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# Queering Gendering: Trans Epistemologies and the Disruption and Production of Gender Accomplishment Practices

Those who are deemed “unreal” nevertheless lay hold of the real, a laying hold that happens in concert, and a vital instability is produced by that performative surprise.

—Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

BEGINNING IN THE 1960S, scholars began to theorize gender as a contextually specific process rather than a universal category reflecting an essential pre-discursive sex. Two interrelated traditions developed: a discursive approach, which theorized gender as performative, and an interactionist approach, which investigated the interactional achievement of gender. For Judith Butler, “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body.”<sup>1</sup> Gender is therefore performative: it is a series of effects produced through the repetition and citation of stylized acts, which are named via and thus produced through discourse; discourse also produces the defining limits of subjects.<sup>2</sup> Candace West and Don Zimmerman theorized gender as a “routine, methodical,

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1. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), xv.

2. Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

and recurring accomplishment” produced in social interaction.<sup>3</sup> They observed how, in the relational process of “doing gender,” social actors display gender, presenting an appearance to others, who attribute gender by interpreting this appearance. In this article, I investigate how actors interactionally challenge and construct discursive structures in order to contribute to scholarship that analyzes the role language plays in such interactions.<sup>4</sup> Following Sandy Stone, who suggests that transsexuals are not a class, nor a third gender, but a genre, “a set of embodied texts,” who, through their interpretation, might potentially disrupt dichotomous sexuality and gender categories, I examine the spaces in which the discursive and the interactional merge to investigate how gender minorities, as simultaneous subjects, texts, social actors, and cultural workers, queer hegemonic gender practices.<sup>5</sup>

I argue that members of trans linguistic communities and gender nonconforming individuals queer the normative gender process in two ways: by *productively* linguistically communicating third-person gender pronouns and by *disruptively* inhibiting gender’s hegemonic attribution. Lal Zimman has made parallel observations, explaining linguistic gender self-determination practices as a new cultural phenomenon, focusing on terminology for types of gendered persons, grammatical gender forms (i.e., pronouns), and lexical items that relate to embodied sex.<sup>6</sup> My analysis builds on Zimman’s observations using sociological, performance

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3. Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender & Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 126.
  4. For example, see Mimi Schippers, “Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony,” *Theory and Society* 36, no. 1 (2007): 85–102.
  5. Sandy Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 296. The term “gender minorities” encompasses individuals identifying with gender identity terms other than those they were assigned and individuals with gender nonconforming appearance.
  6. See Lal Zimman, “Transgender Language Reform: Some Challenges and Strategies for Promoting Trans-affirming, Gender-Inclusive Language,” *Journal of Language and Discrimination* 1, no. 1 (2017): 84–105; Lal Zimman, “Trans People’s Linguistic Self-Determination and the Dialogic Nature of Identity,” in *Representing Trans: Linguistic, Legal, and Everyday Perspectives*, ed. Evan Hazenberg and Miriam Meyerhoff (Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press, 2017).

studies and performativity frameworks to theorize these practices. By approximating new gender pronoun-attribution norms that bring a trans queer paradigm to life in interactions and by disregarding their perceptions of each other's bodies, actors accomplish gender pronouns linguistically, override hegemonic gender attribution norms, and reorganize gender accountability. These practices institutionalize a new interpretive frame and accountability structure through which social actors create and recognize a variety of gender expressions, identities, and pronouns, reworking performativity to produce gender minorities as subjects. I argue that this gendering-queering is a form of disidentificatory gender accomplishment. In addition, I find that individuals who appear gender nonconforming disrupt the hegemonic gendering process when interlocutors have trouble gender-categorizing them, illustrating what I term *gender anomie*, a state of uncertainty and behavioral inhibition. I argue that gender anomie prevents the accomplishment of the hegemonic gender process in these encounters. The empirical bases for these analyses are fifteen years of auto/ethnographic fieldwork, hundreds of informal interviews, and twenty semi-structured interviews. In the following pages, I discuss "undoing gender" debates and how paradigms shape gender attribution norms. Then, I explain my research methods, analyze my data—gender minorities' disruptive and productive queering of the hegemonic gender process—and consider the possibilities and limitations of these queerings in moving toward transfeminist worlds.

#### UNDOING GENDER

Since the nineteenth century, feminists have asked whether gender inequality (conceptualized as between non-trans women and men) and, more recently, how gender, as a category, concept, process, and institution might be "undone." The meaning of undoing varies in this work. For social scientists, eradicating structural gender inequality undoes gender. For queer theorists, illuminating how binaries, categories, identities, and realities are unstable cultural constructs undoes gender.<sup>7</sup> The "doing" aspect of "undoing" references the doing gender framework, suggesting that if gender is done in social interactions (reproducing inequality), perhaps gender and unequal gender relations can be undone in them too.

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7. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

Francine Deutsch's "Undoing Gender" spawned a debate among sociologists over whether and how gender might be undone in interactions and institutional domains.<sup>8</sup> Scholars define "undoing gender" in various ways: when gender loses importance or becomes less pronounced; when people fail to follow gendered scripts, perform gender in discordance from their assigned sex, ignore, make irrelevant, or fail to mobilize gender as a concept, or change their expectations of their own and others' gender performance in order to change oppressive behaviors; or when confusion about a person's gender arises.<sup>9</sup> For West and Zimmerman, "'undoing' implies abandonment—that sex category . . . is no longer something to which we are accountable (i.e., that it makes no difference)."<sup>10</sup> In this sense, undoing gender abolishes it. In my view, abolishing gender would require processes through which gender would cease to have meaning. Scholars pushing for gender's undoing employ humanist conceptions of agency to argue that it is possible to use agentic social interactions to dismantle a system of gender inequality, but for performativity theorists, agency resides within the productive reiterability of gender. In Butler's view, there is no undoing of gender independent of the redoing of social norms.<sup>11</sup> These various notions of undoing gender are interrelated.

Barbara Risman articulated a dream of a "postgender" future world, where "sex category matters not at all beyond reproduction; economic and familial roles would be equally available to persons of any gender."<sup>12</sup> But for West and Zimmerman, this idea "implies that members of particular sex categories are accountable to (unspecified) reproductive issues. For us, this is a shift in accountability: Gender is not *undone* so much as

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8. Francine M. Deutsch, "Undoing Gender," *Gender & Society* 21, no. 1 (2007): 1.
  9. Deutsch, "Undoing Gender"; Stefan Hirschauer, "Die soziale Fortpflanzung der Zweigeschlechtlichkeit," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 46, no. 4 (1994): 668–92; Jocelyn A. Hollander, "I Demand More of People': Accountability, Interaction, and Gender Change," *Gender & Society* 27, no. 1 (2013): 5–29; Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Accounting for Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 23, no. 1 (2009): 112–22; Catherine Connell, "Doing, Undoing, or Redoing Gender? Learning From the Workplace Experiences of Transpeople," *Gender & Society* 24, no. 1 (2010): 31–55.
  10. West and Zimmerman, "Accounting for Doing Gender," 117.
  11. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
  12. Barbara J. Risman, "From Doing to Undoing: Gender as We Know It," *Gender & Society* 23, no. 1 (2009): 84.

*redone.*"<sup>13</sup> In this articulation, "redoing gender" seems to describe situations where individuals who, based on their biology, are assumed to be members of particular sex categories, but who remain accountable to enacting certain roles associated with these categories. Even if all other gendered social expectations were to dissipate, as long as individuals remain accountable to performing certain socially prescribed reproductive activities, gender will not have been abolished. This view suggests that gender cannot be done away with because it assumes that social actors will hold each other accountable to entrenched gender norms; thus, gender cannot be "undone" — it can only be "redone" according to evolving norms.

Risman's and West and Zimmerman's discussions reveal underlying hegemonic assumptions linking gender identity and gender presentation to assigned sex (category) — where reproductive bodies are uniformly gender normative. Neither approach considers the possibilities of an absence of accountability to dominant gender norms or that actors' identities or reproductive capacities might exceed binary expectations. These assumptions undergird a hegemonic paradigm of gender and gender oppression. Research within this paradigm has tended to leave the perspectives and cultural practices of individuals who exceed normative gender expectations relatively undertheorized, limiting analysis of gender structures. The notions of doing and redoing gender seem indistinct, as they remain within the hegemonic gender paradigm. Also, although West and Zimmerman defined doing gender as a process in 1987, in 2009 they did not characterize redoing gender as a process; nor have scholars described undoing gender as a process, limiting its theorization. As meanings are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in the course of social interactions, to develop deeper understandings of gender meaning systems and the processual doing and undoing of gender as a construct, I examine interactional meaning-making processes in this research. To analyze gender meaning-making and -unmaking processes, I start from the perspectives and experiences of those rendered gender minorities and from a concern with gender normative

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13. West and Zimmerman, "Accounting for Doing Gender," 117–18 (italics in original).

domination and gender difference subjugation — a transfeminist point of departure.

In debates over whether gender is undoable, scholars have acknowledged the important roles that perception, interpretation, attribution, and accountability play in both the gender process and the possibilities of undoing it. The field of transgender studies pays particular attention to the possibilities and consequences of “reading” gender and of “being read” and, in particular, centers the structural concerns of gender minorities and their investments in undoing gender.<sup>14</sup> As attribution and accountability are key to gender accomplishment, this article develops an analysis of gender and pronoun attribution and accountability norms and practices. Utilizing a transfeminist methodology to investigate discursive-interactional gender- and pronoun-attribution practices, I examine how individuals whose gender appearances, identities, and/or histories depart from normative conceptions intersubjectively accomplish gender and pronouns and interrupt gender’s and gender pronouns’ normative accomplishment. I thus respond to Raewyn Connell’s call for a turn away from a focus on identity and the assumption of gender intransigence and toward feminist social science as a vital resource for understanding gender diversity, trans politics, and the realities of practice and process in the interactional achievement of gender.<sup>15</sup> Rather than speculate about whether gender can be undone, I push further, asking the question: How do gender minorities disrupt gender attribution?

Most researchers investigating how gender minorities impact the social world find that their presence does not change institutional inequalities, but rather, that they are interpreted (appropriately or not) through hegemonic frames and refigured into structured gender regimes.<sup>16</sup> For example, in employment, trans men receive a “patriarchal

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14. See Stone, “The Empire Strikes Back”; Talia Mae Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 3 (2007): 43–65; Viviane K. Namaste, *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgender People* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Sonny Nordmarken, “Becoming Ever More Monstrous: Feeling Transgender In-Betweenness,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (2014): 37–50.
  15. Raewyn Connell, “Transsexual Women and Feminist Thought: Toward New Understanding and New Politics,” *Signs* 37, no. 4 (2012): 857–81.
  16. For example, see Kristen Schilt and Catherine Connell, “Do Workplace Gender Transitions Make Gender Trouble?” *Gender, Work, and Organization* 14, no. 6 (2007): 596–618; Kristen Schilt, *Just One of the Guys? Transgender*

dividend” while trans women experience downward social mobility.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the routine accomplishment of gender normative interactional, administrative, and structural processes fails to account for gender minorities, mischaracterizing, excluding, and erasing them.<sup>18</sup> Interrelated regimes of gender normativity, heteronormativity, and racism are at work in violence against trans women of color and non-trans people’s rejection and misrecognition of gender minorities.<sup>19</sup> These examples suggest that gender minorities do not undo gender but rather that the hegemonic interpretive system, which shapes how social actors read and treat gender minorities, “undoes” (subjugates) them.

In addition, as hegemonic gender institutional processes are implicated in white supremacist projects of racism, colonialism, and imperialism, the racialization of subjects as nonwhite has constructed them as gender nonnormative, figuring them as inferior, regardless of how they have self-identified their gender; these constructions have been used to justify systemic oppression, such as slavery, genocide, and state violence.<sup>20</sup> Individuals who are perceived as gender-nonconforming, nonwhite men often experience the most deadly discipline, as they as a group have been targeted and murdered in the highest numbers, whether as an organized genocidal project or in separate incidences.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, disrupting gender norms can pose severe risks to gender minorities, especially to transfeminine people of color, and as gender meanings are

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*Men and the Persistence of Gender Inequality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

17. Schilt, *Just One of the Guys?*, 132–59.

18. Namaste, *Invisible Lives*; Sonny Nordmarken and Reese Kelly, “Limiting Transgender Health: Administrative Violence and Microaggressions in Health Care Systems,” in *Health Care Disparities and the LGBT Population*, ed. Vickie L. Harvey and Teresa Heinz Housel (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 143–66; Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2011).

19. Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook, “Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: ‘Gender Normals,’ Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality,” *Gender & Society* 23, no. 4 (2009): 440–64; Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (London: The Women’s Press, 1979).

20. Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

21. Deborah A. Miranda, “Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California,” *GLQ* 16, nos. 1–2 (2010): 253–84.

always already racialized meanings, undoing hegemonic gender meanings is only possible if we address racial/colonial gender discourses.

Rather than continuing the speculative endeavor regarding whether gender can be undone or interrogating oppression, I examine the effects of gender minorities' practices on meaning-making processes of social interaction. Processes of gendered social change, including the public emergence of changing gender identities, have brought about uncertainty in social actors about how to behave with regard to gender pronouns and attributions. This uncertainty can be understood as a form of anomie, or the breakdown of cultural norms. Gender anomie describes the uncertainty actors feel when interacting with gender minorities. In the nineteenth century, Emile Durkheim examined anomie in social systems that were in the midst of change.<sup>22</sup> As he wished for stability in uncertain times, Durkheim treated anomie as pathology of the social system.<sup>23</sup> Gender anomie is indeed problematic, as it contributes to the structural inequality gender minorities face, such as physical violence and discrimination in employment, healthcare, housing, education, and interactions with family members and the criminal justice system.<sup>24</sup> However, as I will explain, there are also positive aspects of gender anomie; it can be understood as a hopeful crack in a seemingly solidified oppressive system, a fissure in which possibilities for a more just society can be imagined and developed.

#### GENDER PARADIGMS, EPISTEMIC ASSUMPTIONS, ATTRIBUTION NORMS, AND POLITICAL PRACTICES

Gender attribution norms reflect gender paradigms and their epistemic assumptions. Although scholars have theorized gender as a cultural construct, the dominant gender paradigm in US culture equates gender

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22. Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (1893; repr., New York: Free Press, 1984).

23. *Ibid.*

24. Nordmarken and Kelly, "Limiting Transgender Health"; stef m. shuster, "Uncertain Expertise and the Limitations of Clinical Guidelines in Transgender Healthcare," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 57, no. 3 (2016): 319–32; Sandy E. James, Jody L. Herman, Susan Rankin, Mara Keisling, Lisa Mottet, and Ma'aya Anafi, *The Report of the 2015 US Transgender Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016).



with sex, figuring a merged “sex/gender” as binary, fixed, and biological.<sup>25</sup> This paradigm reflects epistemic assumptions about how gender *can be known*—holding that social actors are able to determine others’ gender identities (and appropriate gender pronouns) based on their own sensory perceptions of others’ bodies. These assumptions support the notion that individuals’ interpretations of trans people are more valid than their own self-identifications, maintaining social constructions of trans people as pretenders and deceivers.<sup>26</sup> The dominant norm is to attribute gender (placing people into one of two sex/gender categories) by relying on sensory perception—visual, aural, and tactile—to inspect physical appearance.<sup>27</sup> When inspecting others’ appearance, bodily markers such as secondary sex characteristics and body shape, as well as cultural markers such as adornment, comportment, and behavior, are taken to represent genital appearance and, thus, “sex.”<sup>28</sup> Social actors learn that it is appropriate to interpret bodily and cultural markers in order to determine gender and to hold others accountable to presenting such interpretable markers. In other words, it is the norm to attend to how others look and act in order to attribute gender. Social actors also learn that it is the norm (to which they are held accountable) to dress and behave in accordance with the prescriptions for one’s assigned sex/gender—for example, to look and act “like a girl” if one is assigned female.<sup>29</sup> Thus, actors interactionally construct one another in accordance with binary, biological understandings by displaying and attributing gender in these ways.<sup>30</sup> Using a dramaturgical approach, Erving Goffman characterizes this as a

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25. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

26. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl. A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2007); Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers.”

27. Erving Goffman, “The Arrangement between the Sexes,” *Theory and Society* 4, no. 3 (1977): 301–31.

28. Raine Dozier, “Beards, Breasts, and Bodies: Doing Sex in a Gendered World,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 3 (2005): 297–316; Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (New York: John Wiley, 1978).

29. Kessler and McKenna, *Gender*; West and Zimmerman, “Doing Gender.”

30. West and Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” 126.

collaborative process, whereby performers and audiences together construct selves during interactions.<sup>31</sup>

This process describes how gender is produced via the dominant gender paradigm. However, some social actors understand and experience gender in discordance with this paradigm. As Susan Stryker observes, “‘gender,’ as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity.”<sup>32</sup> Gender, as it is *known*, is also complex. Though variation abounds in trans epistemic communities in the United States, there appear two main counterhegemonic gender paradigms in this historical moment that in some ways conflict.<sup>33</sup> I will call these the *binary trans paradigm* and the *queer trans paradigm*. Some autobiographers define transsexuality as a quest for re-embodiment that establishes a missing congruence between sex and gender.<sup>34</sup> This “wrong body” perspective characterizes the binary trans paradigm, where actors conceptually distinguish gender identity from the body and claim epistemic authority in embodied feeling to claim legitimacy in the gender-normative discursive landscape that discredits their self-knowledge. Though it facilitates bodily changes (what Kristen Schilt calls “body projects”) in many medical-legal systems, this paradigm maintains a binary understanding of gender, evident in individuals’ identifications with the “opposite” sex/gender.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, the queer trans paradigm assumes that identities, expressions, and bodies are not intransigent, but can be and are unstable, fluid, multiple, and/or anticategorical; in this view, infinite possibilities exist for genders, sexes, bodies, sexualities, identities, categories, pronouns, and anticategorical existences.<sup>36</sup> This paradigm conceptual-

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31. Erving Goffman, *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).
  32. Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 3.
  33. Patricia Elliot, “Engaging Trans Debates on Gender Variance: A Feminist Analysis,” *Sexualities* 12, no. 1 (2009): 5–32.
  34. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
  35. Schilt, *Just One of the Guys?*, 34, 44–46.
  36. For example, see Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

izes gender as a changeable self-sense. The assumption of fluidity is an important feature of the queer trans paradigm, whereby no self-sense or term is understood as necessarily fixed. This perspective recognizes that an individual identifying as cis might at another time identify otherwise. The presumed instability of *all* social actors' identities and pronouns and the notion of gender as a changeable state of self threaten the semblance of stability and normativity suggested by the cis category, as it is constructed from a hegemonic gender perspective.

Even with changeability, both trans paradigms reflect an individual's avowed commitment to who they are, which may not align with their assigned sex, physical appearance, or another person's perception of them.<sup>37</sup> Individuals here are assumed to be legitimate and ultimate knowers of their own truths. If the hegemonic gender paradigm holds that beneath gender presentation is the body (the sign of gender truth), the binary and queer trans paradigms hold that beneath the body is identity (the actual sign of gender truth).<sup>38</sup>

As distinctions are used to affirm unequal institutional arrangements and relations of power, distinguishing more identity categories (e.g., cis, trans, nonbinary, agender) and pronouns could be used to justify subjugation by reaffirming individuals' imagined essentially different natures and a belief in gender stability and normativity for those apprehending them. Michel Pêcheux describes this kind of problem, where "Bad Subjects" reject dominant ideological identifications, "counteridentifying" and rebelling against dominant symbolic systems, inadvertently reinforcing the dominant ideology's dominance.<sup>39</sup> Pêcheux proposes the strategy of disidentification, which, instead of assimilating or rejecting dominant ideology, works on and against it.<sup>40</sup> Instead of attempting to break free of dominant ideology's inescapable sphere, this "working on and against" tries to transform its cultural logic from within.<sup>41</sup> For José

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37. Talia Mae Bettcher, "Trans Identities and First Person Authority," in *You've Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity*, ed. Laurie J. Shrage (London: Oxford University Press, 2009).

38. Talia Mae Bettcher, "Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance," *Signs* 39, no. 2 (2013): 383–406.

39. Michel Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics and Ideology*, trans. Harbans Nagpal (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 157–8, 164–6, 169, 195.

40. *Ibid.*, 158–9, 162–3, 162n8, 170, 195, 198, 215.

41. *Ibid.*, 158–9, 162–3, 162n8, 170, 195, 198, 215.

Muñoz, “such a process can be understood as disidentificatory in that it is not about assimilation into a heterosexual matrix but instead is a partial disavowal of that cultural form that works to restructure it from within.”<sup>42</sup> For Muñoz:

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.<sup>43</sup>

As I will elaborate, both binary and queer trans paradigms are disidentificatory discourses that separate sex from gender, body from identity, making gender agentic and enabling gender minorities, via the interactional performativity practices I will illustrate, to produce themselves as knowing and speaking subjects.

#### RESEARCH CONTEXTS AND METHODS

The analyses this article develops are based on auto/ethnographic observations over the past fifteen years of my experiences as a gender non-conforming trans person living in trans communities, interacting with others, and witnessing others interact, plus hundreds of informal interviews and twenty formal, semi-structured interviews. As such, the analyses represent particular US-based communities and do not represent all communities or individuals who could be interpellated as trans. Although a historical excavation of how the linguistic protocols developed is beyond the scope of this study, I will share my own personal history to contextualize this research.

I remember the moment I first learned the pronoun *zie*. In 2002, during a college spring break trip, I was visiting a friend at a housing

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42. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 28.

43. *Ibid.*, 31.

cooperative in Santa Cruz, California. Another visitor there, a gender nonconforming person from Portland, Oregon, explained the pronoun *zie*. I returned, excited to know this new information, to my women's studies college classes, only to find that no one I encountered — neither professors nor students — was aware of this term. It was not until I moved to San Francisco in 2004 that I learned linguistic protocols from peers — trans and genderqueer friends and acquaintances, most of whom were in their 20s and 30s. I learned to communicate my pronouns and ask people theirs, and I began referring to others using their self-designated pronouns. I found that some of my coworkers and some professors and students in my then graduate program were familiar with these pronoun practices, and despite my bodily appearance, they and my nonacademic, cis housemates and friends called me “he” after I asked them to. Most individuals ostensibly less familiar with these protocols were slower to catch on, whether they forgot or refused to call me “he.” I had similar experiences while living in Atlanta from 2008 to 2009, western Massachusetts from 2009 to 2017, and Tucson in 2016. In addition, when over the past fifteen years I traveled — for example, to New York City, Philadelphia, and Canada for trans community events, private gatherings of friends, and academic conferences — I observed people following linguistic protocols and honoring others' self-designated pronouns and names.

Most trans and queer people I met in each of the communities I lived in and visited were familiar with these linguistic practices (regardless of their race or class), but there were a few who were not — who, it seemed, were older and had transitioned some time ago, or were isolated from or newer to these communities. The people I interacted with were mobile, assembling temporarily in a particular location, such as a nightclub, theater, conference center, living room, or workplace, or via digital technology. I lived with several informants and interacted with others in phone conversations and digital communications, in private gatherings, and in public trans and queer community events, such as performances, political actions, religious services, academic events, community conferences, and art festivals. Thus, linguistic protocols exceeded sites previously understood to contextualize them, such as social service providers, youth communities, urban areas, and educational institutions. Reflecting broader trends, the trans communities I observed in metropolitan

areas were substantially more racially and ethnically diverse than those in small towns and rural areas.

The interviews I conducted in 2011 ranged from forty minutes to three hours in duration and were with gender minorities in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Bay Area is large (population seven million), metropolitan, diverse, and politically “liberal.” I combined purposive and snowball sampling methods to recruit interviewees through my personal networks using social media and community websites. Seven interviewees identified as genderqueer, six identified as female, five identified as male or FTM (female-to-male), and one claimed no category; one was a drag performer, one cross-dressed, and one identified as female, cross-dressed, and had performed in drag. Nine used “he/him” pronouns, three used “she/her,” three had no preference, one used “they/them,” one used “sie/hir,” one used either “she” or “they,” and three (including the one who used “sie/hir”) used different pronouns depending on the context.<sup>44</sup> Eight participants reported being interpreted as “male” regularly, four as “female” regularly, and eight were reportedly read alternately as “male,” “female,” and/or as “unreadable” — many experienced occasional to frequent misgendering. Their ages ranged from twenty to sixty-one years. Twelve participants identified as white, two as African American, one as Asian, one as Asian American, one as Native American, and three identified with multiple racial and/or ethnic identities. Nine participants had some college education, one held an associate’s degree, four held bachelor’s degrees, and six held advanced degrees. Five had “semi-skilled” to “professional” occupations; nine worked in reportedly lower-paying, “semi-skilled” occupations; five were unemployed; and one was a college student. Although I attempted to recruit people different from myself, my sample is majority white, assigned female at birth, and on average more formally educated than the general US population. Therefore, the interview data reflect certain emphases and absences, and the findings might be more typical of people and communities marked by whiteness, female birth assignment, and/or formal education.

The small proportion (only eight out of a total of twenty) of interviewees of color has specific implications and limitations. Research by

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44. “Sie” and “hir” (pronounced “see” and “heer”) are used in place of “she”/“he” and “him”/“her.”

white people on white people has dominated the enterprise of knowledge-production across world-historical contexts as a component of colonial and racial domination projects. This mode of research in feminist studies leads to the universalization of white women's perspectives, experiences, and knowledges and the erasure and misrepresentation of the perspectives, experiences, and knowledges of women of color and women in the Global South—domination processes that obscure themselves, but that many feminists have exposed through critique.<sup>45</sup> Although anticolonial and critical race feminist studies have expanded, whiteness and coloniality problems remain in much research, wherein scholars leave coloniality, race, and racial domination unacknowledged and unexamined. Similarly, although many transgender studies scholars have centered this problem, it persists in trans studies as well.<sup>46</sup> In the current study, the numbers of interviewees of each different racial group are not large enough to elucidate patterns or make meaningful comparisons between racial groups, making it difficult to determine if and how race shaped gender anomic interactions and linguistic gender accomplishment practices. Acknowledging this, I urge scholars to pursue further research in order to examine how coloniality, race, and racism shape disruptive and productive gender resistance practices in disparate contexts.

Transgender community is a construct and an achievement.<sup>47</sup> As David Valentine notes, “Despite the assumption of a transgender community . . . rather than a pre-existing community, there are a variety of dispersed places which are brought together *by* ‘transgender’ into an idea of community.”<sup>48</sup> Gender diverse individuals may or may not identify as “transgender.” Though I observed particular sites, I found that

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45. For example, see Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61–88.

46. Treva Ellison, Kai M. Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton, “We Got Issues: Toward a Black Trans\*/Studies,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2017): 162–69.

47. David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

48. *Ibid.*, 72 (italics in original).

common linguistic practices join disparate individuals together in a linguistic community and that “trans community” appears to be achieved through the spread of linguistic practices. Therefore, this study examines the achievement of an epistemic-linguistic “community of practice”: a group of people who, regardless of how they personally identify, share a queer understanding of gender and who together engage in queer linguistic gendering practices.<sup>49</sup>

My positionality gave me a particular perspective on these practices. As a trans researcher in a world and an academe dominated by “gender normals,” I am an “outsider within.”<sup>50</sup> I have been both “socially female” and “socially male”: I have been perceived and treated as both female and male. My gender has also been illegible, and I have been treated in the way those of us who embody gender complexity are treated. For fifteen years, as my gender identity and appearance shifted many times, people interacted with me alternately as if I were a white, boyish girl, adolescent boy, young man, feminine man, genderqueer, transmasculine person, and unintelligible person. My history and positionality shape the research, data, interpretations, and knowledge I create.

#### QUEERING HEGEMONIC GENDER

Interruptions to the hegemonic gender process manifest in two ways. First, whether or not they themselves are trans, interaction partners reverse gender accountability by collaboratively disidentifying and reworking attribution procedures, verbally identifying self-designated gender pronouns and terms rather than nonverbally attending to one another’s bodies. Second, gender nonconforming individuals bring about a state of gender anomie in unwise perceivers, which inhibits them from gendering and thus interacting with these individuals. These interruptions queer hegemonic gendering norms and procedures, situationally inhibiting the reproduction of normative categories.

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49. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, “Think Practically and Look Locally: Language and Gender as Community-Based Practice,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21, no. 1 (1992): 461–88.

50. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, 122–28; Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought,” *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): s14–s32.



*"I Use They/Them":**Doing Pronouns, Doing Gender, and Linguistic Accountability*

The linguistic practices I observed reflected an overarching interpretive framework, accountability structure, and resistance strategy, which interlocutors use to orient to, recognize, and intersubjectively produce non-normative gender forms. Interaction partners' exchanges suggest that they did not assume that identities were binary or linked to gender assignment or bodies; rather, their interactions reflect queer trans paradigmatic notions that (1) identities are complex; (2) identities and pronouns are subject to change; (3) selves — not perceivers — are epistemic authorities regarding gender identities and pronouns; (4) nonlinguistic, sensory perception of bodies is an invalid gendering method; and (5) verbal communication about pronouns (and identities) is a valid gendering method. These interaction rules assume that it is not possible to know a person's gender identity or the appropriate gender pronouns to use when referring to them by relying solely on one's sensory perception of their body. When interacting in trans counterpublic spaces, social actors learn to stop inspecting bodies for signs of gender and to communicate linguistically in order to accomplish gender and pronouns. Translating theoretical deconstruction into life interactions, these practitioners queer the hegemonic accountability structure by transforming it, doing pronouns and gender differently.

Individuals ask each other about and hold themselves accountable to using self-designated gender pronouns. Slide, a white person in his mid-thirties appreciated when upon meeting others, they asked him, "Are there some pronouns you prefer?"<sup>51</sup> For Slide, this question "indicates that [the person is] participating in a cultural practice of not assuming that they know how someone is going to identify just by looking at them." Sie could then "signal an appropriate way for people to interpret me, a way that I want to be encountered in that space." Members of this linguistic community attribute gender by disregarding others' bodily characteristics and communicating linguistically — sharing and inviting others to share how they would like to be referred to. Asking about a person's pronouns indicates a queer understanding of gender (as unstable, nonbinary, changeable, complex, and open-ended), deemphasizes

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51. Participants' names are pseudonyms.

gender identities, and recognizes multiple different pronoun identifications or none. The question shifts validity away from the body as a sign of gender and sensory interpretation as a gendering method. When I first encountered these practices in the early 2000s, I learned to attend less to the bodily characteristics I had previously learned to recognize as “gendered,” such as height, voice pitch, hairstyle, and clothing. I learned to deliberately disregard my perceptions, guesses or assumptions about others’ sexed bodies and, instead, sought pronoun declarations. Importantly, I learned to hold myself accountable to asking others about their self-designated pronouns and using them. Asking others to identify their gender identities, such as trans woman, genderqueer, nonbinary, agender, or man, was less common and deemphasized.

I saw many individuals voluntarily communicate their own pronouns. Some people used alternative pronouns, such as “ze”/“hir”/“hirs” or “they”/“them”/“theirs,” in lieu of “she”/“her”/“hers” or “he”/“him”/“his.” Stating pronouns enables others to use them appropriately, as appearance does not necessarily reflect pronouns or identity. For instance, Jamie, a tall, white person with a high voice who wore “men’s” clothing, declared that he identified as a woman and went by “he.” Linguistically communicating self-designated terms holds interlocutors accountable to using them.

Individuals commonly communicated pronouns by introducing themselves or telling an autobiographical story. When I met Zade, a Black and Native American person in hir thirties, ze told me: “I go by ‘ze’ and ‘hir.’” Less directly, at a dinner, Ari, a white person in their thirties, shared a story about how their boss mispronounced them, calling them “she,” not “they.” Telling this story directed listeners to call Ari “they.” At many gatherings, classes, support groups, and conferences, individuals stated their names and pronouns when introducing themselves. Some conferences distributed nametags where attendees could write pronouns, which allowed social actors to circumvent speaking, thus, performing pronouns for their wearers.

In queer/trans community spaces, communication about pronouns and names is ongoing. Understanding that they may change, people regularly invite each other to communicate them. At a party, one person asked for the conversation to pause so everyone could identify their pronouns. Running into old friends I had not seen in a while, some asked me if I was still “Sonny” and “he.” People also proactively communicated

when their name and/or pronouns changed. When Alex, a white trans guy in his early thirties who went by “she” when I met him and later used “they,” let me know that he had begun to use “he” by saying, “You can call me ‘he.’” Checking in demonstrates an intersubjective recognition that identities, names, and/or pronouns can change and communicates and holds attributors accountable to using verified terms.

Sometimes, when people encountered perceivers misgendering them or others (using inappropriate pronouns), they verbally held perceivers accountable to using self-designated pronouns. When Red, an Asian and white person in their late twenties experienced coworkers mispronouncing them at work, they told them, “I need you to not call me ‘she.’” Individuals at times caught and corrected themselves in the midst of using inappropriate pronouns or former names (called “dead names” or “dead-naming”) when referring to others. Individuals “in the know” paid attention to names and pronouns, even after declarations, because they knew they may change and they may have initially received misinformation. Red described how they unintentionally mispronounced their friend who, like Red, used the pronoun “they.” Red shared, “We got introduced through another friend, who introduced them to me as ‘he.’ I called them ‘he’ a long time, but eventually figured it out when I noticed other people calling them ‘they.’ I asked somebody, and they were like ‘I’m pretty sure it’s gender neutral.’ I was like, whoops!” Here, Red asked for clarification when they noticed others referring to their friend as “they.” Although it would have been best to ask their friend directly, Red held themselves accountable to using the appropriate pronouns.

Some people used several different pronouns, different pronouns depending on the context, or no pronouns at all, and some people called everyone by the gender neutral pronoun, “they”/“them” (though this practice was not pervasive). Logan, a transmasculine-identified white person in their early twenties, uses “they” in queer/trans spaces, and “he” in mainstream settings. Slide uses “sie” and “hir” in most spaces and “she” at work. People creatively strategized when others used no pronouns, saying, “that person” or using the person’s name. Some people used specific pronouns in certain contexts and no pronouns in others. At an academic conference in southern California, an attendee declared, “I’m not going to go by any pronouns here,” while writing on a nametag: “no pronouns.” At times, people refused to gender or pronoun others and/or themselves. At a house party in a northeastern city, the host called

everyone “they”/“them.” Red shared, “I like people and places where there is no gendering happening, where people don’t use pronouns, or they use ‘they’ or a name with everyone.” The emphasis on pronouns and self-definition in these spaces alleviated the normative accountability to display and attribute gender through behavior and appearance. Individuals had the choice and authority to communicate their pronouns, and it was the norm to forgo gender-categorizing others. Hegemonic gendering methods became inappropriate, gendered behavioral expectations became irrelevant, and linguistic communication and use of self-designated pronouns gained importance.

However, bodies, behavior, and clothing were not meaningless to individuals — they understood how these things operated in hegemonic gender matrices. Marie recalled how medical providers ignored her “noticeable breast tissue” and focused on her “plumbing.” She also said that these providers should have told each other, “This person is transgender, please refer to her this way, this is the name she prefers, these are the pronouns you use.” Marie observed her body’s importance in hegemonic gender matrices, and though she engaged in body projects, she prioritized linguistic gendering practices, unlike some of Valentine’s informants, for example, who attended to others’ bodies to gender them.<sup>52</sup>

Linguistic gendering practices have extended beyond trans/queer communities, likely because individuals have increasingly held each other accountable to honoring self-designated pronouns in more spaces, especially in educational and religious organizations. Student affairs workers, professors, and students increasingly list their pronouns in email signature lines; some conferences allow attendees to include gender pronouns on nametags; some college instructors have pronoun policies on their syllabi and/or do “pronoun go-arounds” in their classrooms. I observed two religious youth group leaders stating their gender pronouns when they introduced themselves to large groups of people at a public political rally in Tucson. These instances demonstrate that awareness and engagement of linguistic pronoun practices is spreading.

Although West and Zimmerman observed that individuals held each other accountable to presenting and embodying gender according to hegemonic gender norms, members of communities I observed did

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52. Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*.

not hold each other accountable to this conformity. Rather, they held each other accountable to alternative pronoun display and attribution norms, which directed interlocutors to ask and refer to each other using individuals' self-designated terms. Doing gender theory has been built on Goffman's dramaturgical approach, which casts gender attributors as audiences and gender displayers as performers. However, as verbal inquiries and attributions of pronouns are performative, attributors are also performers. Spectators are turned into performers in the acts of asking about and using pronouns. And pronoun displayers are also audiences who witness and receive others' speech acts that characterize them. Pronoun displayers hold attributors accountable to representing them in the ways they have designated. As pronoun attributors know they are being held accountable by those they refer to and by other spectators in a milieu, they hold themselves accountable. Here, the mutual interactional exchange that produces gender pronouns is collaboratively performative — it is more collaborative than the hegemonic self-production process that Goffman described. The interactive linguistic performative practices I describe here represent a change in conceptions and accountability, reversing those West and Zimmerman observed.

These practices operationalized a queer gender epistemology and discourse. Pronoun utterances took the body's place in referential practices, where actors were concerned not with placing people into gender categories but with the use of self-designated pronouns — including the use of no pronouns. Pronouns acted as a placeholder for gender; they gestured toward gender but they did not correspond to gender categories. Pronouns were accomplished, but as pronouns did not necessarily correspond to specific gender categories, when identities were not stated, gender was not accomplished. Thus, pronoun practices linguistically reconstituted the notion of gender as a changeable sense of self, rather than a fixed category.

Actors using these practices queered the hegemonic gender process, using new display, attribution, and accountability norms and assumptions, and undid the hegemonic gender process, doing away with hegemonic gender display, attribution, and accountability norms, meanings, and assumptions. Detaching gender from the body and from nonlinguistic cultural signs, detaching gender identity categories from pronouns and hegemonic meanings, expanding pronoun and category possibilities, and constituting identities as states rather than fixed entities, these

actors *reworked* the gender meaning system, overhauling its foundations. Not assuming pronouns or identities, using self-designated pronouns, and oscillating between pronouns transcended normative gendering. Focusing on pronouns, recognizing self-defined identities, and diminishing the importance of bodies, this community did gender differently, intersubjectively producing new genders and pronouns. Thus, language was mobilized in a disruptive and productive trans subject formation particular to the early twenty-first-century United States.

Alternative gender paradigms and self-referential interactional practices are disidentificatory rather than counteridentificatory; rather than trying to eradicate gender as a meaning system, these social actors queered, reworked, and augmented it, using collaborative meaning-making practices that expanded and cultivated new meanings. Thus, gender minorities as cultural workers reworked gender meanings. Asking others to honor their individual identities and pronouns, they enlisted them as collaborators in a disidentificatory meaning-making practice. All participants, as audience-performers and performer-audiences did gender through a process of collaborative disidentification. Through this relational, co-performative disidentification, social actors contributed to the creation, function, and expansion of a counterpublic sphere, pushing forward queer gender world-making.

### *Incomplete Gendering and the Uneven Institutionalization of Linguistic Practices*

Although many linguistic community members practiced what they learned, some assumed others' pronouns or gender identities, showing how linguistic pronoun practices were utilized inconsistently. These practices are thus ideal types; their institutionalization is incomplete. I also observed an additional practice: wise perceivers either avoided pronouns or referred to other individuals as "they" and "that person" when they seemed to not know what terms to use. For example, when Saulo and his coworker saw a person on the street in San Francisco:

[My coworker] looked at *the person*, and was like "That guy is so androgynous." I was like, "What makes you think that *they're* a guy?" She was like, "Well, I can see he's a guy." The *person* she was talking about I felt was clearly presenting as transfeminine, so I felt protective of how she was viewing *them*, so I was like, "I don't know if *that*

*person identifies that way*—trying to explain how to read different people, how to not read different people.

Saulo guessed that this person might not identify with their assigned gender when he interpreted their appearance. (I demonstrate this here, too). Calling the person “they”/“them,” and stating “*I don’t know if that person identifies that way*” indicated that Saulo did not know the person’s identity or pronouns, even as he privately “felt” the person was “clearly presenting as transfeminine.” Saulo classified this individual within an indeterminate category of “gender unknown,” illustrating an additional queer gendering protocol: if a person appears gender ambiguous, use the pronoun “they” when referring to them until notified otherwise. The “they”/“them” pronoun designation is temporary here, and will be replaced if the person identifies their pronouns (and their pronouns are not “they”/“them”).

I have similarly observed wise social actors referring to a person as “they”/“them” or saying “I don’t know what pronouns to use” when the person’s appearance was gender nonconforming—for example, a person who had a beard, long hair, and a skirt. This suggests that pronoun attributors noted gender nonconforming appearance. Although queer gendering rules claim that bodies are not relevant for attributing gender, bodies seemed to play a role in signifying gender nonconformity. The body therefore remained an important sign to those aiming to use others’ self-designated pronouns. Using “they”/“them” pronouns when unsure, actors deployed parts of both queer and hegemonic gendering protocols, attending to bodies but not categorizing them.

Using “they”/“them” pronouns due to perceived ambiguity constitutes a disruption to the hegemonic gender process and can be understood within the rubric of queering gendering. However, in considering its potential to contribute to the project of undoing gender, there are some conceptual and practical problems. How a person is deemed ambiguous is subjective. Conceptually, ambiguity only has meaning within a binary or categorical understanding of gender. Therefore, noting ambiguity reestablishes notions of nonambiguous gender, which could be valued over ambiguity in a hegemonic paradigm. Calling everyone “they,” regardless of their appearance might more effectively contribute to undoing gender, but individuals who use other pronouns could experience this as misgendering.

*“I’m Identifiable as Being Unidentifiable”:*

*Inhibiting Gender Attribution through Gender Anomie*

While wise perceivers know to use “they”/“them” pronouns when referring to gender nonconforming individuals whose self-designated pronouns were unknown, unwise perceivers are not aware of this protocol. They have trouble when attempting to gender-categorize people who appear gender nonconforming. Thus, manifesting as uncertainty and hesitation, gender anomie interrupts the hegemonic gender process. Gender anomic moments illustrate how developing norms (which threaten established norms) are as yet unevenly integrated into practices; wise social actors operate by new rules while unwise actors do not.

Systems of state surveillance and securitization regulate bodies at airport security checkpoints.<sup>53</sup> Here, passengers are gender-matched to security agents for pat downs, which can bring gender anomie to the fore. Saulo recalled several times airport security agents had trouble gendering him. He shared that once, “I [could] see that the person in front of me [was] having a moment of not knowing what to do and not knowing who to ask to pat me down. . . . One of them was very confused and whispered to the one behind her, ‘I don’t know if it’s a guy or a woman.’” Here, Saulo’s appearance appeared to arrest this perceiver’s gendering process and inhibit subsequent interactive behavior. This illustrates how, as the hegemonic gender paradigm structures interactions, perceivers often do not know how to behave when interacting with people they cannot place into one of the two hegemonic gender categories, which Saulo’s perceiver demonstrated by verbally claiming not knowing if he was “a guy or a woman.”

Blaine, a white trans guy in his early forties, encountered gender anomie at a new job, where he had disclosed his trans identity. In his first week, his boss greeted him and his coworker, saying, “Hello, ladies.” Blaine became visibly upset, which his boss noticed and apologized, saying, “It’s new for me to have transgender people [here], and I don’t know how to be around transgender people,” illustrating gender anomie. Blaine’s

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53. Toby Beauchamp, “Artful Concealment and Strategic Visibility: Transgender Bodies and US State Surveillance After 9/11,” *Surveillance & Society* 6, no. 4 (2009): 356–66; Paisley Currah and Tara Mulqueen, “Securitizing Gender: Identity, Biometrics, and Transgender Bodies at the Airport,” *Social Research* 78, no. 2 (2011): 557–82.



boss was unsure how to interact with him, but attempted to follow hegemonic gender attribution norms, interpreting his bodily appearance.

Gender anomie was evident in perceivers' facial and other non-verbal expressions. Many interviewees described "that questioning look," as Nova, a trans woman of African descent in her early twenties, called it. Jim, an Asian and Native American trans man in his mid-forties, described similar looks. In responses he attributed to his gendered appearance, Jim had seen "furrowed eyebrows, staring, and quizzical or puzzled looks on the face." He encountered "a lot of these looks and [could] recognize [them]." Every interviewee reported observing looks like these in moments when their gender difference was visible or when they had disclosed their transness to perceivers.

Colin, a white person in his mid-thirties who described his gender as "even" and who had recently started taking testosterone, described what it looked like "when people are trying to figure out your gender," sharing, "people have this long, lingering look at me after I say something to them, like the first thing I say to them, they'll look at me longer or look me over." These lingering looks indicated to Colin that others were attempting to gender him and having trouble. He estimated that the incongruence between his "female"-appearing chest and his "male"-sounding voice confounded his perceivers, explaining:

If I'm not wearing a binder and I say something out loud, they'll look back at me with surprise because I'm talking in a really low voice. . . . They'll have a more extended conversation with me with a quizzical look at me. I can see their eyes looking at my body in different places. . . . They'll look at your crotch, breasts, throat, or face. It's like, dude . . . , stop looking at my pants.

Perceivers likely scrutinized Colin's body because it's the norm to look for gender signs on the body, and it's culturally taboo to ask a person about their gender. However, in these cases, perceivers who look at and listen to people in attempts to gender them fail to accomplish the gendering process.

Nina, who was in her early sixties and identified as white, male, "a woman inside," and a drag performer, wore women's clothes occasionally. She understood double takes as responses to her appearance because, "You don't see that in ordinary life," (i.e., when she is not wearing women's clothes). Nina was surprised that her appearance "creates that much

of a disturbance.” She surmised that interacting with people who look like her “is a situation [people] don’t have to deal with often. It is not covered in guidebooks. I may be the first one they’ve ever seen. They have to make a choice, have to make a decision.” Nina pointed to how most people do not learn norms for interacting with someone whose gender is indiscernible; they only learn norms for how to interact with people who appear gender-normative — who look clearly like women or men. She estimated that her perceivers faced a perplexing interactional predicament when she did not appear discretely female or male. As Nina suggested, (and according to hegemonic gendering norms), perceivers must gender people they encounter before they can interact with them because behavioral norms are fundamentally gendered: perceivers should behave in a particular gendered way depending on the gender of the person they are interacting with.

Gender anomie was also evident when perceivers hesitated and avoided verbally alluding to others’ genders. Colin knew when people could not gender him because, when referring to him, they would “leave out their pronouns.” Colin observed this maneuvering when asking the location of a bathroom: “They’ll look at me for a while, and say, ‘Well, the women’s is there, the men’s is there,’ because they don’t know where to direct me. So, I know in a lot of cases I’m identifiable as being unidentifiable.” The hegemonic gender logic that structures built environments leads to the policing of gender minorities in gender-segregated spaces.<sup>54</sup> To direct him to a bathroom, Colin’s perceiver followed hegemonic gendering rules, looking at him, hesitating, scrutinizing him, and stating locations of both bathrooms. Colin interpreted this behavior as evidence that he “looks trans,” which created anxiety for him, as he was aware of prevalent transphobic violence.

These accounts illustrate inhibited attempts to follow hegemonic gendering rules. Visible gender nonconformity challenges the assumption that one can always determine a person’s gender upon inspecting them and obstructs interactional behavior. Whether trans-identified or not, and whether intentional or not, gender nonconforming individuals interrupt the hegemonic gendering process, challenging its

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54. Laurel Westbrook and Kristen Schilt, “Doing Gender, Determining Gender: Transgender People, Gender Panics, and the Maintenance of the Sex/Gender/Sexuality System,” *Gender & Society* 28, no. 1 (2014): 32–57.

epistemological assumptions and preventing perceivers from attributing a gender and from interacting. Gender-anomic scenarios illustrate how, when performers do not hold themselves accountable to approximating norms, would-be gender attributors fail to accomplish the gendering process. Gender nonconformity inhibited perceivers from attributing gender — queering hegemonic gender and undoing the hegemonic gender process by inhibiting the reproduction of gender categories and their binary, biologized, hegemonic meanings. However, gender nonconformity does not undo gender meanings absolutely, because the hegemonic gender process remains intact in situations with normative actors. Unlike the intentional disidentificatory political performances of queers of color Muñoz analyzes, everyday nonconforming actors may not choose to evoke gender anomie; however, gender anomie has similar political effects of exposing the dominant culture's conventions and confounding socially prescriptive patterns of identification.<sup>55</sup> Gender anomie thus interactionally interrupts the discursive production of gender in interactions, rendering gender un(re)iterable.

#### QUEERING GENDERING'S POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

I have shown how interactive gender attribution interruptions and transfigurations queer the hegemonic gendering process. Gender differences that evoked uncertainty in perceivers inhibit gender's accomplishment, undoing the hegemonic gender process. When perceivers reject hegemonic gendering practices and adopt linguistic pronoun practices, they undo the hegemonic gender process and disidentificatorily do gender, doing pronouns without redoing hegemonic gender categories and honoring variations of and movement within and between gendered, nonbinary, and genderless identities. Social actors hold themselves and each other accountable to linguistic pronoun attribution norms, moving the interpretive focus away from the body and from gender identities. Linguistic pronoun attribution reflects a paradigm shift in the locus of epistemological and ontological authority on what gender *is*, from the body to the self as a state, expanding possibilities for many genders to intersubjectively exist. Challenging biologized, binary assumptions, gender

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55. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 28, 31.

attribution interruption and linguistic gender practices disidentificatorily, processually queers gender.

Although, for Butler, gender's possibilities are limited by discourse — the subject does not bring into being what the subject names, but, rather, discourse precedes, produces, regulates, and constrains the speaking subject — she predicted that, "If gender itself is naturalized through grammatical norms . . . then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given."<sup>56</sup> As texts, cultural workers, and social actors, gender nonconformers and queer trans linguistic community members contest and rework the grammar through which gender is hegemonically given. Bodies that interrupt gender attribution also interrupt the citational reproduction of gender. Queer trans discursive structures, which honor gender minorities as speaking and knowing actor-subjects, constitute changes in both *symbolic* and *interactional* grammars of gender and pronouns — modifications in language and how it is used to determine and signify gender. Gender is thus not only citational; it is also interactionally discursive. Though language limits imaginable possibilities, social actors also create language to describe experiences, generating new discourse to engender new realities.

As Connell argues, treating gender as performative and citational is not enough, because gender is ontoformative: "Practice starts from structure, but does not repetitively cite its starting point. Rather, social practice continuously brings social reality into being, and that social reality becomes the ground of new practice through time."<sup>57</sup> My analysis illustrates how not only structure, but also epistemological formations, creative imaginings, and self-knowledge augment practices. Practices accomplished in interactions make conceptual changes to what gender is. Practice stems from and creates new starting points, modifying previous ones, to bring new social realities into being. Thus, new discourse becomes the ground of new practice.

This evidence challenges expectations that social actors hold themselves and each other accountable to entrenched norms and challenges

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56. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xix.

57. Connell, "Transsexual Women and Feminist Thought," 866.

the claim that trans people reinforce the hegemonic gender system.<sup>58</sup> Rather, actors make disidentificatory interventions, obstructing gendering through evoking gender anomie and introducing and using linguistic attribution practices. Rather than mobilizing “naturalness” rhetoric to resignify trans bodies in a hegemonic frame, queer trans linguistic communities rendered bodies illegitimate signs of gender and legitimated selves as knowers and linguistic communication as gendering method.<sup>59</sup> As linguistic gender practices enable actors to fashion and designate self-concepts and referential terms, and as gender anomie interrupts perceivers’ conceptual and behavioral habits, these queerings “open up a field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized.”<sup>60</sup> As embodied texts who have historically been rendered illegible, trans cultural worker-social actors wrest, dissolve, and transfigure the discursive structures that constitute themselves as subjects.

If “doing gender furnishes the interactional scaffolding of social structure,” and if practices constitute and reproduce structures, then how might interrupting and modifying gendering impact gender as a structure?<sup>61</sup> For West and Zimmerman, changes in “the normative system involved in gender accountability... involve both changes in persons’ orientation to these norms and *changes in social relations* that reflexively support changes in orientation” (italics added).<sup>62</sup> Gender anomie and linguistic attribution practices do not dismantle gendered social structure, but they challenge hegemonic epistemological assumptions and orientations to norms, challenging and changing *gender categorizing norms* as well as ideas of what is possible and real—interventions necessary for changing power relations. Gender anomie represents a tear in the social fabric that maintains the gender order. Such a tear could

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58. West and Zimmerman, “Accounting for Doing Gender”; Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire*.

59. Valerie Jenness and Sarah Fenstermaker, “Agnes Goes to Prison: Gender Authenticity, Transgender Inmates in Prisons for Men, and Pursuit of ‘The Real Deal,’” *Gender & Society* 28, no. 1 (2014): 5–31.

60. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii.

61. West and Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” 147; Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

62. West and Zimmerman, “Accounting for Doing Gender,” 118.

lead to the unraveling and possible reweaving of the social fabric into new, not-yet-imagined shapes where power and order might take new forms. Further research is needed to investigate the impacts of gender anomie and linguistic gendering practices on structural power. Studies on the integration and institutionalization of linguistic gender practices in organizations and communities and on how new gender epistemologies, linguistic gendering practices, and gender anomie change power dynamics and hierarchies in actors' interpersonal relations and groups are needed. Additionally, research on gender-queering practices in different linguistic sites beyond Anglophone US communities is needed, as the semantic gender system of Modern English, where nouns referring to females and males generally take gendered pronouns, is the exception, not the rule among the world's languages.<sup>63</sup>

Although this research illustrates provocative processes, there are several limitations to the goal of undoing gender — defined as the cessation of gender as a meaningful concept — and the liberatory potential of the processes I have described. For one, although gender anomie arrests hegemonic gendering, it can exacerbate inequality for the individuals who evoke it — visible gender minorities are often punished. Additionally, challenging hegemonic gender accountability and verbally identifying self-designated pronouns do not combat ideals or structures of whiteness, economic capital, nondisabledness, and heterosexuality, which shape gender defined in a US context. Further studies investigating how race, class, ability, and sexuality ideals and structures shape power dynamics experienced by gender minorities in and outside queer trans linguistic communities are needed. Also, although queer gender linguistic community members make efforts to refer to others using self-designated pronouns, mistakes and the persistent attention to bodies indicate that the body remains a relevant sign to them. This suggests that, though championed and enforced in these communities, the impetus to “unsee” bodily characteristics associated with gender is not completely realized. In the contemporary United States, the political impetus to “unsee” bodily characteristics associated with race has resulted in “colorblind racism,” where individuals claim that they “don't see race,” yet retain

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63. Anne Curzan, *Gender Shifts in the History of English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

racist perspectives.<sup>64</sup> The task of not “seeing” (noting) bodily characteristics associated with gender could result in a parallel “bodyblind”/“genderblind” stance denying a continued attention to bodies and their hegemonic meanings.

As individuals often place importance on their own gender identities, undoing gender and other identity categories appears an imperfect project. Alternatively, we might aim to disidentificatorily confound, expand, and work on, with, and against paradigms, practices, and processes that produce oppressive meanings associated with categories. Taking up and disseminating the norm of collective accountability to view and refer to individuals as they so designate, working to notice and question our own attention to bodily characteristics and investment in linking these to identity categories and behavioral expectations, detaching hegemonic meanings from identity categories, and reconceptualizing identity formations are some strategies we can start with to operationalize disidentification. We can continue to create new norms and processes that enable us to work on and against the power that hegemonic relations produce, and we can experiment with disidentificatory transfeminist forms of inquiry. Working on, with, and against dominant ideas and practices might enable us as texts, social actors, subjects, cultural workers, and researchers to expand conceptual, processual, and deinstitutionalizing possibilities.

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64. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).