits the idea of subject-hood; further, it articulates the boundaries of self and Other, normative and deviant, known and unknown. In permitting us to define the sexed or gendered self in opposition to the unknowable Other, there is an identification of power, an establishment of superiority or inferiority to that Other. Yet, the articulation of sexual difference or gendered identity perpetuates an anxiety that demands continuous checking of the Other to maintain the opposition that sustains how we define ourselves.

### *Communitas*

Collaboration, coordinated meaning and collective ritualization work as unifying survival strategies for communities. Yet, as Pellegrini suggests, 'collaboration also conjures up the troubling specter of the double agent, that treasonous representative of misplaced identifications' (1997, p. 9). Even in a postmodern era of multiplicity and fluidity, we still strive for identification through individual or collective experience. This is made evident by the gender-reveal trend. No longer are expectant parents learning of the sex of their children in doctors' offices or delivery rooms. What was an intimate, personal moment has now been made a public event. The collaborative ritualization, the publication of this moment moves beyond an excuse to party; quite possibly, this trend emerges from our deeper drive toward collective recognition and commemoration of sexual identification. Ambiguity challenges our need to categorize, to define in opposition to what something is not. It creates anxiety and demands recognition for identification and, often, misidentification.

Turner's work on liminality and *communitas* provides a mapping of spaces where heightened experience gathers individuals into groups to explore performative ritual and play. The ritual at the thresholds, particularly at the limen of unborn invisibility and born visibility, manifests a none-ness and all-ness at the confluent borders of identities while rearticulating these borders. Normative ways of doing sexual or gendered identity in the representational field erode as the liminal community constitutes its own internal structure for (re)producing gender at the threshold. In the *communitas* of the gender-reveal ritual, identity becomes marked 'as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutiny for the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs' (Turner, 1967, p. 156). Inviting a public into the intimate telling of gender creates a liminal ritual, a shelter of *communitas* apart from the traditional negotiations of gender identification in everyday life. The uncontrollability of gender and identification motivates this drive to a collaborative, controlling ritual in which gender is controlled and displaced onto the invisible unborn. As Moller states, 'when survival demands complete alertness and concentration, our relation to ourselves is erased, and this can give rise to ecstatic experiences of being fused with the situation' (2007, p. 193). Thus, the potential space at the limen creates a potent performative strategy at one of the most significant thresholds of all.

### Visibility

The public ritual of the gender-reveal party creates performances indicating the complex relationships between visibility and invisibility, representation and reproduction. Phelan touches on these issues in her exploration of the anti-abortion Operation Rescue group, especially in terms of technological access to fetal imagery. The sudden visibility of the foetus 'locates reproductive visibility as a term and an image independent of the woman's body. Once that independence is established, fetal imagery itself becomes vulnerable to all the potential manipulations of any signifying system' (1993, p. 132). Many parents experience that profound bonding experience upon first viewing the sonogram; this is the realization of a new life but also the recognition that this life must be protected. Perhaps writing gender onto the blank canvas of the foetus achieves this goal: it is an opportunity to clarify and categorize, the first moment within that signifying system.

As Munoz suggests, 'shuttlings and displacements are survival strategies that intersectional subjects ... between different communities, must practice frequently if they are to keep their residences in different subcultural spheres' (1999, p. 156). Munoz pushes Turner's concept of liminality as the ultimate zone of hybrid identity; this enables a move toward new political projects in performance and productions of social possibilities for individuals and communities. The performances that engender intersectionality work to enact and disrupt public desires and fears surrounding identities of difference (Crenshaw, 1991). And yet, they also serve as entry moments for those who need to reassert the security and permanence of identity. When parents-to-be throw a (sex) gender-reveal party, they are using performances as 'both theatrical and everyday rituals ... the ability to establish alternate views of the world' (Munoz, p. 195).

Performativity expands our knowledge, escaping our assumptions of the world, crafting critical commentary, rejecting tradition and often, reproducing these assumptions all over again. Gender can be storied, a way of narrating our becoming through culture, history, politics and materiality (Butler, 1990). As Burke suggests, the construction of new worlds, rituals and performances may become a 'rejoinder to assertions current in the situation in which it arose' (1967, p. 109). Gender-reveal parties rise with and against our modern fragmentation of identity, our new narratives of gender fluidity. These are ritual celebrations at that most mysterious of limens: the threshold into life. Bell speaks of the power of performance in its abilities to move from 'entertainment to efficacy, from role theory to performativity, from work to play, from rites of passage to *communitas*' (Bell, 2008, p. 4). Shifting from ambiguity and uncertainty, gender-reveal parties serve as performative processes that make these moves, permitting the illusion of shifting from the ambiguity of identity, the inexplicability of life not yet made visible.

In framing the body through representation and ritualization, there is a risk and reality of fixing that subject in permanence (Kuppers, 2003). Performance moves toward a dialogue that is open and ambiguous; yet much as Butler reasserts the idea that repetition can create normalization, assumption and static expectations of identity, so too can ritualization of (sex) gender celebrations. Long gone are the days of men passing out cigars in the waiting room if 'It's a boy!' Yet, here again are the days of men and women spending untold amounts on pink and blue surprise cakes, balloons and party favours to share the joy of one sex over another. Even as performance offers fluid constructions and disappearances of the self, these performances of parenting and gender reposition historical permanence. While these ritualized performances may grant an illusory sense of security and stability, the gender-reveal trend has also amplified the self-absorbed social 'ME'dia moment, incited competitive consumerism, and generated a polarizing discourse that speaks compellingly to gender construction and performance in the postmodern moment.

### Baby talk

The first published video featuring a gender-reveal event was posted on YouTube in 2008; by the time of this writing, approximately 128,000 results are now posted to the website under 'gender-reveal party'. Also on YouTube, around 8880 results follow for 'gender-reveal party ideas', and about 11,800 for 'gender-reveal party gone wrong'. Using Google as a larger search engine, 23,100,100 results appear

under 'gender-reveal party'. The popular app Pinterest is filled with ideas for gender-reveal parties and countless websites offer lists of gender celebration themes and gifts. The communicative spaces dedicated to this trend not only offer ideas but market products to achieve the ideal image of the celebration so that this image can subsequently be plastered across social media sites like Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram. As Royal (2013) points out, the sharing mechanisms of Facebook, Pinterest and Etsy have helped spread the idea for gender-reveal parties quickly, giving legs to the trend and gaining advertising capital as sources. To illustrate this dialogue, I look to an array of articles detailing this cultural phenomenon.

As with many cultural trends, gender-reveal parties create a divisive discourse regardless of contributor familiarity with the experience of pregnancy, parenthood or the parties. The gender-reveal party is but one example of the growing trend in making the private events of parenthood public. As Williams and Murphy suggest, 'it's the rare surprise party that people can give for themselves' (2012, para. 3). Yet there is not merely a sense of sharing that marks these moments but almost an obligation, from pregnancy blogs to tweets about baby's first word to Facebook pictures of baby's first smile, crawl and walk; the culture of hyper-mediated sharing now requires parents-to-be to become parents-to-be-sharing. According to many online opinions, the gender-reveal trend is either a self-sustaining consumerist phenomenon or a narcissistic serpent eating its own tail.

Applequist's (2014) exploration of Pinterest's impact on the gender-reveal trend used data from the site to examine how US pregnancy culture reasserts commodification of the gender binary. Applequist suggests that 'the baby shower has been re-appropriated to reflect specific representations of gender, using a popular social media tool as its vehicle for the message' (p. 51). Through the reinforcement of a link between 'pins' on Pinterest with pink or blue, there is a representation which elevates a neoliberal feminist subject and negates other categories significant to feminist positions. Furthermore, the uniquely visual aspect of Pinterest encourages representation of gender primarily through images. The image alone begins standing in for the intricate performances and constructions we negotiate daily. The visual commoditization made possible through the initial gender-reveal party (in which identity is bound to bows or bowties, pink balloons or blue cakes) is then perpetuated in the instant visual gratification of social media reproductions.

As pregnancy blog *pregnantchicken.com* offers, one of the pros in not revealing gender is that it 'puts off the gender stereotyping for a while'. The site even offers a giveaway and referral to the website *NotFindingOut.com* where expecting parents can register and receive blue, pink or NFO items along the pregnancy timeline. The site *laybabylay.com* instead offers gifts for a gender-reveal party or announcement, using cherubic tots posing with a pre-programmed phone which will reveal the sex of their soon-to-be sibling. On *The Stir's* *cafemom.com* pregnancy subsite, they offered Judy Dutton's '10 Creative Ways to Reveal Baby's Gender' exactly two months before Suzee Skwiot's (26 May 2015) article '15 Outrageously Inappropriate Gender-reveal Cakes', in which Skwiot calls the parties 'either adorably exciting or just another celebration families and friends are forced to attend before baby's actual arrival'. Skwiot's list of cakes asked: 'Pistols or Pearls?'; 'Guns or Glitter?'; 'Badges or Bows?' Skwiot noted the biases in this trend, asking questions like: 'Maybe now's not the time to start a conversation about the Second Amendment?' and 'Does this mean that girls can't be police officers?'

Grey Allen, who writes a blog for new fathers called *daddytypes.com*, also critiques the gender-reveal party. Allen has seen countless crazes in the parenthood sharing game, yet finds this latest trend distasteful. As Allen told the *New York Times*, 'creating drama around your baby's gender seems so staged and fake ... the whole connection of cutting into the cake to find out, like it's a stand-in for the uterus, is sort of sickening' (Williams and Murphy, 2012, para. 25). While the visual element of slicing into the 'pregnant stomach' or 'baby's blanket' cake is somewhat unsettling, even more troubling are the questions of 'Rifles or Ruffles?'; 'Badges or Bows?' pasted across cakes. These questions create gendered expectations and eliminate choices while the child is still a foetus.

In response to a query regarding gender-reveal parties, famed columnist Miss Manners (2014) responded that 'not everyone is as excited as you are about every detail of your child's life, let alone the pre-life'. Miss Manners also suggested that this new trend is mostly farcical: 'You will actually get more

profound and prolonged joy if you reveal (or “identify”) the gender (or “sex”) one by one to individuals who you think might genuinely be excited by the news. Yet this is no longer the model through which we communicate; social media has enabled all of us to become mass media sources, constantly blasting personal messages to the masses.

The gender-reveal trend made its way to the UK with journalists commenting on it as early as 2012. Bryony Gordon wrote in *The Telegraph*: ‘We have our friends in America to thank for delivering us the latest fad’ (2012, para. 1). Gordon continued, suggesting that ‘these parties make the baby shower – another American import ... look restrained. They make the people who live-tweet their pregnancies and upload their baby’s scan as their Facebook profile picture look positively private’ (2012, para. 5). Gender-reveal parties in the UK have achieved celebrity status, with reality stars like TOWIE’s Dan Osborne and his actress girlfriend Jacqueline Jossa sharing images of a pink-filled cake slice on social media. According to Gordon Rayner of *The Telegraph*, this celebrity hype was cemented during the Duchess of Cambridge’s second pregnancy. Rayner wrote: ‘The betting public is convinced the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge are going to have a baby girl, and they won’t be the only ones getting a windfall if Prince George has a little sister’ (2015, para. 1). This was a comment on Kate’s parents Carole and Michael Middleton’s Party Pieces website, which saw a correlating bump in sales. Rayner detailed the website’s gender-reveal items, including simple tableware asking ‘girl or boy’ colored in half-pink, half-blue, a ‘Baby Carriage Mini Pinata’, and ‘Baby Bump Measuring Game’ featuring measuring tape to be wrapped around the suddenly public property of the mother-to-be’s pregnant stomach.

Aside from the invasive baby bump measuring tape, these items seemed relatively inoffensive compared to the US gender-stereotyping of ‘Bows or Badges?’ cakes. Yet the game of gender-reveal has only just begun in the UK; the Duchess’ pregnancy commenced the public guessing game of gender. Public figures participating in gender-reveal trends (directly or implicitly), function to: ingrain the visibility of the trend; make the pregnant woman’s body public property; and, permanently broadcast gendered expectations for the unborn child. As Smith writes for the *The Daily Mail.com*: ‘One couple who are taking part in the act said it allowed relatives to join in with a woman’s pregnancy’ (2015, para. 9). Again, this follows an assumption that the parents-to-be are actively inviting the public into what was once an intimate process. To ‘join in’ creates a communal bond, yet also inscribes expectations of gender on the foetus and thrusts the mother’s body into public domain.

In a cultural moment where events and rituals are often created to garner a share of the spotlight, these parties have flourished. Packer comments on these manufactured customs: ‘They emerge from an atomized society in order to fill a perceived void where real ceremonies used to be, and they end by reflecting that society’s narcissism’ (2012, para. 5). Much of the online discourse surrounding the gender-reveal trend springs from what Brody (2013) calls its existence ‘at the intersection of All About Me Avenue and Oversharing Boulevard’. While gender-reveal parties may exemplify this social sharing obsession and mediated self-absorption, there are higher stakes involved in the phenomenon.

The gender-reveal trend commoditizes a major event in parenthood and feeds several capital interests that might never have been involved with this stage of parenting. For example, ‘Cake Boss’ Buddy Valastro claims he makes hundreds of gender-reveal cakes every month, costing between \$100 and \$1000 each. Donna Vela, who owns and operates online stationary store Little Angel Announcements, receives multiple orders every day. Williams and Murphy document how ‘creative decorating tips for the parties have popped up on design blogs, and handmade knickknacks for gender-reveal parties are sold on Etsy shops’ (2012, para. 12). Mediated sharing of the trend sustains the capitalist imperative; creating the perfect image to send out into the world via social media fuels this competitive consumerism.

The consumerist drive perpetuating the gender-reveal trend marks a great deal of the discourse. Yet what is not mentioned as frequently is the potential for this parenting performance to widen an equity and authenticity gap. Gender-reveal parties create clear socio-economic division between parents who can or cannot afford to buy into this trend. This subsequently impels these increasingly lavish public performances as parents compete to prove their worthiness in having and raising a child. Furthermore, despite socio-economic obstacles to providing a public ritual deemed necessary to modern ideals of

pregnancy, many parents who cannot afford or cannot have access to these celebrations could become culturally pressured into the performances anyway. This trend shifts the power from the medical institution to capitalism and further diminishes individual agency.

Beyond the critiques of capitalism and narcissism in this trend, I suggest that the gender-reveal party acts as a reiteration of traditional social constructs, ritualizing the borders and expectations on gendered identity that have eroded in the past few years. Of course, one of the more insidious aspects to this trend is locked in the language. Despite the progress made in the past few years regarding gender identity, parties that reassert the significance of a gender-reveal (or more accurately, sex-identification) are placing significance on distinctions in sex and reifying language that we have tried to move beyond. Brody touches on the misnomer, stating that ‘what we actually are revealing here is sex ... biological and physiological characteristics, not a social construct’ (2013, para. 17). This trend seems to circumvent social strides toward greater acceptance of gender difference; moreover, these manufactured rituals often negate the significance of understanding gender as an identity construct and performance unbound to biological or physiological characteristics.

Not only does this trend encourage and ritualize gender binaries, it also creates a celebration of gender stereotyping. Writing about these parties, Siegel said, ‘gender – and therefore gender stereotyping – begins in utero’ (2012, para. 3). Siegel points to sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman’s 1986 study asking 120 pregnant women to describe how their unborn children moved in the womb. As Rothman discovered, the women who’d already learned the biological sex offered descriptives following gender stereotypes. The women aware they were carrying a girl spoke of gentle, moderate movements, while the women who knew they were carrying boys described the movements as vigorous, jabbing and kicking. The pregnant women who did not find out the sex of their foetus did not follow these descriptive stereotypical patterns.

The gender-reveal party works as a parental performative act communicating expectations for the unborn child; moreover, it seems to reassert a construction of normative gendered parenting. This is not new, as birth announcements or baby showers worked in shades of blue and pink for years to ritualize gender construction. Yet moving beyond previous announcements or intimate celebrations, gender-reveal parties work in the pervasive era of social media. These performances of intimate revelations are now broadcast – often in real time – directly to a mass audience. This performatively inscribes the foetus with the expectations and assumptions of gender, interpellating identity through the articulation, ritual and publication of the gender-reveal moment.

### Discussion: the big reveal

Turner speaks of social dramas as transformative, reflexive, regenerative events that act as a salve in times of social chaos. Strong reactive movements often manifest in times of greater acceptance of diversity; thus, perhaps even the assumed light-hearted play in celebrating a foetus’ sex illustrates Huizinga’s (2016) suggestion that there is a seriousness of play in our culture. What many might perceive as a period of ambiguity in gender roles, others may view as a necessary moment to recuperate fixed and assigned gendered identity. The idea that ‘people just love a party’ or that ‘people make money off of it’ should not be the final statements attached to this trend.

As Murphy Paul states, ‘the gender of babies always comes freighted with meaning, of a worldly and even of a metaphysical kind’ (2010, p. 111). From the misidentifying label to the ritualized celebration of biological discovery, gender-reveal parties subvert the cultural realization of gender that forms over the history of a life. Instead, the gender-reveal party returns to sex as the natural core, the reality underlying all gendered performances yet to come for the unborn child. If parents-to-be are now choosing Butler’s ‘costumes’ of gender before they are born, the ritualized nature of the gender-reveal party becomes something that normalizes this experience. If performances of gender have already been chosen prior to birth and ritualized through celebrations of this ‘knowledge’, the body enters the world already tattooed by the normalizing, ritualized choices of others. This is made possible through appropriation of the unborn body as a contested, discursive site (Phelan, 1997).

As Pellegrini (1997) posits, there is an anxiety pushing us toward identification, categorization and often misidentification. This motivates the birth announcements of the past, the gender-reveal parties of the present. The knowledge that the child will grow into a set of constructions and performances that define and redefine gendered identity throughout history may impel this need to inscribe gendered subject-hood onto the foetus. This ignores the performative possibilities for addressing difference and identity without establishing or reasserting oppositions and binaries. Pre-inscribing and ritualizing the gendered binary through the reveal party omits the potential to find identification across and through difference.

The gender-reveal trend encourages a revision of thinking about the relationship between visibility and power; as Phelan says, 'visibility and invisibility within representation are always liminal' (1993, p. 140). To recognize, celebrate and stake that claim of gender depends on visibility as a strategy of gaining power through representation. We seek security and identity through the representational, the visible. Yet, when we employ seeing as the primary means of knowing, we cast ourselves (and in this case, the unborn) into narrative scripts dictated by hegemonic language and binaries that empower and disenfranchise based on the fixed label of sex/gender difference. Gender-reveal parties act as collaborative mimetic representations promising security through a collective belief in identity and witnesses to this (mis)identifying process.

Returning to Turner and his extension of van Gennep's works on the rites of passage, the concept of liminality illuminates the significance of ritualized steps across these social worlds. Gender-reveal parties predicate the importance of the liminal passage from womb to world, pre-assigning and affixing gendered identity to a being not yet in the world. This enables a reassertion of control through a collective ritualization process prior to the unpredictable leap of liminality. The gender-reveal party recalls *communitas* as a magical togetherness for those experiencing liminality as a group (Turner, 1967). *Communitas* cultivates a vibrant sense of belonging, loyalty, personal sacrifice and collaborative commitment to a goal. In moving the act of gender-reveal from the privacy of the sonogram experience or delivery room to public spheres, parents-to-be not only publically identify and articulate the gender of their baby, they also generate this mystical *communitas*. This provides a collective sharing of that liminal moment between unborn invisibility and born visibility. The performances of articulating gender – be it through pink or blue balloons unleashed from a box or pink or blue filling in a cupcake – become strategies to affix the assumption of power and security in the representational field to the ambiguous unknown of the invisible, reproductive field.

## Conclusion

While Munoz (1999) argues for disidentification as a strategy to critique oppressive regimes, it is possible that parents-to-be are using ritualized performances to inscribe a perception of gender based on biology. It is also feasible that these parents are establishing an alternate paradigm that counters the gender fluidity of the modern era. Beyond that, it is plausible that any parent willing to celebrate and ritualize the (sex) gender of their unborn child is also establishing parental control and categorization; this may also serve as a strategy of protection and production through ritual and celebration. Perhaps parents are refusing to allow the vulnerable foetus to become subjugated to the signifying system; instead, these parents commemorate and ritualize gendered identity, staking a claim to categorical identification for their child and protecting them from the oppressive mechanisms of the system. Yet, this is ultimately another layer of control as the parents inscribe reproductive visibility onto the still invisible child (Phelan, 1997). This strengthens the identification between the foetus and its named gender (recognized sex) before the child is born. Gendered binaries support patriarchal and hegemonic interests and institutions; therefore, the foetus is thrust into the hegemony via language and ritual as the pregnant woman is subsumed in the province of patriarchal control.

Perhaps these rituals could serve positively to increase the participation of male partners throughout pregnancy. While traditional baby showers have been located in the feminine realm, the gender-reveal party invites male partners and community members to this celebration. However, recalling the

celebration in which my male friend marked his wife's pregnant belly pink, some rituals might reaffirm man's power to reclaim the woman's body and the unborn child. Thus, as the communal nature of the gender-reveal party may reinforce public ownership of pregnant bodies, the presentation by the male partner might also publically rearticulate the woman's body and foetus as his domain. These are significant considerations as the pregnant body becomes subjected to strategies of surveillance, reasserting legacies of control over women's bodies in relation to pregnancy and parenthood.

The trend of gender-reveal parties also inevitably preferences one gender over another. The velocity of technological and scientific advances will produce greater power in revealing and even determining the sex of the child. We may face an era in which sex selection of the foetus is as accepted as other notions that were once controversial, such as prenatal testing or in vitro. Drawing from her survey of over one-thousand Americans, Murphy Paul states that if asked to choose the sex of a child 'by taking a pink pill for a girl and a blue pill for a boy; 18 percent said yes, they would' (2010, p. 136). While sex selection still looms over the horizon, the ability to identify the sex of a foetus has never been easier. With access to products like sex-identification kits sold in pharmacies, the 'ever-shrinking curiosity gap means that we will be applying our expectations and assumptions about gender to our children sooner than ever before' (2010, p. 137). Thus, with greater technologies, the mysteries of the unborn child fall away.

Increased access to knowledge can be powerful but it can also be exploitive, especially when it encourages a return to preconceived notions or biases surrounding gender differences. Finding out the sex of the foetus is a significant moment and the right for any parent. Yet, as Siegel asks, 'don't most enlightened parents these days act with shock and glee regardless of which sex is announced? Shouldn't we be a tad more concerned with "Who will it be?" than "What will it be?"' (2012, paras. 5, 6). Despite proclamations of progressive thinking regarding gender, there remains a lag in moving past the gendered boxes surrounding the unborn child or newborn. Baby clothes, toys and decorations still adhere to narrow constructs of gender; with the advent of the gender-reveal phenomenon, we have yet another commoditization of identity and chance to affix gender stereotypes before the child is born.

In exploring the performative nature and the critical discourse surrounding gender-reveal parties, there remain several questions that could be addressed in future research. While a critical media analysis against a performance studies background informs this present study, other methodological or theoretical approaches might divulge more in exploring the gender-reveal trend. For example, an ethnographic approach focusing on interviews with pregnant women and their partners could provide invaluable insight regarding the significance and impact of planning and ritualizing gender in a public way. Narrative experiences of pregnant women and their partners could also contribute to understanding issues of performances and expectations related to the parenting experience. Families with inter-sexed children, adoptive families or families refusing to adhere to gendered binaries might also contribute their experiences as symbolically excluded from this trend. Furthermore, a deeper interrogation of how this trend impacts social implications surrounding race, ethnicity, religion and class could be especially illuminating.

As Schechner states, 'performances mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn and reshape the body, tell stories, and allow people to play with behavior that is "twice-behaved", not-for-the-first-time, rehearsed, cooked, prepared' (Schechner, 1998, p. 361). In the example of gender-reveal parties, these words become eerily profound. The ritualized performance of the gender-reveal creates a space for parents to articulate and mark the identities of their unborn children. Uniting a community permits a collective reshaping of the now-sexed/now-gendered baby through shared stories, games and visual celebrations linked to binaried perceptions of identity. It allows 'twice-behaved' performances of what adults have learned from their own gendered construction, placed upon the intimate, private, blank canvas of the foetus and propelled into the digital, social, public world.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Carly Gieseler** is an assistant professor in the Department of Performing and Fine Arts at York College – City University of New York. She earned her doctorate at the University of South Florida in the Department of Communication; her dissertation, 'Performances of Gender and Sexuality in Extreme Sports Culture', focuses on how the marginalized cultures of extreme sports offer new possibilities for performing gender, sexuality and the body with and against mainstream sports and culture. Her work focuses on issues of gender, performance, identity and representation in emerging trends and marginalized communities.

## References

- Applequist, J. (2014). Pinterest, gender reveal parties, and the binary: Reducing an impending arrival to 'pink' or 'blue'. *Pennsylvania Communication Annual*, 70, 51–665.
- Bell, E. (2008). *Theories of performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Brody, S. (2013, March 20). Pink or blue, it's all oversharing: Trendy parents-to-be hold 'gender reveal' parties. *Cognoscenti*. Retrieved from <http://cognoscenti.wbur.org/2013/03/20/gender-reveal-parties-sharon-brody>
- Burke, K. (1967). *The Philosophy of Literary Form. Studies in Symbolic Action*. (4th ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40, 519–531.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241–1299.
- Dolan, J. (1993). *Presence and desire: Essays on gender, sexuality, and performance*. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan Press.
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10, 147–166.
- Goffman, E. (1958). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday.
- Gordon, B. (2012, May 1). 'Gender-reveal' cakes? Sorry, but this is one baby celebration too far. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/mother-tongue/9236463/Gender-reveal-cakes-Sorry-but-this-is-one-baby-celebration-too-far.html>
- Huizinga, J. (2016) *Homo ludens*. Kettering, OH: Angelico Press.
- Kuppers, P. (2003). *Disability and contemporary performance: Bodies on edge*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Miss Manners. (2014, February 5). Miss manners: Announcement of baby's gender is not an occasion for party. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/miss-manners-announcement-of-babys-gender-is-not-an-occasion-for-party/2014/02/05/e87803e2-7eeb-11e3-9556-4a4bf7bcbd84\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/miss-manners-announcement-of-babys-gender-is-not-an-occasion-for-party/2014/02/05/e87803e2-7eeb-11e3-9556-4a4bf7bcbd84_story.html)
- Moller, V. (2007). Walking the edge. In M. McNamee (Ed.), *Philosophy, risk and adventure sports* (pp. 186–197). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Munoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications. Queers of color and the performance of politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Murphy Paul, A. (2010). *Origins: How the nine months before birth shape the rest of our lives*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Packer, G. (2012, April 23). Narcissism in pink and blue. *The New Yorker*.
- Pellegrini, A. (1997). *Performance anxieties. Staging psychoanalysis, staging race*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked. The politics of performance*. London: Routledge.
- Phelan, P. (1997). *Mourning sex. Performing public memories*. London: Routledge.
- Rayner, G. (2015, April 17). Royal baby: How Carole Middleton's Party Pieces website could benefit if it's a girl. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/kate-middleton/11537277/Royal-baby-How-Carole-Middletons-Party-Pieces-website-could-benefit-if-its-a-girl.html>
- Royal, D. (2013, June 6). Here's why gender-reveal parties are the worst. *Phoenix New Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/arts/heres-why-gender-reveal-parties-are-the-worst-6580773>
- Schechner, R. (1998). What is performance studies anyway? In P. Phelan & J. Lane (Eds.), *The Ends of Performance* (357–362). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Siegel, D. (2012, April 9). Quick hit: Six reasons I think gender-reveal parties are for the birds. *Girl w/Pen! Bridging feminist research and popular reality*. Retrieved from <https://thesocietypages.org/girlwpen/2012/04/09/quick-hit-six-reasons-i-think-gender-reveal-parties-are-for-the-birds/>
- Smith, J. (2015, February 14). The proof IS in the pudding! Popular U.S. 'gender reveal' parties where parents find out baby's sex by cutting into blue or pink cakes arrive in the UK. *Daily Mail.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2953470/Popular-U-S-gender-reveal-parties-arrive-UK.html>
- Turner, V. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Turner, V. (1988). *The anthropology of performance*. New York, NY: PAJ Publications.
- van Gennep, A. (1960). The territorial passage (M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee, Trans.). In *Rites of passage* (pp. 15–25). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1908)
- Williams, A., & Murphy, K. (2012, April 7). A boy or girl? Cut the cake. At parties, revealing a baby's gender. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/fashion/at-parties-revealing-a-babys-gender.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/fashion/at-parties-revealing-a-babys-gender.html?_r=0)