

# Gender Transcendence: The Social Production of Gender in Queer Communities

Author: Adina Ora Koch

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2507>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2011

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.

Boston College  
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
Department of Sociology

GENDER TRANSCENDENCE: THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF  
GENDER IN QUEER COMMUNITIES

a thesis

by

ADINA KOCH

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts

May 2011

© copyright by ADINA KOCH  
2011

Gender Transcendence: The Social Production of Gender in Queer Community

Adina Koch

Leslie Salzinger, Advisor

**ABSTRACT**

Over a period of eight months, I conducted an ethnographic comparative study in a northeastern metropolitan area, identifying and exploring a variety of non-normative social spaces regarding both gender and sexuality. I focus this research on comparing two different non-normative communities of gender and sexuality, the queer and the lesbian communities. By concentrating on spaces populated by those who identify as queer, I witness and discuss the process of identity formation. Negotiation of both tangible and theoretical spaces contributes to the operationalization of queer as a category of identity. Using social space bound by identity as a unifying factor, I share observations of time spent in lesbian community, where intricacies of queerness, both as critique and as category of identity, were illuminated.

The meaning of the theoretical construct of queer as explained in the literature and the experience of queer as an identity within community have areas of disconnect to which I draw attention in this paper. I interpret community space as giving power and visibility to the experience of those who live outside of, or between, gender norms in an experience that is unrecognized within mainstream heteronormative culture. I found this space creates a voice for a more encompassing and liberating embodiment of gender than that found in mainstream western society with its adherence to more rigid gender norms.

## INTRODUCTION

I walk onto the football field on a chilly Sunday afternoon in mid-November. I'm holding a tray of brownies, my currency; as I know I'll meet the team right after they finish their game and start to crack open their beers. I get to the field, recognized by Anne<sup>1</sup> and Monica who have just lost their game, but are standing looking stoic and tough as they "good game" the rest of their team. Anne gives me a warm hello. Monica, whom I ran into the night before at the neighborhood gay club's ladies night, notices the brownies. Remembering our conversation about bringing baked goods, she smiles and thanks me, taking the brownies to pass around to the team and their supporters as they commence their sideline drinking and watching of the next game.

Everyone around me, from players to partners to fans, is female though there are a variety of gender presentations. Some don the classic "sporty girl" attire and presence, or have spiky pixie haircuts and butch looks. There is a distinct camaraderie that comes, not only from the crowd's enjoyment and support of football, but from the unifying relation of all these women to each other as lesbians. Anne calls me over and is pointing to a player on the field as the next game starts, saying; "you see that one, she's cute! That one right there." "Number 65?" I ask. Anne replies "Oh yeah, she's cute; but she's 42. Can you believe she's 42?!" She doesn't really pose this as a question but more of an explanation to those around her. "Out of my age bracket" offers Monica, baiting Anne, as the two continue to tease back and forth commenting just as much on the football plays as the attractiveness level of the women playing the game.

---

<sup>1</sup> All names and places are pseudonyms.

Later that same Sunday, there is an event going on at a local bar known in the area as a queer hang out. After some coaxing by Cece, noting that “everyone” was going to be there, I head over. I feel like I’m a lifetime away from where I was earlier when at the football field. I walk in and feel the chatter of the room. People are dressed distinctly different from one another, not necessarily blending as a result of their attire, but fitting together as a result of the room’s openness to differing interpretation. There is an asserted performance of gender presentation here. It is one that feels fun and almost playful; while at the same time is serious in efforts to honor experiences of identity that don’t fall within rigid or binary categories that align with sexed bodies. I wouldn’t be able to tell you the body that some of the individuals in the room were born in, but, to a certain extent, that is none of my business and, here, it doesn’t really matter.

People are queer, falling under an umbrella of non-normativity when it comes to expressing and living their genders and sexualities. Some are transgender, or cisgender – the “opposite” of trans, or androgynous, or feminine women or masculine men, trans-, cis-, or otherwise; or masculine women or feminine men, trans-, cis-, or otherwise. People are read by some in the room as something other than what they know themselves to be, that is to say a transwoman may be read as a ciswoman by one, a transwoman by another, a person born male by a third, and as none of these categories of gender by a fourth. All these terms become clear as people embody them, but the focus is not upon any one of them on its own. The fascinating thing I see, is that while something is happening to gender that binds this as a specific social space and brings many of these

individuals here, it is not the focus of the conversations and activities in the room, but rather, it is the comfort level that provides them all with foundation.

This project began as an inquiry into the world of gender in order to explore the “something” that is happening to gender identity and presentation. In the discipline of sociology, certain categories, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, age, and ability are understood as framing institutional opportunity and social organization. I was spending time with people like Laura, people who live their lives between genders and who are determined to present themselves as queer, regardless of how the rest of the world classifies them. People like Laura don’t present themselves in a way that adheres to gender norms. She is a tall woman, wears a short haircut and dresses in a typically “butch fashion,” which is to say she has a more masculine or androgynous appearance. Others in the community are like Ash, identifying himself as genderqueer, dressing in masculine fashion and using male pronouns to identify himself, though born in a female body, and thus, while he works at and is often successful in concealing them, he has secondary sex characteristics that are classified by mainstream western society as female. Ash’s sexual identity is also queer, which means he engages in romantic and sexual relationships with individuals who have a variety of gender presentations and sexual orientations. Queerness is a radical rejection of the gendered system of social organization. In my hope for the possibility of dismantling gender oppression, I want to understand how this phenomenon of fluid gender and sexual identities is occurring.

I leverage my own identity which resides somewhere between lesbian and queer to be able to bear witness to these nuances and observe behaviors that on the outside appear to

be confusing. Confusion comes when one attempts to read a gender or sexual identity as falling within the binary system that is read and interpreted by those in community as practices that radically reject the dominant gender system. As I participate in activities with people who organize their sense of community and identity around being queer and/or around being lesbian, I see the assertion that functions of community provide space for an identity to be enacted (Goffman 1959) played out in the case of gender and sexuality.

Community provides a place of intelligibility. As C. Jacob Hale argues, “in order to be efficacious gender performativity must be intelligible and to be intelligible is to occur within a set of social constraints” (2003:62). Community space is the location of determination between social construction of queer identity as empowering and social construction of queer identity as contributing to oppression. Community space is defined not by location specifically, but in places that are marked by face-to-face interaction and given meaning because it is where people congregate on the basis of identity. When positioned in relationship to the outside world, differently gendered individuals are alienated or forced to conform to dominant ideas of gender, however, within community they are recognized as queer. The football field on a Tuesday is just green space within a city, but on Sunday is a space of recognition and inclusion. A question of sustainability is embedded within this space; is it possible to reify this community without recognition from the outside? In this regard Patricia Hill Collins explores community as a political construct, asserting that it holds a variety of social, political, and theoretical meanings that organize experience (2010).



Identity is informed by the experience of community. Presentations of self are reconstituted within the realm of how individuals and groups understand and operationalize queer in transcending the bounds of gender norms. As the social self is mediated through interaction, which according to Erving Goffman is, “organized on ritual principles” (2010:342), queer becomes tangible experience within a theory that imposes no limits on the boundaries of gender. Ritual principles that constitute the self in context are also employed in lesbian communities, using different points of reference to frame experiences of gender than those of their queer counterparts.

In this paper, I explore literature on queer theory in conjunction with literature on presentations of self and the lived experience of queer identity and community. I compare lesbian to queer spaces in order to better understand phenomena of gender and sexuality that are conflated and erased when those on the outside look in. Looking at these two social groups as distinct from one another can lead to further understanding of the malleability of the blueprint of gender and sexual social organization. Gender is something subverted, reorganized and queered; all of which is happening in a community context. In order to assert this interpretation of gender, I investigate differences among lesbians and queers in the conceptualization and operationalization of non-normative gender and sexuality. Using my experiences in queer and lesbian communities, I will provide an account of the social construction of a queer identity and the ways in which aspects of gender play out in social spaces that intentionally make room for them. This leads to an analysis of gender tropes, the expressions and rhetoric of gender that are understood across social spaces as a result of socialization, as they are utilized in each

setting and what queer and lesbian manifestations of identity can teach us about the fluid limits and the bound limits of gender practices.

#### SUBJECTIVE OBSERVER

I am sitting in a circle on the floor of the “activity space” of a social justice collaborative community house. The people around me have come together for a structured conversation about organizing around queer experience. We sit comfortably on couches and pillows; many seem happy to be in a sympathetic setting after a long day spent in their professional worlds. I look around and see the usual suspects, some genderqueers, some transfolk, some high femmes – all legible presentations of gender here. As Lucy, the facilitator, calls us to order, she asks each person to state their name and preferred gender pronoun, a common occurrence. No one in the room seems to think twice about this opening that allows opportunity individuals to self identify their genders, regardless of whether or not one’s physical appearance corresponds to commonly held social and visual stereotypes about what constitutes the dominant appearance of gender. In a queer setting even those, like me, who could be read as presenting gender normative characteristics, are given agency to assert their non-normativity. There is high value put on this type of consciousness. When my turn comes, without missing a beat, my preferred gender pronouns of she, her, and hers roll off my tongue and my femme identity is understood because I have named it. My qualifiers have been accepted and I fit.

I did not come to access queer or lesbian social space as an objective observer, or even as a foreign researcher. It was my preceding involvement and personal identity that allowed me to fit into these environments without being seen as an outsider. It cannot be

denied that lesbian and queer are in relationship with each other, even though for purposes of this research I highlight their differences. Traveling back and forth between the two, changing very little about my appearance and demeanor, and still being read as both queer and lesbian can easily be used to erase the nuances embedded within non-normative identities. Queers and lesbians are more than just “gender others.” As Michael Burawoy explains, “the situation is the object of analysis and the uniqueness of the cases is located in a context external to itself” (1991:280). The situation being analyzed is that of gender and sexuality, constructs that are a part of social organization regardless of how they are employed or the context of the place and people. The specific relationships to gender and social scripts used in these locations are what interact with queer theory, creating a queer experience, and making these communities unique.

I first came to do participant observation in the social justice collaborative community house because of my previous involvement as a community member. As a result of this, my credentials as a researcher were trusted and I was granted entrance because of pre-existing relationships with individuals. People saw themselves as doing me a favor. This space, as well as the others like it in queer communities, centered on a core group of individuals indicative of the range of identities found in queer communities. These individuals led me to where I spent my time as participant observer. Knowing the people in these spaces and having pre- and post- existing relationships with them, allowed me a type of access somewhat different from a researcher/subject relationship. I was witness to in-group practices and understandings from the very beginning, as I was familiar, comfortable, and most importantly, had an “insider” understanding of queer, which is

highly valued in community. As a result of this position, I believe I received a certain snapshot of this world; participant's comfort and discomfort with me extended from an understanding that when the period of research was over, I wasn't going anywhere. Even so, amidst IRB protection and signed confidentiality waivers, follow-up one-hour informal interviews were conducted with community members to further understand their experiences in this community.

I entered lesbian community spaces through a slightly different route, but personal relationship and my own lesbian identity were keys to getting access. The football league, which was my first site of entrance, was more of a public space. As with my time in queer community spaces, my subsequent time in lesbian community spaces and in doing similar one-hour informal follow-up interviews with community members centered around a core group of individuals I met through the process of participant observation that began with the football league. The first football game I went to was with Laura, who is a traveler between lesbian and queer communities and someone with whom I had a pre-existing friendship. She brought me into the space, introduced me as a researcher, and helped forge connections and relationships with members of this community. Many of these participants were entertained by the fact I was doing research in a social space that I could also claim as my own and granted me this access precisely because of my own identity and what was perceived as an insider understanding of theirs.

I spent eight months going to organizationally and socially sponsored queer and GLBT events (social events, parties, pot-lucks, political events, rallies, activist meetings, lobby days, sporting events, bar nights, etc.) both witnessing and taking part in queer life.

I spent five to eight hours a week in each of the two communities and did ten follow up one-hour informal interviews with members of both communities. There were differences in community locations, a potluck in an individual's home versus a group outing at a pub, though they served similar functions within their respective communities. I chose a variety of sites, as they were where the people are. Queers and lesbians organize themselves around different social activities and I went to places that were important to each community. While outside of these locations queer and lesbian worlds are seen as the same, the conditions that support identity and community are different. The football game serves for the lesbian community in the way the campaign launch event does for the queer community.

During the hours of the week I spent socializing with members of these communities, I came to conceptualize and reconceptualize what queer looks like and I was interrogated about my own identity in the process. Knowledge and usage of in-group terms and lingo become gateways to community access. Queer, though difficult to define, is understood as resistance to social force, questioning of norms, and assertion of critique in regards to gender and sexuality. For Daphne, a member of the queer community, it is "a response to heterosexism -- a refusal to be constricted by gender roles and heterosexual scripts. Queer means that I occupy a critical sexual-political space, and that I find joy there, and that queer is where I thrive." Theoretically, the simultaneously challenging and liberating reality of queerness is its lack of definitive boundary, as it aims to completely dissociate itself from traditional manifestations of power, but cannot always escape them (Cohen 1997, Galewski 2005, Gamson 1995, 1997, Gamson and Moon 2004, Jagose 1996, Rubin

1984). It is this concept that informs access to community space; to act queer is to express your embodiment and ownership over the theoretical approach to fluidity and openness that classifies queerness.

As stated earlier, my knowledge of vernacular and history of involvement really are what enable me to enter these places. I have been socialized with both the lesbians and the queers and thus no longer have to think about what characteristics of self to employ either at the football game or the political rally. If I had not fit seamlessly into these communities due to my own identity and previously established relationships; my ability to do this to do this participant observation would have been hindered by outsider status and I would have missed some of the nuances that allow for my analysis.

Entrance to lesbian space, where I had less social capital, was also helped by the fact that lesbians often classify in simpler terms than do queers. A lesbian is a woman who has romantic and sexual relationships with other women. The litmus test is tangible; what is needed for belonging is a recognized definition of self that need not be debated. Dyke, lesbian, butch, and queer are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes the subject of debate. Navigating the terminology, recognizing this, along with my own experience of operationalization, was key to my participation as “one of us.”

In this queer community, age ranges mostly from 22 to 35. Class status is middle to upper-middle, education is a bachelor’s degree at least; racial categorization finds almost all individuals to be white enough to benefit wholly from white privilege. These factors of life make it easier to critique queerness as an age specific, privileged self-exploration of radical identity possibilities. Most queers that I interacted with fall into these

categories. While there are definitely queers identified as people of color, as not of upper class, and of all ages, for purposes of this project my subjects are those whose axis of oppression is ruled by non-normative genders and sexualities not in conjunction with other institutional oppressions of race, class and age. In the lesbian community, class and race status are very similar to that of the queer community and participants ranged in age about five to ten years higher on average than those in the queer community. The similar demographics of these communities allow for a specific type of analysis to be made about gender and sexuality, as most benefit from the same dominant race and class privileges.

Similar rhetoric around gender, or gender tropes, and parodies of traditional gender roles are chosen presentations in both community settings. These include presentations like butch, the masculine presenting woman, or femme, the woman whose feminine presentation is subversive. Both of these presentations are each intended for the attraction of other women. The genderqueer person is understood colloquially as the one who adamantly resides in an androgynous or all-gendered meta-physical space, resisting binary definitions. These are just three tropes of the many varied nuances of identity in operation in these settings. As Laura tells me when putting her identity in comparison with those she classifies as sporty dykes, “No, I’m not a dyke, dyke comes with an attitude or with life or cultural circumstances, not arrogance - but more than confidence, it’s a little more in your face.” Without missing a beat however, she continues, “But really, who knows? It means ten different things to ten different people. I’m a butch, a butch with a soft center. But how often do any of us need to label ourselves?” The lesbian recognition of a space as gay doesn’t call for complex gender navigation when you’re

“just a bunch of dykes playing football.” Understanding the experience of labels meaning “ten different things to ten different people” as Laura says, and riding the waves between them enables me to locate myself within the situation in order to analyze boundaries of self and concepts of community as they are being employed in queer and lesbian settings.

#### CONTEXT OF THE LITERATURE

While I am aware that collective and queer are not necessarily terms that go hand in hand, as I am concerned with exploring the function of queer as an identity, I need to frame the experience of queer within certain recognizable constructs. Symbolic interaction theorists see a relationship between self and context that structures identity (Garfinkel 1967 Goffman 1955 Mead 1934). The process of meaning making stems from people’s dynamic social interactions with one another. I use this as a framework for looking at questions of ways in which particular community identities, in this case queer and lesbian community identities, are more distinguished because they are in opposition to dominant paradigms of gender that pervade most social contexts.

It is important to note the role community plays in construction of the self to understand the effect of queer as an identity category. Self-concept is influenced by the boundaries of community; a complete self is representative of whole social processes (Mead 1934). Subjects become objects of self after taking on attitudes that come from within a social environment, as a whole self is still a situation based self (Mead 1934). Social processes of identity construction impose on the subject, according to Adam Isaiah Green, either radical deconstruction, which is a conceptualization of queer identity, or radical subversion, which functions as a conceptualization of gay or lesbian identity.



Deconstruction, for Green, is a breaking down of norms in order to recreate concepts of sex and gender, therefore putting it in the queer category. Subversion is the reorganizing but not recreating of existing concepts to fit the inverse experience of homosexuality (2002). He differentiates between subversion and deconstruction as they inform self-concept, and consequently inform community subjects (2002). One cannot understand one's self as queer or gay without the context of like behavior. Mead's self resides within a social structure that arises from interaction and experience, which manifests in this specific case as one of subversion or deconstruction. Community subjects here are the example of experience that enable the operationalization of queer or lesbian as identity categories for these individuals.

Community is built upon likeness and recognition of self in others. Erving Goffman uses the term performance to mean that which is marked by "presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (1959:22). Performance is the place of observation for many aspects of self, including in this case the presentation of queer and lesbian identity. There is intentionality to queer identity and a consciousness around lesbian existence that make them both performative. This community frame is also dependent upon the social recognition of queer and lesbian as concrete identities to be enacted. Community space and recognition, both for Goffman and those who are queer and/or lesbian, is key for the function of non-normative gender and sexuality more than as concepts, but rather as lived experiences. In order for a performance to be both staged and accepted, there needs be space that is designed for it (1959). Queer and gender theories do not necessarily leave such a space, thus individuals who can only understand

themselves as transient in regard to gender and sexual identity create the needed space through practice and recognition.

Navigating a gender or sexual identity that is not reflected in mainstream society is most often studied in relation to its effects on certain aspects of social experience,<sup>2</sup> not in relation to the experience of the category and social manifestation of non-normative gender. Scholars such as Josh Gamson, Ann Cvetkovich, and Arlene Stein<sup>3</sup>, are some of the few who have examined identity, collectivity of experience, and political viability of those with non-normative experiences of gender and sexuality. Cvetkovich analyzes stages of experience as they occur communally, in regard to collective trauma, such as the effect of the AIDS crisis, as they fit within the context of gay, lesbian, and queer communities (2003). She highlights the experiential aspect of analysis that is often missing from queer readings on gender and sexuality. Cvetkovich helps bring light to experience, looking at the effect of collective non-normative sexual identities. While her

---

<sup>2</sup> LGBT studies focus on specific aspects of mainstream life as they affect gay community. As cited: Dowsett, Gary W. 2009. "Dangerous desires and post-queer HIV prevention: Rethinking *community*, incitement and intervention." *Social Theory & Health* Vol. 7 No. 3 pp. 218-240; Shiu-Ki and Travis Kong. 2004. "Queer at Your Own Risk: Marginality, Community and Hong Kong Gay Male Bodies." *Sexualities* Vol. 7 No. 1 pp. 5-30; Taylor, Jodie. 2008. "The queerest of the queer: Sexuality, politics and music on the Brisbane scene." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* Vol. 22 Issue 5 p651-665; Welle, Dorinda L. et. al. 2006. "The Invisible Body of Queer Youth: Identity and Health in the Margins of Lesbian and Trans Communities." *Journal of Lesbian Studies* Vol. 10 Issue 1/2 p43-71; etc.

<sup>3</sup> David Valentine's work is important to consider as it looks at non-normative gender and sexual identities as holistic experiences, with a particular focus on the transgender experience. He is locating an experience within a framework of social space. He explores implicit otherness extant between gender and sexuality. He analyzes these differences between gender and sexuality and posits recognition of them as necessary for understanding spaces of non-conformity (2007).

Valentine is making a statement about the use of transgender as a category. He recognizes that its categorization is functionally different across social spaces and time periods. His work, however, is a conceptual exploration of a group that, in many ways, has had a category assigned to it. This differs subjectively from my analysis of those who choose a boundless category, queer, in which to organize their gender and their sexuality. However, I see my ethnography as existing in relation to the work of Valentine though taking a different perspective on identity in similar categories.

focus may be collective trauma which is an external force framing identity as opposed to the internal force of gender norms, her framing of non-heteronormative collective experiences of gender and sexuality provides a reference point for further work in queer community.

Gamson's work remains key in analysis of queer community where queer becomes a function of self-presentation. In his work "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct?: A Queer Dilemma" he outlines a queer politic as an anti-establishment, deconstructionist politic that does not rely on collective identity; in fact, he posits that it aims to oppose normative structure (1995). Some aspect of collective identity, or at least a collection of identities, is what confines gayness and queerness to a particular social space. In later work he looks at how boundary is employed around an anti-essentialist identity. The break between theory and community that he acknowledges as a function of how the discourse is used is the place in which my participants reside. He notes that practical boundaries and symbolic boundaries vary across communication patterns and specific community spaces (1997). The boundaries enacted between queer and lesbian spaces are largely symbolic as they work around each other to create a concept of self that resides within a community.

Arlene Stein, like Cvetkovich and Gamson, explores lesbian and queer community space. She explores what has happened to the "lesbian generation" (1997). She is important to note because an underlying assertion of her work on lesbian feminism is that community does matter and that people work through identity structure within community through relational experiences, much like I witness in queer social settings.

She places identity formation in the context of cultural change and in relation to age, both factors which remain important in framing queer and lesbian communities today. She sees lesbian identity as collective (1997), which puts lesbian communities in contrast to the resistance to collectivity that Gamson recognizes in queer space. Stein's analysis of narrative identity, born out of lesbian feminism, brings light to a somewhat mirrored process currently happening in queer community. Following its own historical trajectory, and borrowing from lesbian feminism only in order to resist, queer communities create identity using similar mechanisms of necessity and experience in order to create a public basis of identity (1997). In later work, revisiting negotiations of non-normative sexual identity within community, Stein questions ideas of boundary as they are actually enacted, rather than as they are theorized. She sees boundaries as the making of social territory within which people negotiate belonging (2001). Identity is formed in relation to boundary; queers and lesbians need each other as much as they need mainstream society in order to outline the parameters of their identities. To know what you are, you must also know what you are not.

Jonathan Alexander tackles the dilemma presented by Stein, examining identity, much in the way Gamson does, as it follows the path of identity politics, making it something essential and collective (Alexander 1999, Gamson 1995). Building on the work of Cathy J. Cohen, he calls for a queer critique of identity that moves away from a collective sense of identity and toward looking at queer values as that which will build parameters of coalition (Alexander 1999). Coalitions come together to create spaces of

intelligibility and work to expand the parameters of what fits within that space by stretching the limits of social constraints.

Identity in all of these cases remains dependent upon intelligibility. Amber Ault points out how the dictation of a gender and sexual binary creates a logic that makes it difficult to describe ambiguous identities such as queer (1996). Queer creates a space for any who defy the structures of the dominant sex/gender/sexual identity system; even when institutional constraints necessitate default to the system of linear category (Ault 1996 Heyes 2003). Using as an underlying premise the idea that gender entails a hierarchical set of relationships among subjects in order to read queerness, the social constraints surrounding the experience need to be recognized and employed in the presentation of self (Hale 2003, Heyes 2003). The emphasis on community and collectivity present in this work is imperative to understand how queer and lesbian spaces are occupied.

For Harold Garfinkel, accountability is a necessary force of social organization; accounts of self are what render actions to be observed by others as meaningful. Individuals consciously organize their actions to fit within a social framework (1967). Performativity and repetitive acts are necessary elements for the reification of situated identity, such as queer identity. In order to be intelligible as ‘woman,’ Garfinkel’s Agnes had to over perform the feminine role. To be understood as queer, an individual must over assert their queer critique of gender, or their butch presentation of lesbian, in order to fit within an intelligible social framework. Thus, there is a need for community in order to frame fluidity and non-normative behaviors and presentations. As Mead asserts,

the “unity and structure of the complete self reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole” (2010:228). To be recognized as existent, queer and lesbian must be accountable to process of repetitive acts that create an identity that is situated within the community. The processes by which both of these identities are operationalized are the processes that outline the context of community, movement between fluid and rigid selves, gender tropes, and struggles around hierarchy and order.

As noted, using a Meadian (1934) framework of identity that includes tenets of understandings of self and self in contexts from Goffman (1955,1959) and Garfinkel (1967) I will analyze the process of identity created in relation to queer and lesbian community. Influenced by the work of Gamson (1995, 1997, 2004), Stein (1997, 2001), Cvetkovich (2003) and Valentine (2007), I pick up on themes of relationship between gender, sexuality, and community as they function as the foundation of queer identities. In doing so, I will be able to fill in holes left by issues of effect of normative tropes of gender not addressed by Gamson, experiences of effect of `social order not addressed by Cvetkovich, and be able to focus on differences between queer and lesbian experiences in the face of Stein’s reading of queer as coming from lesbian. Questions in their work lead me to break up my analysis by issue of function and practice, coming to an understanding of queer experience as incorporating queerness at this moment in history within a focus on praxis not present in earlier work.

## SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

I’m sitting at the bar with Laura’s friend, Sam and her teammates post football game. It’s the local post game stop for many players in the league. As I push my way

around a crowded rectangular bar in the middle of the room, climbing over people attempting to get where Laura and Sam have seats, I take note of the fact everyone looks the same. The way these women present and occupy space appears to be in contrast to queer spaces, where everyone strongly tries to assert their differences and goes above and beyond to respect presentations of gender and the space they take up. As I weave through the maze of women, who all seem to be wearing a variety of collegiate and professional sports clothing; t-shirts, hoodies, wind pants, hair pulled back in buns with elastic headbands or spiky bleached-blond pixie cuts are the two style options I observe. All are athletically built and have more masculine presences, that is to say these women take up the space around them, not just physically but with wide gestures and sitting draped across chairs and tables shouting and laughing. When I finally make it over to the corner of the bar where Laura and Sam are, we are sitting chatting about the events of the afternoon when we notice rowdy behavior across the bar. Sam and her teammates mock the rowdies and boast about their own team. When I ask about this Sarah B. tells me proudly, “Our team is the oldest team in the league. Our average age is 37.8, we’re the oldest by a bit.” “Wow, really?” I ask. “Yea, it’s great. And we’ve got our players that have been around since the beginning, like Jess, over here, ya know 13 or 14 years since the league started.” Sarah B. who they call Gay Sarah B, or GSB for short, is maybe 5’3” and her kind of androgynous style, complete with a small spiky brown faux hawk, doesn’t have her looking older than her early 30s, though who knows what end of the age spectrum she is on in relationship to her team.

I can tell that Jess, another teammate, is a little bit older, she is also shorter and a little stockier. She has black-framed plastic glasses and bleached-blond hair, an edgier version of an Ellen DeGeneres look. “The fact we’re an older team makes us a better team,” Jess tells me. “Why is that?” I ask. “Because we know how to handle the ball, play by the rules, and make strategy for the game. We give our players close to equal field time and we know it’s a game.” She tells me this matter-of-factly, expressing ownership. “It’s a good team,” Sam says to me. “I played like 6 or 7 years ago and came back and it was mostly the same people, everyone was dating everyone else and when I came back everyone was just dating someone different, but all still the same team!” She baits her teammates and motioning as she says this, they respond with a grin or chuckle. “So why’d you lose today?” I ask. “Couldn’t get the score up in the first half.” Sam says. Jess chimes in with “then they got through on every drive against all of our defensive plays, they played a good game.” There are no hurt feelings here when they talk about it, a calm matter of fact just an off day kind of attitude, acknowledging that the other team played a good game.

This league is the site of community. While it never seems to be mentioned explicitly, these women are not just coming together because they like to play football; they are coming together because they share an identity they want to honor and need a space within which to honor it. This definite boundary and purpose is in stark contrast to the limits of queer community, and not fussed with constantly. They do not seem upset about the loss because the sport is not the focus, friendship and play are. Using Hill Collins understanding of community as, “an idea that people use to make sense of and



shape their everyday lived realities,” (2010:8) these women can be seen as taking experiences attributed to non-normative sexuality, such as rowdy bar behavior, or desire for the sexual spectacle of women, which are usually reserved for men, and creating a space where they can present themselves and be recognized. This community is explicitly lesbian, regardless of the fact it appears to be self-selected, because it employs a definition for inclusion. The definition is clear and simple and the surface level referent is sexuality.

The community members are not actually all the same, but there is a solidarity that comes from being able to relate to one another through a focus on similarities. Likeness, what is superficially seen as sameness, is what makes community recognizable from the outside and what brings individuals together under the banner of a specific identity. In the case of the lesbian setting it is organized around sexual behavior, which establishes a set of norms for adherence. The way they communicate with one another is a positioning of the processes of sexuality and of gender. Talk is in terms of sexuality; Sam comes back to the community locus, the team, years later, and references how people’s sexual connections have changed. In so doing she is invoking the relationship of their activities to the recognizable ways gender and sexuality binds their space. She comes to this community space on the surface because it is where she gets to engage in activities she likes, but it is also where her norm bending sexual identity and behavior are recognized and understood. In ways the referent of sexuality aligns the space with that of its heterosexual counterparts, using sexual relationships to represent manifestations of

gender. As lesbian identity is intelligible outside of the community setting, this setting is not as imperative to existence as it is for those who identify as queer.

Community in queer settings is more nuanced. Community likeness is formed around a referent of gender, which is less tangibly bound together by universally intelligible behaviors of the body than is a referent of sexuality. When everyone is deviating from a norm, trying to present gender differently from the next person, either by trying to blur the lines and present as truly androgynous or in presenting as a gender different from one's sexed body, as in the anatomical female who lives as a male, there is no one set of behaviors to identify as unifying the group. In many ways, to define yourself as queer you need community and the existence of space for recognition and understanding because only in this space will deviation from gender or sexual norms first be recognized and then be used as a measurement of queerness. While lesbian behaviors are non-normative, their community boundaries remain clear and understood outside of the space.

I am at a party with those in the queer community, which the host has aptly named, "Celebrating the Entire Gender Galaxy." On the invitation is a photo of a person wearing a t-shirt that says "deconstruction is sexy." Partner pairings, like Ash and Jay, who are both transmasculine, cannot be classified as anything other than queer. Genderqueers, people with ambiguous gender identities like Lucy, are partnered with genderqueers, or with femmes, women who consciously play the role of female in what is considered a critical way, or with transmasculine folks, female bodied but male identified individuals. The relationship to gender is what frames this community. Experience as

critique is at the forefront and outlines a relationship to gender that focuses on non-alignment and a breaking down of all that is thought to be normative. Queer experience embodies this critique, as it is gender presented in a way that manipulates norms and makes new definitions, making community represent the social process of resistance to distinct gender recognition. Fluidity of experience and rigidity of label are put in opposition to each other, when it may be that they exist with different emphases in queer space than in lesbian space.

#### BETWEEN FLUIDITY AND RIGIDITY

I'm spending my Sunday evening at the neighborhood bar/ lounge at the launch party of an awareness campaign for a State transgender rights and advocacy organization. The friendly somewhat trendy setting has posters and flyers supporting GLBT and community organizations and GLBT dance nights at the lounge with a big projector showing the images and name of the awareness campaign. In this setting that honors a multiplicity of gender presentations, people understand how others work to present their gender and sexual identities and don't allow assumptions or mainstream socialized interpretations of identity to dominate the space.

At this event the elements of critique and movement extend far beyond gender and sexuality; it is one in which queer is asserted as an identity. I'm standing by the bar in a group conversation with two women and one transmasculine person. In the parking lot passersby have called out names and taken second looks at both these women and this man, as they are all transgender. One woman I am talking to is incredibly tall with broad shoulders and has what may be interpreted as classic male facial features, however she is

wearing a dress and heels, with beautiful long wavy hair framing her made up face; there is no question in this room that she is a woman. She is read and responded to as a woman. Some care nothing about her history and only read what she is presenting in this moment, knowing that they see the trans aspect, and reading the presentation of trans as woman is commonplace for them. Some pay no attention at all and need not think beyond the dominant presentation of female. Some don't think, just act like they would with anyone and still others assert a little too obviously that they are reading her as female, emphasis being drawn out by some to make the point that the desired gender effects are being honored.

It is the nature of this space that one has varied reactions, interpretations and demeanors. This is partly indicative of comfort levels and partly showing how effective resocialization has been within community to read gender as it is desired by the individual. Personal relationships also play a part, for after one gets to know an individual you don't see only their gender but who they are and the way in which their gender is a part of the whole identity, not the defining factor. An issue of disrespect often facing these individuals is that they are whole people, more than just a subversive or deconstructed gender identity, but often they are reductively read as just gender others. Having recognizable space allows for recognition and respect not often afforded in a discriminatory world.

I am standing in this little circle by the bar with Cece, Sarah, and some other queers, some genderqueer and some high femme. The femmes, by performing femininity with classic attire, heels, form fitting tops, skirts and make up, do so in a way that

expresses they are playing with it. In the midst of conversation, Cece asks the group if anyone likes the opera, as she is looking for someone to attend with her. Sarah smiles and replies, "I'm going to get a drink and then I will explain to you my complicated relationship with opera." Cece replies, "Ok! I want to hear it!"

I cannot help but laugh here, Sarah embodies the identity of queer, evidenced by her deep roots of queer within the political realm. As a result, she has a complicated relationship with everything. No answer is simple; her relationship to the world is constantly moving. She tells me that she uses queer "as a nod and reference to the history of radical queer liberation, to people who were unwilling to be whitewashed out of existence." When she talks of her politics she asserts she is "actually talking about a world view, and a way of being in the world that queer embodies in a way no other word does." Her complicated relationship with opera is due to the clash between her love of theater and her rebellion against opera as it was forced upon her as a child. On the surface this type of critical, resistant existence can seem forced; but, ironically, striving for fluid existence is a way to classify queer. The intelligibility of fluidity is a primary tenet of queer community, taking the time to recognize this fluidity and exist in constant struggle is simultaneously oppressive and privileged. While queer identity is an oppressed identity the ability to assert constant critique is one that comes with a certain level of education, awareness, and time to orient oneself in critical opposition to mainstream society.

Queer's valuing of fluidity is taken from the theoretical underpinnings of queerness. On the surface it seems paradoxical that transient relationships to gender and

sexuality can be markers of identity. However, it is the very attempt to live this dynamic that creates queerness. To be able to enact the tenets of queer theory, such as deconstruction and a fluid relationship to identity that turn norms of gender and sexuality on their head, one must recognize the need for valued openness and resistance to conventional behaviors.

The queer community solidifies fluidity, which is a paradox arising when theory meets practice. Cece resists giving herself labels that will put her into a category, telling me that she doesn't identify. She tells me, "I don't identify because I think every person is a story rather than just a checked box." When hard pressed however she says, "I suppose like if you ask internally Cece what must you be, I don't really identify that way either, so you could call me genderqueer by my lack of identification. But, I present as female, I was born with like a cisfemale sort of body." Fluidity needs to be solidified in order for experience to be bound; Cece understands that even with her strong and consistently asserted resistance to identification she is experienced as female in social contexts. Queer community gives a freedom to play, creating new social processes around self-presentation that opens gender operations. There is a liberating quality to this behavior that does not translate to lesbian spaces; in queer space Cece is acknowledged and honored freeing herself from the constraint of her gender presentation in a way that is paid no attention in lesbian social space.

It is earlier that same Sunday afternoon; I am going to the awareness campaign launch event at the bar and I am in the car with two of my new lesbian friends from the football league, Anne and Sharon. We are on the way from the game to the pub social. Anne has

just pointed out her ex-girlfriend and is telling me why it didn't work out. "It's not that she wasn't nice, she was. I think we just wanted different things. But, there is this element of being lesbian enough that I never got. You know like Beth, she's so sweet she could be someone to go for, but then you see her with Karen and they're just so together and right, ya know?" "They were cute, they're engaged though, right?" I ask. Anne answers me, "Yeah, they are. It's nice. But you know Karen is the first girl Beth has ever been with; first one and they're getting married. I mean I spent a long time with the first girl I was with, six years with her. But I mean, it's so hard with girls, gotta love 'em, but it's hard." She continues, "I'll say, I'm just not aggressive and I can't deal with all the crazy, ya know? I don't know what kind of girl to find. I mean because we are all women you don't really know the way to go about it... What kind of girl do you date?" She asks me, seeming not to want to deepen her analysis of how lesbians find each other.

Although the lesbian frame of reference differs from that of heterosexual quests for romance and love, the ideas of order and the rules for compatibility are still being utilized. The boundaries of relationships are clear. While there is some measure of fluidity around behaviors not completely in alignment with the traditions of masculinity or femininity, tropes of gender influence the implementation of roles. Anne does not know what to do with herself in regard to forming relationships because she does not rigidly identify as a relationship aggressor or as the one who is pursued. She talks of the difficulty in figuring out what roles each are supposed to play in relationships. There is fluid space for play within these roles, but a fixed reciprocal binary relationship is still the basis for placing people together. In lesbian community these roles are adhered to more

rigidly, often referred to as “butch” and “femme” in a more classical way or defined as “top” and “bottom” because there are no gender differentiations to rely on for delegating of dating responsibility, the reciprocal binary is put in place as a tool for community organization.

The reference points for understanding lie at the opposite ends of the spectrum. Queer, by definition, needs fluidity in order to organize and lesbians’ reference falls within a more rigid frame. Both actually lie somewhere in between, but the theoretical understanding of the process of queering gender is what frames the queer referent, while lesbian identity is framed by sexual orientation and behavior. There is a struggle at each end of the spectrum; queer needs some fixedness and lesbian needs some fluidity. This struggle emerges as the realities of experience and subjectivity lie at various points along the spectrum, not at its ends. Anne is looking for more room to play, as Sarah has to put a line around her transience in order to have her resistance be intelligible. The fixed reference points are what set the parameters within which reality and subjectivity are experienced and understood.

## GENDER TROPES

It is another Sunday afternoon and I’m sitting in a less crowded bar after a football game. We are more sectioned off at this football social than at the previous one, the crowd is a little more subdued and we haven’t taken over the entire place with a maze of never ending bodies, but instead seem to be blending in with the locals who pay no mind to the dozens of butch women in athletic attire who are still exhibiting a fair share of rowdiness. Sam, who has taken an interest in the research aspect of my project, asks me



what I think is happening at the bar in regard to gender. Sam is in her mid-thirties, broadly built, and wearing a t-shirt over a collared shirt with jeans and a backward driver's hat over her pigtails. She fills space with her presence, is loud, witty, and likes to horse around and joke with her teammates. I tell her that I think there is a lot of masculinity and male behavior present. "Nooooo, you think?" She looks at me sideways and then looks around considering everyone. "I don't think so," she responds somewhat dramatically. I ask her, "Well, what do you think it is then?" "I think," she says "I think it's just..." She searches for words, it's apparent that she has never had to question what is happening in the space, the simple recognition of self among those surrounding her affirms her lesbian identity. "Sporty?" I offer. She kind of smirks and responds, "yeah, its sporty, athletes, gay athletes."

Sam understands her place within community without the need for constant analysis of gender. She has no need to assert a critique of the frame of dominant gender tropes in order to understand her place within community. The trope of behavior here is one of masculinity; but, it is a masculinity reclaimed and redefined. As the actors of the behavior are women, it shows the permeability of a gender trope once perceived as rigid, the body is used as an indicator to interpret behavior. It is subversive in the sense that it is women who are engaging in this behavior, but also that they are reclaiming it as their own. When women are ogling at other women from across a bar, it is done with a wink and a smile that carries objectification without the same level of misogyny. There is accountability to social practice that comes from the employment of recognizable tenets of gender, even

when the body of the actor disrupts the traditionally received unity of gender and sexuality.

To assert desire and camaraderie in a lesbian community, tropes don't need to be reinvented, just adapted. The behavior here is referent to masculinity as the desire for women is classified as a masculine desire, even though those who are interested are women themselves. Self-concept is created around this dominant trope, challenged not by reorganization, but by placing women within a masculine behavioral frame. These tropes provide a social script that clearly defines boundaries and allows for play within a somewhat rigid structure of gender. In lesbian community there is a certain amount of fluidity within traditional rigidity, as people like Laura or Sam are still presenting outside of dominant gender norms and are thus often perceived as confusing or hard to place by mainstream society.

Among queers, social script is not seen as having a direct progression; rather, a certain amount of rigidity of social rule resides within the fluidity of queer values. Thus in queer community there is a different orientation to the organization of tropes than that found in lesbian community. At the local queer bar's second Saturday event both the dance floor and bar are filled with a variety of presentations of gender. These presentations do not seem to fit within any linear trope of gender behavior but pull from a variety of aesthetics and behaviors. Watching people express interest in one another becomes a dance that does not keep to the beat of normative ritual. People are dressed as masculine, as feminine, and as androgynous. Masculine presenting individuals are behaving in line with tropes of femininity, purposely defying social scripts in order to

create space for play. Same goes for femme aggressors, but their behaviors are not just reciprocal. There is a conscious manipulation of gender roles and references in order to stretch the limits of tropes that would otherwise act as rulebooks for expression.

The experience of critique is shown through the reformatting of gender concepts in order to play with desire. People here are communicating in a way that may appear to be unintelligible to an outsider, but is clear within the setting as an expression of desire. These cannot be classified as gay or lesbian because they do not refer to a linear trope of gender; instead they appear as threads of femininity, masculinity, body, and desire in order to express self and reconceptualize social process within the bounds of community. Problems do arise when presentations are misinterpreted, often those who are genderqueer are assigned a gender and those who are transgender are often mistakenly read as the sex they were born rather than the gender they live. Thus, often, different levels of expressive power are given to presentations, such as genderqueer or androgynous, which are perceived as more critical to forming relationships. This is exemplified through the ways in which hierarchical relationships occur.

#### SOCIAL HIERARCHY

Cece is a femme identified queer, she consciously plays the feminine role but in a way she consistently asserts as critical of normative, traditionally understood tropes of femininity. This assertion is dependent upon queer community, as outside of this social space the same performance is read as normative. Her wink, smile, and constant taking of opportunity to share her own theory of identity, coupled with the fact community members are often on the lookout for reading queerness into all gendered behavior, is

how she is able to accomplish looking so differently in group than out group. She presents genuinely and yet somehow seems false in her use of female cuteness in order to be friendly and flirty. Her female cuteness and friendly flirtatiousness is the source of her community power. She is socially dominant, using feminine attributes to assert this; she wrests control using “cute” and “friendly” which are traditionally seen as subservient aspects of femininity. In Cece’s behavior I read the hierarchy of power present in a queer community setting. Things that I see as queer in play when Cece expresses herself in queer community, many queer theorists would not define as queer. They would be seen as part of the community dynamics of power, social capital, and social hierarchy.

Hierarchy in queer space usually operates with the person deemed “most queer” residing at the top. Being the most queer is often perceived through experience, as Cece’s presentation is given queer value as a result of the way it manifests within the community. Presenting as fluid, or androgynous, or in a way not easily classified by normative society, is often accompanied by danger, in that those who do not understand it often fear queer gender. There is a certain salience to this idea; life is difficult when your body is the battleground between subversive deconstruction and hegemonic social order. Hierarchy within this social space occupies a space of tension. It is tense because fluidity, boundlessness, and freedom to self-express are queer values. The functional experiential reality of valuing one experience over another is antithetical to queer theory. The disconnect between theory and experience once again highlights the locus of queer reality as somewhere between rigidity and fluidity, where theory and experience meet in conflicted, opposite pull.

Cece's employment of hierarchy however, is one in which she seeks a high level of queer power as it serves to strengthen her normative appearance. She speaks of presenting herself in a way that makes people the most "comfortable." She dresses in a way that does not overtly place her gender presentation at odds with her assigned sex. I see this as a paradox of queerness, the fact that being free and fluid has been co-opted, making it a term employed to place a theoretically impossible identity of otherness within the dominant structure of gender and sexuality. Cece remains valued in queer space because her self-identified understanding of her experience uses the necessary concepts of queerness that makes her presentation of self fit within queer community contexts. Yet she does this while simultaneously retaining her position as intelligible within mainstream social contexts.

In this queer community setting people struggle with who is queer enough, who is the queerest and what social power accompanies those labels and presentations. The fact this is happening is not often referenced or publicly acknowledged, as placing value differentiations on queer presentations is in direct conflict with the values of openness and acceptance that mark queer theory and are touted by the community. Cece's work lies in separating her presentation of self from the meaning it is assigned in different contexts. Her claim of queerness is intelligible within the community setting because its power comes from an existing queer discourse that is not present outside of queer settings. This is part of a set of community dynamics around hierarchies of queerness that must exist in order to counter the lack of intelligibility of queerness in the mainstream world. In queer settings there seems to be a corollary between the less normative you are,

or less intelligible your understanding of self from a normative perspective, the queerer you are.

Cece's use of her position within the ranks of both mainstream and queer social orders is almost strategic. She tells me, "I like when different people find me attractive. Even at work, I know when people find me attractive and I really like that. I like giving people what they want and making people feel comfortable, it makes me happy. It would be much harder to have them find me looking attractive, as it would make fewer people comfortable if I assumed a more butch role at work and it would make fewer people comfortable if I appeared to be attractive as masculine and if, you know, if I could try to pass as male..." It is evident that Cece's relationship to her presentation is one in conflict. It is difficult to give up a position of privilege within a hierarchical structure. To be able to do so enacting concepts of queer in that moment speaks to the power that resides in the resistance to rigidity that queerness provides.

In lesbian space hierarchy in relationships is less explicit and more about how you claim the validity of your connection to others. As we watch the league superbowl, her team not having made it, Sam is explaining to me all the partnering combinations that have occurred within their team over the years. When discussing Bekah and Megan, a team couple, and how their relationship is "for real," I ask if they're married, to which there is tense laughter. "No" Megan replies, "she doesn't want to get married, she says we love each other, why do we need a piece of paper." Sam, in the process of ending a marriage asks, "Why would you want to do it?" Megan answers, "For the KitchenAid mixer!" Sam, laughs, "Yeah those things are sweet! They're reason to get married, I'll

give you mine!” They all laugh it off as if the convention of marriage is just as much theirs as anyone else’s.

The lack of opposition to each other’s locations within the group does not mean there is no hierarchy in lesbian community. These lesbians are much further along in their mainstream social presence than are the queers. They are working through power dynamics of visibility and legitimacy that are present in non-normative space to make room for themselves to be intelligible outside of community setting. Lesbian identity is less obtrusive when it comes to living in opposition to the confines of the binary while remaining intelligible within a dominant paradigm than is queer identity. This relationship to heteronormativity is what enables visibility of lesbians as lesbians not only in their social space, but also in the workplace and the grocery store. They are thus ensuring their sustainability as a recognized space of non-normativity. Gender is real, as far as they are concerned, and while they play with its bounds it is still a structure within which they are willing to exist. The hierarchy here is more representative of the dominant society; while it is being subverted, it is not being queered.

The hierarchy of queerness is one that paradoxically puts higher value on resistance and deconstruction than it does on subversion. Queer perspectives value a break down and creation of gender that is free from adhering to dominant norms. Lesbian community is inverting concepts of gendered power keeping norms of gender within a context of all women, which in and of itself is a subversion of dominance. The meeting of theory and lived experience generates from this point of norm creation and effect of

hierarchical social experience, as illustrated in the different relationships witnessed to define boundary within lesbian and within queer social spaces.

### LIVING THEORY

These aspects of interaction mediated the implementation of the gendered social self. Community is the ground on which theory is being played and identity is being formed in relation to tropes of gender that affect the social scripts used to present the queer or lesbian self in intelligible ways. In order to realize its function as a theory that informs experience, queer theory needs to incorporate the tangible within the abstract. Living queer alters how queer theory is operationalized. Lesbian setting and experience contrast with the queer setting and experience in how they cooperate with the binary. Albeit subversive, lesbian space has functioned to further illustrate how unique the queer perspective is, giving a different approach to the function of gender. The theory must grow in order to make space for change and enlarge the ability to recognize and decipher queer identity. It is unique that the queer experience emerges from theory in that theory usually follows experience as an analytical understanding. In order to be lived, queer theory's abstract notions of factors like community hierarchy and boundary, will need to incorporate the actualities of lived experience.

Queer theory has framed thinking about sex and gender epistemologies and consciousness. To organize gender in a queer sense takes it out of the realm of repression and into the realm of oppression (Rubin 1984). By reclaiming marriage and using dominant tropes of masculine behavior to subvert gender, lesbians are repressing themselves by engaging in a heteronormative social practice of power that makes them



complicit with a narrow lens of acceptable social identities. In creating an oppositional existence that attempts to move beyond hegemonic tools of social organization, queers are working against the oppression of gender tropes.

Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's concepts of power and category in regards to gender and sexual behavior are very much a part of the vernacular in queer community settings. I'm in a coffee shop sitting and doing work, a stack of books by these authors and other queer theorists next to me. While I am working, Ash and Sarah see me and come over to say hello. Ash is looking through my stack and Sarah starts to tell me some of her thoughts on these authors, asking me how I'm using them for my own writing, telling me of her love hate relationship with some of these theoretical approaches. When Judith Butler comes up, I learn that Ash affectionately refers to her as J.Buts and has critical questions on the limitations of what he thinks her theory provides. This conversation is far from rare, and in community conversations of queerness that occur frequently in the field their names, and some representation of their concepts are invoked. Here they are discussed as part of community norm and queer identity function.

Gayle Rubin's analysis of power gave way to creation of concepts of queer as a political force. She sees power in the political realm as the site of relationship between human beings and the forces of power and agency (1984:34). By organizing themselves as resistant, queers locate themselves in a site that makes use of their own agency. Sarah uses queer in just this way. She says, "I use [queer] because it makes people ask about it, so I get to talk about history, celebration of non-normativity, and reclaiming of the term and how they are part of who I am in the world, how my politics and my identity aren't

disconnected or irrelevant, but rather informed by one another.” Sarah is taking up politics, as it cannot be separated from this conscious performance of resistant gender for her and as example of the intertwined relationship of politics with queer understanding of self. This led theorists like Annemarie Jagose toward an analysis of boundlessness within a pre-existing system (1996). This concept of the political plays out within queer communities as individuals and collectives are continuously attempting to reorganize meaning around gender and sexual performance.

The idea that identification is enacted incorporation of behavior highlights that whatever is to be thought of as “essence” is produced through social fabrication of expectation (Butler 1990). There is not gendered “essence” but identity-shaping social powers that frame the limitations of gender expression, understanding, and behavior. This concept of fabrication destabilizes the notion that gender and sex are innate realities. By arguing that gender is instituted and inscribed within and upon a body; Butler shows that desire and presentation is a fact of performance and illusion, only solidified through tangible behaviors (1990). This frame of understanding a gendered body shows that intelligibility is a result of a sacrifice to the power of dominant expectations of social behavior that are perpetually reproduced without consciousness. As a result of the deconstruction of reproduced gendered behavior, when I enter into a queer setting and see a seemingly female bodied person dressed in masculine attire and using masculine mannerisms being called by an androgynous name, my subconscious no longer automatically assigns them male or female, but has been resocialized within another

locus of identity shaping social power to see the in between as a produced category of gender.

This concept of gender fabrication both helps and hurts contemporary presentations of queer gender as it functions in communities that are organized around non-normative gender structures. It helps by asserting the notion of gender being a resistant presentation of self that can recreate organized rituals of community. When queer people like Cece and Sarah make strategic choices around the social processes they utilize, they are holding onto the reification of mainstream gendered behavior to reshape social frames of identity and move queer gender from an illusion to an inscription on the body. However the unconscious reproduction of the gendered behaviors is what queer experience is bringing into the realm of consciousness by making strategic choices about how to employ gender tropes and thus the abstract inscription of gender is being reclaimed.

Judith Halberstam emphasizes queer as something more transient, but she also reifies the concept of identity as a performance in regard to gender (1998). This is something that is present in any community space, but the idea of a conscious gender performance runs rampant in queer social spaces. I find relevant to this her assertion that there is no experience, transsexual, queer, butch or otherwise, that could be universally represented (1998). Lesbian identity is as much a performance as queer identity, occupying a place of representation that is understood by the players as a performance of roles, but there is less critique involved making experience fit within a less transient and more fixed or universal lesbian social space. The dykes at the bar on football Sunday

know that they are objectifying the women by calling attention to what others are wearing, like addressing one as “football pants”, or coming up common refrains when those around them engage in rowdy sexual behavior saying “faux hawk is making out again.” In turn they know they are being objectified, and smile and wink across the bar, playing with presentation in order to perpetuate this. There is no joke on anyone here however, because they exhibit a power in the free game of the fact that their behaviors are not those of their heterosexual counterparts, but subverted, as they are all women. Additionally, they seem to need to consciously and critically verbalize this experience in order to resist something dominant as not present.

Halberstam does pointedly outline and see as problematic an idea of borders between manifestations of gender identity and performance. This seems to cause great discomfort in theoretical discussions of queerness, yet has very real implications in the lived experience of queer community. Queer gender is something supposed to be borderless, and some do not think of their identities as performed but lived, innate and not created even if their innate nature took work to bring out because of the lack of mainstream recognition. The performance is present however, because even though those like Cece, Ash, and Laura are just presenting and living as they understand themselves as gendered beings, the very fact that it is not an unconscious reproduction of dominant norms it is seen as performative of a specific consciousness and value set.

As also evident through the work of Stein, in order to understand one’s self as being, there must be reference to a perimeter of experience. Halberstam appropriately outlines the paradox of mobility and freedom that lie within queer representations and

identities of gender. To be constantly moving outlines Sarah's being, but to be she must identify something she is and something she is not. Halberstam posits that queer identities may in some light be seen as "giddy zones of freedom," while in other lights they are manifestations of "bodies committed to making do with the essential discomforts of embodiment" (1998:170). By consciously behaving, in every area of life, with resistance and critique Sarah is attempting to create freedom within the discomfort she experiences when being forced into any one category of experience.

The tension between the theoretical and the lived realities is present throughout each of the works that interact with and frame a community built around queerness. Having noted this tension between the theoretical realities of the literature and the lived realities of the community places this researcher at an interesting and exciting point in an attempt to have these two realities inform and enhance each other. Many of the theorists may argue that analyzing community behavior within such frames is not the purpose of an anti-essentialist theory or politics. Yet I see a new category of gender emerging from this place. Debates over the possibility of this type of agency are tangible and occurring as I witness a group of people binding boundlessness. They are struggling to define something not necessarily definable in regard to queer as an identity of gender.

Elizabeth Galewski puts forth the idea that the power of subversion is in the perception of this queer identity within both the mainstream and the queer worlds (2005). She has a goal of developing a perspective that does not lose this gender presentation amid the pitfalls of subversive identity politics, but, rather, to conceive of femme as a queer presentation of normative gendered behavior (2005). In attempting to honor its

deconstructionist basis, queer perspectives can often fail to interact with the cultural functions of identity in social space. In order to understand herself as queer, Cece has to identify it as something more than an act of resistance in order for her identity to be treated as a possibility of gender. Queer presentation of normative genders is a bridge between the abstraction theory calls for and the boundaries necessary to enact community, a space of shared, lived experience.

## CONCLUSION

Queer community and lesbian community are both spaces in which social processes that frame self-presentation are occurring. Gender as fluid in concept and more rigid in behavior is employed in these settings that frame lived experience and make identities that may be unintelligible to the outside world. These identities are understood through the queer paradox of bounded openness. Dominant and subversive gender tropes are influential in informing behavior in lesbian communities, and in framing behavioral resistance in queer communities. A pitfall of bounded social space is that patterns and hierarchies develop. To watch hierarchy dissipate in lesbian community where it is not opposed so strongly only highlights the struggle around hierarchy in queer community.

To be queer is not to be bound or to rank, but in order to function as a community, social mores determine who can or cannot be in a space that must be bounded to be recognized. Queer identity is unique in that it is taken from a theory and the theory is reworked in order to function as an experience. This is a privileged but also modern phenomenon. While certain aspects of privilege can make it possible to carefully examine concepts of queerness, the taking on of queer as an identity is deeply rooted in the history

of those deemed gender others. The framework of queerness is operationalized politically as it aims to bring a different perspective to work in the realm of GLBT rights and social understanding of the possibilities of gender experience.

Queer community and queer identity ground the abstract nature of queer theory. While studies continue to investigate how queer life is occurring in a mainstream society, I use this work to focus on the existence of queer as an identity different from other non-normative performances of gender and sexuality, like those in lesbian settings. Collectivity and experience are a missing foci in queer studies and a place where queer theory will need to go. This examination is not conclusive, but queer has no definitive starting or ending point, a great strength and weakness of the theory as it translates to experience. Looking at a particular moment in the movement of queer from theory to identity one sees processes of accountability being employed and ritual processes of self-presentation being applied to theoretical understandings. This meeting point of theory and identity is one difficult to decipher and is rarely talked about. My experience has led to an understanding of how abstraction is processed and how the forceful assertion of this resistance makes queer a tangible political force, rerouting systems of gender. To understand the nuance of interaction between theory and experience in framing social and political identities, more time must be spent exploring non-normative experience. The meeting of macrosocial theoretical concepts with microsocial lived experiences is often the site where hegemony is challenged, but one difficult to quantify. There is a possibility for an understanding of queer as a radical rejection that leads to freedom that can only be

understood through the continued examination of queer as it is actually operationalized, which is within a politically focused community.

I continue to wonder about what the explicit performative nature of queerness is in my conversation with Laura following a football game. I ask her, “What do you think is this need in a queer space for individuals to explicitly identify your gender and sexuality and so strongly assert as fluid?” She tells me, “I mean with Sam, our gender presentation is significant to our friendship and it’s why we’ve bonded and how we’ve formed our friendship, but I don’t think we’ve ever explicitly talked about it.” I see this as the orientation of consciousness shifting between queer and lesbian space. “I see what you mean, it’s becoming clear, that when gay people get together, they talk about being gay.” She quickly asserts her agreement. “Oh definitely! I mean for work we were putting together this research thing and the people of color were in one group and that is what they talked and joked about, being of color and that experience.” This is not entirely uncommon as a point of solidarity within communities oppressed by social hegemony, who must live and interact with their oppressors, non-normative identity appreciation tends to burst out when you can create your own community space. Laura continues, “But I mean, as much as age affects how verbal people tend to be about what they are, I still think that there is an element to talking about it that happens anyway, maybe not talked about, but definitely present. And yeah, the queer crowd is having the conversation about what’s happening, it’s why we talked about butch identifications moving toward trans...”

Laura is rationalizing the differences between these spaces in order to make sense of travel between the two. It is clear however, that gender has many functions in regard to



identity and community. Teasing out the processes of queer makes cause for an accountability that takes attitudes of a social environment and extends the limits of gendered practices in the hopes of radical liberation from hierarchy and trope. Remaining the site of this “something” that is being talked about as happening, the practices of gender that tease out hegemonic understandings of self, community is the ground upon which theory is experienced and possibility is created. The resistance exemplified through both communities living non-normative gender and sexual experiences can serve as a guidepost for understanding experiences not recognized or labeled through hegemonic organizations of gender. Both these rejections and reclaimings of experiences that are occurring are processes of hope. Using community as a referent and reconceptualizing operations of gender and sexuality to be more encompassing of possibility can lead to a radical liberation, and be a force in the world of political advocacy for those with a variety of gender and sexual identities. This appears as a force of change that is beginning, in different ways, in queer spaces and in lesbian spaces.

## Bibliography

- Alexander, Jonathan. 1999. "Beyond Identity: Queer Values and Community." *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity*. Vol 4. No. 4 293-314
- Ault, Amber. 1996. "Ambiguous Identity in an Unambiguous Sex/Gender Structure: The Case of Bisexual Women." *The Sociological Quarterly*. Vol. 37 No. 3 449-463
- Burawoy, Michael et. al. 1991. *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Cohen, Cathy J. 1997. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* Vol. 3 437-465.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. 2003. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*. Random House Inc. United States of America.
- Galewski, Elizabeth. 2005. "Figuring the Feminist Femme." *Women's Studies in Communication* Volume 28, Number 2, Fall. 183-206
- Gamson, Joshua. 1995. "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma." *Social Problems*. Vol 42, No. 3 390-407
- 1997. "Messages of Exclusion: Gender, Movements, and Symbolic Boundaries." *Gender and Society*. Vol 11, No 2. 178-199.
  - and Dawne Moone. 2004. "The Sociology of Sexualities: Queer and Beyond." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 30:47-64.
- Garfinkel, Harold. 1967. "Studies in Ethnomethodology." Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday Anchor Books. Garden City, NY.
- 1955. "On Face-Work." Lemert, Charles. 2010. *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings, Fourth Edition* 338-342 Westview Press, A Member of the Perseus Books Group.

- Green, Adam Isaiah. 2002. "Gay but Not Queer: Toward a Post-Queer Study of Sexuality." *Theory and Society*. Vol. 31 No. 4 521-545
- Halberstam, Judith. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. Duke University Press.
- Hale, C. Jacob. 2003. "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex Without Women or Men." Corber, Robert J. and Stephen Valocchi. 2003. *Queer Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reader* 61-70 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Heyes, Cressida J. 2003. "Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender." *Signs*. Vol. 28 No. 4 1093-1120,
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2010. "The New Politics of Community." *American Sociological Review* Vol. 75 No. 1 7-30
- Jagose, Annemarie. 1996. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York University Press. Washington Square, NY.
- Mead, George Herbert. Ca. 1929 "The Self, the I, and the Me." Lemert, Charles. 2010. *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings, Fourth Edition* 224-229 Westview Press, A Member of the Perseus Books Group.
- Rubin, Gayle. 1984. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" Abelove, Henry, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Haperin. 1992. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. 3-44 Routledge, New York and London.
- Stein, Arlene. 1997. *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* University of California Press. Berkeley, California  
- 2001. *The Stranger Next Door : The Story of a Small Community's Battle Over Sex, Faith, and Civil Rights*. Beacon Press. Boston, MA
- Valentine, David. 2007. *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Duke University Press.