

The Body as Text:  
The Construction of Contemporary  
Gender Within a Queer Context in  
Salvador, Bahia

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## Abstract

This research paper conducted in Salvador, Brazil seeks to explore the construction of gender in contemporary society in relation to the dominant *machista* society. This research was conducted through observation and participation in the organization *Grupo Gay da Bahia*. Through a consultation of decades of archives that included newspaper clippings, letters and informational activist literature, this research has a foundation in the practical work against the powers that are dominant in the Salvador society. Using these findings as supplementary evidence, this evidence considers the testimony and experiences of three transgender – non-normative gendered persons – within the Salvador Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) community. The data collected through this research addresses and attempts to explain the way in which gender is constructed by these individuals in ways contrary to the dominant hegemonic culture. Through exploring this question this research discovers and posits that when those that don't fit into spaces that are so finely drawn and marked by society – specifically in terms of gender identity – those on the outside are left with no other option than to create a space for themselves within which there is room for their identity and sentiments. These new constructions that serve the individual are not uniform in their existence, but in their path to conception. With the support of the GGB as the integral center of GLBT issues in Salvador and inclusive environment for those within that community, this identity is accepted and appropriated as a part of the resistance to the dominant culture.

## Introduction

This research explores the formation of contemporary gender identity within Salvador, Brazil and the ways in which the formation and performance of this identity is influenced by the dominant hegemonic structures of society, within a queer context. The organizing within the Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) community – that harbors a physical and theoretical safe-space – supports this identity and works to effectively facilitate change and acceptance within the confines of the dominant hegemonic structures, as exemplified by the *Grupo Gay da Bahia* (GGB). The conflicts that the transgender community incurs with the outside realm and within the queer community itself is expanded upon through this research and the basis of these conflicts as understood through historical and cultural contexts. How the gender identification of people with non-normative bodies is performed and realized as a part of the Salvador gay community is related to the influences of the traditional gender roles and ideologies perpetuated in Salvador, Bahia.

What does the construction of gender mean in a Brazilian context and how this gender identification works against dominant powers and outside those same frameworks. Establishing the divergence between the physical bodies of non-normative gendered persons and their inner sentiments is crucial to understanding how these ideas of gender develop. Focusing on the transgender community is important for a number of reasons. While sexual orientation is not a visible part of one's identity, gender is typically assumed to be as a visible trait and is typically constrained to rigid signifiers that are demarcated by dominant systems. Making transgender people incredibly visible and out in their lives whether or not they choose to be, especially in a society and environment

that has not been particularly welcoming to these differences, considering their conflicts with their nationality and home. This research is focused on the experience of gender within this community, but there is much consideration to be had about the ways race, class, and sexual orientation also contribute to these constructions of identity, but also to the society that is surrounding this community.

## **Social Relevance**

This work has tremendous social relevance especially within the context of social justice, because understanding the motivations and forces that create, what in contemporary society is known as, gender is a primary tool to combat and deconstruct those forces. Understanding gender performativity and construction as a social practice acknowledges the capacity that people subject to dominant systems have to interrogate these hegemonic structures through means of self-identification, this is especially important when it emerges from historically marginalized communities. Examining the tools that are being used to combat white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is to further understand the way in which resistance and social justice manifests itself in different facets of life. Consequently this research serves to show how the structural and systematic exclusion of communities and individuals outside the dominant culture is reproduced in mainstream conceptions of gender and identity and the ways in which these communities can organize to combat these larger themes.

## Methodology

The methodology employed in this research was ethnographic research through conducting a combination of informal and formal interviews of members of the GLBT community as centered around the GGB. This methodology allows for members of this community to give personal testimony that provides insight on the experiences that this research closely examines and posits is a product of larger societal and cultural influences. Through observation and immersion into the physical center of the GLBT community in Bahia at the GGB –the oldest association for the defense of the human rights of homosexuals - I was able to gain access into the daily lives of the people that worked, volunteered and frequented the center. These people were a significant part of the research as they were out members of the gay community and had the ability to provide focused insight into the structures of Salvador’s GLBT community and their lives as well. This method is the most effective way to gain an understanding to the culture as I have also been making observations through participating and being immersed in the organization on a daily basis. Extensive observation works to supplement this research because it takes into account every instance of the research experience as being a viable and important part of the research being conducted.

I conducted three formal interviews and recorded these interviews with the oral consent of the participants to do so; they are transcribed according to their direct wording as translated by myself from Portuguese to English. All these interviews were conducted at the GGB and arranged through the center as well. At the request of the interviewees I have only included first names of the people I interviewed in this research. My first subjective account is from Malena, who was biologically born male but does not



personally identify as a transsexual. I also interviewed Cristiano who identifies as a gay male and he also performs as a *transformista*<sup>1</sup> at night. My third interviewee is Michele who also goes by Vinicius, through the remainder I will refer to her with the female pronoun and as Michele; as Michele has no specific preference as to which pronoun or name to be called. Supplementary to these interviews is one informal interview conducted with Jorge a volunteer at the GGB. He was informed and gave oral consent to my plan to include his testimony and interview in this research paper. This interview is documented through notes taken during the duration of our conversations.

The GGB contains the largest archive of gay South America through which I read through daily and cite these resources as a significant part of my research. Archival study is an integral part of the study and is another methodology I employed throughout the study. I explored thoroughly the archives and files maintained by the GGB that dated back to its creation of the organization in the early 1980s. These documents consisted of newspaper clippings from all of Brazil that focused on Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender issues. The files that were organized by different categories highlighted issues that were relevant to the gay community and also as to how those issues relate to the region and time period – whether it be Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Salvador, or Minas Gerais. Using the archives held by the GGB I also encountered files that documented their continued involvement with the gay pride parade of Salvador every year, and their documentation of hate crime in the city of Salvador, but only during the year of 2004; there were three complaints reported. In addition I encountered a number of archives

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<sup>1</sup> A gender performance artist that often performs in gay nightclubs and bars. They are most often gay men dressed in drag for this performance. I continue to use this word throughout this paper as to not lose the significance and particularity of this performance in the Brazilian context.

about gay rights and pamphlets that outline their rights produced and disseminated by the GGB that were often a response to the pertinent issues of the community at that time.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework from which this paper is constructed is that of a poststructuralist framework and using this theory to delve into understanding how the mainstream is attacked by these self-formed gender constructions within Salvador, Bahia. Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* explains the relationship between the norm and the individuals subject to that normativity in terms of knowledge and the control of that knowledge. As sex is looked at in biological and medical terms people's understanding of sex is not repressed but rather it is confined by these notions of sex and in turn internalized as a way to dictate the individual's conception of their sexuality. This system turns these objects of scientific reasoning into self-monitoring subjects. With these notions in mind it is crucial to explore the self-formation of gender identity in Salvador, Bahia within the transgender community, because this identity is self constructed, but without succumbing to the dominant ideologies and pressures being produced and controlled. The rejection of this knowledge control and reclamation of the individual's control is the key in deconstructing the relationship between the two forces. Within this poststructuralist framework the transcendence of gender by the transgender subjects breaks down ideas of male and female as being in direct opposition and also the idea that within that dichotomy one is dominant and one is submissive. This paper seeks to describe the deconstruction of these dichotomies as perpetrated by the subjects that participated in this research and those in the larger context of society in Salvador, Bahia.

Foucault gives an explanation of his concept of "reverse discourse" through the example of the evolution and formation of the homosexual and his identity throughout history.

“There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and ‘psychic hermaphroditism’ made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of ‘perversity’; but it also made possible the formation of a ‘reverse’ discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy of ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.” (Foucault 101)

Using the tools of subjugation to form an identity that works outside the normative framework is a way in which this identity evolved into being; from one that was considered perverse and a medical abnormality to one that is self constructed and outside the realm of biology. Foucault’s perception of sexual liberation as the gateway to political liberation is the keystone of this paper. As the formation of gender identity is fundamentally linked to many influences of culture, society and politics it is bound to have cultural, social and political consequences; which in this case is exemplified through the work of the GGB and its members.

Furthermore, Foucault’s understanding of power acknowledges that power does not lie in one place but it is fluid in its nature and is passed through different hands and it is the appropriation of that power that can lead to resistance. “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, rendering it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.” (Foucault 101) The transmission of power into the construction of identity is liberating because it successfully challenges the power reproduced in essentialist groupings such as gender.

Another key aspect in this research is the usage of language and terms in reference to these communities and lives which are represented in this work. As

categorization is the very construct these communities are fighting against and this paper seeks to work outside of, it is critical to understand the way in which the word transgender is being used within this context. Consider the early configuration of the term transgender as defined by Leslie Feinberg in *Transgender Liberation* :

“A community has begun to emerge that is sometimes referred to as the gender or transgender community. Within our community is a diverse group of people who define ourselves in many different ways. Transgendered people are demanding the right to choose our own self-definitions...We’ve chosen words in this pamphlet we hope are understandable to the vast majority of working and oppressed people in this country, as a tool to battle bigotry and brutality. We are trying to find words, however inadequate, that can connect us that can capture what is similar about the oppression we endure. We have also given careful thought to our use of pronouns, striving for both clarity and sensitivity in a language that only allows for two sexes.” (Feinberg)

With this understanding of language and terminology as a part of the struggle for liberation – politically, socially and sexually – this paper explores the identity constructions formed by those within the transgender community.

Continuing within this framework this paper does not seek to speak on behalf of all groups of people or in terms of absolutes, but rather highlight the consistencies and significances that emerge from exploring the construction of gender through a number of different subjects and subjective observation of this community. This paper seeks to answer questions posed about the way these constructs occur and what relevance they have to these communities and beyond, while also exposing the difficulties and complexities of identity politics in contemporary society, within a Brazilian context.

## Discussion

The GGB as an organization has served as an integral part of the gay community in Salvador, Brazil since its inception in 1980. Serving as the primary physical space for GLBT people outside the realm of nightlife, entertainment and prostitution – the GGB has the task of creating and working in a space that is inclusive of and recognizes the complex identities that are shaped within the GLBT community. The GGB has meetings twice a week and also hosts meetings of other GLBT groups in Salvador as needed and requested by those groups. Additionally, in terms of outreach and resources the GGB has classes specifically geared toward transvestites and the teaching of skills in order to provide opportunities other than prostitution – a field of work that many *travestis*<sup>2</sup> turn to as a means of survival.

The GGB is located within the town of Pelourinho, which has a complex history dating back to slavery and continuing into the more contemporary development of the neighborhood. In Pelourinho there have developed two main houses that are the homes of *travestis*; a number of the residents have come to the closely situated GGB as a space for comfort, condom disbursement and job training sessions. The GGB offers two courses specifically intended for *travestis* that teach the skills to become a hairstylist or a clothing designer. Cristiano, a Coordinator at the GGB, who also has worked as a *transformista* – explained how it is difficult for people who do not fit into the normative gender categories to gain jobs in other fields of work and prostitution is a field that they can work in with certainty. In an environment that rejects the identification and

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<sup>2</sup> The Portuguese word for transvestite; I choose to not translate this word throughout the rest of the paper, because the identity constructions that are so specific to this community can not be so easily translated.

performance of these genders taken on by people that don't fit into the normative framework – there is still a demanding market within the world of sex work for these bodies. Keeping these issues in consideration, the GGB works in response to mainstream society's rejection of the needs and lives of transgender people – specifically in Salvador, which according to subjective accounts of city residents fosters an intensely homophobic environment.

The information that is dispensed through the GGB focuses on protecting and informing the community it is serving in order to secure their safety and ensure informed decisions. Specifically focusing on the materials available to the transgender community, there is an array of silicone health and a reiteration of their rights in cases of police violence and aggression. Cristiano explained that in 1998 in Salvador there were was a case of two *travestis* being attacked and burned in the street – this hate crime occurred during the peak of aggression from the police toward the GLBT community. The police had been doing nothing to stop the violence against these citizens and even at times participated in the aggression and abuse of the *travestis*, especially those involved in sex work. Following this event the GGB organized a number of demonstrations and prepared a number of informational packets and flyers that were spread throughout Salvador to the general public and called attention to the injustices that were facing this community and had been facing the community for decades. The archives that the GGB holds has documented an enormous amount of assassinations and violent crimes against members of the GLBT community and the heightening tensions between these citizens and the military police in Salvador, but also in other cities in Brazil. According to Cristiano after the backlash that came from the community as lead by the GGB the conditions had

bettered for the GLBT community and that the police that was meant to protect and not provoke had begun to acknowledge the rights of these citizens as well.

This form of organizing in the community is where the GGB has done its most work and seen the most results. While the issues that plague the GLBT community in Salvador are not merely resolved by means of information and protests –the only way in which the community can respond is to counter the actions that reproduce the ever-present structures that create these tensions. As problems arise the direct action response is a crucial part of GGB’s mission as a proactive association that deals with the concerns of the GLBT community non-passively, this work speaks to the underlying motivations and ideas promoted and disseminated by the community and the dominating systems. The GGB’s work empowers its community members especially within the transgender community as it is not merely inclusive of the conflicts and issues they face, but has an understanding of these problems within the greater context of the gay community and Brazilian culture and tradition.

In addressing one of the major concerns of the *travesti* community regarding silicone injections and the use of body modifying agents, the GGB along with *Associação de Travestis de Salvador* (ATRAS) produced an informational pamphlet and campaign in 2002 titled *Silicone* giving warning and advice on the use of silicone within the transgender community. *Silicone* speaks to the many dangers of silicone injections that *travestis* encounter during their lives as well as out of the 200-250 *travestis* in Salvador 32% injected one 12 liter cup of silicone into one or more parts of their body. In this sample the youngest started self-injecting at the age of 13 and 73% of the sample started taking silicone injections before the age of 25. These major issues of safety and underage



silicone consumption are addressed by the GGB in this campaign. While the GGB remains neutral in its position on the decision to use silicone it provides a number of stories and warnings on the harms of the use of silicone in the body of *travestis*. GGB provides advice for *travestis* that make the choice to modify their bodies with silicone as well as for the *bombadeiras* – those that perform the injections. However, they do not actually recommend this form of physical and medical body alteration for *travestis*, while they respect the individual's choice to make this choice.

This stance on the act of modifying ones body in order to appear more like a certain gender is significant, because it is a piece of the conception of gender and its construction in Salvador's society. The decentralizing of the physical body as the sole indicator of gender is in line with the ideas shared by those interviewed from the GLBT community. This understanding of gender that goes beyond the biological and the physical is an understanding of identification as something that one can feel and perform and is multifaceted in its composition. Not working within the belief that one has to appear female to be female rejects essentialist notions that being of the female gender has inherent components that can be defined in absolute terms.

In the GGB's *Carta Aberta do Grupo Gay da Bahia aos Policiais Civis & Militares do Brasil* their literature addresses a number of issues that not only informs the GLBT community of their rights, but the limitations of the police force as well. The text states that the homosexual and *travesti* victims of police violence are victims of *machista* intolerance without criminal justice. The *Carta Aberta* addresses the injustices to which the GLBT community is subjected to, at the hands of those with authority in their society, on a level that delves deeply into the inner workings of the dominant systems of

oppression. Positioning the police force as an embodiment and manifestation of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal system, the GGB's tactics and ideology as presented in their literature focuses on the perpetrators of this status quo – situating the victims of these crimes as not merely the subjugated examples of oppression, but rather puts culpability on the forces and structures that create and reproduce these injustices.

The GGB has tremendous effect in practical and activist terms for the GLBT community in Salvador, Bahia. All of the subjects interviewed and consulted in this research had positive and important relationships with the GGB. Jorge a 23-year-old gay man, who volunteers at the GGB, encountered the GGB early in his getting acquainted to Salvador when he moved there six months ago. To Jorge the GGB is a group that exists to help the gay community, because the police are not going to help them, especially with the issues they continuously face, such as issues of work discrimination. For Jorge the way to have less discrimination in society is if people organize inclusively within the GLBT community, which is why he feels the GGB has a positive impact on his life and others in the community. Jorge's means of identifying with the GGB in such a short amount of time speaks to the capabilities the GGB holds in terms of empowering, mobilizing and engaging with the GLBT community.

Through the GGB I conducted three formal interviews with three members of the GLBT community with different gender identity constructions and life experiences as explained to me. The first participant in the study is Malena<sup>3</sup>, originally from Salvador, Bahia, but lived in Rio de Janeiro for the majority of her life. Malena explains she does not identify as a transsexual, but she will use the term only for the purpose of clarification

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<sup>3</sup> Interview 1

when needed, but if asked she is a woman, because that is how she should have been born. Malena's self-realization of her gender construction started at the age of five, when her mother said that as a little boy she didn't need to wear a shirt and Malena refused because she said girls can't be topless. By the time Malena was ten years old she was performing androgynously and when she was thirteen her family attempted to make her more masculine and sought therapy for this reason. However, for Malena when she turned 18 she was completely no longer living as a man, but as the woman she is and feels.

Malena's exploration and experience in constructing her gender is fundamental on a basic level of understanding how gender is not bound to biology. That the construction of Malena's gender is not based on what she was told to live as or what her physical body or outside influences were dictating she should be, but rather she assigned her gender in line with her own sentiments. Although Malena's gender identification is what she classifies as woman, she is still challenging the normative gender roles, which rely on biological sex as the only marker of gender. While, Malena identifies as female— one half of the gender binary — she is still outside of that dichotomy because her definition of being a woman is not controlled by anyone or anything other than herself. Malena has undergone body-modifying changes in order to appear more like what is conventionally understood as female, in terms of breast enhancement, rhinoplasty and facial reconstruction. This is important to discuss as it appears to fall into the system of traditional gender norms, however one would be remiss to assume that Malena's conception of gender despite its similarities to the normative female gender is not her own construction. As cited by nearly all the subjects of this study dominant society as a

whole has yet to be able to fully accept or understand the lives and experiences and identities expressed by transgender people.

The next subject that I interviewed is a gay male who also performs as a *transformista* at night for certain shows in gay clubs and bars. Cristiano<sup>4</sup> explained that for him his work at night is not a manifestation of a desire to be what he considers the female gender, but rather something that makes him feel happy during that performance. He explains that for him and what he supposes it might feel like other *transformistas* is that during the show it is an acting out of a fantasy and that fantasy is about making the audience happy and making himself happy and calm. During this performance he does not have to think about other issues such as race, AIDS and the other problems that most gay activists are concerned about. An integral part though is that performing in a show turns a profit for Cristiano and while it serves a very personal purpose it also is a means of making a living. He explains that the profit he makes from this job is not always enough to support him, especially because the work isn't necessarily constant. When speaking of his identity though, Cristiano was clear in his classification as a gay male and is not to be confused with *travestis*, because they are defining themselves as women 24 hours a day, while for *transformistas* it is only in the context of the show.

Cristiano's conception of performing gender is interesting because it makes no inherent assumptions on the relation between the appearance and the identity. Cristiano's assertion that his work as a *transformista* has nothing to do with his gender identity is true, but his construction of his gender identity is related to his work as a *transformista*. By working as a *transformista* he is challenging the strict limitations of gender that are

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<sup>4</sup> Interview 2

put onto those within the Salvador society. To perform in a manner that is typically recognized as being female but to also separate one's identity from this gender performance is a deconstruction of the entire notion of gender as maintained by the mainstream society. Additionally the act of perceiving the performance of gender as a means of revenue diminishes the control that mainstream conceptions of gender typically holds.

The third participant that I interviewed through this research is Michele<sup>5</sup>, who also goes by the male name of Vinicius. Michele works as prostitute within Salvador, as this is one of the few professions that allows the visible presence of these bodies. Michele explained that for her there is no difference between herself as Vinicius and herself as Michele, the two are the same, but one side is male and one side is female, but they exist simultaneously in the same world. Michele takes hormones and applies makeup, but in terms of gender Michele doesn't choose to use a word of male or female. This identification depends on which part of her identity she chooses to perform that day; to Michele's boyfriend she is Vinicius but she is also Michele because they are intrinsically linked to one another. This gender construction is as Michele says, not complicated, because it accepts the idea that one entity can perform an identify with two genders, because the only obstacle to this construction is the hegemonic culture's conception of how gender identity is to be formed.

When I asked all the participants how they exist and work against the homophobic ideologies produced by the dominant society, all three gave similar responses, which I analyze as focusing on two central themes. The first is a detachment

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<sup>5</sup> Interview 3

and estrangement from that aspect of society and the second part is the centralizing of the GGB as an organization and as a space.

For Malena she felt that leaving those issues and attacks at the site and instance of them is the only way to deal with it – by not taking it with her. This is a refusal to internalize the marginalization and discrimination she is being targeted with, while simultaneously affirming an estrangement from this society. Malena continues to say how there isn't any way to actually fight against it through the resources of mainstream society. All she has is the GGB to talk about it and work through these difficulties constructively.

Cristiano explains how he was without any understanding of his sexuality and at the age of 15 he encountered the GGB as a way to express himself openly and in a way he wanted to. As the only conception that he had of being a gay male was as a sickness or a perversion. With a community to thrive in and a distancing from those ideologies, Cristiano was able to form his own identity as a gay man who also finds “tranquility” in the performance of gender.

Michele was clear on the immensity of discrimination and bias that exists in Salvador, Brazil, but for her it is irrelevant because she does not care what others say – she is herself only for herself. This realization of one's self outside of the constructs of dominant society is the key to being able to and needing to create one's own identity construction of gender. She gives an example of how for her she has never lived on the side of heterosexuality or conventionalism, so there is no way she can truly understand that realm – there are bound to be complications. For this reason she acknowledges these

biases, but also acknowledges that there are no means for her to even feel a part of this dominant society.

The commonality between these three subjective accounts is that they each have a self-constructed gender identity that doesn't conform to the traditional *machista* societies idea of gender and sexuality. These constructions are not occurring within a vacuum they are in relation to and in response to the hostile environment around which they are surrounded and pressured by. While in theory the ultimate transcendence of gender would be the denial of its existence at all, in practice the way in which these people have responded to not fitting into traditional roles goes beyond the restrictions of normative gender. Exploring these formations is important because it is a form of resisting the domination inflicted upon transgender people but also society as a whole.

## Conclusion

Gender as a construct is forever changing and identity as an essentialist concept cannot be contained even by dominant structures, because for those outside the norm the only option is to be outside this framework. The people included in this research have developed a way of identifying and performing their gender that is contrary to notions of the strict binary gender system. This is not to imply that transgender people are creating a third gender because this assumption still functions within that same dichotomy, but rather the understanding that the lives experienced, lived and shaped by transgender people of Salvador transcends normative gender identification as a retaliation to the intense patriarchy and compulsory heterosexism that exists within the culture. This hostile environment that exists has systematically removed the existence of these people's lives in its discourse, vernacular and realities, and the only evidence of the recognition of these lives is through the maintenance of this subjugation. Recognizing this exclusion, those that do not fit into the normal boundaries of gender identity defined by society construct their lives and themselves outside of this framework. This works to produce a number of results, the most visible of which is that of gender construction.

Recognizing gender as independent of factors that have historically suppressed the formation of any sort of identity is the first realization that all the subjects encountered in this research. This realization in its very nature challenges the limits set up by dominant society and are further challenged when this understanding is actualized through the performance and self-construction of gender. The act of constructing one's gender is more than choosing to be male or female or even choosing to be neither, rather it abandons the whole notion of choosing from within these options. It is even more than



creating new definitions of being male or being female, but it is about rejecting the need for definitions in the realm of gender identity, because it is not the constant that society perpetuates it as being. This construction is not subject to outside influences whether those within or outside of mainstream society dictate it, but rather it is an individual composition, which speaks to the malleability of gender. Although this individualism is significant and it is crucial to address that the constructs themselves differ, the ways by which they come to fruition are similar and relate to the dominant hegemonic culture. An alienation from mainstream society and an existing community that harbors and welcomes those outside the conventional community are the foundations of non-normative gender constructions as done by those involved in this research. The construction and performance appears as an affront to the mainstream, but it is a way of resisting its control on the lives of individuals that have found a means of taking control of their own lives.

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