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The Future is Non-Binary: Investigating the Genesis of the Non-Binary Movement in Amsterdam and Beyond

Sky Karp

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The Future is Non-Binary: Investigating the Genesis of the Non-Binary Movement in
Amsterdam and Beyond

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History and the Study of Women and Gender

Europe, Netherlands, Amsterdam

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Abstract

This project examines butch and crossdresser communities in Northern Europe in the late 20th century, and their transformation into the non-binary movement of the last ten years. This research investigates the recent trajectory of gender-diverse communities and evaluates the role of the non-binary movement in the history of gender-diverse people in the Western world. Findings come from interviews with Dutch individuals who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, or otherwise outside of the gender binary, as well as periodicals and other materials related to crossdresser and butch identities from the IHLIA LGBT Heritage Archives and the Atria Institute. This study demonstrates that the non-binary movement represents a significant shift in communities of gender variance and an opening for gender liberation. While butch and crossdresser communities transgress binaries in important ways, the non-binary identity allows gender-diverse people in the Western world, for the first time in centuries, to have the freedom to imagine their identities beyond the categories of male and female.

Keywords: History, Gender Studies

Introduction

Society saw a considerable shift in the way we talk and think about gender over the past ten years. New gender-diverse identities and communities emerged into the mainstream and continue to challenge the gender binary in new and significant ways. This phenomenon does not come from nowhere; our current non-binary movement originates from a long history of gender variance. By examining butch and crossdresser communities in Northern Europe in the late 20th century, I demonstrate how their transformation into the non-binary movement of the last ten years represents a significant change in gender-variant communities, as well as an opening for liberation. While I recognize the ways butch and crossdresser communities transgress binaries, I emphasize that the non-binary identity allows gender-diverse people in the Western world, for the first time in centuries, to have the freedom to imagine their identities beyond the categories of male and female.

I ground my research in LGBTQ and feminist archives, as well as interviews with non-binary Dutch individuals in the Netherlands. I use crossdresser journals and interviews and oral histories with butches to understand historical precedents to non-binary. I also employ my own autoethnography in addition to interviews to further analyze the current non-binary moment.

My project works to understand historically marginalized and misrepresented history and render visible gender-diverse people, lives and communities. I aim to understand and preserve the history of gender variance that resists the binary because as a non-binary person, I experience erasure daily, institutions telling myself and my trans siblings that we do not exist. By demonstrating that we evolved from a long history of gender-diverse identity formation, history remains one of the most powerful mediums we have to assert to dominant, binary systems of

power that our identities are legitimate, real and should be advocated for and respected. This project will both seek to forge historical representation for those that do not see themselves in the historical record and create legitimacy for trans and non-binary identity formations.

There exists little scholarship on non-binary people because the language is new and the socially-constructed gender binary continues to drive the conversation away from recognizing historical gender variance. Our non-binary movement calls for new scholars who are living and creating a queer world to investigate our place in the centuries of gender revolution. As the popularity of the non-binary identity continues to rise, the academy must address and remedy the gaps in the field surrounding the history of gender variance. My project begins to confront the erasure and invisibility of gender-diverse history by creating valuable source material about the non-binary identity of our current moment as well as analyzing how we arrived here. Following in the footsteps of the feminist and queer scholarship that came before me, my research forges a path for non-binary histories to be seen, recognized and uplifted within and beyond the academy.

Glossary of Terms

The following terms below will be used throughout the paper.

AFAB: Assigned female at birth

AMAB: Assigned male at birth

Gender dysphoria: Distress an individual experiences because of the incongruency between their gender identity and sex assigned at birth.

Gender euphoria: The joy an individual experiences from expressing their authentic gender identity.

Genderqueer: Someone who does not adhere to traditional gendered conventions and engages in “queering” gender norms. May identify as neither, both or a combination of binary genders. Can also be used as an umbrella term for (contemporary) gender identities that fall outside of the binary.

Social dysphoria: Distress an individual experiences when they are gendered incorrectly in public or social settings

Transmasculine: An individual who was assigned female at birth but identifies more with masculinity than femininity. Can include both trans men and non-binary individuals.

Literature Review

This project examines historical categories of the gendered other, such as butch and crossdresser, that defy the gender binary, as well as their relationship with the contemporary non-binary movement. It asks how the butch and crossdresser are being transformed into ‘non-binary’ and evaluates the role of non-binary in gender liberation. This project sits at the intersection of queer and especially trans theory and history. It asks how we can apply theories about trans performativity and embodiment to historical processes of identity recognition and disappearing. The trans movement has evolved so quickly that the field lacks analysis on the development of non-binary in relation to its historical precedents. This project picks up where others have left off, examining the history of gender variance while centering the voices of our current moment, one that is shifting the binary gender paradigm and letting new and old forms of gender (back) into the spotlight.

Judith Butler, the mother of discourse around gender, asserts in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” that gender is performative: it is not a fixed or immutable identity, but rather the repetition of stylized actions associated with men or women.¹ On one hand, Butler’s work is groundbreaking for non-binary individuals. If gender is not fixed, we can break with the acts we understand to constitute man and woman. Butler presents the possibility of a whole realm of gender nonconformity, the ability to write and perform new acts and genders outside of the binary. However, her analysis also erases the lived experiences of many trans people who feel the incongruity between their gender and assigned sex deeply. While gender may be a social construct, that does not mean that we do not feel our gender or that it does not feel real to us. It also does not mean that there are not trans individuals who feel pain and distress about the bodies they are born into, no matter how they subvert the rules or acts that constitute their gender assigned at birth. My project will examine the spaces where gender-diverse people subvert performativity to make room for other modes of constituting gender outside of the binary, while also centering the real experiences of trans people and their relationship to gender.

Susan Stryker’s “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin” helps to clarify the relationship between queer and trans theory, and bridges the space between queer theory and the emerging field of trans studies. In her article, she argues that trans studies offers radical potential to queer studies and challenges the anti-trans discourse often prevalent in queer theory. She writes

¹ Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519–531.

Transgender studies... has the potential to address emerging problems in the critical study of gender and sexuality, identity, embodiment, and desire in ways that gay, lesbian, and queer studies have not always successfully managed. This seems particularly true of the ways that transgender studies resonate with disability studies and intersex studies, two other critical enterprises that investigate atypical forms of embodiment and subjectivity that do not readily reduce to heteronormativity, yet that largely fall outside the analytic framework of sexual identity that so dominates queer theory.²

Stryker argues that transgender studies challenges the academy to look outside the domain of sexual identity when examining embodiment and identity. She also critiques the relegation of trans as “the site in which to contain all gender trouble”, thereby rendering categories like gay and lesbian normative and stable.³ Her analysis provides a strong critique of queer studies and also a helpful criteria for what principles radical trans studies should embody. I hope to emulate in my work the challenge and radical potentiality that trans studies can offer queer theory.

The conversation around crossdressers as a form of gender variance existed for much longer than queer or trans studies. To understand crossdressing as a historical precedent to contemporary gender variance, I look at Magnus Hirschfeld, one of the first people to write about trans people, and especially crossdressers. In *The Transvestites*, he articulates the Theory of Intermediaries, which demonstrates how transvestites fall under the category of “manly formed women and womanly formed men at every stage.”⁴ He writes, “There could be an equal amount of womanly and manly features present; indeed, it could even be with a bearer of the female

² Stryker, Susan. “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2004, pp. 212–215.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hirschfeld, Magnus. *Transvestites: the Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress*. Prometheus, 2003.

ovary, also, a woman whose numerous manly features had been represented as womanly ones.”⁵ On one hand, this theory perpetuates essentialist notions about what it means to be manly or womanly. Hirschfield’s medicalization of trans people contributed at the time to the emerging medical-industrial complex that continues to oppress trans people today. However, the recognition that crossdressers’ self-expression often defies and challenges the gender binary remains significant, especially given that Hirschfield wrote *The Transvestites* over a hundred years ago. My project uses this framework to look at the phenomenon of crossdressers as a historical precedent to non-binary, but also challenge the dangerous medical and psychological paradigms that often come with such analysis.

In *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg argues for the importance of studying trans history. Ze writes “These examples of transgender leadership have great meaning to me. I grew up unable to find myself anywhere in history. Now I have examples of transgender in the leadership of social change. Here were peasants who cheered their cross-gendered leaders. Here were moments in history when transgender was a call to arms, when cross-dressed people fought for justice in their ranks.”⁶ Feinberg emphasizes that the cross-dressed and cross-gendered have always existed throughout history. At a time when the (binary) transgender community was just gaining legibility in the mainstream, the idea that transgender history had an intellectual foundation and should be included in the academy was a much needed intervention in the field. However, Feinberg’s reading of contemporary gender categories that did not even exist when actors such as Joan of Arc were alive weakens zir argument and causes many of zir case studies to lose historical specificity. While the book provides many useful analyses of predominantly

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*. Beacon Press, 2005.

female crossdressers in early modern Europe, I intend to read similar figures in their own historical specificity and examine how their behaviors and identification developed into modern classifications like transgender and non-binary. Additionally, Feinberg provides useful analysis about the relationship between gender and class, explaining that “wherever the ruling classes became stronger, the laws [about gender] grew increasingly more fierce and more relentlessly enforced.”⁷ Especially in examining historical precedents to non-binary, during which categories like crossdressing emerge from the confines of the gender binary, it remains important to consider the other social conditions that produced such social (and legal) regulation.

I also investigate iterations of female and butch masculinity and crossdressing as a historical precedent to non-binary through Jack Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*. *Female Masculinity* provides a comprehensive history of “alternative” forms of masculinity (i.e. not constructed by cisgender men) and examines the ways these masculinities are subordinated to reify male masculinity as “real”.⁸ Halberstam argues for the importance of an examination of the history of female gender variance: “The meaning and significance of many forms of contemporary masculinity seem inextricably bound to earlier representations. I do not believe that we can actually understand the meaning of contemporary Anglo-Saxon masculinities (male and female) without considering the history of the production of modern masculinity.”⁹ While Halberstam still looks at masculinity through a binary framework, he argues for the need to understand the historical representations and precedents of non-normative gender expression in order to understand the current historical moment, unlike the universalizing of Feinberg. I hope

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Duke Univ. Press, 2006.

⁹ Ibid.

to implement a similar approach in my own project on non-binary identity: examining earlier forms of gender that resisted the binary in order to understand our current non-binary moment.

Additionally, Halberstam demonstrates how categories of “female” gender identification transcend contemporary definitions of sexuality. He writes, “I have argued for the need to keep the label “lesbian” at bay throughout the first half of the twentieth century...the women in Havelock Ellis’s case histories nor their lovers would have identified as lesbians....The emphatic defense of modern notions of lesbianism...may also result in the disavowal of certain historical events.”¹⁰ Halberstam emphasizes the importance of not projecting certain contemporary identities, especially sexual categories on historical actors who lived before such labels existed. Historical case studies that Halberstam analyzes which include women who crossdress, wear a dildo or want a penis, for example, fit better into an analysis of gender deviance than sexuality, although we must always be careful to situate actors in their own historical context. The book introduces countless examples of alternative masculinity and creates a framework to read female or AFAB¹¹ masculinity as a precedent to contemporary notions of gender variance and fluidity, while also honoring the historical context that allows us to see mechanisms of gender that are not imaginable today.

While the first three chapters of Halberstam’s work are most relevant to my project, situating alternative masculinities throughout history, the book also explores the category of the stone butch (as “untouchable sexuality”), another more recent category that upends binaries around gender and sexuality, and examines turf wars between FTMs and butches. Halberstam again argues for historical and cultural specificity of identity and alludes to the development

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Assigned Female at Birth

from butch to non-binary that my project is interested in: “There are transsexuals and we are not all transsexuals; gender is not fluid, and gender variance is not the same wherever we may find it. As gender-queer practices and forms continue to emerge, presumably the definitions of “gay”, “lesbian” and “transsexual” will not remain static, and we will introduce new terms to delineate what they cannot.”¹² My project draws on Halberstam’s specificity in exploring and centering non-binary identities in our contemporary historical moment. Ultimately, I want to continue where Halberstam leaves off: examining where this new non-binary alternative masculinity (and femininity) comes from and how we got to it.

In *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*, Kate Bornstein forges one of the first narratives in the public consciousness and gender studies at large about her own transition that does not strictly fall into the gender binary. For example, she writes, “I’m supposed to be writing about how to be a girl. I don’t know how to be a girl. And I sure don’t know how to be a boy. And after thirty-seven years of trying to be male and over eight years of trying to be female, I’ve come to the conclusion that neither is really worth all the trouble.”¹³ While she still defines herself as a transsexual, she articulates her gender in ways that challenge the gender binary and force her readers to question essentialist and natural concepts of gender. Her work represents a generation of trans people that did not have the language of non-binary or even genderqueer, yet still forged identities that were decisively outside of the gender binary. As a performance artist, the very structure of the text also challenges certain binaries or essentialist notions about trans theory, consisting of autobiographical material, interviews, definitions, or even the script for a play in one chapter. Her work is just as fluid as her gender, introducing new forms to talk about

¹² Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Duke Univ. Press, 2006.

¹³ Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: on Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. Routledge, 1994.

new conceptions of gender. It remains key in understanding the generational transition into non-binary identity.

*Trans** tackles what Jack Halberstam sees as the key themes and theories in trans* studies today: labels and categories, embodiment, trans generations, representation and transfeminism. Throughout the book, Halberstam articulates a clear rejection and criticism of the integration of trans identity into normative discourse, from the regulation of trans bodies, to the pushing of privileged trans* youth into normative and biological family life, to the orientation of children towards normativity.¹⁴ His use of the asterisk expresses his need to open up trans identity and discourse and allow for fluidity and new possibilities. He asks: “Is the future genderless, gender variable, gender optional or gender hacked-- or none of the above? We may not know what gender or transgender will become in the next few decades, but we can certainly account for its past, its present and its potentiality.”¹⁵ Halberstam emphasizes how fast trans identity changed in the past few decades and the uncertainty about what the identity category will continue to hold. Halberstam also argues for the need to bridge trans* generations and learn from older trans* folks to balance the desire for visibility and the need for radical change. He offers that the asterisk might open up the conversation among generations instead of closing the door on each other. My project will put Halberstam’s theory into action and investigate what happened over the course of the past sixty years that rendered crossdressers and butches invisible and produced the new category of non-binary, causing such seismic shifts among trans* generations today.

¹⁴ Halberstam, Jack. *Trans*: a Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. University of California Press, 2018.

¹⁵ Ibid.

My work stands at the intersection of all these discourses, histories and fields. I intervene in the relationship between queer and trans theory that Butler and Stryker stake out. My project examines the ways gender-diverse people subvert the rules of gender performativity while also giving room for the experiences of trans and non-binary lives. I look to scholars like Hirschfield and Feinberg to read both male and female crossdressers as precedents to the trans and non-binary movement, while emulating Halberstam's emphasis on historical specificity. Lastly, both Bornstein and Halberstam help me to understand the generational transformation of other trans* identity formations into non-binary.

While contemporary scholars stop short of exploring this new era of trans identity, I pick up where they left off and ask where non-binary people came from. How can we see categories like crossdresser or butch as part of the non-binary geneology, as precedents to our current moment? And how and why do old ways of categorizing gender variance disappear and new forms take shape? My research asks the question "What happened?" Where did the stone butch or the male crossdresser go, and why is the future non-binary?

Methodology

I primarily examined archival materials at the IHLIA LGBT Heritage and Atria Institute archives in Amsterdam and grappled with the Western bias of the written archive. I looked at crossdresser periodicals and publications as well as interviews and oral histories with butches. I relied on the written archive, which only captures certain perspectives and materials. Not everyone has the ability to read and write, especially the most marginalized. Written archives remain Western in nature and often erase the value and lack the content of Eastern and

indigenous practices and histories rooted in orality. They also do not always include alternative forms of identity formation, such as oral storytelling or performance. Additionally, the biases of the institution shine through the archive, as they get to choose what the archive does or does not include. I mitigated some of these biases by using archives dedicated to feminist and LGBTQIA content and choosing to study a marginalized population. I also did not claim to include indigenous or Eastern societies or communities in my study; I recognized the bias of the archive by limiting my scope to Europe. Nevertheless, it remains important to recognize that my project holds the danger of centering white, wealthy, privileged communities over those that face more oppression.

The methods I used to study the current non-binary moment raise more ethical concerns, as studying any current historical moment involves living human subjects. My own biases as a non-binary person and a US-American come through when interviewing Dutch subjects. The interviewees came from the same trans and queer circles in which I immersed myself in Amsterdam and nearby areas. While my own identity as a non-binary person helped me to gain access to trans communities in Amsterdam, my own biases and values shaped the interviewees I met. I minimized the ethical concerns around interviewing living subjects by using oral history. While the biases of both the interviewer and narrator shape the history produced, I sought to record a life history rather than obtain answers to a research question or proof for a hypothesis. In order to include more perspectives and not essentialize the non-binary experience, I used an abbreviated oral history approach with interviews lasting about an hour. While questions captured different areas and stages of life, I focused on the process of non-binary identity formation.

My main ethical concern was the vulnerability of trans and non-binary interviewees as a result of the increased discrimination, trauma, financial instability and mental and physical health barriers to which trans people are often subjected. If outed, these risks could be significantly worsened. To minimize this, I gave each participant a written consent form which explained the purpose of the study and privacy, confidentiality and anonymity procedures. I gave interviewees the option to provide a pseudonym and explained that they would remain anonymous unless requested otherwise. I also removed any identifying features from recordings of the interviews and digitized and altered recordings so that participants voices were not recognizable at their request. Additionally, I will pursue further consent electronically after the completion of the project to donate interview recordings to a local archive.

Participants had to self-identify as non-binary, genderqueer/genderfluid or otherwise outside of the gender binary. I spoke with participants between the ages of 20-40 and conducted all interviews in English. I recruited eight participants through the Facebook group GZ (Gender Zone), through my advisor Lu Lodi and other local transgender organizations. Participants had the opportunity to share their story and received a write-up of findings and the opportunity to learn about their history and the stories of other non-binary people.

My use of autoethnography is more reliable because I am more aware of my own biases and how they shape my work. I used my own experiences to further my research and communicated my own experiences and motivations as part of the study, instead of trying to remain “objective”. However, my unique positionality as a study abroad student shaped my work. As a US-American student who only lived in the Netherlands for a few months, I have a different subject position than those I interviewed who were Dutch and had lived in the

Netherlands for a long time. I reconcile these different subjectivities when I write about my findings and conclusions.

On Positionality: Using Autoethnography

Instead of positioning myself as objective, I want to share my positionality and how it fuels and motivates my work. As a non-binary person, my own story and narrative is also a part of the non-binary moment I study in this project. I employ autoethnography¹⁶ here to help make connections between my own personal experience and my research at large and share how my own story fits into my broader findings.

It is a peculiar feeling, the dysphoria I feel when I listen to the recordings of my interviews with non-binary people, and have to hear my voice. It is so high and I can hear all of those socialized-as-female tics. Perhaps this discomfort captures the position I am in. Having to consider my own existence in the world, my body, my sense of self. Alex asks me if *I'm* considering medical transition in the middle of our interview. And I have the same answer as they do: I just don't know. Even after years of thinking about it, it is still too scary. It's a reminder of the realness of this all, the newness, the uncertainty. No matter how many books I read, how many archives I study or how well I understand Judith Butler, I still have no idea how to navigate my own feelings about my body and my selfhood. But maybe that's the point. After hundreds of years of confining gender variance to the categories of male and female, we're finally breaking free. It's only natural that we have no idea what to do with it.

¹⁶ Autoethnography is a tool a researcher uses to connect their own personal experiences to broader social and cultural themes. However, you have to be careful that to not conflate singular experiences with broader claims. I use it here and later in conjunction with many other sources (Ellis, Carolyn, Adams, Tony, AND Bochner, Arthur. "Autoethnography: An Overview" *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [Online], Volume 12 Number 1 (24 November 2010))

I realized I was “not cisgender” eight weeks into my first year at Smith College. I believe that I had heard the word “non-binary” and “gender fluid” through my high school GSA.¹⁷ We had these “definition” sheets that we would do at the beginning of each year, defining various gender identities and sexualities. I was a big “GSA kid”, eventually becoming the president my senior year. I came out as gay at the end of my junior year, but still presented as very femme. While the urge to dress more masculinely had started to creep in, I was very closeted during my high school years. Two students in my grade of five hundred used “they/them pronouns” but the language was new at that time and I didn’t identify with either of them. College, especially at Smith, was an entirely different story. At every new meeting, we introduced ourselves with our pronouns. There were many out trans and non-binary people in my house alone, of various expressions, including my Head of New Students. One day I was lying in bed, trying to take a nap, when it suddenly clicked for me. I thought: *I don’t want to wear any of my dresses ever again. I want to cut off all my hair. I think I might like to use she and they pronouns.* And then: *I think I might not be cis.* I immediately came out to my Head of New Students, because I knew they would be supportive. They started using words like trans and non-binary to describe myself, and I started to think of myself as those identities. They went clothing shopping with me and took me to get my hair cut. In November, I started using they/them pronouns and came out to my close friends and family. The following summer I started going by a new name.

¹⁷ Gay-Straight Alliance: a high school association for LGBTQ students and their allies.

My family has always been pretty liberal and I barely came out to them as gay. However, they still have a heteronormative relationship and this was hard to grasp. They told me that they would always be supportive but it took them some time to get on board in action as well as words. My younger sister in particular, who at the time was ten, had a hard time accepting my new identity. She expressed fear that I wouldn't be "the same person". Everyone struggled to get my pronouns right and use gender neutral language, especially my father. It took about a year of me being out for everyone to start getting the language right. Ignorance often resulted in hurtful conversations. My mom, for example, once told me that I could not be trans because only binary people are trans even as I tried to explain it to her. She also struggled to understand the importance of a campaign I was working for to defend transgender non-discrimination protections in Massachusetts or the kind of vitriol I often faced. Changing my name in particular was difficult for my mother, as I was originally named after her mother, who passed away when I was still in the womb. While I know there are some topics that are tense for family members, such as medical transition, I now feel as loved and supported as before I came out. However, I still struggle with extended family members who often can't get behind gender neutral language or struggle to get it right. Additionally, it has been an often painful and difficult process to get to where I am today with my family, and there have been times in my life where I have not felt secure or at home in my own home. I both feel lucky for the support I receive from my family, support which I know many trans young people never get, while also remaining cognizant of how painful it is to come out and try to grow with those who don't always "get it".

Smith College has been a peculiar place to grow into my trans identity because it is a "historically women's college". They still only accept people who identify as women, and state

on their website that they do not accept non-binary students. However, they will not make you leave if you transition while at Smith. Smith is also known for its radical, feminist activism, with alumni like Gloria Steinem and Sylvia Plath and my peers are, on the whole, very accepting and embrace a thriving trans population. Smith feels like such a paradox. On one hand, it is where I first came into my identity and was accepted for who I am. On the other hand, staff, faculty and members of the administration misgender me, erase my identity and make me feel invisible on the regular. For me, my very presence at Smith feels like resistance; just by being there and being visible I take part in challenging how we think about womanhood.

I was told several times before I even arrived in the Netherlands that it would be difficult for Dutch people to get my pronouns right, since a singular they pronoun was a concept most were not familiar with. When my host parents wrote me a letter, they used they/them pronouns instead of you! For example, they would write “we’re very excited to meet them”, etc. They were very excited to have a “gender neutral” student and welcomed me with open arms. An interviewee told me that the “gender neutral” phrasing which they used was very common in the media to talk about non-binary people.¹⁸ I explained to them how to use my pronouns correctly and although they stumbled they tried very hard to talk about me in an affirming way and even corrected each other. Similarly to my own parents when I first came out, they didn’t always have the language right, but always accepted me and wanted to try to get it right.

I spent a lot of my time in the Vrankrijk, a queer, punk, radical space in Amsterdam that hosts parties and sex-positive workshops. This is the space that felt closest to my own

¹⁸ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

community at Smith. People often asked me for my pronouns and openly talked about gender identity. People also almost exclusively talked in English. I think this is perhaps because it is so much easier to use gender neutral pronouns in English. This is why, for example, some participants use binary pronouns in dutch and they/them in English. The Vrankrijk showed me that although my life in Amsterdam did not feel as affirming as my life at Smith, there were still radical and loving spaces for queer and gender-diverse people if you knew where to look.

I also interacted with Trans United-Netherlands Dutch BPOC (black and people of color) Network at multiple events, one of the major trans organizations in the Netherlands. The organization provides much needed support and resources for the most vulnerable trans populations in the Netherlands: sex workers and migrants, predominantly of color.¹⁹ They even run a clinic where trans individuals can access hormones and consult with a doctor without going through the official system, which can take years.²⁰ However, their language was very binary and alienating to those who do not identify as men or women. Trans United speakers at a queer night event I attended at the De Appel museum, referring to the organization as “trans women and men of color”. Later in the semester, I also attended a Transgender Day of Remembrance event they hosted, and again referred to those impacted as “women and men”. As a white American college student, I come from a place of great privilege compared to members of the organization; however, this kind of language is alienating for anyone who does not imagine themselves in the binary, regardless of race or background.

Additionally, I got to attend a “gender clown” party in Rotterdam, which Kees helped bring to life. In their interview, they talked about there being virtually no queer community in

¹⁹ Trans United Europe/ Trans BPOC European Network, <https://www.facebook.com/TransUnitedEurope/>

²⁰ Ibid.

Rotterdam when they first came out.²¹ As I entered the party, I saw people lined up down the block, as far as the eye could see, in wild and extravagant gender-bending outfits, waiting to enter. I was in awe that Kees grew this out of nothing. I felt the power of being out, visible and loud, and creating a space for others to do the same. The possibilities of what non-binary could mean also opened up for me. It was not just AFAB people being masculine or AMAB²² people being feminine. It could be this queering of the very concept of gender, presenting so loud and bright that people could not even tell what binary gender you were “supposed” to be.

I also started to pass as male more frequently while I’ve been in Amsterdam. More people call me sir, or even hold the men’s bathroom door open for me. And it feels absolutely euphoric. While I concluded that I am not a man and still identify solidly in the non-binary transmasculine camp, being read as male feels like a breath of fresh air compared to the femaleness that has been forced upon me my whole life, of which strangers will not even let me let go. Female makes me dysphoric and male, when I experienced it, makes me feel euphoric. When I spent two weeks in Morocco, being gendered as female felt unbearable. I knew, 100%, that if I had to live in such a gendered world, I would choose male. I never wanted to be in a situation like that where I could not pass as more masculine. Negotiating such a gendered world has become more complex for me. It would be so much easier for me to pass as male all the time. I’ve struggled with whether or not to medically transition, especially over the past couple of months. There is no passing as non-binary. Every change that I would make would affect how people read me, either as female or male. This is the negotiation that I, and all of my participants

²¹ Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

²² Assigned Male at Birth.

have to make every day. How do we present ourselves to a society that will only ever see us as male or female?

My autoethnography has given me the tools to connect theoretical frameworks about the prevalence of the gender binary and resulting oppression and repression to my own lived experience, and by extension, the lived experiences of others. I can look at my own life and recognize that times I have felt without language, erased or powerless as a non-binary person is the result of the power of normative binary structures to repress and make invisible gender-diverse people. Autoethnography is powerful because it brings the theoretical into world experience. Additionally, it helps me to connect to and analyze the experiences of other non-binary people I have talked to. It acts as another viewpoint through which to see non-binary experience. Especially because non-binary experience is so broad and diverse, my own story adds another layer of complication through which to think about the identity.

Analysis

Crossdressers

The periodical acts as one of the best methods to study and understand crossdressers as an identity and social movement. Crossdresser organizations produced hundreds of newsletters, magazines and journals throughout the 20th century, and especially in the 90s and early 2000s. The publications often follow similar formats, with letters, stories, anecdotes and editorials from the members themselves. These publications serve as a gateway into the lives and identity formations of crossdressers over the past several decades; they remain some of the only materials

produced by and for gender-variant communities themselves. I wanted to understand how crossdressers viewed themselves and formed their own identities and uncover how we might read this community of gender diverse individuals in the context of today's non-binary movement. I examined three different periodicals in the IHLIA LGBT Heritage Archives, all based in the UK: *Narcissus*, *GLAD RAG* and *Cross Talk*, as well as the stand-alone publication *Transgender underground : London and the third sex* located in the Atria Institute.

In the context of these periodicals, crossdresser means male and heterosexual. While colloquially we might use the word crossdresser to refer to anyone who dresses or presents as another gender than that which they usually live as or identify,²³ the crossdressers who appear in the archives in the late 20th century identify as heterosexual and male. In the book *Dressing up : transvestism and drag : the history of an obsession*, written in 1976, author Peter Ackroyd writes that crossdressers are “firmly heterosexual.”²⁴ Ackroyd continues: “It should be evident by now that the available literature is concerned with only male transvestism; indeed female transvestism, according to Stoller, does not exist.”²⁵ Contributors to the periodical *GLAD RAG* affirm these claims; one crossdresser writes, “We are heterosexual males who identify strongly with females.”²⁶ Ackroyd's erasure of female crossdressers or transmasculine individuals at large remained consistent with what I found in the archives. I did not find material about female-bodied individuals when I searched for crossdresser, transvestite or even butch with an archivist. While I discuss the historical significance of this in the section about butches, in this context, transvestite refers to heterosexual individuals assigned male at birth. Additionally,

²³ Gilbert, M. A. 2014. “Cross-Dresser.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (May): 65–67.

²⁴ Ackroyd, Peter. 1979. *Dressing up: Transvestism and Drag: the History of an Obsession*. London: Thames and Hudson.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *GLAD RAG*, no. 35 (1987).

contributors almost never used the word crossdresser, but referred to themselves as transvestites. I use the word crossdresser to refer to this group of people to respect the stigma and negative connotation the word “transvestite” carries today in North Western contexts.

Transgressing the Gender Binary

Crossdressers queered and transgressed the gender binary by rejecting complete maleness, paving the way for gender-diverse generations to come. In their writing, crossdressers identified as something beyond entirely male and masculine and began to imagine gender as flexible. In an interview in *Transgender London*, Wilfreeda Beehive says, “I consider myself the ‘third sex’, which means that I am neither man nor woman.”²⁷ A crossdresser in *Narcissus* writes, “I am of the transgendered in mind - that is physically male Transvestite, mentally either gender or both at once, whatever suits you.”²⁸ And a third contributor in *Cross Talk* discusses the importance of “accepting that, mentally at least, I could never be either male or female.”²⁹ The revolutionary aspects of crossdressing lie in this innate understanding that an individual could be something besides a single binary gender, especially at a time when gays and lesbians were just gaining recognition and binary transgender people were barely on the horizon.

While these crossdressers would never use the word non-binary to describe themselves, we can see them as historical precedents to the non-binary movement today. Non-binary people use many of the same ideas of being both both male and female or neither to explain their identities to others. We also see the emergence of the concept of a “third sex” or gender, which has been used as a basis for current legal recognition for non-binary people, such as the X gender

²⁷ Andrei, Claudia. 2002. *Transgender Underground: London and the Third Sex*. London: Glitter Books.

²⁸ *NARCISSUS* 1, No. 3 (1989): 44.

²⁹ *CROSS TALK*, No. 44 (2002).

marker on forms of identification to mark a third gender.³⁰ Lastly, we see a distinction between gender expression and gender identity which shows remarkable nuance for its time. The crossdressers demonstrate an understanding that they can both have and enjoy their “male” bodies, while still “mentally” feeling like they are another gender.

Another crossdresser who writes in *GLAD RAG* also demonstrates this nuanced view of gender identity by articulating a gender spectrum among crossdressers. They write “We are heterosexual males who identify strongly with females. Cross dressing is simply just one result of this -others may not crossdress - perhaps the thought didn’t occur to them; they may display effeminacy in their mannerisms only....there aren’t any dividing lines, simply a lot of grey areas!”³¹ The author recognizes that crossdressing is not static or singular like the gender binary, which demands an individual either be male or female. Rather they describe a spectrum of identities and behaviors of the gender-variant community and thus recognize there are many ways to experience gender. While they limit this understanding to a select group of people--heterosexual male crossdressers--and do not capture all gender diversity, it still represents an awareness of the multiplicity of gender identity that challenges the binary.

Models of Crossdresser Identity

While crossdressers present an important challenge to the gender binary, their dominant model of gender identity remains binary. The most common conceptualization of crossdresser identity embodies two personas, one male and one female, within a single individual. As Ackroyd writes, “...many transvestites dwell within two separate personae. They call themselves

³⁰ Holzer, Lena (2018), ILGA-Europe.

³¹ *GLAD RAG*, no. 35 (1987).

by their ‘femme’ name - Alan may become Pamela, Paul becomes Joyce...’’³² I found this model in all of the periodicals I examined. Every article, story or poem was signed with the femme name. The crossdressers even chose gendered names that society recognizes as female/male; they do not adopt an ambiguous name that could pass as masculine or feminine. A short story in *GLAD RAG* captures this conception of identity: “I think I will [continue dressing as a girl]...Not all the time, because I enjoy being Peter too much as well. But I’m sure that now I’ve been Anna for one day, I’d love to be her again sometime.”³³ Crossdressers imagine themselves as both male and female, but never simultaneously. They only conceptualize themselves as male or female at any given time, and those two selves as different people. Even crossdressers cannot fathom that one person could be male and female at the same time.

I found this model throughout the language and writing in crossdresser periodicals. In *Transgender London*, Elizabeth writes, “I feel equally comfortable as both Elizabeth and as my male persona. I like myself when I am a man, and I like myself when I am “her”. I would not change anything about my appearance.”³⁴ While the satisfaction in being both a man and woman challenges binaries, Elizabeth cannot imagine her identity outside the confines of male and female. Either she is Elizabeth or she is her “male persona”; she cannot both. Likewise, a contributor to *GLAD RAG* writes about these two parts of themselves as different people: “It would have been thrillingly exciting to have left all ‘his’ clothes at French Place...he would have to return to work for a few hours on Thursday; but Sally would still have plenty of time to herself.”³⁵ Yet again, both of Sally’s personas do not even share the same life or activities, but

³² Ackroyd, Peter. 1979. *Dressing up: Transvestism and Drag: the History of an Obsession*. London: Thames and Hudson.

³³ *GLAD RAG*, no. 35 (1987).

³⁴ Andrei, Claudia. 2002. *Transgender Underground: London and the Third Sex*. London: Glitter Books.

³⁵ *GLAD RAG*, no. 45 (1990).

remain distinctly separate entities. The archives reveal both the revolutionary potential of the crossdressing community, but also the limitations of an identity formation that remained contingent on binary gender. The dissonant language of these crossdressers does not reflect the crossdressers themselves, but the social conditions in which they lived. We can see this identity formation as the product of gender diverse people trying to express their gender in a binary world: they use the only language they have.

As demonstrated previously, the dominant attitude of crossdressers towards their two personas is this desire to live as both, like Elizabeth, who feels “equally at home”³⁶ in either. A crossdresser named Louise writes in *Cross Talk*, “Louise deserves more life, and if this experiment works then she shall, but not at the expense of Robert. I’m not ready to abandon Robert yet, to throw him aside.”³⁷ On the whole, crossdressers express a desire to inhabit both their female and male selves, establishing an identity that falls outside of a traditional gender binary.

However, I did examine crossdressers who expressed more discomfort with the dual personas. A few connected more with their female self than their male persona. Crossdresser Sally writes in *GLAD RAG*, “It was not my favorite time, changing back from Sally to the rather nondescript envelope who carries her locked away inside himself.”³⁸ Another crossdresser in *Cross Talk* describes their male persona as “He, the one who wears trousers, the one for whose sake I am an actress, playing a despised male role for the world.”³⁹ This understanding of themselves reads more like a binary transgender person without the tools to transition than

³⁶ Andrej, Claudia. 2002. *Transgender Underground: London and the Third Sex*. London: Glitter Books.

³⁷ *CROSS TALK*, No. 8 (1989).

³⁸ *GLAD RAG*, no. 45 (1990).

³⁹ *CROSS TALK*, No. 8 (1989).

someone who enjoys both the male and female parts of themselves. At a time when transition was far more expensive, stigmatized and inaccessible than it is now, it is likely some individuals who identified strongly with being female would crossdress to ease their dysphoria without having to carry the stigma of a transsexual. The idea of these two parts of themselves may have been easier to accept or conceptualize than the idea they were “born in the wrong body”. Even today, trans lesbians have not entered the mainstream. Perhaps it was much easier for some to conceptualize themselves as a heterosexual crossdresser.

The idea that crossdressers are closeted transgender people persists today. One of my non-binary narrators Sophie said that “a crossdresser was a person that might have wanted to transition but wasn’t at that point yet or maybe was still in the closet and at some point you went from crossdresser to transgender.”⁴⁰ While there exists many crossdressers who do not want to transition, transgender people also crossdress as a form of experimenting with their gender.

Another subset of crossdressers did not conceptualize their identity using the dual persona model at all. For example, a crossdresser in *GLAD RAG*, writes that “I love my body as it is-it’s the only one I have, and it is the source of all my feelings. However, I do like to wear clothes that are normally worn by women...I do not want to wear make-up or pass as a woman, I just wear what I feel good in” and “Please do not refer to me as ‘she’ or ‘her’. I do not pretend to be a woman, I just wear the same clothes as one.”⁴¹ These crossdressers display a nuanced understanding of gender identity and gender expression. They see gender identity and gender expression as two different entities and believe they can wear a dress because they like how it looks and still feel like and be a man. They likely also had a different conception of themselves

⁴⁰ Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019

⁴¹ *GLAD RAG*, no. 45 (1990).

than society or even their fellow crossdressers would see. In addition to crossdressers who seemed very satisfied with their lives and their identification, there existed others who had no clear path forward, who remained unrecognizable even by their own sub-communities. The crossdressers that resist the common narrative serve as an important reminder that the written archive does not give us the whole story, and that there are others who remain illegible, invisible or in pain, because there still does not remain an identification that allows them to be seen.

Normalization and Heteronormativity

The support of crossdressers' wives demonstrates their ability to normalize and rationalize their identity, often through their male heterosexuality. There existed an entire network of wives among crossdressing organizations in the UK, which often helped crossdressers to start living their authentic selves. For example, one crossdresser writes in *Narcissus*, "...my wife [got] in touch with a helpline which put her in touch with another wife at the Chameleon club, which is when my life really started to be worth living again."⁴² Wives even became the center of crossdressing communities alongside their partners. A profile in *Cross Talk* details that "Tucked away in a cosy little cottage in Northwich you will find Raymond (Shirley) and his wife Christine. It is they who were at the heart of the Manchester TV group at the University several years ago...now you will see them nearly every Wednesday at the Rembrandt making visitors and new members feel welcome and at home."⁴³ Another wife "Maxine makes 90% of Gina's clothes and the two of them regularly support the Northern Concord functions."⁴⁴ While crossdressers did not always find supportive wives, there existed a massive network of

⁴² *NARCISSUS* 1, No. 3 (1989).

⁴³ *CROSS TALK*, No. 27 (1995).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

them who heavily involved themselves in the crossdresser community. Hundreds of crossdressers explained and justified their identity and female self to their predominantly heterosexual, cisgender wives.

While we cannot know exactly why the wives of crossdressers remained so supportive and involved, it appears to be most closely related to the male heterosexuality of their partners. Once their partner dispelled common myths about crossdressing and emphasized that crossdressing did not keep them from being male or sexually attracted to women, wives seemed more likely to get on board.⁴⁵ Wives' ability to hold onto their heterosexuality enabled them to be more encouraging. In this way, crossdressing becomes normative: heterosexual men with loving, supportive wives, who just happen to have this feminine tendency. The support of wives shows how broadly crossdressers' heterosexuality normalized their identity within personal circles, if not society at large.

An analysis of *the Danish Girl* by one of the crossdressers in *Cross Talk* displays how heterosexual crossdressers themselves also held onto heteronormativity. They write that in comparison to transsexuals, "We do need to have our female personas have free expression but we stop far short of sacrificing our male selves and distancing ourselves irrevocably from those we love."⁴⁶ By not completely transitioning and still embodying their male persona, crossdressers could maintain their heterosexual relationships and normalize otherwise very stigmatized identities. While heterosexual crossdressers represent one of the first communities in the modern Western world to inhabit identities outside of the binary, they also used crossdressing as a strategy to normalize transgender identity and distance themselves from queerness.

⁴⁵ *CROSS TALK*, No. 27 (1995).

⁴⁶ *CROSS TALK*, No. 44 (2002).

Generational Differences

Non-binary research participants declared crossdresser to have fallen out of style as an identity, viewed as old and even offensive by much of society today. Marije described it as “almost old fashioned or a very fetishized term”⁴⁷ and Sophie emphasized that “crossdresser is a bit of an insult, it’s not a nice word to use anymore.”⁴⁸ Across the board, participants knew more people who identified as a butch than as a crossdresser and asserted that the term was more or less out of use.

Furthermore, participants responses emphasized that there is a gap in how they understood crossdressers and how crossdressers understood themselves. Kees said “It’s hard for me to deal with that there are men who in their leisure time like to dress up as women but that is so separate from their day to day gender...and that’s such a weird separation of two worlds...makes me a bit sad.”⁴⁹ There is a fundamental misreading of crossdressers here. While Kees might struggle with the binary nature of crossdressers today, crossdressers did not feel sad or repressed; they felt happy to explore their feminine persona while still holding onto their male and straight privilege. And others like Sychu, viewed crossdressing as more of performance and separate from gender identity: “[Crossdressing is] a person dressing as a different gender, it’s kind of in the same realm as a drag person.”⁵⁰ However, crossdressers emphasized the relationship between their crossdressing and their identity and reiterated that their feminine persona was a core part of their inner self. Not only has the usage of crossdressing terminology

⁴⁷ Marije, interview by the author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 7, 2019.

⁴⁸ Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁴⁹ Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁵⁰ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

fallen out of fashion, but the understanding of crossdressers' identity formation has also faded even from trans and gender-diverse communities.

In addition to the binary quality of the identity, crossdressing's associations with fetishism and sexual deviance caused the community to not achieve long term acceptance and visibility.⁵¹ While the majority of crossdressers in the periodicals express crossdressing as a distinct gender identity unrelated to their sexuality, the public image never got beyond its sexualization and the idea that people crossdressed because it turned them on. Marije emphasized the fetishization of crossdressing to this day multiple times in their interview.⁵² Society often sees non-binary, on the other hand, as a legitimate gender identity distinct from sexuality.

Examining crossdressers in our current non-binary moment reveals how this gender diverse community both transcended and was limited by the binary. On one hand, crossdressers began to imagine a world where we are not confined to being male or female all of the time and laid significant groundwork for trans generations to come. However, the limitations of crossdressers' social conditions becomes obvious when examining their periodicals. For the most part, the construction of the crossdresser identity fails to transcend binary notions of male and female. Crossdressers were constricted by a binary world, unable to see themselves as anything other than male or female at any given time.

Additionally, the crossdresser community only included heterosexual males and relied on heterosexuality to normalize the community and distance itself from queerness, leaving many outside of its narrative. Manifestations of the crossdresser that express discomfort with the dual persona model emphasize that identity was not as straight-forward or easy for all gender-diverse

⁵¹ Ackroyd, Peter. 1979. *Dressing up: Transvestism and Drag: the History of an Obsession*. 1st ed. London: Thames and Hudson.

⁵² Marije, interview by the author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 7, 2019.

people. The ‘community’ expressed in the archives does not tell the *whole* story and does not include those who had no mechanism to be visible. Where were the gay or bisexual crossdressers who likely existed (CITE) but did not appear on these pages? While we must acknowledge what crossdresser communities of the 90s and early 2000s gave to our current movement of gender-diverse people, we can also see how the limitations of the time prevented the crossdresser community from being more liberatory and inclusive for those who did not make it onto the pages of the archive.

Butches

Female-bodied crossdressers and butches remain absent from the written archive in Amsterdam. While stories of women who dress as men for power, freedom or success materialize here and there, I found no written evidence in the archives of communities or organizations dedicated to female crossdressers or masculine individuals assigned female at birth. Even butch or butch-femme communities barely appeared in numerous searches in the IHLIA and Atria archives. This gap in the archives represents the misogyny that plagues the historical record. Society can understand why “women” would want to present as men but not comprehend why “men” want to embody women. The public cares more about a “man” in a dress than a “woman” in pants.⁵³ Therefore, the archives pay more attention to male crossdressers than female crossdressers or masculine women. While the lack of archival material makes interpreting butch communities difficult, I turned to current work in the field and my own

⁵³ Serano, Julia. 2007. *Whipping Girl : a Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.

interviews in order to understand the state of butch identity and community in the world today.

Butch Constructions of Gender Identity

By close-reading testimonies of butch identity, I read butches as a predecessor to non-binary identity and examine their transcendence of the gender binary. I turn to histories and interviews of butches conducted in the field because of the lack of written sources. Tyler, a participant in Jade Williams' study of butches in the Netherland, says "People think butch lesbians are just trying to be men or boys, but that's not what we are trying to achieve with our image...we want to be masculine women as we feel more comfortable that way and sometimes more confident."⁵⁴ As Jack Halberstam explains in *Female Masculinity*, butch represents an alternative masculinity outside of maleness that challenges the domain of cisgender men.⁵⁵ While the idea of "masculine women" remains rooted in a gender binary that cannot transcend ideas of femininity and masculinity, it also allows butches to be comfortable in their masculinity while still rejecting manhood. It enables butches to occupy a space that is not entirely female or male.

Halberstam explains how butch constitutes a distinct gender identity in his oral history in the Documenting Lesbian Lives project at Smith College. He says,

[My girlfriend] wanted to be with me where we were being women. [She said,] you have a female body and I want to be with you because you have a female body and I'm like, well I want to be with you because you have a female body, but I don't want to be with you as a—as a woman....I sort of was able to understand myself as a Stone Butch.... I had not been happy as a lesbian. I did not want my body to be seen as a woman's body and in lesbian relationships that was how I was understood.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Williams, Jade. "Butch Lesbians: A Misunderstood Breed?" Master's thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2017.

⁵⁵ Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Duke Univ. Press, 2006.

⁵⁶ Halberstam, Jack. Interview by Sky Karp. Video recording, March 20, 2019. Smith College Archives.

Halberstam understands his Stone Butch identity as different from lesbianism because he does not want to be intimate with other people as a woman. His oral history demonstrates how butch represents not just a sexuality but a gender identity that resists identification with femaleness.

Like crossdressers, butches do not understand themselves as completely female or male, but remain limited by binary constructions of masculinity and femininity. For example,

Williams' participant Ellen

Identif[ies] herself as 'female with an inclination towards masculine'...Wearing male intended attire, binding her chest, cutting her hair short along with her interest in cars and motorcycles are, in Ellen's mind, features of her appearance and personality that may be considered butch. However, Ellen contends that she is still very much in touch with her 'feminine side' as she 'celebrate[s] feminism, [is] not afraid to show [her] emotions and enjoy[s] pampering [herself] on occasions...' ⁵⁷

Another participant in Williams' study identify themselves as "Female but more manly." ⁵⁸ A

third participant "(...) like[s] stereotypical feminine items like pretty underwear and make up...

[but] wear[s] male clothing and ha[s] very short hair." ⁵⁹ These butches conceptualize their

identity as beyond female and feminine, treating both their "masculine" and "feminine" sides as

important aspects of themselves. However, participants do not talk about their gender without

using a binary feminine/masculine framework. They situate themselves at the extremes of gender

presentation, talking about activities like cars and motorcycles or makeup and lingerie. Similar

to crossdressers, butches do not see their masculinity and femininity as integrated or

simultaneous but rather as separate entities, reifying the gender binary as well as challenging it.

⁵⁷ Williams, Jade. "Butch Lesbians: A Misunderstood Breed?" Master's thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2017.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

“Where Have All the Butches Gone?”

Much recent literature about butches asserts that they are “disappearing”. In the ten-year old study *“Where Have All the Butches Gone? Analyzing the Butch-Femme dyad in the Netherlands”*, Clementine Breslin claims that “The women I interviewed were quick to confirm my own conclusion: *There is no butch-femme in the Netherlands*. Its existence has been dwindling for decades, and now it is barely visible, just a relic from a long forgotten past...Dutch lesbians of the new millennium are moving away from this tradition.”⁶⁰ The majority of my own participants did not know anyone who identified as a butch and added that the terminology was disappearing. Participants in both studies noted geographical differences, asserting that butch remains an English term and more prominent in the U.S. One participant in *Where Have All the Butches Gone* sees butch as “an American thing”. My participant Sychu explained that butch is a “Term...that didn’t originate in the Netherlands and especially when I talk about queerness in Dutch those are terms that don’t really kind of come up.”⁶¹ Butches constitute a more prevalent community and acknowledged history in the United States than elsewhere.

However, butches have not disappeared, but rather have transformed into others terms and identities, even in the Netherlands. In her essay “Where Have All the Butches Gone?”, social justice activist Roey Thorpe writes about her experiences interviewing older lesbians in Detroit in the 1990s as well as her personal experience with butches. She writes, “I knew that for many, “butch” was the closest they could come to a word that would describe the experience of being a masculine person in a woman’s body. But for these folks, while “butch” was better than

⁶⁰ Breslin, Clementine. *“Where Have All the Butches Gone? Analyzing the Butch-Femme dyad in the Netherlands”*. School for International Training, 2009.

⁶¹ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

"woman" or "lesbian," it still fell short."⁶² Thorpe emphasizes that people continue to find better language to describe their experiences of living in a gendered body. She argues that butches *aren't* disappearing, but simply called by a different name. "So where have all the butches gone?," she concludes. "They're still around, although some of them go by other names. Some are still proud butches and studs; others, particularly young people, prefer the term "genderqueer," with endless subcategories that underscore that gender identity and expression may intersect with sexual orientation but aren't subsumed by it."⁶³ The language may change and become more accurate for certain communities, but the presence of masculine female-bodied individuals remains as strong as ever.

Dutch participants in Williams' study also emphasize this change in language. Ellen says, "....there are so many labels for everything now, there's more than one label for butch."⁶⁴ Another participant Shay notes, "I think that the butch label isn't necessarily dying out. I see so many more ways to identify these days: tomboy, androgynous, etc."⁶⁵ As language emerges that more accurately describes the experience of a masculine person in a female body, butch falls out of use. However, it is not disappearing, but rather transforms into other identities and language.

Non-Binary Participants and Butch Identity

In particular, butch is transforming into the non-binary movement of the past ten years. One of my participants, Alex, who is twenty-three years old, emphasized the generational shift in language. They explained that they always saw butch as "an adult person which I was not yet"

⁶² Thorpe, Roey. "Where Have All the Butches Gone?." HuffPost. HuffPost, February 2, 2016.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Williams, Jade. "Butch Lesbians: A Misunderstood Breed?" Master's thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2017.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

and that the terminology itself is starting to disappear.⁶⁶ Someone of Alex's generation could not even imagine themselves as butch. Rather, butch manifested in older generations around them. Another participant, Kees, noted that "Non-binary identity [is] very old and...[has] always been there...maybe the whole butch identity...would have been non-binary if that was the language that they had back then...I think it has a lot to do with language...what changed is knowledge and more of an open discourse."⁶⁷ Although our language changes, gender variance will always have a distinct presence throughout history. As access to knowledge increases and the conversation about gender moves beyond the binary, our language and identity formations evolve. However, butch is *not* disappearing, as I earlier suspected, but transforming. Gender variance never goes away, but takes new historical and cultural forms.

Some participants could not relate to butch because of its relationship to lesbianism and masculinity. Sychu emphasized that "Butch really feels rooted in lesbian culture."⁶⁸ Butch encapsulates both lesbianism and gender variance, leaving masculine-presenting individuals who do not feel (only) attracted to women without adequate terminology. Marije added that "Butch...came from lesbian communities. And I've never identified as lesbian....[it is] not a term I could claim....[it is] associated with a kind of masculinity that for me is not something that fits."⁶⁹ In addition to lesbianism, the machismo associated with butch alienates AFAB individuals who do not identify with masculinity but still feel discomfort with their gender assigned at birth. Especially as discourse moves beyond a gender binary and the constructs of

⁶⁶ Alex, interview by author, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 6, 2019.

⁶⁷ Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁶⁸ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

⁶⁹ Marije, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 7, 2019.

masculine and feminine, queer communities need new language to capture the broader range of gender variant individuals.

Additionally, non-binary participants felt constricted by butch-femme spaces. Kees said,

When I am in lesbian spaces with a lot of butch energy, it really feels like masculine energy to me. And that is a kind of masculine energy that I am a bit afraid of. Also, when it comes to flirting and dating with butch lesbians I've tried but it's really hard for me because I still feel like I'm being pushed into the girl part or something. I feel like I have to make a choice or something, I'm either a butch or a girl and I don't feel like I am any of those.⁷⁰

Kees emphasizes again that butch identity does not resonate with individuals who do not feel at home in butch masculinity. They also attest that butch, and especially butch-femme, communities feel restricting when an individual does not identify as butch or femme. While butch-femme communities have queered gender in essential ways for decades,⁷¹ butch-femme spaces can feel limiting for individuals who identify beyond the confines of masculinity and femininity. As our conception of sexuality and gender broadens, participants reveal how butch can be too narrow of an identity to accurately describe the diverse range of queer, trans and non-binary expressions proliferating in the world.

Another participant, however, challenges a straight-forward genealogy where one term or identity becomes another. Raj explains, "I know a non-binary person who has butch tattooed on their body so I know it is also something that non-binary people use."⁷² Raj emphasizes that the chronology of any community, and especially queer and trans communities, does not stay linear. Butch and non-binary are not mutually exclusive. I identify as non-binary and transmasculine, but would use the word butch to describe a certain piece of clothing or haircut I might get. The butch identity has a strong historical and cultural legacy that is not going away anytime soon.

⁷⁰ Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁷¹ Nestle, Joan. 2003. *A Restricted Country*. San Francisco, CA: Cleis Press.

⁷² Raj. Interview by author. Amsterdam, the Netherlands. November 18, 2019.

When I began this project, I expected to find that butches were disappearing and being replaced by the non-binary identity. Instead, I found a new appreciation for the ways butches both transcend the gender binary and remain limited by the trappings of male and female. Additionally, I discovered that identity formation does not operate in such a linear and chronological fashion, where one identity disappears, replaced by another. Rather, identities become transformed, fluid and co-opted into one another. Non-binary people continue to express the need for a broader, more inclusive gender-variant community and language and society is beginning to evolve to a place where such a world is possible. This shift in the language does not spell doom for butch identity, but rather the continued evolution and uplifting of all gender-variant people.

The Non-Binary Movement

The eight individuals I interviewed to understand the current non-binary movement demonstrated the diversity of experience the identity category captures. Participants only needed to identify as non-binary to participate, and each interviewee told a vastly different story. Participants grew up all over the Netherlands, although most resided in Amsterdam, the Hague, Rotterdam or Utrecht. They used a range of pronouns, and some identified as trans, genderqueer and bigender in addition to non-binary. Some had medically transitioned, some were actively pursuing transition and some had no desire to do so. Some felt they experienced dysphoria and some did not. Four participants were assigned female at birth and four were assigned male. The diversity in participants does not come close to capturing the nuances and characteristics of all those who identify as non-binary. However, it does demonstrate that even in a small sample size,

the identity non-binary remains far reaching. Each participant, with varying desires, presentations and ideas about gender, still felt that non-binary accurately described their identity. Unlike both crossdresser and butch, which describe more specific groups of people (heterosexual men or masculine lesbians, respectively), non-binary includes a broad variety of individuals and gender expressions. Its strength lies in putting language to the lives and experiences of so many.

Non-Binary Identity Formation

Many participants discussed the significance of defining themselves as “not” something. Alex explained “Non-binary is a label I’m very comfortable because it says exactly what I’m not....My gender is complex in a way I can’t really put anything more definite on it.”⁷³

Non-binary allows for more flexibility and complexity than previous gender variant identity formations. It acknowledges the fluidity of gender identity and gives individuals space to change and grow within a community or label. Community activist Kees stated that at first they found themselves “...annoyed a bit at the fact that we had to not be something...be so reactive...[but] it’s also cool to just refuse, prefer not to.”⁷⁴ Kees emphasized the frustration that many feel with defining themselves in relation to normative gender identity. However, they also acknowledged that this refusal to engage in normative identity holds power.

Additionally, participants emphasized that ‘non-binary’ freed them from gendered norms and expectations. Marije explained that it helped them to let go of internalized gender roles: “I’m not a woman, so why should I follow those things?...it really created a lot of freedom in being who I am and how I present to the outside world....leaving that label of woman behind really got

⁷³ Alex, interview by author, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 6, 2019.

⁷⁴ Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

me more to that ideal of I really can be anyone I want.”⁷⁵ Feminists often criticize AFAB trans and non-binary people for leaving womanhood behind because it is easier to be a man than a woman.⁷⁶ However, because we live in such a gendered and sexist world, we should employ all strategies that resist gendered expectations and assumptions, including non-binary identity. By opening up gendered possibilities, non-binary identity fights sexism and assumptions about women, men and everyone else. Sophie emphasizes this point: “Being non-binary for me is a state of mind where what your body is or what your clothing is doesn’t necessarily...isn’t necessarily the same as the gender identity you have in your head...I can wear whatever I want and still know that that doesn't mean I’m a man. I can look however I want, I can grow my beard, I can grow my hair really long and I’m still not a man or a woman, it’s irrelevant.”⁷⁷ Non-binary identity challenges the assumptions we make about people and distinguishes gender presentation from identity. The non-binary movement works towards a world where people can express themselves however they want without society forcing a certain identity upon them.

Although participants imagine their identity beyond a binary, many still do not talk about their gender beyond male/female or masculine/feminine frameworks. Some participants, like Sychu, describe their gender as “generally non-existent”⁷⁸ and reject a gendered identity altogether. However others, including both Marije and Sophie above, define themselves as not men or women; they still cannot transcend binary language when they describe their identity, even if they conceptualize their identity as resisting the binary. Byleth explains that they want to “be both genders”, and Mika describes themselves as “somewhere in between [male and female]

⁷⁵ Marije, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 7, 2019.

⁷⁶ Nataf, Zachary I. 1996. *Lesbians Talk Transgender*. London: Scarlet.

⁷⁷ Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁷⁸ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

but more the boyish side.”⁷⁹ Our language and society still cannot imagine gender without masculinity or femininity, even if we define ourselves in opposition to it. Non-binary participants both demonstrate the power of resisting binary gender identity, and reveal that we still use normative ways of talking about gender to describe ourselves. While the articulation of gender outside of the binary has not happened in the Western world for many centuries, we still cannot escape the gender binary altogether.

Non-Binary Communities

The internet and the modern age of technology made the rapid popularization of non-binary possible. Every single participant mentioned the internet when describing either their own process of identity formation or the identity formation of younger trans generations. Alex noted that the internet allowed them to gain knowledge about trans and non-binary people long before they came out, explaining that they “looked everything up about transgender and then...put it away for a time.”⁸⁰ Mika mentioned finding information about trans people when a friend added them to a Facebook page⁸¹ and Sophie met many of their queer friends through Twitter.⁸² Sychu said that because people of their generation “have the words and...the internet, being internet-natives, we’re able to sculpt communities in a way that better suits ourselves...the internet is a bad place but it’s also a wonderful place when it comes to being queer because you can sculpt a community around yourself that supports who you are and supports growing into who you are.”⁸³ Sychu emphasized that the internet gives trans and non-binary people access to knowledge and language about their identities and connects people on an unprecedented scale.

⁷⁹ Mika, interview by author, the Hague, the Netherlands, November 4, 2019.

⁸⁰ Alex, interview by author, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 6, 2019.

⁸¹ Mika, interview by author, the Hague, the Netherlands, November 4, 2019.

⁸² Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁸³ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

Sophie added that after joining the Facebook group “Created with Queer,” “I saw that there were a bunch of possibilities that are not like binary transgender. And that you don’t have to do everything and you’re not considered female only after you’ve done everything transition related...I realized that there’s other options.”⁸⁴ The internet opens up new possibilities and choices for trans people. The ability for a closeted non-binary person to access hundreds of stories, articles and people while staying anonymous has become essential in the process of identity formation.

Both Marije and Kees, the oldest participants in the study, also named the internet as the major difference among trans generations today. Marije mentioned that while growing up, they did not have internet and “men who dressed up as women” constituted their awareness of gender fluidity , with “The Transvestite Show” as their main source of representation.⁸⁵ Kees explained that “When I was that age...I didn’t know about different gender experiences, I didn’t know about different sexualities and sex positive and all these words that the kids have now...it didn’t open the world for me, the computer screen.”⁸⁶ The access to resources, language and representation that younger generations of trans and non-binary people have today plays a significant role in their ability to find and use new language and pronouns to describe their identities. I found most of my participants on an online Facebook group for Dutch trans and non-binary people. I participate in other non-binary Facebook groups with thousands of people. The internet’s ability to connect non-binary people to others like them as well as important resources helps them to come out and take part in building a resilient community, playing a significant role in the popularization of the non-binary identity.

⁸⁴ Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁸⁵ Marije, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 7, 2019.

⁸⁶ Kees , interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

Traditional forms of queer community building also remain important in non-binary identity formation. Mika discussed meeting other queer and trans people through the Hang Out, a space for trans youth, as an important aspect of coming into their identity. They emphasized that “I know more people...[who] are the same as I am.”⁸⁷ Kees talked about being an elder to trans youth and that it gave them “a whole different perspective on family...I just don’t like children so I never wanted them for myself but I loved being this elder figure for these kids.”⁸⁸ Sophie described learning from the people in the Created with Queer Facebook group who attended events in Utrecht,⁸⁹ and Byleth expressed the importance of “hearing the stories of other people and how it is for them” in their gender identity support group.⁹⁰ Sychu found community in their queer and non-binary Quidditch team, the first place they tried out gender neutral pronouns.⁹¹ All of these participants show how they use the tools of the internet to find tangible community out in the world. While the internet aids in connecting people, physical spaces and organizations remain essential in helping non-binary individuals find other people like them, legitimizing and growing their identity and community.

Erasure and Resistance

While non-binary identity continues to increase in popularity, we still live in a society that polices and regulates gender identity and expression that does not conform to the binary. Kees, who identifies as a gender clown, explained that “especially because of the way that I look, it really takes away a lot of possibilities..especially in my professional life....Not being taken

⁸⁷ Mika, interview by author, the Hague, the Netherlands, November 4, 2019.

⁸⁸ Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁸⁹ Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁹⁰ Byleth, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁹¹ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

seriously because I look like this.”⁹² Femme presenting trans individuals, especially those of color, face even higher rates of violence and discrimination.⁹³ Byleth noted that “the biggest reason I do not wear just the normal clothing and a skirt [is] I’m just afraid of people doing something to me, of violence.”⁹⁴ Alex told me that “When I’m wearing a dress, people look at me weird, like eyes, this silence. People are uncomfortable with my presence when I’m feeling like myself.”⁹⁵ Marije notes that they are even protected by presenting as more masculine: “I experience more discrimination...or challenges when I express as femme...for me that was way harder than the way I express now.”⁹⁶ Violence and discrimination remain real threats to the safety and stability of non-binary individuals, especially those who present as femme.

In addition to violence and discrimination, non-binary individuals must confront the erasure of a binary system that constantly fails to recognize their existence. Alex said that “I say that I’m non-binary and people just gawk at me.”⁹⁷ Sychu added that although they pass as male, “I’m sort of like invisible...people assume that I’m masculine and it’s nearly impossible for me to be read as anything else. If I put on a skirt, I’m a weird hippy guy who is wearing a skirt instead of a non-binary person.”⁹⁸ While the current historical moment allows individuals to imagine identity beyond the binary, the erasure and violence towards individuals who live out and proud as non-binary remains pervasive. Participants point to the gap between the ability to

⁹² Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁹³ Rojas, Rick, and Vanessa Swales. “18 Transgender Killings This Year Raise Fears of an ‘Epidemic.’” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, September 27, 2019.

⁹⁴ Byleth, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

⁹⁵ Alex, interview by author, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 6, 2019.

⁹⁶ Marije, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 7, 2019.

⁹⁷ Alex, interview by author, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 6, 2019.

⁹⁸ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

imagine their identities and the ability to live them. They still must live in a world where their non-binary identities remain unreadable.

The genderedness of the Dutch language presents another challenge for Dutch non-binary individuals. Sychu explained “I really try to incorporate the dutch neutral pronouns in my speech and it still is hard because they don’t really fit as well as, for example, singular they in English or like the neutral pronoun in ...Swedish.”⁹⁹ Sophie emphasized that they do not use gender neutral pronouns in Dutch because Dutch people do not recognize them. They said

I’d like to use gender neutral pronouns...in Dutch we do have them but we’re not at the point where they’re widely used or accepted and I don’t want to go through explaining them to everyone I meet so I don’t bother with it. But maybe in a couple of years I really hope that gender neutral pronouns get more accepted and more used and then I will definitely go around and say hey guys I would like to use gender neutral pronouns.¹⁰⁰

Alex emphasized the emotional labor that goes into explaining pronouns to everyone: “[I] don’t want to put all that effort in to convince someone [my] existence is valid.”¹⁰¹ The lack of usable language and pronouns itself remains a barrier to rendering non-binary people in the Netherlands visible and affirmed.

Each participant found their own way to live authentically and resist the gendered systems that so often govern their lives. For some, resistance meant an act of refusal. Kees told me that “Resistance means saying...maybe I don’t want to participate...to stop and consider and think about so what is it that I want to do and what are the norms that are being put on my right now and do I want that.”¹⁰² For others it meant a more tangible “effort towards being seen in the first place and being acknowledged.”¹⁰³ Some participants talked about finding ways to be

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

¹⁰¹ Alex, interview by author, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 6, 2019.

¹⁰² Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

¹⁰³ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

themselves in the world. Alex discussed the pain of finishing medical school, a place where they hide their true self. They said they survived by “Find[ing] little bits of me being me inside of that world.”¹⁰⁴ Mika did not understand what resistance meant when I asked. However, they repeatedly emphasized “I’m just being me how I am and I’m not gonna change.”¹⁰⁵ Alex and Mika demonstrated how the act of mere existence, of living as their true, authentic selves, serves as a powerful challenge to the gender binary. Raj echoed this sentiment when they asserted that “everything that is outside of the norms is an act of resistance...just being you, showing yourself.”¹⁰⁶ While the gender binary remains ingrained in each one of us, every participant found ways to resist it and live lives beyond the binary. From the political to the social to the personal, non-binary people are rejecting the gender binary and finding ways to exist outside of its reach.

Living in Gendered Bodies

Non-binary research participants navigated the relationship between the sexed body and gender identification, often complicating the ideology of feminist constructivism. Gayle Rubin writes about feminism creating a “genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love.”¹⁰⁷ She also outlines the “coat rack” theory: that the sexed body does not receive meaning or significance until society places expectations of masculinity or femininity onto it, much like placing clothing

¹⁰⁴ Alex, interview by author, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 6, 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Mika, interview by author, the Hague, the Netherlands, November 4, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Raj. Interview by author. Amsterdam, the Netherlands. November 18, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Rubin, Gayle. 1975. “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”, in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, R. Reiter (ed.), New York: Monthly Review Press.

on a coat rack gives it shape and significance.¹⁰⁸ On one hand, Rubin's theory resonates with participants: it allows us to see gender and sex as separate and therefore understand how participants' gender could be distinct from their sex assigned at birth. However, Rubin asserts we need to eliminate gender in order to liberate ourselves, whereas participants hold onto their sense of gender identity. They do not advocate for their gender to be ignored, but made visible. Participants also expressed severe discomfort with their sexed body because it did not match their gender identity. Their solution was often medical transition, to change their "sex" in some way. However, if our sexed bodies did not *mean* anything, if society did not associate them with men or women, would participants still feel the need to change them? Rubin imagines a world in which our cultural understandings of gender are fundamentally different, while participants react to the ways they must navigate the world we live in now.

Butler adds another important voice to the discourse, seeing gender and sex as indistinct and critiquing the proliferation of 'identity politics'. She argues that sex and gender are both social constructs and therefore indistinguishable from one another. She criticizes the general trans framework that asserts an individual's sex remains undeniable but their gender identity can differ. Rather, Butler argues society socially constructs sex as well.

Butler also criticizes identity categories as exclusionary and presents the possibility that non-binary could be normative. She writes, "[i]dentity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary."¹⁰⁹ As the Netherlands continues to integrate non-binary people into the binary as a third gender category, the identity does become normalized and even exclusionary for those who do not fit the mold. While non-binary

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, Judith. 1991. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'", *Praxis International*, 11: 150–165.

individuals advocate for the X gender marker as a way to be acknowledged, Rubin or Butler might advocate for no gender markers at all. I experienced this dissonance myself. Intellectually, I advocated for the removal of all gender markers on documents, believing that the “X” gender marker only assimilated non-binary people into the binary and increased state surveillance of gender-nonconformity. However, when my state added an X marker to their licenses, I was ecstatic to finally have the opportunity to be recognized for who I am. When the state constantly erases your identity, it remains difficult not to accept their normative attempts to acknowledge you.

Feminist interpretations of the sexed body and gender identity come into conflict with the experiences of my participants. Most participants did not question their sex, and talked about their gender as an innate part of themselves. They saw a medical and/or social transition to non-binary as the solution to the incongruity between their sex assigned at birth and gender identity. Feminist theorists, on the other hand, either imagine a genderless world where sex does not dictate an individual’s identity or see both sex and gender as socially constructed and indistinguishable. These theories help to illuminate the more problematic aspects of the non-binary moment and the ways the category can become normative and limiting.

“Born this way” discourse continues to divide the non-binary community, with participants both identifying and rejecting “born this way” ideology. Sophie explained that

it’s like when you have a box and it’s wrapped and for a long time you just don’t touch the box. It’s there but you don’t touch it. And at some point you open it and then you find ah this is what’s in there. It’s always been there, but you just didn’t know. And then you open the box and then there’s something else in there that’s also always been there but you just didn’t know about it...but it’s always been there.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

Byleth added, “I felt that way as long as I can remember”¹¹¹ and Sychu said that “If I didn’t at some point decide to actively examine and question my gender, I might have not...[have] realized I was non-binary for a couple years more.”¹¹² While I believe that my life experiences shaped me, I too feel that my non-binary identity remains innate, existing inside of me since I was a small child, only to be re-discovered now. Most participants, including myself, assert that there remains something innate and fixed about their non-binary identity.

However, community activist Kees countered this ideology: “I honestly don’t know who I am...outside of this world I grew up in and that surrounds me now...I don’t think I was born as anything...probably there was already something going on in my genes and my body...but it doesn’t have anything to do with being gay or not or being queer or not...it’s way beyond all these identities.”¹¹³ Kees implies that it does not matter how we came into our identities. We live in a cultural moment that remains experimental: even within our own community, we cannot agree on whether we are born this way or not, and whether or not it matters. This is also where non-binary people’s lived experiences come into conflict with feminist constructivists like Rubin. While “born this way” ideology often harms queer communities,¹¹⁴ this broad, innate sense of existing beyond gender norms before one even had a name for it remains important to recognize and complicates Rubin and Butler’s theories of gender as a social construct. Trans activist Julia Serano even emphasizes this idea in her book *Whipping Girl*: “certain aspects of femininity (as well as masculinity) are natural and can both precede socialization and supersede biological

¹¹¹ Byleth, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

¹¹² Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

¹¹³ Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

¹¹⁴ McArdle, Megan. “Born This Way”? The Answer Shouldn’t Affect Gay Rights.” Bloomberg.com. Bloomberg, June 14, 2017.

sex.”¹¹⁵

Participants expressed their relationship to their sexed body in a variety of ways, but most saw medical or social intervention as the solution to dysphoria. Mika wanted to start hormone replacement therapy and get top surgery immediately. They asserted that “I’m going to be fixed...the way I want to be.”¹¹⁶ Others expressed desire for a partial transition. Byleth, for example, said that “I don’t want a full transition at the very least...going into the bigender part, I kind of want breasts.”¹¹⁷ I connected with Alex’s uncertainty, who explained that “I have days where I firmly believe it’s something I need to feel comfortable with myself” but that it also felt scary.¹¹⁸

While not all participants expressed dysphoria with their body, they each voiced discomfort with being perceived as male or female. Participants also experienced gender euphoria when others affirmed or recognized their identity. Even if they did not see medical transition as a solution, they did identify social transition as an important step in feeling at home in their sexed body. They emphasized the impact of their specific gender identity being recognized and affirmed, seeing progress as the recognition of their gender identity, not the disavowal of gender altogether.

Gaining access to trans-related medical treatment in the Netherlands remains difficult, especially for non-binary individuals. In order to receive hormones or surgery, an individual must prove they are sick and need to be treated.¹¹⁹ This model perpetuates dangerous ideas about

¹¹⁵ Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl : a Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. 2007. Emeryville, CA :Seal Press.

¹¹⁶ Mika, interview by author, the Hague, the Netherlands, November 4, 2019.

¹¹⁷ Byleth, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

¹¹⁸ Alex, interview by author, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 6, 2019.

¹¹⁹ Raj. Interview by author. Amsterdam, the Netherlands. November 18, 2019.

transness, treating it as an illness instead of an identity. Additionally, medicalization continues to rely on a binary, and non-binary people often experience gate-keeping in the medical industry because they do not identify as men or women. Raj, who transitioned as a trans man before coming out as non-binary, emphasized that “I was always known as a trans man...I knew if I would have...told my psychologist...that testosterone made me realize that I am non-binary, I wouldn’t have had the surgeries that I have right now.”¹²⁰ Even non-binary people who do feel they were “born this way” are not authentic or trans enough in the eyes of the medical establishment to medically transition. The medical-industrial complex makes it much more difficult for non-binary individuals to transition than their binary trans counterparts.

In describing a “non-binary utopia” to me, most participants emphasized a desire for a world that does not enforce gender. Marije emphasized “that we grow up with not gendering people right from the start,”¹²¹ Sophie described it as “No one actually cares about gender...they care about their own gender of course but they don’t care to know anyone else’s gender”¹²² and Sychu imagined a world where “We can get rid of genderedness...a completely gender neutral language would be best and...people can express themselves however the heck they want but it shouldn’t have any concrete meaning in language or culture.”¹²³ Participants do not imagine a genderless world, but a world where society does not enforce the gender binary and individuals can express themselves however they want without feeling erased or invisible. They still emphasize the affirmation of individual gender expression, but participants do describe a utopia similar to Rubin’s, where a sexed body has no meaning. While participants emphasized different

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Marije, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 7, 2019.

¹²² Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

¹²³ Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

views of the sexed body when asked about the realities of their day-to-day lives, ultimately they shared a vision of utopia with Rubin and other scholars theorizing about gender. And just as crossdresser and butch transformed into non-binary, perhaps non-binary will soon be transformed into a world where such designations are not even necessary.

In conclusion, the current non-binary movement makes important strides in creating a more inclusive and liberated gender-diverse community. It gives individuals the tools to place themselves in opposition to the dominant and oppressive gender binary and imagine themselves as beyond male and female. The terminology itself affirms and unites a broad range of individuals with varying sexualities, experiences and relationships to gender. However, our society still lacks the language to talk about non-binary identity without the binary framework of masculinity and femininity. Additionally, non-binary people still face high levels of erasure, violence and discrimination. While gender-diverse communities have seen much progress in the past thirty years, there still remains much work to be done. Lastly, the realities of non-binary identity challenge feminist constructivism and risk becoming normalized through medical, social and political intervention. However, non-binary people, by being visible, seen and authentically themselves, continue to create a more liberated world for generations to come.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

My inability to speak Dutch, my inadequate participant pool and my attempt to study the current historical moment limited my research. If I could read Dutch, I could have examined more archival materials from the Netherlands. It also was difficult to communicate with participants in English; it is hard to talk about identity in a non-native language, and participants

had varying levels of fluency. I sometimes had to explain what certain words meant, and participants who struggled with English often gave briefer answers. Interviews would have likely been more fruitful and easier for participants had I spoken Dutch. My interviewee pool was also demographically limited; out of eight participants only one identified as a person of color, and none identified as black. I contacted most of my participants through the Dutch facebook group Gender Zone (GZ). Given the time frame, I could not employ a more diverse set of tactics for finding participants. More research needs to be done about non-binary people of color. Additionally, while I gained many insights from interviewing participants about the current historical moment, it is difficult to assess the significance of the non-binary movement when it is still happening. Future research will need to be done in 20-30 years and onward to truly understand the impact of non-binary identity formation.

More research needs to be done about female crossdressers and butches, ‘fags’ and indigenous genders. Archives dedicated to lesbian history in particular may have more relevant material than IHLIA or Atria. While beyond the period of this paper, women who crossdressed for financial and social independence in the 18th and 19th centuries should be studied. Their complex relationship to power, feminism and gender remains to be explored. Additionally, the category of “fag” is another identity in the history of gender-variant people left unexamined by this paper. Lastly, more work needs to be done in understanding the relationship between these western identity constructions, colonization and indigenous gendered practices. Uncovering the history of gender variant people is just beginning, and there remains much to explore.

Conclusion

Examining historical precedents to today's gender-diverse communities often feels like a paradox. These earlier communities reveal individuals who came up with inventive strategies and identities to survive in a binary world and still live their authentic selves. Yet at the same time, it is only too apparent today how these communities were still trapped by the gender binary and unable to imagine themselves outside of the boxes of male and female. They both lived liberated lives for their time and were constricted by their historical conditions.

Looking back from our current moment, it feels tempting to write off crossdressers and butches as disappearing. However, in studying the chronology of gender-diversity over the past several decades, it becomes clear that identity, especially queer identity, is not that chronological. While the language may change, the tradition of forming communities that challenge and queer the gender binary certainly does not. Crossdressers and butches are not disappearing, they are expanding. They are being transformed into new language and identity categories that unite an even broader range of gender-diverse individuals. And with each new transformation, comes another crack in the gender binary.

My research makes clear that non-binary is not the end-point, but another evolution in the long history of gender-variance. The work of gender revolution is far from over. Trans and non-binary people still suffer from violence, discrimination and erasure, and our current non-binary framework still relies on the binary for its existence. While this new total opposition to the binary is a significant shift, we have not yet succeeded in escaping the gender binary. But by being proudly loud and visible, non-binary people lead the way to a world emancipated from gender expectation.

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Interviews

Alex, interview by author, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 6, 2019.

Byleth, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

Kees, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

Marije, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 7, 2019.

Mika, interview by author, the Hague, the Netherlands, November 4, 2019.

Raj. Interview by author Amsterdam, the Netherlands, November 18, 2019.

Sophie, interview by author, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, November 8, 2019.

Sychu, interview by author, Utrecht, the Netherlands, November 11, 2019.

Appendix: Interview Guide

Childhood & Family

1. Tell me about your childhood, especially in regards to your gender.
 - a. Did you feel that you were “different”?
 - b. What kind of language did you have for your sexuality/gender id?
 - c. Were you ever punished for your gender id/expression or for not conforming to the norms?
 - d. What kinds of messages were you receiving about gender? How did you deal with them? Did you resist them or comply?
 - e. What was your community like growing up in terms of queerness?
 - i. What were the expectations around gender?
 - f. Who was your first crush/first relationship?
 - g. Did you have any queer role models growing up?

2. What’s your relationship with your family? Did you come out to them? Has it changed over time at all?
 - a. Do you have siblings? What’s your relationship to them?
 - b. Do you have found family?

Coming Out

3. Tell me about coming out.
 - a. When and how did you “know” you were queer? Trans?
 - b. Have you come out multiple times?

University & Work

4. Did you go to university/other school? What was that like for you, in terms of queer and gender identity & community?
 - a. Did you find queer community there? Meet other queer/trans ppl?
 - b. What other activities were you involved with?
 - c. Did you ever feel “othered” because of queer/trans ness? Face discrimination or isolation?
 - d. What is the environment around pronoun usage? LGBT centers? Do you know where gender studies is at?

5. Tell me about your work.
 - a. What’s the environment like for trans folks? Do you feel like you ever face discrimination?
 - b. Can you be/are you out?

Transition/Embodiment

6. Do you want to or have you medically transition(ed) in anyway?
 - a. What does that look like for you?
 - b. What does it mean to be non-binary and want to transition medically? Or not?
 - c. Do you experience dysphoria?
 - i. How does it manifest for you?
 - ii. How do you cope with it?

- d. What is it like to navigate the dutch medical system as non-binary?
 - i. Do you have to perform your gender in a certain way to get care?
- e. In what moments do you feel gender euphoric?

Representation and Language

7. What kind of representation do you have?
 - a. Do you feel like you see yourself reflected? Non-binary ids?
 - b. Do you have non-binary/genderqueer role models (both in real life and in the media)?
8. When did you first hear/see the words trans and non-binary?
 - a. How did you first learn about those identities?
9. I'm studying kinds of identity that came before non-binary, in particular butch and crossdresser. What kind of relationship do you have with those words and identities?
 - a. What about your community at large--do you think people know or identify with those words in your community, or are they being transformed into non-binary?
10. What does non-binary mean to you? How would you describe your gender?
11. Do you believe you were "born this way"?

Dutch Context

12. The Netherlands, and Amsterdam in particular are hailed as being a model for progressiveness, especially in regards to the LGBT community. How do you feel about this idea? Is it true? How does your experience with being queer and trans relate to it?
13. How do you navigate pronouns, genderedness of dutch language and society?

Generations

14. What do you see as the major differences between your generation of queer and trans folks and younger/older generations today?
15. How have you seen the language/discourse about trans and non-binary identity evolve over your lifetime?
 - a. How has the way *you* 've thought about gender changed?

Community

16. (How) Have you found other non-binary/genderqueer people?
 - a. Do you feel like you're part of a trans community?
 - b. What does that look like for you?
17. What's your relationship with LGB folks? Feminists?

Discrimination/Erasure

18. Have you faced discrimination for being trans/genderqueer?
 - a. What other challenges do you feel like you face?
 - b. Have you ever faced violence for your queer/trans id?
19. Do you have fear about presenting in a way that feels good for you? Where do you think that comes from?
20. How do you deal with the erasure of non-binary identities?
 - a. In what ways do you feel like you're resisting the binary system?
 - b. What does resistance look like for you?

Relationships

21. Tell me about any significant relationships in your life.

- a. Did you come out to your partner(s)?
- b. How do you navigate gender in your relationships? Intimacy?

Futures

22. What would a perfect world look like for you, in terms of gender freedom?
 - a. How might you imagine a non-binary utopia?