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BIOPOLITICAL BECOMINGS AND FRINGE FEMINISM: CONFESSIONS OF A
TRANS* RADICAL FEMINIST

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Biopolitical Becomings and Fringe Feminism: Confessions of a Trans* Radical Feminist

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From the perspective of a trans* individual who identifies with radical feminist politics, I attempt to navigate the longstanding and divisive debate between both the mainstream transgender community and radical feminists. At the core of the debate between the trans* advocates and radical feminists is the contention over the utility of gender. Through the use of textual analysis, I examine common narratives within the trans* movement and the counter arguments posed by radical feminism. Additionally, I base my argument on Foucault's theory of biopolitics and Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory which serves as a lens to interrogate various studies within medical discourse. By doing so, I highlight the paradoxes of both perspectives in an attempt to bridge fundamental gaps in feminist discourse. Ultimately, I aim to facilitate a productive conversation between the trans* community and radical feminists that can be accepting while also constructively critical. This research seeks to conceptualize a better feminism, one that is inclusive yet critical of the ways in which we come to socially and biologically conceive of ourselves.

Keywords: transgender, radical feminism, biopolitics, assemblage theory, gender identity, human rights, coordinated management of meaning theory

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INTRODUCTION

“The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations that we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us”
(Lorde, 1984).

I distinctly recall uncovering these words amidst the plethora of text I consumed throughout my feminist graduate education. During the time I confirmed my decision to undergo hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in mid-March of 2015, I discovered this profoundly truthful revelation. After my first injection of testosterone was administered, I experienced an intense sensation of heat course through my body; as if part of myself was engulfed with triumph and relief, but also with dissension. What were the corporeal and cultural implications of quite literally injecting what science regards as the *most important* ‘male classified’ sex hormone into my bloodstream on a weekly basis? How would my voice be altered acoustically and also as an advocate for social change? How could I resolve myself to accept and better understand the fragments of the oppressor that are buried deep within me, in addition to the observable reflections that are visibly manifesting more with each passing day? The antiquated dualistic contention between my mind and body was formally declared. My social existence served as the front line.

As an individual who physically represents a trans* identity, while also holding radical politics close to heart, I experience a profound schism on an internal and communal level. As a result, I am compelled to address the divisive debate between the trans*community and radical feminists. I am drawn to examine this vast separation because I yearn to rejoin the women's spaces that once nourished me, yet, now regard me at a distance as a result of my perceived gender identity. I am driven to analyze these arguments because I do not subscribe to the common narratives assigned to the trans*

community. I am motivated to explore this issue because I am attempting to sew my severed selves together and hopefully, many others in the process.

According to widespread Western conceptions of gender and sex, I am considered a transgender man—which is to say that I was ‘assigned female at birth’ but currently do not demonstrate culturally ingrained feminine characteristics. My bodily contortions do not align with societal prescriptions of what it means to be a ‘woman’ or even a ‘man’, for that matter. I seek to defy concepts of sexed or gendered identities, while still navigating a world that relies on these markers as the very fabric of one’s personhood. I refuse to allow my biology to serve as a destiny in any particular direction. Instead, I aim to explore the broad implications of what it means to inhabit liminal gendered space while simultaneously residing under the auspices of ‘transgender’ as a means of legitimizing my experience as a non-conforming body in the eyes, not only of mainstream public institutions, but also in queer and left-wing political spaces.

As a feminist and Women’s and Gender studies student, I often find myself interrogating how notions of sex and gender are currently conceived. As an undergraduate, I felt nourished and enriched by the passionate insights and prolific work of radical feminists such as Audre Lorde, Andrea Dworkin, bell hooks, Shulamith Firestone, and many other scholars who shaped the discourse of second wave feminism. I was invigorated by their flagrant efforts to call attention to patriarchal underpinnings of social institutions. Throughout this thesis, I define radical feminist theory as a movement within feminism that identifies patriarchy as the system of oppression that assigns privilege, power, and rights based upon one’s assigned binaric, biological sex and gender identity.

I proudly actualize myself as a trans* radical feminist—an identity steeped in complex gender politics and, at times, immense social stigma. I identify with radical feminist ideology insofar as I do not believe that the use of gender serve anyone. In other words, the seemingly progressive deployment of gender identity (i.e. the expansion of gender through the ‘spectrum model’) camouflages the repressive origin of gender. As a radical feminist, I believe that patriarchal hierarchies of gender are harmful. I do not believe that inclusion into this system liberates anyone. To identify as a radical feminist risks being perceived as anachronistic at best; and at worst, exclusionary, dogmatic, or even trans-phobic. Radical feminism distinguishes itself from other forms of feminism by focusing on dismantling current systems as opposed to the integration and inclusion of marginalized individuals within contemporary institutions. Radical feminism is skeptical of social movements such as ‘choice’ feminism and liberal feminism, which it perceives as seeking to center the individual as apolitical and regard personal choices as unchallenged and sacrosanct. Radical feminism upholds the conclusion that we can never truly separate ourselves from the political strongholds of patriarchy. Within the context of the debate between the trans* community, radical feminism maintains that the focus on gender identity detracts from a wider understanding that gender can never truly be an equal playing field. Instead, radical feminists recognize gender as a hierarchy of privilege that ceaselessly posits women as an oppressed demographic. Radical feminists understand socialization to be the cause of sexism and, thus, those who have not been socialized as women, cannot truly experience womanhood authentically, as ‘cis’ women do.

Conversely, the trans* community aims to liberate individuals from sexism through the expansion of gender identities. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the transgender community as trans*. As Jack Halberstam notes in *Trans* - Gender Transitivity and New Configurations of Body, History, Memory and Kinship*, the asterisk serves as a marker for all terms associated with a particular word. Thus, using the asterisk allows for variability and inclusion of all bodies throughout this discussion (2016, 368). By 'breaking the binary' of gender, trans* individuals aspire to transform understandings of identity through the 'spectrum model'. The spectrum model of gender fosters a broad range of identity that is not a fixed two categories but instead allows for fluidity. As a result, this understanding directly opposes gender as inherently oppressive but rather, liberatory. This line of logic posits that creating more than two possible gender identities will eliminate the power imbalance that is associated with the binary model. Another key factor to consider is the understanding that gender identity is self-determined and, thus, not dictated by socialization practices. Therefore, one is free to identify with any gender and can fluidly change throughout one's life.

The polarized debate between trans* rights advocates and radical feminists revolves around the use of gender within identity politics. This divide is driven by seemingly opposite demands. The mainstream transgender rights movement focuses on the assimilation of trans* peoples into conventional understandings of gender: a trans* person, therefore, may choose a different gender identity assigned them at birth but nevertheless chooses from the gendered identities made available to them within patriarchy. In that regard, radical feminism does not center equality between the binary sexes as the goal but rather the elimination of oppressive systems entirely. The trans*

community aims to expand the concept of gender by creating more gender identity options. While this expansion allows for more free interpretation and personal expression, it can result in mirroring binary sexes and perpetuating the perceived naturalness of masculinity and femininity through assimilation and inclusion to mainstream gender norms. Meanwhile, radical feminists actively seek to eradicate the gender hierarchy, yet, still uphold essentialist ideals of biological realities. Both groups fear that social erasure will lead to a decrease in legitimization as women and subsequent denial of services and support. For example, on the one hand, some radical feminists believe that the inclusion of trans* women into all ‘women’s spaces’ could disrupt the collective safety of that space and decrease the necessary, specialized focus on ‘biological women’s’ unique needs and realities specifically in regard to women’s health initiatives. On the other hand, trans* women believe that exclusion from ‘womanhood’ further fuels the violence and oppression that they frequently encounter throughout society.

However, both parties fail to acknowledge the more primary and, therefore, critical influence that biopower has on the meanings used to conceive of corporeal realities in all contexts. Put simply, both theories rely on the understanding that gender identity lies on a foundation of binaric biological sex that has the possibility of influencing one’s gender identity and life experiences. The insidious interplay of biopolitics normalizes populations in order to sustain governance and social control (Foucault, 1975). Thus, biopower thrives off of the pervasive assumption that humans naturally exist on a binary and, therefore, masculinity and femininity are the “essence” of one’s being—regardless if one believes that gender should be eliminated or expanded.

The trans* movement targets patriarchy's norms in a individualistic and medicalized way. That is, through the personal expression of gender nonconformance, the trans* community resists binary understandings of men and women. Meanwhile, radical feminism tackles the same norms from a political and foundational perspective such as the drive to eliminate the concept of gender altogether through education and resocialization. Together, these approaches can be combined to enact effective and impactful social transformation that enables true freedom of expression beyond the concepts of sex and gender. Yet, we must dig deep into such claims and assumptions to cast light upon the paradoxes of both arguments and the leaks in each logic. By doing so, the realization that right and wrong do not exist in absolute terms and truth is relative can be uncovered and utilized as a means of mediation. In order to do this, we must ravenously claw at the partitions that have been systemically erected to keep us separate and, thus, weakened as a force.

Since I have a foot in both camps of this protracted and acrimonious debate, I possess a unique vantage point to examine the intricacies of each perspective. Throughout my thesis project, I aim to analyze the claims of both the trans* movement and radical feminists regarding gender identity. I argue that embracing both identities, produces a more nuanced understanding of body assemblages. Radical feminism has the potential of highlighting the non-necessity and imminent dangers of gender identity, while the trans* movement demonstrates the fluidity of human identity in accordance with sex and gender. Together, these understandings can lead to radical social change.

Throughout my exploration, I inquire: Is gender truly necessary for understanding ourselves? What are the ways that biological sex is determined and used to control our

perceptions of ourselves and others? How can identity be reframed if gender is dismantled? Can our commonalities invoke more solidarity than our differences? Furthermore, how can we highlight the paradoxes of our ideologies while finding ways to establish collaborative means of understanding through the mediums of communication and medical science? Throughout this research, I focus on systemic power relations and the insidious measures deployed to invoke separation, social surveillance and policing, and lateral violence among marginalized demographics within patriarchy. Given the challenges associated with radical feminism or the trans* movement, I suggest espousing a movement that would eradicate the mandate for sex categorization across social and legal systems. Such a movement, I believe, would be a more transformative long-term change as it would challenge the very rigid gender binary on which patriarchy is based. Hence, I believe that the gender hierarchy must be dismantled to make way for a deeper understanding of bodies on a biological and social continuum.

Ultimately, I aim to facilitate a productive conversation between the trans* community and radical feminists that can be accepting while also constructively critical. This research seeks to conceptualize a better feminism, one that is inclusive yet critical of the ways in which we come to socially and biologically conceive of ourselves—one that truly aims not merely for integration within institutional systems but rather a reimagining of possibility beyond what currently exists.

The reality is, whether we identify with the expansion or elimination of gender identity as a societal phenomenon, we are all profoundly harmed by social division. Given the current political climate, it is crucial that we unify, communicate our collective goals, and ignite our revolutionary potential to protect the human rights of all those in

marginalized communities across the globe. We must seek to transcend the boundaries of patriarchal projections of sex to create stronger, inclusive, and radical communities that foster the authentic diversity of human beings. We must be willing to embrace humility and earnestly identify shards of the oppressor within each of us in order to revolutionize the way we understand our bodies and ourselves.

METHODOLOGY

The design of this research will adopt a progressive approach by collecting and describing information from textual sources. I intend to interpret and examine the texts from various critical angles while utilizing theories of power, identity, and communication. In doing so, I examine the interests and concepts of each side under the lens of postmodern feminist theory. Through the use of textual analysis, I examine common narratives within the trans* movement and the counter arguments posed by radical feminists. Additionally, I base my argument on Foucault's theory of biopolitics (1975) and Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory (1980) which serves as a lens to interrogate various studies within medical discourse. By doing so, I highlight the paradoxes of both perspectives in an attempt to bridge fundamental gaps in the discourse.

To begin, I trace the genealogy of gender identity in order to shed light on the insidious operations of the medical industry to create and subsequently pathologize what it considers 'deviant' forms of human expression. I am particularly interested in the unique utility of gender as a social construction based on patriarchal differentiations of sex, that grants a sense of 'fixed fluidity' within one's sexed identity whereas there are seemingly no corresponding counterparts along other sectors of identity. By acknowledging the constructed origin of 'gender', I aim to call attention to the arbitrary nature of attempting to homogenize and normalize oppressed identities to meet societal standards. Additionally, I seek to draw attention to the ways in which medical science is manipulated to serve biopolitical interests. In order to illustrate my argument, I plan to interrogate scientific claims that support the biological basis for gender identity in comparison to studies that dispel any sense of the 'naturalness' of gender.

This research focuses on scientific discourse regarding gender identity. I explore the ways in which medical science has been used to affirm claims in the long-standing heated debates between radical feminists and the trans* community. My analysis unpacks the essentialist conceptions of bodies which are invoked from both sides of the debate. Science is often cited as the causation, justification, and validation for innumerable social issues. Human biology is among the most called upon resources for legitimizing claims regarding the material realities of individuals of diverse identities.

Historically, genetics, neuroscience, and other fields of scientific study have been largely responsible for both substantiating and demystifying assertions in relation to the ‘true nature’ of social experiences and corporeal realities. Science is routinely upheld as an absolute ‘truth’ and perceived as the only objective measure of reality. However, as Foucault hauntingly notes truth is “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and functioning of statements” (1976, 113). Thus, it is vital to examine and interrogate the underlying bio-political motivations of the scientific claims regarding gender through a lens that is keen to “regimes of truth”.

I explore how these concepts have been perpetuated within neuroscience, psychology, and genetics to prove the biological basis of masculine and feminine identities. To do this, I call upon biopolitics as a lens to analyze how bodies are manufactured (both culturally and medically) in accordance with social interests. I highlight how studies carried out by neuroscience, genetics, and endocrinology impact in both proving and disproving the scientific basis for social conceptions within the mind and body. Ultimately, I posit that similarities between sexed bodies are largely and intentionally undocumented and understudied not only in an attempt to retain systemic

patriarchal interests but also further endorse a conception of individualized gender identity.

Therefore, I apply assemblage theory as a means of providing an opportunity to examine the multiplicity of biological sex determination. Assemblages are a framework for examining the complexity of social entities by centering fluidity, interchangeability, and multiplicity. Through the lens of assemblage theory, bodies are not fixed but rather possess exchangeability (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). Assemblage theory provides the groundwork for conceptualizing sexed bodies without the need for gender identity. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's assemblage theory lies in opposition to the essentialism invoked by both proponents of gender identity and those who wish to inhabit a genderless (though not sexless) society by allowing for a truly fluid and interwoven form of identity to exist (DeLanda, 2016).

I conclude my thesis by interrogating how language both limits our abilities to transcend binaric systems and creates discordance among the trans* community and radical feminists. My initial research and personal experience with the debate between trans* activists and radical feminists demonstrates that gender critics (those who challenge the need for gender identity as a social marker to differentiate among human beings) are often regarded as reductive, dismissive, or even transphobic by the trans* community. However, I would like to dig into these accusations to truly understand what constitutes 'hate speech' and how the silencing of certain voices shapes the 'truth-making' process of our communities that dictates who is worthy of membership and who remain outliers.

Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) will be employed as a method to analyze the utility of gender by focusing on communication perspectives. Diverging from other theories of language, CMM serves as a practical theory that improves social interaction and promotes community building by focusing on the ways communication is creative and constructive as opposed to transmittable or representational (Pearce, 2004). CMM provides a unique method of analysis for communication and conflict management. Applying CMM theory illustrates how language and ‘truth-making’ influence our identity politics. I use “the daisy model” to illustrate the multilayered conflicts within the debate between radical feminists and the trans* community (Pearce, 2004). Additionally, I highlight the common goals that each community presently strives for and offer suggestions that can increase empathic understanding. Ultimately, CMM demonstrates that communication is the fundamental means of constructing social worlds and interpreting language. Hence, CMM provides a mechanism to bolster generative efforts to revolutionize how bodies and, thus, identities are formed (Pearce, 2004).

1.

The Genealogy of Gender Identity

“For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never

enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support” (Lorde, 1979).

Gender identity is cited as the underlying determinant of one’s sense of self in relation to cultural contexts of masculinity and femininity guided by the bi-gendered system of patriarchy. More broadly, gender is defined as the behaviors, preferences, activities, and characteristics that are deemed appropriate for humans differentiated as men and women in accordance with rigid interpretations of their genitalia. This chapter aims to examine the origins of the concept of gender; particularly, it is an attempt to identify precisely what is implied when gender identity is called upon to explain one’s embodied reality. Through the lens of Foucault’s theory of biopolitics, I plan to examine the significance of recognizing gender identity as an apparatus of social control (Repo, 2015).

By centering gender within body politics, I postulate that we are misdirected in our objective to liberate bodies from the stronghold of patriarchy. When observing the claims of truth in the form of either the fluidity of gender or the sanctity of the two-sex body model, I cannot help but be reminded of Audre Lorde’s poignant “master’s tools” message, which opens this chapter. We have conceived of and developed material realities for ourselves using precisely the same divisive and repressive tools that have been used to socially corral us into oppressive frameworks; it is through this oppression that we conceive of our own bodies. However, we must reconceptualize what it means to experience ‘embodiment’ beyond the reference points of gender and sex that are laden with insidious political and economic interests. In order to do this, an optimal starting

place for interrogation is the birth of gender identity as a medical and social concept, as examined.

Gender originates from the French term *genre* which can be traced back to the Greek word *genos*, which refers to “kind, type, or sort” (Repo, 2015). Prior to the 1950s, the term gender was not inherently interlaced with denoting masculine or feminine expression. Around 1955, psychiatrist John Money coined the phrase “gender role,” deriving from sociologist Talcott Parsons’s concept of “sex roles.” Money’s theory of gender descends from the notion of psychological sex, which was conceived of by sexologist David O. Cauldwell in 1949 (Meyerowitz, 1980). Cauldwell, who first coined the term *transsexual*, made the initial distinction between biological and psychological sex within Western medicine. Cauldwell believed that psychological sex was responsible for determining masculinity and femininity; when an individual’s sexed expression was misaligned with their genitalia and, thus, biological reality, one was regarded as mentally ill and subsequently pathologized (Meyerowitz, 1980).

Transsexuals were differentiated from intersex individuals because Cauldwell posited the disruption of sex within the psychological realm as opposed to a malfunction existing within the body. Prior to Money’s assertions regarding the development of gender, psychological sex was believed to be influenced by biological attributes such as chromosomes and gonads (Meyerowitz, 1980). However, the psychological component of sex was devised as a resistance to predated theories of human bisexuality that emerged in Europe.

Understandings of biological sex have altered in time and have been used for the justification of social control for centuries. By the early twentieth century, scientists

began to explore the differences, not only between men and women, but within and among them as well. Human bisexuality was theorized in 1903 by Otto Weininger, an Austrian philosopher who conceived of biological sex on a spectrum as opposed to earlier theories that recognized sex only in three separate categories: male, female, and intermediate (known as hermaphrodite at the time) (Meyerowitz, 1980). Weininger hypothesized that there was a great deal of overlap between sex determination and hormonal levels and, therefore, believed that there was an inherent bisexual nature to human beings. However, medical doctors used this proposed fluidity to legitimize sex-reassignment procedures; by adjusting hormone levels and the appearance of ambiguous genitalia, ‘abnormal’ levels of either ‘maleness’ or ‘femaleness’ could be corrected. Social expectations and sex roles (eventually understood as gender) greatly influenced the motivations behind seeking out and performing such surgeries.

It becomes evident that systems of oppression must adapt in order to be sustainable. While the acknowledgement of human bisexuality posed an evolutionary shift in the way bodies are understood (with the potential to disrupt the social order of the sexes), it ultimately was perceived as an austere threat to heteronormative patriarchal institutions. Postulating that humans possess traits of both ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ (i.e. that we are more similar than different) is not conducive to justifying male privilege. Therefore, in order to maintain essentialist notions of ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness,’ surgeons often screened patients in accordance with preferences that aligned with conventional understandings of sex roles. ‘Successful’ candidates would appear and act in socially appropriate ways for men and women, which included exhibiting heterosexuality (Meyerowitz, 1980). One can still find evidence of this today, as many

trans* individuals are subject to questioning from medical providers if their 'transition' deviates from standard medical practices of hormone replacement therapy and surgeries to alter one's genitalia or chest. For example, trans* individuals often must first undergo therapy sessions in order to obtain a letter of approval from a licensed therapist to enable them to undergo hormone replacement therapy. This measure is to 'ensure' that trans* individuals are mentally stable and 'eligible' for medical transition. Additionally, in order to receive certain surgical procedures such as chest or genital alteration surgeries, some trans* patients need to provide evidence of therapy and/or a letter from their physician/endocrinologist which justifies the necessity of the surgery.

Weininger's sex spectrum theory possessed the potential for explaining differentiation among sexed males and females recognized as gendered 'men' and 'women.' This concept could have radically transformed societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity. By understanding that binaries are not natural, bodies could access growth and expression that is unbound from normalization practices and subsequent hierarchical oppression. Tragically, this concept of sex was not applied as a gateway to undermining sexism or eradicating patriarchy. Instead, the spectrum model was used as a sort of lateral hierarchy that posited women at one end of the spectrum that highlighted a range of deviance from falsity, irrationality, unintelligence, and deception, while positioning men at the other end associated with a range of behaviors indicating oppositional characteristics (Meyerowitz, 1980). It was proposed that if masculinity and femininity were not biologically inherent, it would be the responsibility of society to implement sex expectations through the home, formal education, and medical clinics and, therefore, force into 'normalization' rigid patriarchal gender norms. This conclusion led

to a sense of urgency around the need to affect proper socialization to produce masculine men and feminine women (Repo, 2015).

This era ushered in the emergence of gender as a theory to explain the social inscription of sex roles onto biological embodiments. Sex was increasingly seen as biological and, thus, immutable, whereas gender was perceived to be malleable and influenced by enculturation. Money and his colleagues ventured to prove that gender was conditioned postnatally and used the bodies of intersex subjects as the means to substantiate his profound claims (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Similarly, Dr. Robert Stoller was interested in studying the distinctions between sex and gender and, thus, defined both as exclusive categories. While gender, for Money, was an offshoot from biological sex (one of several components of sex such as gonadal, chromosomal, hormonal, etc.), for Stoller, gender was entirely influenced by culture (Repo, 2015).

During the 1960s, Stoller coined the term “gender identity” and founded the Gender Identity Research Clinic (GIRC) at UCLA, which still exists today. Gender identity clinics served as hubs for the implementation of proper gender identity and, mainly, to prevent abnormal gender incongruence in children. Stoller defined gender identity as “the knowledge and awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, that one belongs to one sex and not the other” (1968, 10). Therefore, the concept of the transsexual subject was conceived; the phenomenon of incongruence between one’s mind and body was only comprehensible through the invention of gender (Repo, 2015). According to this theory of gender identification, an individual’s sense of gender (set within the confines of being a ‘man’ or ‘woman’) was solidified by the age of three years (Meyerowitz, 1980). While the understanding of gender as culturally influenced

possessed the potential for revealing the constructed nature of masculinity and femininity, it instead was used to contribute to fervent efforts to ensure that parents were effectively socializing their children along binaric concepts of sex. Twice within the twentieth century, there were opportune moments to discredit and dethrone the hierarchy of gender and sex. However, in both instances, these findings were instead contorted to further reinforce gender norms and sex-based oppression. As I will later demonstrate through the use of CMM theory, there have been several bifurcation points throughout history that possessed the potential for a radical shift in how bodies are comprehended.

An initial review of Money and Stoller's claims that affirmed that gonads and chromosomes do not determine one's gender seems liberating. In fact, these supposed discoveries resulted in a dire urgency to stringently socialize children to ensure proper gender identification. The 1950s was an impactful era for structural functionalist thinking within social sciences. During that era, socialization was perceived as essential in order to establish conformity to ensure normal psychological development and the maintenance of the nuclear family unit. This ideal was universalized as 'truth' to regulate reproduction and productivity (Repo, 2015). It was within this social climate that Money and Stoller were able to perpetuate gendered conditioning by pathologizing intersexed and transsexual patients (Repo, 2015). The normalization rhetoric was used to justify a plethora of invasive surgeries in order to standardize bodies as binarically sexed beings. It is at this point that gender can initially be identified as a biopolitical project.

In *The Biopolitics of Gender*, Jemima Repo boldly confronts the concept of gender within feminist discourse and aims to unveil the inconvenient truth behind the history of the theory. Repo urges that gender must not be mistaken as a feminist invention

that has been hijacked by neoliberalism but rather as an insidious manifestation of biopower. Within the text, Repo states that “to examine gender genealogically it is necessary to suspend all theories of gender—including theories of its cultural construction—to examine the conditions of possibility that enabled its emergence” (2015, 10). In order to fully comprehend the bio-political utility of gender, Repo sets the context in which gender was initially conceived. Repo expounds on how the postwar era of the 1950s served as fertile soil for strict social reform to flourish. WWII had resulted in an increase of women in the workforce, which led to a decline in birth rates. Simultaneously, the theory of human bisexuality was developing throughout Europe. Gender became a response that served as a resistance to societal change and an attempt to take control over the population trends while preserving the dynamics of the nuclear family unit (Repo, 2015). This chapter explores how acknowledging gender as a tool wielded by biopower as opposed to emancipation from sex based oppressed, one can begin to see how new tools must be fashioned to dismantle sexism.

Biopolitics as it is currently understood was first addressed by Michel Foucault in 1976 and was presented alongside the concept of biopower. Foucault described biopolitics as a means of governmental power that is concerned with the control of populations via reproduction, public health issues, and other bodily behaviors. Biopolitics has a vested interest in protecting the life of certain populations (“make live”) that are privileged within the state at the cost of others (“let die”) that are marginalized within the state through subtle and insidious social and political strategies deployed by medical and governmental agencies (1976). The exertion of such authority is known as biopower. Biopower acts as a means of possessing authority over embodied knowledge and the

production of truths, while vastly influencing the formation of individual and collective subjectivity. In other words, biopower quite literally means control over bodies (1976).

According to Foucault, a central strategy of biopower is to normalize populations to make them governable (1975). A ‘normalizing’ governance requires people to conform to conceptions of the “universal human” (i.e., possessing skin complexion, genitalia, sexual orientation, and physical and cognitive capabilities that are deemed preferable and assigned privilege) in order to be worthy of humanity in accordance with the spectrum of ‘human value’. This prerequisite fosters notions of human exceptionalism while pathologizing subjects who deviate from societal ideals so that humanity becomes classified into full humans, sub-humans, and nonhumans (Friedman, 2010). The social construction of ‘biological’ aspects of humans (such as ability, race, and sex) that we accept as absolute truth, not only organizes our sense of self, but our sensory perceptions of others. Therefore, ‘human’ is not merely a biological state of being, but a conceptual one.

Foucault expounds on “regimes of truth” that consist of discourses of knowledge, scientific studies, and technologies that are formed by systems of power to create a pervasive conception of what is ‘natural’, ‘real’, and ‘true’. Foucault identifies five traits that are present within Western societal truth making processes, that truth: is centered within the institution of science; demanded and subsequently cited amongst political and economic forces; is highly “diffused and consumed” throughout societal institutions; is produced and disseminated by dominant political and economic apparatuses; and serves as the epicenter for ideological conflict (1976).

Knowledge production and acquisition surrounding embodiment transitioned from Foucault's concept of "*ars erotica*" to "*scientia sexualis*" (1976). Foucault describes the attitudes of early societies toward embodied expression as pleasure-inclusive and based upon sensory experience. This mode of knowledge production is perceived as personal insight and is passed from those more experienced to those who are novices. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, this societal perspective toward sexuality and embodiment transformed into a "*scientia sexualis*" mode of knowledge production as a result of the growing interest in social reform (Foucault, 1976). Foucault refers to "*scientia sexualis*" as that which is the scientific comprehension of embodied experiences of others as opposed to sensual knowledge derived from personal experience. It is in this manner that 'truths' and knowledge are created and justified based upon the clinical observations of those in authoritative roles (1976). These forms of knowledge production impact the information that is propagated throughout educational and legal institutions and, thus, directly influences the way we come to understand our sexed and gendered identities.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault expounds on mechanisms utilized by biopower in order to maintain control over populations. According to Foucault, the success of power is dependent upon three key factors: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and examination (1975). A great deal of Foucault's work focuses on the concept of societal surveillance. Hierarchical observation serves as a means of controlling populations via coercive omnipresence as opposed to force. While power was once exerted in a restrictive manner, it is now enacted via normalization that is enforced by entire cultures. Punishment is no longer utilized to enforce standards of being; instead,

immense pressure to conform to norms is induced through social conditioning (1975). Any deviance from these norms is met with prejudice, discrimination, violence, and even eradication. It is imperative to note that the policing of gender has been applied by both conservative efforts and liberal projects alike. While gender is regulated based upon patriarchal conventions of masculinity and femininity, the use of gender identity is also strongly encouraged within left-wing circles as a marker of personhood. Regardless, if one identifies as ‘cisgender,’ ‘transgender,’ ‘gender nonconforming,’ or ‘non-binary,’ gender is perpetually called upon to explain our cultural and corporeal realities.

2.

The Feminist Adoption of Gender Identity

“Social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature” (Beauvoir, 1972).

In the 1970s, the concept of gender was appropriated by second-wave feminists in order to create a distinction and, thus, means of resistance to biological determinism. While gender theory is often mistakenly traced back to Simone de Beauvoir’s statement “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” some theorists argue that *The Second Sex* has wrongly had the sex/gender dyad read into it (Repo, 2015). Instead, it can be argued that Beauvoir was mainly interested in characterizing the multiplicity of ‘female’ identity. The second-wave feminist movement perceived women as a collective with the assumption that they shared experiences and features among them. This assumption of

collectivity suggests that there are correct ways of being a woman and, thus, serves as a means of policing specific practices, while actively rejecting other forms (Butler, 1990).

Some of the first theorists to introduce the concept of gender into feminist discourse were Kate Millet and Gayle Rubin (Mikkola, 2016). Both drew upon the concept of gender from Money and Stoller's theory of gender identity, which was perceived as the authority providing scientific evidence for masculinity and femininity within the psychological realm. However, by doing so, Repo states that feminists reaffirmed the power of the authoritative truth-making process that scientists and medical doctors possess. The normative motivations behind the implementation of gender (which was immensely harmful and invasive to intersex and transsexual subjects), remained unacknowledged and were instead reinforced and validated by the continued use of gender to liberate women from the shackles of biological determinism (Repo, 2015). However, in order to do so, feminists accepted the repressive conditions and normative use of biopower affiliated with gender. Thus, it is crucial to remember the genealogy of gender when calling upon it within contemporary feminist discourse; gender is not and never has been in favor of women, or trans* and intersex individuals. Instead, it has been a master's tool that has been refurbished and sold for initial market price at the cost of marginalized individuals who suffered greatly from its societal deployment.

Both Millet and Rubin situated gender as possessing a cultural basis that is created through socialization practices. To demonstrate this, Rubin devised the concept of the 'sex/gender system'; this dyad placed sex as the biological foundation on which cultural notions of gender were inscribed (Rubin, 1975). Sex was perceived as immutable yet neutral, whereas gender was imposed and, thus, enforced normative roles of

masculinity and femininity on sexed bodies. Through this feminist lens, gender was responsible for enforcing the subordination of women who learn passivity, helplessness, and reliance of male counterparts through socialization (Rubin, 1975). Therefore, it was proposed that a disruption of and intervention into the process of socialization should be the goal of the feminism. By creating a 'genderless' society, human personality would become untangled from the matrix of gender and eliminate the oppression of women (Bettcher, 2014). Repo notes that although radical feminism seeks to eliminate gender categories in order to emancipate women by attempting to control the means of socialization and reproduction, this in and of itself is an act of biopower (2015, p. 96).

While gender was posited as problematic (which is still in accordance with current radical feminist theory), Rubin and Millet did not challenge biological sex as a marker of identity. A call for a sexless society was never resounded. Rather, sex was perceived as apolitical, inert, and purely raw material that is contorted by gender projections onto it. Socialization is deemed to be the root cause of social control and, therefore, must be disrupted in order to facilitate radical transformation. This position further endorses the biology/culture split, which permits the two-sex model and subsequent social ordering upon which it is based to persist unchallenged.

This sentiment is echoed by prominent feminists such as Butler who states that all bodies are gendered from birth and the way gender is understood, thus, shapes how sex is interpreted (1990). However, her solution to undermine the 'truth' of biological sex is to configure the natural as cultural. This becomes problematic when considering a bio-political analysis because Foucault posits the control over bodies not as determined by culture, but rather the drive to exert biopower over lives (Repo, 2014). In *Neural*

Geographies: Feminism and the Microstructure of Cognition, Elizabeth Wilson expounds on the dangers of reinforcing divisions between nature and culture (1998). The split between nature and culture inherently enables the regulation of bodies within capitalist societies. By positioning the sexed body as an inert foundation upon which gender is to be carved, the material existence of the body as a dynamic and interactive cycle of its own accord is denied. As Annelies Kleinherenbrink argues in *The Politics of Plasticity: Sex and Gender in the 21st Century Brain*, the physical body, in addition to one's social existence, is literally formed by cultural conditions (2016).

As I will later explore, political agendas become intimately personal through the physical manifestations that occur on a neurological and somatic level. This explanation renders the sex/gender divide to be unnecessary and a hindrance to wider understandings of material realities. There is a grave danger in permitting bodies to be perceived as passive slates on which to inscribe gender. In doing so, bodies are eminently susceptible to bio-political configurations. While a new materialist perspective does not eliminate the concept of biological sex entirely, it enables the possibility for understanding bodies as an assemblage of sorts as opposed to monolithic concepts that are compressed into social categories. As we will later explore, neuroplasticity can perhaps serve as a means of expounding on embodied assemblage theory while circumventing biological and social determinism (Kleinherenbrink, 2016).

Repo notes that although Butler's gender theory contributed to thwarting the concept of biological determinism, it nevertheless utilizes gender in order to do so (despite her efforts to reconfigure how gender is comprehended). While this discernment does, in fact, collapse the sex/gender divide, it still fails to account for the ways that

biopower infiltrates the material body. This perspective also validates and relies on the system of gender in order to identify ourselves, which is still pervasive today.

Remnants of this exclusionary rhetoric are still present within current radical feminist discourse, which situates womanhood as defined by experiences reflecting specific gendered and racial identities within society. Hence, in order to embody womanhood, one must also navigate the world in a certain way. This is often used as justification for essentialist claims that transwomen will never quite qualify as ‘women’ due to their early socialization and lack of ‘female’ genitalia and related experiences (i.e., pregnancy, menstruation, etc.). This logic cracks easily when applied to various aspects of so-called ‘womanhood.’ For example, many radical feminists attribute sexual objectification as constitutive of being a woman. Therefore, those who do not experience sexual objectification by this line of reasoning would not be recognized as women (Bettcher, 2014).

Additionally, Judith Butler notes that the accusation of transwomen appropriating femininity implies that feminine embodiment belongs exclusively to the ‘female’ sex (Butler, 2004). However, Butler emphasizes that bodies are never without cultural framing. The radical feminist movement’s universal and essentialist claims regarding gender are presented as ‘truth’; similarly we see the conception of gender as a spectrum relegated as counter ‘truth.’ We must be equally resistant to both notions of gender as each presumes that gender is natural and ubiquitous. Repo illustrates that the concept of gender is often seen as a progressive way of comprehending identity beyond merely biological sex. Through understandings of plurality and performativity, gender is lauded as liberatory and revolutionary.

The second key factor in the success of power is an emphasis on the socialization of what is accepted as ‘normal, natural, and, thus, privileged.’ Repo states that gender was streamlined and, thus, normalized by the use of psychologization and medicalization, which rendered the body more pliable and governable (2015). As we will soon explore, the concept of gender identity as an essential component of one’s mind and body is embedded throughout scientific studies. By attempting to prove that the mind and body dualism exists, the medical industry can continue to propagandize the ‘wrong body’ narrative; in doing so, it legitimizes the trans* experience, while simultaneously pathologizing ‘gender incongruence’ in order to justify the two-sexed model. The problematization of bodies that do not conform to societal ideals and the subsequent transformations that are facilitated at the hands of medical professionals are pervasively perceived as ‘progressive,’ ‘inclusive,’ and ‘liberating.’

Meyerowitz identifies the ‘liberal discourse of happiness’ that pervades narratives of transgender subjects (1980). Historically, this narrative has been used as a normative means of justifying hormonal and surgical interventions for tran* individuals. Stoller believed that transition to a conformative social presence (i.e., respectability, law abidance, and submission to medical authority) would lead to fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness (Meyerowitz, 1980). Meyerowitz strongly concludes that this perspective further pathologizes the transgender subject as problematic while entirely avoiding social institutions as the issue. This strategy is insidious as it frames transition as an empowering decision of individuality and assertion of self-acceptance. To accentuate this point, Repo boldly states that “the imperative for subjects to be free and happy made it possible for the medical establishment not to have to choose between maintaining bodies

or controlling minds. It could do both by justifying surgeries and inducing subjects to conform to sexual norms” (2015, 70).

When considering how gender is comprehended and framed differently depending on the cultural context, the ‘wrong body’ narrative is one that has clearly been fabricated by the medical industry and sold to those who cannot contort themselves to fit into societal boxes of identity. Thus, this narrative becomes internalized and perceived as one’s authentic reality. However, I cannot help but wonder how we would conceive of ourselves within variant contexts. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler states that while one determines one’s sense of gender identity, these determinations and declarations occur within the confines of the social contexts that enable self-identification in the first place. Butler states that the body’s intelligibility is not a given but is produced (2004). The production of this lies at the site of performativity or specific modalities of power as discourse. The subject then becomes a product of constraining normative frames. Butler concludes that in exchange for the ability to control our own identities, we, in fact, are being controlled by the larger outside societal realm that predicates gender as a facet of personhood (2004). Butler states that identity categories are troubled by the impossibility of fully establishing an identity contingent on both reiteration and exclusion. It seems then that interconnectivity is where hope for reformation of identity politics lies.

Similarly, in *Making Up People*, Ian Hacking expounds on how categories of personal identity are systematically created and dismantled by formulations of ‘truths’ within given social eras (1985). We can only define ourselves within the confines of normative frameworks. How truly ‘authentic’ are our identities if they are immensely shaped by our cultures, time period, and geographical location? Hacking asserts that the

formation of certain people (i.e., ‘making up’ people who conform and defy conventional ideals) is a recent, bio-political means of social control. By creating individuals (based upon knowledge acquired through examination), biopower can enable greater social management.

Making up people ironically fosters a sense of naturalness due to the shrouded focus on individualism and agency that is lauded within Western societies. Imperialism has vastly contributed to the global permeation of Western gender norms. This lays the groundwork for internalized oppression to thrive. Pathologized embodiments are associated with socially deviant demographics, in the recent colonial era, this included native, colonized peoples and also peoples of lower-socio economic rank within Europe and the West in general whom are thus ‘individualized’ and become ‘cases.’ Yet, as Foucault comprehends, the concept of the ‘individual’ is a construction of power that is employed to exclude and stigmatize those who are seen as abnormal (1975). The notion of the ‘individual,’ hence, is strategically implemented throughout mainstream society while giving the impression of autonomy.

To be an individual in Western society is positively reinforced by means of endless amounts of media advertising, academic encouragement, and professional development. To be an individual is the presumption of possessing free will and independence. To be an individual is to be isolated from the rest of nature, isolated from each other, our own bodies, and our own horrifying, yet anesthetic, experience. This personal reduction is vividly evident within the rugged individualist theme that runs deep into the core of the U.S. mindset and strategically contributes to placing responsibility for one’s reality within personal actions (Hong, 2006). When one becomes individualized,

one is subsequently sequestered from a sense of belonging to a wider community. When communities are divided into individuals, it becomes incredibly easier to place accountability of one's fate and failures on the shoulders of an individual. The individual's reality, and the resulting ostracization related to that reality, becomes the responsibility of the individual not the societal structures that inherently facilitate oppression, nor the figures of authority and wielders of power who enable discrimination.

In *Bodies with New Organs*, Jasbir Puar provides commentary on the ways in which trans* identity becomes normalized and remains unchallenged within academic and intellectual arenas as a branch of biopolitical and neoliberal projects (2016, 2). Further, she quotes Aren Z. Aizura who identifies this form of trans* identity as one that must coalesce within the general population through assuming a normative identity by economic, reproductive, and embodied means (2016). U.S. media representations of trans* individuals are rife with depictions of heteronormative individuals who live within the confines of nuclear family units and the capitalist workforce as 'men' and 'women'.

Similarly, Puar's theory of homonationalism can be tied to this discussion when thinking of how the queer community is 'domesticated' within the realm of capitalism. By contributing to the capitalist market via corporate 'sponsorship' and engaging in institutions such as marriage, oppressive societal values are being perpetuated. By acting as participants, the queer community attempts to assimilate in order to gain recognition and tolerance (Puar, 2013). This is to say that marginalized bodies are only valued when upholding the principles of Western society. By serving as a laborer and consumer within the capitalist workforce and by engaging in societal institutions, oppressed populations

are able to feel validated as opposed to experiencing inherent value in existing as themselves (Hill, 2004).

There is a sense of fabricated protection under the guise of ‘domesticity’ (i.e. normative, non-disruptive identities within the realm of societal norms of gender, class, and race). Individuals are only worthy of some sort of existence as long as they are able to be commodified and exploited. By remaining in the confines of domestic space, ‘deviance’ is harnessed and thus perceived as non-threatening under biopolitical authority. To be permitted to exist as a being that biopower regards as subordinate, means to domesticate oneself for survival. By refusing to be subdued by means of domestication result in institutionalization, incarceration, and death.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the potential for social transformation in the name of trans* politics is immensely hindered by biopower’s utilization of gender. By accepting the narratives and recipes for existence that are provided by bio-political governance, which are masked as self-improvement and liberation, we are merely perpetuating the very system that is enacted to oppress us. I am endlessly reminded of the quote author Derrick Jensen frequently notes in his work by Meir Berliner, who was killed while fighting the SS in Treblinka: “When the oppressors give me two choices, I always take the third” (Jensen, 2000). Other alternatives exist, however, we may have to conceptualize our current selves out of existence in order to access them. By solely choosing from pre determined and socially controlled options, we are only treading water.

3.

Social Eutrophication

"The belief that 'variation is deviation from an internal ideal' rests on a false distinction between the essential and the accidental" (Kleinherenbrink, 2016).

The normalization of subjects through representational politics is a process that I identify as *social eutrophication*. Environmental scientists and ecologists define eutrophication as the process by which lakes and ponds become afflicted with an overgrowth of nutrients that spurs the accumulation of algal blooms. The proliferation of algae in the water results in decreased sunlight and depleted oxygen, thereby causing the death of other species that reside beneath the surface (*Science Daily*). My concept of social eutrophication uses this process as a model to demonstrate how the widespread expansion of monolithic representation (i.e., mainstream media depictions of the trans experience or radical feminist politics as exclusionary and discriminatory) creates an environment that suffocates other possibilities that lie beyond public attention preventing them from even being seen by society.

The overabundance of information and ‘facticity’ around gender identity creates an environment in which gender is held as ubiquitous and omnipotent. However, in the same manner that excessive accumulation of algae and plankton cause severe water quality reduction, the ubiquity of ideology results in a decreased quality of life for everyone involved. This model can similarly be applied to binaric conceptions that regard biological sex as the only format of existence. We actualize ourselves from the wellspring of biopower because it is all we can see. As a result of this pervasive knowledge

production, other alternative ways of existing are stifled due to lack of surface awareness, exposure, and airtime (lack of oxygen). The pervasion of the ‘doctrine of gender identity’ and two-sexed model serves as a form of pollution to human diversity. What would we unearth if we dared to dive below the surface of our society or even further, ourselves?

If we reflect on our own communities, we can similarly notice the process of social eutrophication at work. For example, within the trans* community there is an overarching perception of transition that is deeply rooted in binaric understandings of bodies. The widespread portrayal of trans* individuals is one that celebrates masculinity and femininity. Rarely, do we see those who reside as outliers within the community represented within mainstream outlets. Scarce are the individuals who question the limited choices sponsored by society. Invisible are those who defy and deny the narratives given by doctors and surgeons. The mainstream media captures innumerable accounts of individuals undergoing gender confirmation surgery and cosmetic procedures to alter their appearance. It is no coincidence that the most prominent figures representing the trans* community are those who not only ‘pass,’ but also conform to mainstream beauty ideals.

The closer a person is to meeting the Western standards of what it means to be ‘normal,’ the more successful and socially desirable they are perceived to be. This phenomenon is particularly interesting when considering gender nonconformity and the wider trans* community within the mainstream media. Those who fit neatly into boxes of ‘masculine men’ or ‘feminine women’ (despite whether they are identified as cis or trans) are not perceived of as threatening because they do not disrupt the *status quo* that affirms the existence of two genders in patriarchy. However, those whose personal expressions

color outside the lines and defy mainstream aesthetic projections are hidden, silenced, and in some ways entirely erased.

This biased representation is evident when noting the figureheads who speak publicly on behalf of the trans* community. While it is important for individuals such as Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and Caitlin Jenner (among the most well known trans* individuals in the media) to be acknowledged and heard in the public sphere, each of these women display conventional forms of femininity. Each have undergone the prescribed medical interventions to ‘complete’ their transition. There is little debate about the inclusion of trans-masculine individuals into the fraternity of manhood. Since masculinity and manhood are stringently protected and privileged behind the backing of phallocentrism and patriarchy, transmen are regarded as ‘cheap imitations’ at best, or categorized similarly to female masculinity. Either way, trans-masculinity is not entertained as authentic or worth acknowledgement within mainstream society.

This limited depiction of the trans* community becomes problematic when it contributes to a monolithic understanding of what it means to defy conventional understandings of gender. It sends the message that trans* individuals are only acceptable when perceived as beautiful, in conformation with one’s perceived gender roles, and aligning one’s body to sexed expectations. This also becomes a racial and socio-economic issue as a result of restricted access to healthcare and hegemonic beauty standards that privilege an anglo aesthetic. By highlighting the commonalities among trans* individuals who are recognized in mainstream media, I do not mean to undermine but, rather, acknowledge the partial representation of the trans* experience.

It is interesting to note that the fierce debates of inclusion and authenticity are most heightened around femininity and womanhood. As previously noted, the most ardent debates among trans* advocates and radical feminists involve women and who qualifies as a 'woman'. As a trans-masculine individual, I am able to perceive of this debate from partial outsider perspective. Since femininity is not privileged as a dominant demographic, this terrain is fertile for interpretation and competition. Thus, women who identify as cis or trans* are relentlessly subjected to societal strategies for the purpose of dividing women as a class. Horizontal hostility is a strategy deployed to prevent vertical violence. That is, opposed to questioning the motives of the oppressor, populations have been indoctrinated to focus on individual failures that prevents solidarity and organizing to create change.

Early in my transition, I was offered the opportunity to join New York City's first transgender modeling agency. Prior to transition, modeling was never within my scope of reality. However, I found myself surrounded New York's most beautiful people. I was posing alongside runway models, fashion designers, and even interviewed on the news. People wanted to learn about what it was like to once live as a 'woman' and now inhabit the world as a 'man'. While one may initially assume this experience was affirming and validating of my identity, I realized during this time how the use of trans* bodies as vehicles of transmission for conventional gendered beauty norms is insidious and immensely problematic. There is something rotten in the state of affairs that utilizes trans* bodies as representations of the same societal beauty standards that invoke many instances of gender dysphoria to begin with. Nonetheless, the pressure to conform to standards of masculine and feminine forms of expression is alive and well within the

trans* community, even after individuals undergo transition. I have never experienced more dysphoria and insecurity than while modeling. Yet, my transition was never more celebrated than when I displayed traditional masculine features. However, once I disassociated with the modeling firm, put down the dumbbells, and cancelled my appointment for top surgery, the phone calls and public affirmation was discontinued.

Interestingly enough, the interrogative encounters I experienced with individuals within and beyond the trans* community increased after my decision to reroute my transition. While I frequently fielded invasive questioning during my ‘conventional’ transition process (i.e. displaying traditional masculine characteristics), the line of questioning that followed once I stopped demonstrating mainstream masculinity was worse — particularly from the LGBT community and those who provide trans-specific healthcare, “Why would you cancel your top surgery?”, “Why do you want to lower your testosterone dosage?”, “Why would you leave the modeling firm?” Once I became aware of the societal urge to normalize trans* individuals, under the guise of ‘progression’ and ‘change’, I immediately questioned my own path. What institutions am I at the mercy of in order to merely ‘be myself’? I began to feel distanced from friends who were engaging in gender normative expressions and activities. I could no longer find myself celebrating the various ‘milestones’ of transition in the same way I once did. I felt displaced, deluded, and defeated.

Gender non-conforming bodies serve as constant reminders that the personal is political. The access to or restriction from navigating space, the political debate regarding the ability to receive services, and the mere question of the legitimacy of one identity are testament to the bio-political implications of ‘deviant’ identities. Systems of oppression

seek to maintain themselves by adapting to current political climates in order to appear progressive and, thus, remain invisible and unchallenged. A contemporary example of this is the ‘coming out’ narrative. ‘Coming out’ is often perceived to be a form of disclosing a revelation from the depths of oneself. Foucault notes that since the Middle Ages, confession has become increasingly prevalent; the advent of moral confession within religious institutions has led to an understanding that revealing ‘self-truths’ can be a liberating and noble act (1976). This notion has prevailed and persisted throughout various facets of society, which is made evident through pervasive cultural messages encouraging people to ‘come out’ about their sexual orientations, gender identities, mental illnesses, and forms of disability to confessions of criminal offenses and perceived perverse sexual desires. These personal revelations are perceived to be therapeutic, progressive, and truth affirming facts pulled from one’s consciousness that allow the confessor to integrate more authentically into society.

Confession also connotes ubiquity insofar as everyone is understood to be fostering sensitive disclosures within ourselves and must expose them in order to come to a ‘true’ understanding of oneself. However, that information and the ‘truth’ it implicates are commensurate with patriarchal narratives that have been compiled and utilized to gain insights regarding ‘deviance’ and ‘abnormality’ for decades within the medical realm. The confessions gathered by those in authority are converted to ‘knowledge’ and thus ‘truth’ when it is presented as scientific and technical information. The shroud of factuality and sterility make this knowledge production believable and far-reaching (Foucault, 1976).

While the process of examination results in increased discussions around sex, confessions imply secrecy or shame. In order to purge the sense of guilt and disgrace related to non-conformity, divulgence and distancing oneself from internal ‘secrets’ became necessary. Therefore, it is evident that the information that is revealed via ‘coming out’ narratives is not perceived as valuable in order to develop wider understandings about oneself but rather arsenal utilized to further pathologize specific forms of personal expression. It is the shift to coercive omnipresence that centers the individual subject rather than systems of oppression. Likewise, I would additionally argue that medical discourse perceives bodies that do not conform to physical and psychological normative configurations as deviant, deficient, and in need of intervention. The responsibility consistently lies on the shoulders of marginalized individuals to explain their embodiments and attempt to navigate cultures that actively restrict their human rights.

4.

The Genetics of Gender

“Our bodies are too complex to provide clear-cut answers about sexual difference. The more we look for a simple physical basis for "sex," the more it becomes clear that "sex" is not a pure physical category. What bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already

entangled in our ideas about gender” (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

The focus on the self as opposed to collectivity fuels the desire to scientifically locate differences within the body and the brain. For centuries, neuroscience has taken on the task of seeking to discern between male and female brains. Genetics and endocrinology have also contributed to maintaining the rigidity of the two-sex model. This section will explore several studies that attempt to identify the biological basis of trans* identity. Additionally, I plan to unpack essentialist arguments that are cited by radical feminists in defense of womanhood as an exclusive experience. While the attempt to normalize one’s reality through the inclusion within medical discourse is a reflection of the hope for wider social acceptance, the risks in doing so are austere. The price of being perceived as ‘natural’ is steep and the bio-political implications of such an assertion are vexing.

Genetic studies have historically been cited in an attempt to place a natural basis for a plethora of behaviors and traits. Within the debate of analysis, radical feminist theorists frame sex as ‘immutable’ due to widespread conceptions about the ‘sex chromosomes.’ On the chromosomal level, the binary between the sexes is perceived to be rigid and fixed. In other words, no amount of social transition can change one’s genetic sexed reality. Within this framework, sex chromosomes comprised of XX are considered to designate the female sex and of XY as male - except when it is not. Interestingly enough, while chromosomes are among the first reasons cited in arguments supporting the social maintenance of binary sex segregation, that facet of biology is only used as a medical diagnostic tool when outward genital appearance is deemed

‘abnormal.’ In other words, if a newborn’s genitals are called into question due to an ambiguous formation, only then are the chromosomes examined in an attempt to determine one’s ‘sex’. However, despite its irregular usage, sex chromosomes are still considered fundamental in determining one’s sex as either male or female (Richardson, 2013).

In *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome*, Sarah Richardson traces the history and formation of ideologies regarding sex chromosomes. During the late nineteenth century, scientists perceived sex as ranging within a continuum that was multi-faceted and interactive with one’s environment (2013). Richardson expounds on yet another moment in history wherein the potential for progressive thought was converted into grounds for regulatory social perceptions and practices. By the early twentieth century, the discovery of the Y chromosome led to the belief that genetic makeups could be differentiated into two distinct categories: those with and those without the Y chromosome (2013). In 1906, Edmund Wilson invented the term “sex chromosomes” and, thus, captivated the general public with scientific explanations for cultural manifestations and expressions (Richardson, 2013). Richardson points out that in doing so, the concept of sex chromosomes framed the Y chromosome as a male presence while the lack of a Y chromosome posited females as absent, lacking, and primordial-theories that continue to guide patriarchal views of femininity (2013).

Historically, female development was perceived to be the default mode of being *in utero*. Differentiation only occurred with the activation of the SRY gene. A gene can be defined as a distinct unit of heredity that makes up one’s DNA. According to the Human Genome Project, human possess approximately 25,000 genes (ghr.nlm.nih.gov).

The SRY gene was credited as the exclusive initiator of testicular development *in utero*, hence, the gene that caused the fetus-which always starts as female-into a male fetus (Richardson, 2013). The SRY gene was thus regarded as inscribing masculinity upon the body. However, various studies have demonstrated that the SRY gene is merely a facet of a complex mechanism that occurs in order to determine one's sex (Ainsworth, 2015). In the early 2000s, it was discovered that the SRY gene is not the lone stakeholder in genetic sex differentiation. For example, Claire Ainsworth points to the effects the WNT4 gene has on ovarian development. It has been observed that if an individual with XY chromosomes has an additional copy of WNT4, they will develop 'feminine' gonads such as fallopian tubes and a uterus (Ainsworth, 2015). WNT4 works in a similar fashion to SRY in that the presence or absence of specific sex chromosomes do not seem to affect the development of certain gonads. For example, once the SRY gene is activated, the Y chromosome does not need to be present in order for the development of 'masculine' external genitalia to persist; this is evident in cases of what is classified as 46 XX testicular disorder of sexual development (DSD) (i.e. a form of intersex identity) (Ainsworth, 2015).

The disregard for sex chromosomes is also apparent in cases of what is known as 'sex reversals.' According to some statistics, sex reversals are present in 1 out of 20,000 births and occur when the SOX9 gene enacts the mechanism that enables the development of male gonads despite the absence of the Y chromosome (DeNoon, 2011). Further research has shown that genes such as SRY are merely facilitators of a cascade of genes that function to determine one's sex (Richardson, 2013). For example, Richardson discusses the importance of the DMRT1 and FOXL2, which are located on autosomes

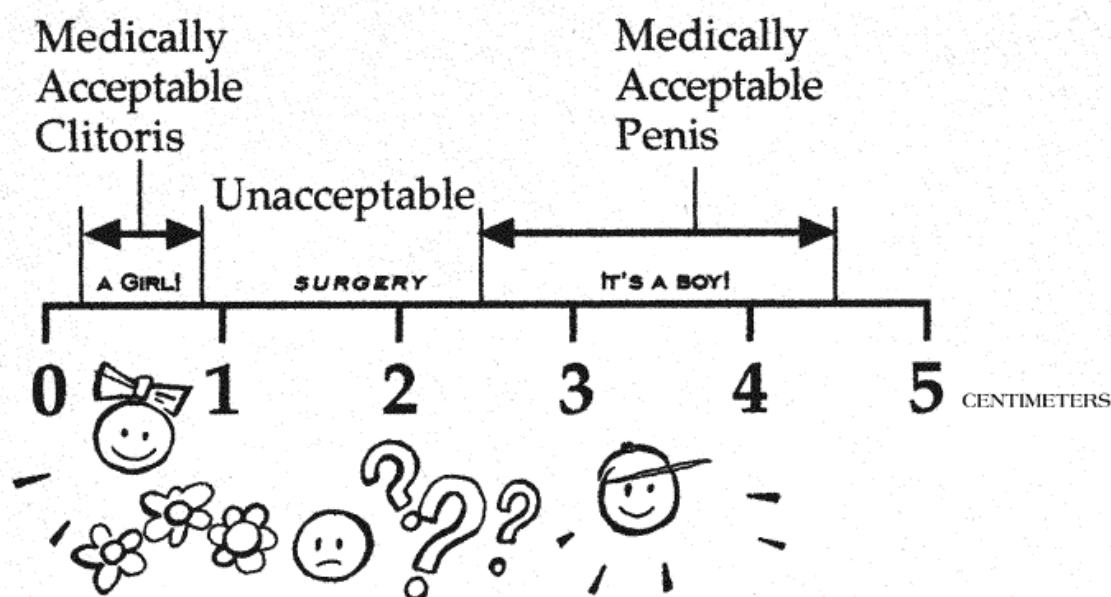
(a.k.a. any chromosome besides those deemed a sex chromosome) and yet play a significant role in ovarian and testicular maintenance (2013). To date, there have been nearly thirty genes that affect sex development - many existing on other autosomes (isna.org).

Richardson also notes that endocrinologists have increasingly moved away from using terminology such as ‘male hormone,’ ‘female hormone,’ and even ‘sex hormone’ due to the fact that sex-specific effects do not necessarily exist on the sex chromosomes. Instead, neutral terms such as ‘steroid hormones’ and ‘gonadal hormones’ have been applied in order to describe the behaviors or characteristics of testosterone and estrogen (Richardson, 2013, 206). The reframing of testosterone and estrogen in a sex-neutral way possesses the potential to disrupt the binaric understanding of hormones and their holistic effects on the body. This framework enables a comprehension that we all require levels of both steroid hormones in order to ensure proper bodily function including blood cell formation, digestive functions, and brain activity (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 179). The ‘sex hormones’ have indeed been a channel through which gender has pervaded understandings of endocrinology and prevent a holistic image of the body, free from gendered influence from occurring.

For decades, the alignment of XY with maleness and XX with femaleness was reinforced with the donning of social roles and responsibilities onto those thought to be genetically associated with either genetic combination. The genetic binary created yet another entry point for the pervasion of gender. Masculinity and femininity became embedded within one’s DNA by naturalizing gendered behavior and positioning one’s biological sex as permanent. This becomes particularly dangerous because it assumes that

gendered behavior is innate, unalterable, and this remains unchallenged. Gender becomes perceived as one's 'essence' and is in some ways likened to the way a 'soul' is understood to be inborn and natural. Under this framework, those who deviate from 'normal' gender development and behavior are, therefore, not only are socially defiant but also possess faulty hardwiring. Once again, the focus on individual biological constitution places the blame and responsibility on the personal level and fails to recognize the political, social, and economic involvement at play.

As previously mentioned, one's genetic makeup is not often explored unless there are physical indications of abnormal development. Yet, the parameters of abnormality are in accordance with societal norms of sex and gender. For example, Fausto-Sterling illustrates the arbitrary nature of the systematic procedure for sex determination upon birth. *Figure 1* below depicts the absurd reasoning of phallic measurement as the first line of identification to determine whether one is a "boy" or a "girl."



Phall-O-Metrics

Fausto-Sterling and other feminist researchers have written extensively on the dangers of sex assignments and the dire impact it has on intersex individuals. Since

(Figure 1 - By the Intersex Rights Movement members - Fausto-Sterling, 2000, 59)

intersex individuals pose a hindrance to claims of essential sex dualism, the medical industrial complex has sought to quite literally erase their realities by stitching up deviant seams. The supposed low percentages of intersex individuals that has been recorded makes evident the pervasive ability of biopower to “make live” and “let die.” On the contrary, some researchers estimate that intersex conditions regarded as DSDs occur as frequently as one in a hundred births (DeNoon, 2011). Fausto-Sterling and her team estimated that intersex traits occurs at a rate of 1.7 percent of the population (2000). While this percentage may seem relatively low, the practical application is considerably vast. For example, New York City has an estimated population of 8.5 million people; therefore, applying Fausto-Sterling’s theory, it follows that an estimated 144,500 people within the city’s population have varying degrees of intersex traits. On a global scale, out of a world population of 7.5 billion, approximately 127,500,000 people possess varying sorts of intersex development. To put this into perspective, this amounts to the entire population of Japan. In other words, there is an entire nation’s worth of proof that humans do not merely exist as XX or XY.

Biopolitical erasure of intersex demographics informs us of the degree to which reproduction and normative embodiment are vital to social control. Intersex identity not only threatens the *status quo* of sexed narratives in society but also challenges the authority of biopolitical interpretations of science. For decades, researchers and medical doctors have worked tirelessly to situate intersex conditions as pathological and in need of surgical correction. The patriarchal hierarchy of anatomy becomes clear when

considering the methods for sex determination within Western medical discourse. For example, phallic size and function were deemed a top priority for the healthy development of ‘boys,’ while reproductive capacity was the main objective of preservation for ‘girls.’ This is the logic that directs procedures such as the removal of micro-penises and enlarged clitorises (isna.org). These procedures make evident pervasive phallocentrism and the stringent harnessing of ‘female’ pleasure. A clitoris that is presumed to appear ‘too long’ or ‘too large’ are wrongly discerned as ‘male’ and thereupon removed or reduced to prevent the development of ‘incessant male traits’ such as aggression and promiscuity (Green, 2005). ‘Abnormal’ clitoral and labial formation is regarded as unappealing and socially unacceptable due to its phallic resemblance. The clitoris is a central means of female pleasure which is understood as a direct threat to male sexual dominance (Green, 2005). Vaginas must also be aptly prepared to receive a penis; if not, they are seen as inadequate and thus, not a ‘whole women’ (Green, 2005). The insistence of heteronormative expression furthers sexist agenda. By integrating ideals of vaginal appearance within gender identity issues, the impulse to alter one’s genitalia becomes naturalized and normalized. These surgeries persist today despite the understanding that intersex individuals are not at risk of any health concerns related to variant genital and genetic manifestation (with the exception of congenital adrenal hyperplasia, a.k.a., CAH) (isna.org).

Nonetheless, children born with ‘ambiguous’ genitalia are perceived as ‘unfinished,’ ‘incomplete,’ and, therefore, in need of early intervention procedures to ensure proper psychological and social development. It is at this location that the residual potential for transformation can be identified; the discovery of intersex conditions

possessed the ability to expand understandings of sex beyond the binary. Instead, the two-sex model has been firmly enforced via genital surgeries and hormone therapies. If one dares to peer through a gender critical lens, the parallels between the medical industry's treatment of intersex and trans* individuals are starkly austere.

Meyerowitz analyzes the way in which intersex identity was conveyed to parents during the 1960s and onwards, starting with John Money's protocols and procedures (1980). Money and his team used their medical expertise and social authority to strongly recommend that parents willingly allow their children to undergo surgical procedures in order to ensure 'healthy' and 'optimal' development. Parents who refused the guidelines of psychologists and surgeons were portrayed as neglectful, irresponsible, and pathological (Meyerowitz, 1980). The threatening of painting one's social image as a poor parent is a prime example of what Foucault categorizes as the panopticon effect. The ever-presence of hierarchical observation leads to self-surveillance and community policing. Panopticism creates a sensation of constant visibility, while simultaneously not knowing precisely when one is directly being observed (1975). While there is a chain of observers put into place throughout various institutions, in this case, doctors, therapists, teachers, other parents, etc.; ultimately, panopticism leads to the policing of oneself out of fear of not meeting required standards of being (commonly understood as 'norms'). Thus, out of fear of being regarded as a 'bad parent,' many willingly accept the biopolitically charged recommendations of medical doctors and permit surgeries on their intersex children.

Similarly, children who identify and/or are classified as trans* also are met with recommendations from doctors and therapists. Since more young children are identifying

as trans*, parents often find themselves in positions of making life-altering decisions on behalf of their children. There are several parallels that can be identified between the narratives that are received by the parents of intersex and trans* children. One of the themes is the notion that the child is ‘incomplete,’ ‘unfinished,’ ‘different,’ or in need of some sort of medical and therapeutic correction. Once again, the reflection of individual responsibility is present. The next theme concerns the assurance that clinical interventions can and will drastically improve the wellbeing of said children and will inevitably enhance their prospects of a brighter and more successful future. Here we can recognize shards of the discourse of happiness, which as previously mentioned, posits such procedures self-improvement, life-affirming, and ultimately an act of self-love. These underlying claims imply that without undergoing the recommended procedures, children will not thrive socially or psychologically. In both scenarios, parents and children are led to believe that these procedures will uncover an ‘authentic essence’ that can be managed through institutional influence (Repo, 2015). Lastly, parents of trans* children who resist the classifications of therapists and doctors, who are gender critical, or who refuse to make decisions on their child’s behalf (therefore, delaying the ‘transition’ process until the child can legally do so as an adult), are considered intolerant, narrow-minded, and/or selfish. However, this narrative fails to acknowledge the inner workings of normalization through the lens of heteronormativity and the nuclear family unit which are at play. By urging parents to alter their children’s bodies at a young age to be in accordance with sex and gender norms, the agency of the child is lost. Ultimately, the ability for sexual and gender deviant individuals to exert ownership over one’s bodies is systematically and persistently stunted.

I would like to pause to note that these procedures in and of themselves are not what I am postulating as problematic. Instead, it is the social pressure and meaning that is inscribed within the procedures that foster precarious circumstances. When removed from conventional understandings of sex and gender, these procedures become likened to other routine aesthetic interventions and cosmetic surgeries; it is then that we can actualize the pervasive rooting of gender within our material bodies. Once the sexed venom of bodies is siphoned, subsequent alteration no longer hinges on the weight of one's social identity.

The attribution of trans* identity as a malfunction of one's genetic development mirrors social perceptions of intersex identity in that both are perceived as aberrations and deviating from normality. As a result, there has been an emphasis on gauging prenatal conditions in order to determine where the 'impairment' or 'defect' occurs to subsequently attempt to rectify the issue. I purposefully use such terms, not as a reflection of my beliefs about such conditions, but rather to draw attention to the fact that trans* and intersex individuals are understood as resulting from biological 'errors.' For example, genetic studies have attempted to demonstrate that trans* identity can be traced to the CYP17, SRD5A2, estrogen receptor beta gene (ERb), or androgen receptors (Saraswat, 2015). However, when closely analyzed, these studies all fall short in proving their hypotheses. Many of the studies are neither based upon large sample groups, nor are their conclusions applicable to many individuals who were studied. Even in the most frequently quoted twin studies, researcher Aruna Saraswat found that monozygotic twins have been shown to more likely be discordant than concordant for trans* identity (2015, 5). Despite the lack of conclusive scientific evidence, according to some, trans* identity

is still attributed to discordance between one's chromosomal and physiological 'gender.' This ultimately points to the assumption that gender lies within the brain; a concept that will be further explored shortly.

To illuminate the fluidity of genetics, a discussion of microchimerism seems pertinent. This phenomenon occurs when cells from the mother and fetus are exchanged during pregnancy and remain exchanged after childbirth. Ainsworth notes that a study in 2012 discovered that instead of rejecting foreign tissue, the body actually incorporates the 'foreign' DNA exchanged by designating functions to those cells, including giving them the task to form neurons in the brain. During the 2012 study, immunologist Lee Nelson discovered male DNA in postmortem brain samples of women as old as ninety-four years of age—the assumption that these women had sons with whom they exchanged cells during gestation (Ainsworth, 2015). Ainsworth finds this to be supplementary processes to those already blurring the lines of sex with the fluidity of male and female DNA (2015). By understanding that our bodies are in constant exchange with the environment and our experiences, an interconnected and fluid interpretation of ourselves in relation to sex and gender can flourish.

In contrast, biological/cultural split relating to bi-gendered systems fails to acknowledge that as organisms, we are highly responsive to our environments. This interaction does not merely exist on the surface but penetrates deeply within our core to our genetic material. Studies have shown that the plasticity of the body is not simply limited to the brain but is in play even at the genetic level. Accordingly, epigenetics has emerged as an understanding that chemical changes at the genetic level can occur in the body as influenced by one's environment and experiences. In other words, our genetic

codes are literally shaped by our environments, and, therefore, our experiences directly impact the way our bodies (and the bodies of future generations) are formed, not only postnatally but prenatally as well. While the field of epigenetics is still in its infancy, the potential for understanding human development in epigenetic terms is revolutionary. We are neither simply products of social construction nor are our genetics permanently fixed.

Genetics are so frequently cited in binary terms that some scientists even propose the concept of two human genomes (Richardson, 2013). The far-reaching implications are the ultimate essentialist notion that men and women are not simply two-sex variations but rather two entirely different subspecies. However, extensive studies have shown that humans share more DNA across lines of sex and race than among demographics of “like” individuals. In an interview with the Huffington Post, Dr. Robert Sussman discussed how geneticists have the capability of measuring differences in DNA and quantifying them as an “Fst score” (Sankar-Gorton, 2015). According to Sussman, in order for humans to truly be considered as having subspecies along sexed and racial axes, there would need to be an Fst score of at least 0.30 on a scale from 0 to 1 with one being an entirely other species. Currently humans only score a 0.156 (Sankar-Gorton, 2015). Simply put, our similarities are larger than our mirrors. To acknowledge our collective sameness, would be to accept a sense of responsibility beyond oneself, that extends globally.

The ascription of differences between the sexes on the basis of genetics leads to a logic that does not fall too far from the rationale of eugenics. While the use of the term ‘eugenics’ has fallen out of favor since WWII, the concept of framing social identities as biologically determined is still relevant. Today, this rationale manifests as the widespread assumptions that certain demographics inherently possess intellect, excel in certain sports

or physical activities (dancing, basketball, and sprinting are often cited...), or have a natural attunement for music. In the same manner, assumptions are made in regard to the strengths, attributes, and weaknesses of ‘men’ and ‘women’. Eugenics is often cited among certain radical feminist circles when expounding on the perceived increase of trans* identity, particularly among young children (Jeffreys, 2014). Some radical feminists, such as Sheila Jeffreys, state that the acknowledgement of trans* identities among children results in a decreased display of gender non-conformance that ultimately leads to the erasure (hence, the assertion of eugenics...) of butch lesbian identity, and the effeminacy of men (2014).

Throughout this research, I have noted that many radical feminists attempt to make a clear distinction between one’s gender identity and gender expression. Often, while radical feminists are fully supportive of the freedom of gender expression, they are opposed to the concept of gender identity as a marker of one’s legal and social identity. In a recent interview for *National Geographic*, geneticist and director of the UCLA Center for Gender-Based Biology Eric Vilain states that he advocates for a broad understanding of gender expression (Henig, 2017). Vilain claims that often many of children’s curiosity surrounding their gender identity is fleeting and, thus, serious considerations such as medical transition for children who desire it should not be considered until the child becomes an adult. Vilain states that gendered preferences alone do not constitute one’s gender identity. Instead, he believes that men and boys can “have long hair, love dance, wear dresses, love men” and none of this means they are girls (Henig, 2017).

To an extent, Vilain is right. Engaging in or refraining from these activities does not make a child a girl or a boy. While Vilain's message and the resounding variations of this sentiment among radical feminists seems liberal in its understanding of gender, it nevertheless still reinforces binaric understandings of children and adults as either men or women, boys or girls, males or females. The radical feminist efforts to resist the concept of gender identity, while championing for the fluidity of gender expression, is, therefore, yet another paradox within this complex debate.

Regardless of the presentation, the focus remains on difference as a means of justifying systemic oppression with the use of biological reasoning. Scientific racism has thrived for centuries by maintaining the belief of 'natural differences' (whether in the brain or genes) as the true cause of social inequality. There are vital lessons to be applied from the course of scientific racism throughout U.S. history to the topic of gender identity. While scientific racism focused on differences in a range of supposed biological differences from cranial sizes and IQ levels among members of different races (Morton, 1839), to different genomes entirely; the main objective was (and to some extent still is) to disguise social bias under the shroud of 'objective' science in order to normalize inequality and naturalize discrimination. Similarly, the science of gender identity (as is also the case for similar attempts to situate sexual orientation as inborn), aims to find a cause in order to naturalize the phenomenon of trans* identity.

There are notable parallels between scientific racism and the current situating of gender identity within the biological realm. Scientific explanations of race and gender are two sides of the same biopolitical coin. Part of biopower's primary agenda is to naturalize oppression as to render it imperceptible and, thus, uncontested. Both practices seek to

identify biological differences between social identities in order to justify inequality while simultaneously positing specific racial or gendered categories as inherently 'deficient' and, thus, inferior. The acute danger with attempting to identify socially 'undesirable' and supposedly 'abnormal' traits within one's genes lies in the real possibility of medical modification and manipulation of biology in order to prevent certain characteristics or conditions from coming into fruition. These claims are then used to legitimize procedures that aim to 'cure' or 'fix' the supposed issue through the means of medical intervention. In the case of scientific racism and pervasive ableism, a call for sterilization was resounded (and still continues to this day). For example, women of color and people with disabilities have long been targeted for population control and subject to sterilization abuse. Similarly, those who deviate from gender and sex standards have been subjected to a plethora of surgical and hormonal intervention. The pervasion of biopolitical interference with one's body and navigation of the world is clear and cutting. It sends the strong message that 'inferior' populations do not own their bodies, therefore the parameters of how it will be expressed and embodied are predetermined. This predetermination not only impacts the individual on a personal level but affects entire demographics in a political manner. Given the weighted authority of Western medical science, bold claims regarding 'biological realities' such as gender identity and race, hold the potential to influence the entire global community.

5.

Gender Imperialism

“Every empire, however, tells itself and the world that it is unlike all other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate” (Said, 2003).

By centering the individual within body politics, the focus is vastly taken off of the wider political systems that are at play. The individualization process is significant within this debate because bio-political interests lie in quarantining deviant demographics through the justification of their biological difference. However, trans* individuals use medical pathologization as a means of legitimizing their existence. This form of analysis is what radical feminists acknowledge as ‘choice’ feminism; a form of feminism that positions personal choice as empowering and situates the individual as an apolitical subject. Considering the penetrative influence of societal norms, is authentic choice truly viable?

In *Language and Agency*, Laura Ahearn defines agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (2001, 112). Ahearn calls upon Ivan Karp’s interpretation of agency to discern actors from agents (2001, 113). She identifies actors as individuals who are driven by the rules of governance while agents act with the aim of social reform. Ahearn importantly notes that agency is often represented as synonymous with free will. However, this approach fails to acknowledge the pervasion that culture has on human thought and action (2001, 114). In order for agency as understood in its fullest sense to function, an individual must be free of coercive cultural influences, including marketing and advertising. Ironically, marketing and advertising in the West create a false sense of autonomy under the guise of ‘free choice’ and empowerment for individuals. Since

individual knowledge, experiences, and desires are culturally produced, free will becomes culturally circumscribed (Braun, 2010).

One's access to agency extends beyond gender identity and sex to racial and class status. For example, individuals in the West are presumed to override the influence of culture by their ability to make free, empowered, and authentic 'choices', while non-Western individuals are perceived to be bound by cultural expectations, systematically victimized, and thus, agency is seemingly beyond their reach (Braun, 2009). The permeation of Western notions of agency assert the false assumption that concepts such as 'gender identity' as universal and, thus, applicable across the globe. The danger in universalizing Western notions of personhood based in gender identity is the limitations of other contexts to co-exist. The preference of Western identity ideology is systematically coded into international laws and guidelines such as the Yogyakarta Principles, which I will later discuss.

Agency serves as a central mechanism by which to reframe patriarchal principles as positive and liberating choices. Gender confirmation surgeries have stealthily been conveyed as empowering and liberating procedures. Surgeons often defensively argue that their procedures are life enhancing and as surgeons and physicians, they are merely vehicles to improving the quality of life for trans* individuals (Braun, 2009). This rhetoric serves as a means of leading individuals to believe that their inclinations, preferences, and means of self-identification are purely self-driven instead of being imposed by normalizing governance. This sense of personal freedom gives license for individuals to seemingly remove the political underpinnings and implications of gender transition in an effort to become their authentic selves. This illusion of freedom is vital

for understanding the mechanisms of gender as a biopolitical apparatus. While surgeries sought out by trans* individuals are perceived as measures of self-preservation, innovation, and a personal expression of authenticity, trans* individuals are still required to integrate themselves as subjects within the medical industry to gain access to treatment (Repo, 2015). In other words, the leash is only so long, and our imagining of self only permitted to drift so far.

A critical distinction must be made in regards to how to portray the entire removal of gender in assessing human identity and agency. Radical feminists have notoriously been noted for their urgent need to abolish gender as a concept; however, there are means of accomplishing that agenda that are non-exclusionary and, hence, do not rely on essentialist notions of sexed embodiment that are exclusionary in their manifestation. Political theorist Rebecca Reilly Cooper frequently speaks of the detrimental ramifications of gender as a legal and social marker of identity. Reilly-Cooper identifies any iteration of gender as rooted in a value system that functions to naturalize the subordination of women (2016). Reilly-Cooper furthers her argument by positing that the concept of gender identity has risen to sacrosanct entity in that it remains socially elevated despite critical inquiry. Those who do not subscribe to the concept of gender identity are perceived as threatening, misplaced, and in need of silencing (2016). This is evident in the widespread attempt to deny those who are critical of the use of gender identity as a social phenomenon from engaging in public forums in the name of ‘transphobia’ and trans-exclusionary radical feminism, a.k.a., TERFS).

Reilly-Cooper’s argument deviates slightly from mainstream radical feminist arguments in that she urges both ‘biological’ women and trans* women to resist the

notion that womanhood is subjectively determined as that notion will “dilute” the complexity associated with female experience and further risks eliminating woman as a political category altogether (2016). This line of reasoning is also problematic because it lends itself back to the idea that womanhood is natural, consists of certain biological functioning, and is specific social experiences. Ironically, the same logic has historically been cited to justify the subordination of women. As previously discussed, biological determinism has legitimized the oppression of women for centuries. However, Reilly-Cooper warns that the removal of the word “woman” from discussions of pregnancy, for example, will erase the reality of and legitimacy of experiences specific to female bodies; this would shroud the true cause of female oppression in patriarchy (i.e., vagina bearance) (2016). Again, this perspective assumes that the female experience inherently revolves around identifying with one’s vagina.

Foucault notes that during the Middle Ages in Europe it was possible for people to be recognized as possessing more than one sex (1976). However, the modern age narrowed self-perception by restricting the individual’s access to plurality of sexes to merely one per person (Repo, 2015). Western imperialism imposed the concept of gender differentiation to societies as a means of ‘civilizing’ cultures that did not acknowledge difference along sexed or gendered axes (Lugones, 2016). In *The Coloniality of Gender*, Maria Lugones discusses the far-reaching and complex implications of the global-scale imposition of gender as a social concept and a biological reality. Lugones examines how the infiltration of Western social identities onto colonized cultures resulted in drastic reframing of subjectivity within those social contexts. The imposition of race and gender within colonized societies also advanced the assumption that these markers of identity are

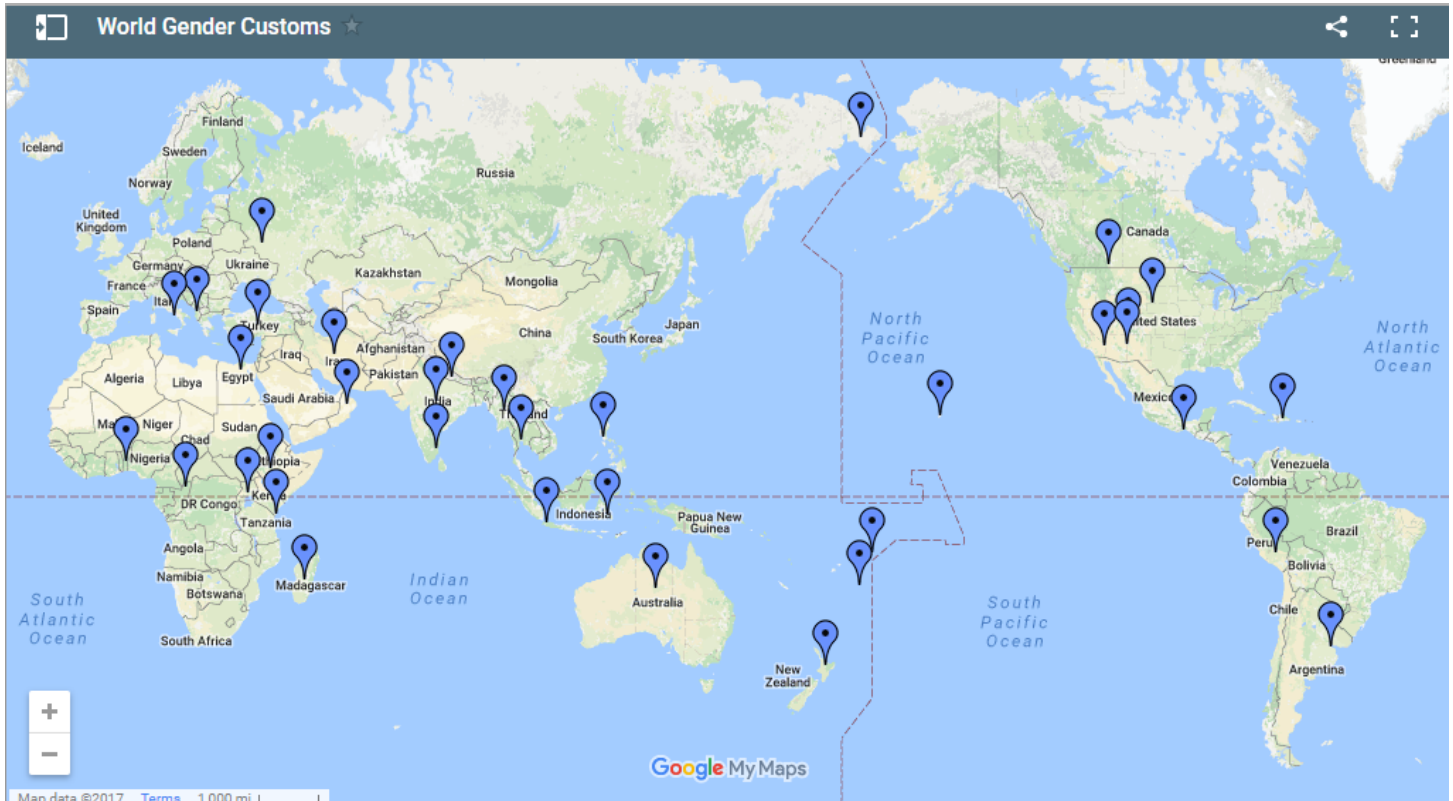
inherent to human nature (Lugones, 2016). As we will later explore, the contemporary manifestation of this phenomenon exists by coding Western conceptions of gender identity within international human rights laws and principles.

Oyeronke Oyewumi highlights in *The Invention of Women*, that Western feminism is often challenged by ridding society of gender categories such as “man” and “woman” and struggles to conjure an “unsexed humanity” (Lugones, 2016, 9). However, she makes it a point to note that this struggle is not universal. “Unsexed humanity” has existed and still does in some contexts (Oyewumi, 1997). However, the proliferation of gender identity within international law imposes this Western issue onto cultures across the globe. Often, cross-cultural references are included in conversations about alternatives to binary gender systems. Frequently are terms such as the *Fa'afafine* of Samoa or the *Hijra* of India cited as proof that ‘third options’ exist in other cultural contexts. However, Oyewumi warns that skepticism and critical discernment must be applied when comparing gender systems of non-western cultures to Western understandings of gender and sex (Oyewumi, 1997). Oyewumi notes that the concepts of social categories are mistranslated and adapted to fit into Western narratives of personhood. Prior to imperialism, many cultures did not have social categories based on reproduction that were hierarchical or binary. However, anthropological explanations and colonial influence contorted non-western practices and identities to conform to the two-sex model and gender norms of masculinity and femininity (Lugones, 2016).

A prime example of this is a map of gender-diverse cultures around the world that was published in 2015 by PBS (pbs.org, 2015). *Figure 2* below depicts the map of various cultures across the world that exhibit gender diversity. This interactive map

allows users to learn more about these cultures by reading short descriptions of the populations and subgroups that demonstrate gender fluidity within that particular context. However, a close reading of the descriptions makes evident the mistranslations of the social and personal significance of these identities. For example, many subgroups described on the map all seem to adhere to a “two-sex” model. Even in the cases where a ‘third’ option is demonstrated, the descriptions make clear that underlying each gendered display are males and females. The descriptions also rely heavily on Western notions of masculinity and femininity to situate individuals as ‘gender diverse’. In other words, one may notice there are many ‘feminine men’ or ‘masculine women’ across the map. One may attribute this commonality to the inherent nature of gender. However, this visual makes clear that Western understandings of sex and gender have been used to ‘make sense’ of various forms of human expression.

Oyewumi highlights the assumption that the prominence of gender is universal



parallels the presumption of biological reasoning (Oyewumi, 1997). Issues relating to

Figure 2: PBS World Gender Customs - A Map of Gender Diverse Cultures (pbs.org, 2015).

gender identity and sexual orientation have spread to the global South by means of

cultural imperialism. As a result, international law relating to gender identity and sexual

orientation is developed by and to the benefit of the global North. A prime example of

this is the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law

in relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. The Yogyakarta Principles are a set

of twenty nine standards that were developed in 2006 and are intended as

recommendations for governments, civil society, and the United Nations (International

Commission of Jurists 2007). These recommendations are set forth to address the human

rights of LGBT individuals worldwide. While these recommendations are well-intended to protect LGBT individuals, broad assumptions regarding sex and gender can be found throughout.

For example, in the introduction of the principles, gender identity is defined as “each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms” (International Commission of Jurists 2007). Since these principles have been established with the understanding of a universal application, this very definition is contradictory in that it presumes that gender is an internal experience that occurs worldwide.

Another example can be found in the Preamble which states “NOTING that international human rights law imposes an absolute prohibition of discrimination in regard to the full enjoyment of all human rights, civil, cultural, economic, political and social, that respect for sexual rights, sexual orientation and gender identity is integral to the realisation of equality between men and women and that States must take measures to seek to eliminate prejudices and customs based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of one sex or on stereotyped roles for men and women, and noting further that the international community has recognised the right of persons to decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free from coercion, discrimination, and violence” (International Commission of Jurists 2007). The notion of “equality between men and women” bolsters the concept of

sex as a universal binary and fails to acknowledge biological diversity and the mosaicism of human nature. It is in this way that the principles do not address the variability of embodiment and, thus, do not protect intersex individuals.

Similarly, binary gender is present within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that were created by the UN in 2015 as a directive to target the elimination of poverty and inequality by 2030 (UN General Assembly, 2015). Goal five of the SDGs states “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. (UN General Assembly, 2015, 14). This goal specifically prioritizes the end of discrimination of “all women and girls” and call for an end of all gender based violence (UN General Assembly, 2015, 18). While it is crucial to acknowledge the distinct forms of discrimination and violence that certain individuals are routinely subject to as a direct result of how they are perceived in the world, this phenomenon is not exclusive to ‘women’ and ‘girls’. Furthermore, the continued use of such binaric gendered language inflates the socialized and enculturated experience that is ‘female’ as homogenous and universal. Conversely, many individuals face violence and discrimination based on their outward presentations and perceptions, regardless if they are categorized or identify as ‘female’ or ‘women’.

While to some, these claims are a matter of mere semantics, the real world implications of these discussions are immense. As I will explore, language is not merely representative but generative so that, interestingly enough, the removal of the words ‘man’ and ‘woman’ from mainstream discourse serves not only to disrupt narratives surrounding the gendered experiences but also works to dismantle gender identity as a self actualizing concept entirely. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize the inseparable

connection between sex and gender that has been conceived of throughout societal institutions and feminist discourse. While radical feminists and transgender advocates have participated in an intellectual tug of war for decades over the necessity and legitimacy of the term “woman,” each side fails to realize that preset social understandings of sex and gender both must go in order for true liberation to occur. By opening up the frame of those who are deemed vulnerable and susceptible to discrimination and abuse, we can begin to create more holistic and inclusive conceptions of humans and a broader sense of collective experience.

6.

The Neurology of Gender

"A scientific fact, once established, may sometimes be disproved in one field, remain a 'fact' in others, and have a further life in the popular mind" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000).

Over the past two decades, several studies have emerged in an attempt to situate gender identity within neuroanatomical structures. Studies have focused on various facets of the brain, including differential proportions of grey and white matter between cis and trans* ‘males’ and ‘females.’ This focus on differences between brains along sexed lines derives from the pervasive and immensely influential brain organization theory. Brain organization theory was developed in 1959 by William Young and researchers at the University of Kansas. The theory posits the brain as inherently sexed and, thus, subsequent reproductive behaviors related to each of the sexed brains become hardwired *in utero* through the influence of hormones (Jordan-Young, 2010). The organizational effects of hormones have been known to be transient since the late 1960s (Jordan-Young, 2010). In fact, Jordan-Young expounds on how in studies of both non-human animals and humans alike, the influence of hormones do not lay the foundation for one’s sexual orientation in the world (2010). Yet, the use of a language that implies permanence, such as references to hard-wiring and neuro-blueprints, are still cited throughout medical discourse (2010). As we will later explore, language is a key element in creating realities and managing the meaning of our social worlds. Nevertheless, brain organization theory supports the concept that prenatal hormonal exposure imprints gender identity within one’s neuroanatomical structures before birth. Since the differentiation of genitals and brain development occur separately, it has been proposed that this can enable the development of disassociations between one’s mind and body (Kleinherenbrink, 2016).

After a review of prevalent research, it appears that merely a handful of studies are continuously quoted in arguments concerning the neuroanatomical basis of trans* identity. Many of these studies also seem to have residual connections to earlier efforts to prove that men and women have different brains. Neuroanatomical studies have often been cited as a means to justify sexism and racism. Despite that these studies have been disproven and debunked several times over, many are still used today to strengthen claims of the “naturalness” in regard to gender identity its related and subsequent discrimination.

Two early studies on cerebral gray matter have been endlessly cited as grounds for the existence of gender identity within the brain. In 1995, researchers in the Netherlands analyzed the bed nucleus of the stria terminalis (known as BSTc) among cis and trans individuals. The study concluded that the volume of neurons within a human were perceived to differ based on their biological sex. This study further expounded on this phenomenon by comparing the amount of neurons in male-to-female transgender individuals (MTF) to the amount found in men and women who did not identify as trans*. The amount of BSTc in rodents demonstrated essential functions within rodent sexual behavior associated with males, although the amount of BSTc levels was reported to be approximately 2.5 times larger in human males than in females (Zhou, et. al., 1995). However, as sociomedical scientist Rebecca M. Jordan-Young warns in *Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences*, there is decreased similarity in brain structure between humans and other mammals.

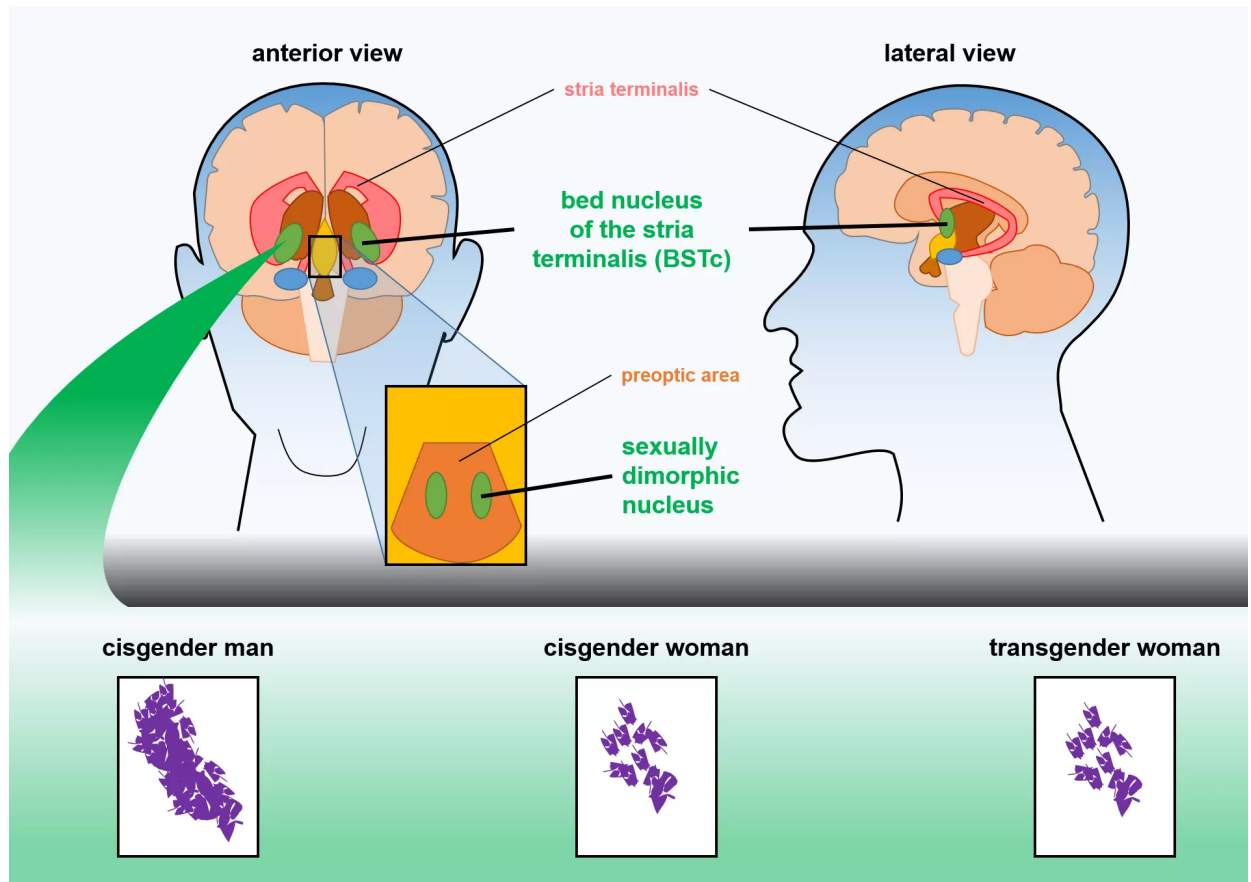
While rodent studies are often cited to analyze the sexual dimorphism of genital development in humans, the impact of androgens (also known as a male sex hormone) on

brain development differs immensely between rodent and human. The development of genitals occurs in a shorter time frame and serves primarily to facilitate reproduction across species. Brains, on the other hand, develop after the genitalia have developed and consist of complex networks of sexual behaviors that cannot cross interspecies lines (Jordan-Young, 2010). Human sexual behaviors are vastly different from those that are observed among other species; therefore, we cannot make broad assumptions regarding brain activity and sexual expression about humans via rodent studies.

Another point of contention in this research study is the limited amount of MTF subjects which were examined; additionally, these subjects had all undergone hormonal treatment, which inevitably contributed to the results of the study. The researchers concluded that the number of BSTc in the MTF subjects more closely matched XX female levels (1995) (*Figure 3*). In 2000, another study regarding the quantity of BSTc in MTF subjects was released. This study used the postmortem tissue from the same exact subjects as did the 1995 study to execute an additional examination of a female-to-male transgender individual (FTM) who had also undergone hormone therapy. This time, the quantity of BSTc in the subjects was aligned with natal males and females (Kruijver, et al., 2000). While these studies demonstrated that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) affects the structure of the brain, they also demonstrated that such effects cannot entirely account for positing gender identity within neuroanatomical structures. In fact, in 2002, a study was conducted that challenged the role of BSTc in the development of transgender identity formation. Chung et al. examined fifty postmortem control subjects and concluded that sexual differentiation among them in relation to BSTc volume does not occur until adulthood (Chung, et al., 2002). However, many trans* individuals state that

their experiences with gender dysphoria and cross-sex identification began during early childhood. Hence, Chung's research renders previous conclusions to be obsolete.

Each of these studies base their conclusions on data collected from postmortem samples. Anne Fausto-Sterling cautions against the use of postmortem tissue in order to determine neuroanatomical size differences as the acquisition and preservation of postmortem brain samples remains precarious. Fausto-Sterling notes that the method of preparing postmortem brain samples, known as fixation, varies depending on which procedure is used (2000). Varying levels of shrinkage and distortion result in different measurements; these data differentials have crucial implications for the way results are determined and, thus, applied to corporeal realities.



(Figure 3. Zhou et al., findings: BSTc of MTF closely resemble the volume of natal females; Wierbowski, 2016).

Given the risk of inaccuracy when using postmortem samples, more recent studies seem to rely on Magnetic Resonance Imager (MRI) to measure numerous facets of brain size and activity. For example, in 2009 Luders et al. observed MRI scans of twenty four MTF subjects who had not yet undergone HRT. The researchers noted that the subjects displayed greater grey matter volume in the right putamen region of the brain (located at the base of the forebrain) that corroborated the proportions located in females (Luders et al., 2009). Conversely, in 2011 another group of researchers studied twenty four MTF subjects and discovered that the right putamen region was reduced in thickness when compared to the thickness found in natal women (Savic et al., 2011 (As shown in Figure

3). Several neuroscientists have stated that while examining MRI scans, they found that the boundaries between neuroanatomical structures are not clearly depicted (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Furthermore, MRI scans require thicker optical slices than do postmortem samples and, hence, provide limited spatial resolution. Fausto-Sterling states the importance of considering the differences in measuring a two-dimensional perspective of the brain versus a three-dimensional view, which more closely relates to its existence within the body (2000).

Corpus callosum sizes have been notoriously called upon to create gender distinctions within the brain. Within *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Fausto-Sterling dismantles arguments for differential corpus callosum sizes in men and women. In 2005, Yokota et al. observed that the shape of the corpus callosum in FTM and MTF subjects deviated from that found in individuals with similar natal sex (Yokota et al., 2005). However, Fausto-Sterling analyzed the data from several studies and discovered that there were different measurements of samples depending on whether the researchers used postmortem methods or MRI scans.

For example, Fausto-Sterling notes that there were clear differences in the measurement of the splenial width and the corpus callosum length/thickness when using postmortem methods; however, these differences did not appear in MRI scans. It becomes evident that caution must be exercised when examining, not only the ability to objectively interpret data, but also how the initial procurement of information is subject to distortion via mixed methodology. Additionally, Fausto-Sterling also calls attention to the fact that the corpus callosum was once used to justify racially charged scientific proposals that posited people of color as inherently inferior (2000). While these claims

have since been largely dismissed and disproved, the corpus callosum persists to exist as a site that can be manipulated to translate social bias into scientific theory. To counter these claims, Fausto-Sterling continues to dismantle distinctions made via the corpus callosum by stating that changes that are found within adult neuroanatomical structures are not present in infants (2000). This finding directly relates to the concept of neuroplasticity, which I will further expound on later.

In addition to vague methodologies and biased data interpretation, one must also consider the overall ethical limitations of conducting neuroanatomical studies on humans. Jordan-Young emphasizes the need to recognize that many of the studies conducted are not true experiments; instead, due to ethical and safety protocols, research that focuses on human brain structure and activities are considered “quasi-experiments” (2010). True experiments consist of randomly selected and assigned subjects who undergo various exposures or observations. The other group, known as the control group, is usually given a placebo. Researchers typically do not know which results belong to which group during the study in order to avoid observational bias (this is known as a ‘blind study’). Since randomly distributed hormone exposure is unquestionably unethical, scientists often must use evidence from animal studies and human quasi-experiments in order to develop conclusions.

Quasi-experiments are dependent upon a synthesis of studies that must fit together in order to create comprehensible conclusions. In other words, each quasi-experiment—despite its differing design from others being conducted—must point to the same conclusion in order to be considered convincing (2010). In the case of discerning gender identity within the structure of the brain, the mapping of evidence is inconclusive.

One of the primary snares in the positioning of gender identity within the brain is that these efforts attempt to attach a facet of one's identity as a permanent anatomical fixture. While this permanence is an attempt to legitimize one's experience as diverging from social norms, it also suggests that human brains do not fluidly interact with their environments. However, human development does not occur in isolation, but rather through an interwoven, consistent exchange with our surroundings. While this may initially seem romantic and reminiscent of social constructionist theory, the emerging studies of neuroplasticity make evident the profound impact this connection has, not only on our psychological, but our anatomical formation.

In 2014, Gina Rippon and her colleagues, including Rebecca Jordan-Young and Cordelia Fine, emphasize four key points when understanding perceived neuroanatomical sex differences. These points include mosaicism, overlap, contingency, and entanglement (2014). Each of the key points demonstrate that brains are certainly not binary, the differences among brains generally are minor, and can be altered through life experiences and one's environment as a result of neuroplasticity.

Neuroplasticity is known as the phenomenon in which the brain's neural pathways are physically altered by environmental and behavioral changes. As early as the 1970s, researchers and scientists acknowledged the malleability of the brain by not only internal stimuli but also external factors (Kleinherenbrink, 2016). Neuroscience has come to understand that the influence of internal and external stimuli coordinate together to form new neurons. This process known as 'neurogenesis,' ultimately lead to the formation of new synaptic networks. The groups of neurons come together as networks in the process of synaptogenesis trigger specific sequences for tasks and behaviors.

Neuroplasticity enables these networks to exist in a continuous state of evolution that permits the modification and creation of neural pathways (Kleinherenbrink, 2016). These pathways adjust to one's learning process, stress response, and even play a role in post-injury assimilation (Kleinherenbrink, 2016). In other words, our brains are constantly interacting with our environment and are subsequently shaped not only psychologically but anatomically by our experiences. Hence, no two humans possess the same neural organization.

The concept of neuroplasticity relates to a concept widely discussed by Canadian physician Gabor Maté known as 'Neural Darwinism.' Imagine brain synapses as plants; in order for growth to occur, the plants must be nourished and properly stimulated. The plants that receive adequate amounts of sunlight and water will thrive and flourish, whereas those that do not receive appropriate amounts will not continue to grow and may eventually wither. The same experience happens to neural synapses. Neural pathways that are most stimulated will become strengthened, whereas neural connections that are not often utilized are subject to synaptic pruning (2008). In other words, our neural pathways are like muscles; the more they are exercised, the more prevalent they become. Hence, our habits, behaviors, and preferences are muscular in nature. Just as the strengthening of certain muscles are celebrated over others (biceps and abdominals are the first that come to mind...), gender is no exception. The bulking of specific gender expression and ideologies (whether influenced by conservative or liberal agendas) are socially rewarded. The gender muscle is the social equivalent of Schwarzenegger's quadricep. This becomes significant when considering how gender permeates neuroanatomical structures.

In *The Politics of Plasticity: Sex and Gender in the 21st Century Brain*, a doctoral candidate from the University of Amsterdam, Annelies Véronique Kleinherenbrink, expounds on the importance in conceiving of humans as plastic subjects. Through an understanding of neuroplasticity, Kleinherenbrink identifies humans as ‘plastic subjects’ whose anatomical and experiential realities are in constant exchange with environmental and neurological stimulus that shapes one’s identity and physiology (2016, 4). In order to demonstrate this, Kleinherenbrink cites two recent studies that illustrate how supposed gender differences of neuroanatomical structures can be altered through the power of plasticity. The first study examined was conducted by Haier et al. in 2009 wherein in Haier sought to discover whether brain structures relating to visual-spatial problem-solving possessed the capacity of plasticity. Visual-spatial learning is associated with left hemisphere brain activity, which is commonly linked to male learning patterns. This rhetoric has been used to justify the disproportionate amount of males in fields such as engineering, sciences, and mathematics. In 2009, Haier’s research team studied a group of adolescent girls between the ages of twelve and fifteen years for a three-month period (2009). In this study, the team separated the girls into study groups; the experimental group was instructed to play Tetris for as little as 1.5 hours per week, while the control group was not allowed access to Tetris. Both groups underwent structural MRI scans before and after the study period.

The results were stunning. Just after three months of playing Tetris for 1.5 hours per week, the structural and functional regions of the brain in the experimental group had differed from those in the control group. The researchers noted that the cortical thickness of the girls in the experimental group had increased in the Brodmann area 6 (BA6) region

of the premotor cortex, while activity in portions of frontal lobe had decreased (2009). These findings are of particular interest because the BA6 region of the brain is associated with complex movement and spatial coordination (brainmaps.org) (See Figure 4). In other words, after a mere eighteen hours of consistent and routine activity, the physical structure and cognitive function of the brain shifted.

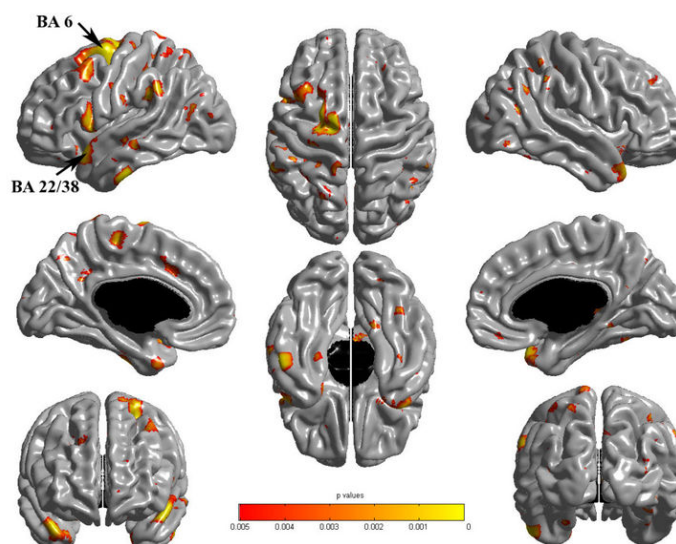


Figure 4 illustrates Haier's results from the post-study MRI scans of the study group, (Haier et al, 2009).

The second study cited by Kleinherenbrink was conducted in 2012 by Jausovec and Jausovec using the medium of origami to measure differences in brain activity before and after a sustained activity. Similarly, their results found that eighteen hours of training in spatial skills activities altered the women subjects' brain activity in the frontal and parietal regions, (2012). These studies demonstrate how one's experiences are inextricably interlaced with one's anatomy and material body. Therefore, it is imperative that the neuroanatomical effects of experiential learning are factored into our conceptions of gender. Gendered behaviors become embodied to the extent that they literally form the brain. This is relevant when considering the types of interests, expressions, and education that are reserved for 'boys' or 'girls.' It also begs the question: Given these findings, how

can the measure or positing of gender within neuroscience ever truly be objective or neutral?

Simone de Beauvoir perfectly captured this sentiment when stating that “social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature” (1972). It is often assumed that embodied differences between men and women are naturally occurring. However, gendered uniformity cannot be entirely attributed to biological difference. For example, men and women are not encouraged to exercise similarly, but rather are exposed to different types of physical activity. In *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like A Girl” and Other Essays*, Iris Marion Young discusses the variant modalities of being that are ingrained from childhood (2005). Young expounds on how women and girls are not afforded the same opportunities to engage their full bodies when engaging in physical activities, but instead are encouraged to display more sedentary forms of activity (2005). Additionally, girls are not exposed to the same amount of spatial awareness, skill-building exercises that are often associated with male play.

All of this is to say that binary sex characteristics are largely constituted by social conditioning as opposed to natural difference. As a result, the world has many human beings who are guided to achieve gendered ideals of appearance and being. Thus, formulations in our material bodies are actually formed through intricate interactions with our environments toward a specific gender. To be clear, these claims do not dismiss the fact that there are physical variations among human beings; however, the distinction must be made that these differences need not be attributed to preset sex or gender differences

within human bodies but rather to the ‘mosaicism’ of the human experience, addressed subsequently.

7.

On ‘Becoming’ Mosaic: Biological Assemblages

“We are confronted by not one social space but by many - indeed by an unlimited multiplicity...” (Lefebvre, 1991)

In 2015, psychologist Daphna Joel led a research team at Tel Aviv University to explore the mosaicism of the brain. This vast study included examining over 1,400 brains from individuals of various ages and demographics using several methods of analysis and types of MRI scans (2015). Joel’s team primarily analyzed patterns of white and grey matter in the brain in an attempt to discern between male and female brains. Joel’s research indicates immense overlap between the neuroanatomical structures of males and females. As a result, Joel proposes that instead of brains lying on a binaric continuum

(i.e., male on one end and female on the other end), brains consist of a ‘mosaic’ of features (2015). The perception of brains as mosaics of attributes and behaviors enables the removal of sex and gender as singularly critical to defined categories of gendered existence and, instead, highlights the impact that neuroanatomical structures have on identity formation.

This perspective can be streamlined across the body even in regard to steroid hormones. In a similar fashion, steroid hormones can be comprehended as what Jordan-Young identifies as ‘developmental cascades.’ Developmental cascades are understood as the cumulative response resulting from interactive effects of steroid hormones across various bodily systems (2010). Therefore, behaviors are not heavily determined by the predominance of a particular steroid hormone but rather those hormones create minor predispositions in behavior. These predispositions can be fulfilled or entirely eradicated depending upon one’s subsequent experiences and biological input (Jordan-Young, 2010). An example of this is Gettler et al.’s discovery that the rate of testosterone decreased as a result of becoming a parent (Gettler et al., 2011).

Bearing in mind earlier criticisms of Butler’s notion of culture being perpetually inscribed upon the body, a dynamic systems approach toward the manifestation and interpretation of sex is relevant and necessary. Fausto-Sterling characterizes dynamic systems theory as a means of understanding how environmental influences become embodied in a material manner (2000). The body’s responses are a result of one’s experiences; this implies that the formation and behaviors of the body are fluid, interactive, and integrated within social systems (2000, 243). It is with this understanding that Kleinherenbrink states that it is vital to acknowledge that neuroanatomical

differences observed in a lab are an amalgamation of plasticity; personal experiences of test subjects; interactions of brain scan technologies; and the political, economic, and social facets of data interpretation (2016, 48). In other words, scientific explanations for a particular behavior cannot occur in a vacuum. rather, that connectivity forms an assemblage understanding in regards to the formation of the material and assumingly 'sexed' body.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (D&G) conceived of assemblage theory as an extension of dynamic systems theory; this theory is used to expound on the organizational patterns of materiality. While one may imagine an assemblage to connote fixed parts, assemblage theory refers to flowing movements between connections and entities. D&G state that assemblages are a composition of "physical objects, happenings, events, signs, and utterances" (1980). In other words, assemblages are a patchwork of various facets and moving parts that come together to create entities. Through the lens of assemblage theory, bodies are not fixed but rather possess exchangeability (1980). Therefore, from the perspective of assemblage theory (informed by notions of neuroplasticity), each human is a unique assemblage that is in a perpetual state of becoming.

However, caution must be exhibited when conceptualizing assemblages. While assemblages consist of combinations of several components, that logic does not support the need to situate such assemblages within any spectrum of behavior. For example, Alison Stone suggests that sex is a cluster in that its is the result of an assemblage of various features that when merged together form a perceived 'sex' that is discerned and registered by society (Stone, 2007). Stone notes that one need not possess all of the

features associated with a particular sex to be acknowledged as fulfilling the socially accepted criteria associated with a particular sex (2007). For example, one may be acknowledged as ‘male’ based upon one’s internal and external genitalia, regardless of the chromosomal arrangement that expresses both.

However, Stone’s analysis also does revert back logically to state that degrees of sex should be placed on a spectrum of characteristics associated with sex. This is the misstep I argue that theorists and the trans* community make in an attempt to expand upon the range of gender identities preset within patriarchy to enable the liberation of ‘gender identity’ from conventional social norms of sex. A spectrum can be defined as a range of characteristics, behaviors, etc., organized between two extreme or opposite points used for the purposes of classification of an identity related to its position within those points on a scale (*Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary*, 1999). Regardless of how wide the spectrum may be and, hence, its potential to bring into existence numerous identities within its range, those identities are still grounded and, therefore, understood in relation to its points of polarization. In contrast, an assemblage is a collection of various points that converge to create a broad union of components without any specific organization of those components, for example, according to any specific range. Unlike the spectrum model, assemblages are not rooted in two fixed points and, thus, can be deployed to more efficiently and accurately convey the complexity of biological and social human variability. *Figure 5* below demonstrates the contrast between the two models of explanation.

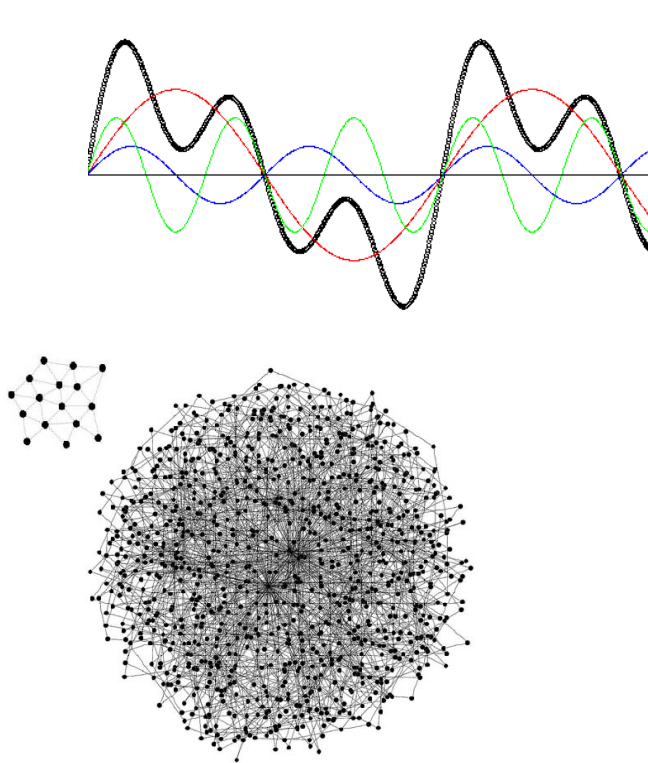


Figure 5 - Spectrum Model vs Assemblage Model of Biological and Social Human Variability (umanitoba.ca) (viralcontagion.wordpress.com).

Nonetheless, Stone does invoke a conversation surrounding the process of filtration concerning components and the selective interpretation of sex characteristics that is employed daily to understand those components. In *Blind to Sameness: Sexpectations and the Social Construction of Male and Female Bodies*, Asia Friedman uses filter analysis as a method of understanding how attention and disattention are used to define certain bodies. Friedman outlines how mental anxieties surrounding ambiguity create a disattention to similarities and instead focus on differences in order to affirm one's sense of gendered self (2013). Friedman identifies what she calls 'cognitive blindspots' as a coping mechanism implemented to meet our need for certainty and predictability regarding identity of ourselves and all others (2013, 89). Those who cause discomfort, cannot be categorized efficiently, are ignored and not recognized as viable

realities because ambiguity threatens conventional conceptions of what is thought to be “true.”

However, we have been informed through the works of Foucault that truth is a vehicle for the exertion of power. Social norms shape mental filters of human beings and create prefabrications in their minds that they use to broadly to efficiently categorize the various components associated with the assemblage of individual identity (Friedman, 2013). This occurs as a result of mental anxiety over the ambiguous identities that human beings can express and the societal need to decipher who among those human beings receives privilege or is marginalized. Therefore, the social construction of ‘biological’ aspects of humans (such as ability, race, and sex) that are accepted as absolute truth, act not only to filter and organize the characteristics we associate with our sense of self but also guide our sensory perceptions of the identities of others.

Assemblage theory becomes relevant when conceptualizing humans beyond sex/gender binaries. Western science characterizes one’s sex based upon nearly six biological facets, including chromosomes, gonads, steroid hormone levels, secondary sex characteristics, and genitalia (Ayala and Vasilyeva, 2015). Despite the common binaric understandings of each category, none of these aspects are dualistic. In fact, assemblage theory accounts for transformation and fluidity within one’s life experience by acknowledging the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). Deterritorialization is the process by which disconnections are made, while reterritorialization is the means that new assemblages are formed. In other words, humans are endlessly constituting and deconstructing themselves over the course of a lifetime so that one’s identity is not an idle entity. Therefore, the implementation of

assemblage theory is immensely impactful here in comprehending how these features converge to create multiplicitous realities during the course of one's lifetime and as interpellated with those into whom an individual comes into contact during that time. Since assemblage theory acknowledges the heterogeneity of bodies, one can deduce that each individual is comprised of a range of unique, sex-related features. In contrast to conventional concepts of sex and gender that often mask the wide variability among humans. However, as previously illustrated, biology has never been binary.

Conceiving of human identity as a fluid mosaic of features dismantles the biological and social stratification of bodies by allowing, instead, for the emergence of and prioritization of variability, growth, and development of human identity. If mosaically sexed individuals were permitted to authentically exist, conceptions of what is 'natural' and 'normal' would no longer be culturally intelligible (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). In other words, a shift in conceiving of humans as mosaics that consist of overlapping identities and anatomies would radically alter the way we understand ourselves and others. The existence of multiply-sexed individuals disrupts the hegemony of heteronormative binary sex systems and provides a means of expansively conceptualizing humans that is free from the apparatus of gender. This explanation not only offers the inclusion of biological diversity in gauging human identity but also incorporates environmental influence, emotional experiences in the process of 'becoming.'

D&G define the concept of 'becoming' as the process by which one component of an assemblage comes together with another component, thereby changing its composition through the unity (1980). Becoming allows for fluidity within the relational contexts of one's life instead of containing one's development in an organizational whole

(Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). In this way, the concept of becoming contributes to the generative way of being that is afforded from assemblage theory. Within this lens, our experiences and environments are not merely representational of our corporeal realities, but immeasurably influential. Hence, it is nearly impossible to make generalizations regarding limited, supposed social categories due to the extensive dynamics comprising the development of each individual. However, a clear and firm distinction must be made: gender cannot be utilized as a means of explaining this phenomenon as it is still based upon a continuum that relies on polarized ends in order to exist.

Degendering

In *Breaking the Bowls: Degendering and Feminist Change*, Judith Lorber candidly speaks to the dangers of gender as an identity concept. Lorber makes the distinction that degendering is not synonymous with the concept of gender neutrality. The call for equality and neutrality when assessing patriarchal gender norms and their association with sex often implies the false assumption that individuals can be categorized into homogenous groups for the purpose of achieving what Lorber identifies as “gender balance” between those two gender identities (2005). The concept of “fixing systems from the inside” or by establishing equal representation in society for both genders is another manifestation of Lorde’s master’s tools metaphor. The mainstream trans* rights movement often states that if trans* individuals had equal access to social institutions and the benefits of legal recognition accorded cis gender individuals that discrimination would be decreased. However, this assumption echoes the fallacy that equality leads to liberation.

Lorber identifies the belief that gender equality leads to the liberation of all genders from oppression as “gender freedom”; Lorber further identifies the purpose of that phrase as having the goal of living beyond the binary and against the grain of gender norms (2005, 12). Within this perspective, gender is cast as a natural and inherent sense of self. Gender is perceived as developing organically and, according to some, individuals are understood to possess “masculine” or “feminine” energies that do not necessarily conform to conventional norms. However, there is a grave danger in naturalizing gender identity. For example, displays of masculinity (including socially ascribed connotations of aggression, dominance, etc.) ascribed to and experienced predominantly by “cis” men as their ‘gender identity’ would be perceived as innate, inevitable, and thus valid. In other words, the concept of gender identity naturalizes and normalizes behaviors and attributes as either masculine or feminine that are embodied by ‘men’ and ‘women’. Thus, if masculinity and subsequent acts of violence associated with masculinity are excused on the basis that violence is a natural masculine characteristic, patriarchal oppression will never be overthrown.

Referencing Butler’s gender performativity theory, Lorber expounds on how queering gender expression and identity misses the mark by focusing on bending gender as opposed to eliminating it. In fact, Lorber notes that in order to bend gender identity and expression, one still must rely on gender as a social institution. Similar to Hacking’s sentiments, it becomes clear that trans* identities would cease to exist if not for their dependence on gender as a social concept. According to Lorber, transgender transitions imply that the core of gender consists of legal status, body, and gender display (2005, 27). While defying gender norms and refusing conventional classification of those norms

begins to unravel the reign of gender on a personal level, this fails to enact change on a wider scale. Lorber reaffirms that gendering is inherently based in sexing. Thus, by disrupting the conceptions of sex, the dismantling of gender can swiftly follow suit.

Lorber boldly states that the attempt to liberate oneself by attempting to attain privileges that are afforded to dominant demographics is futile and non-revolutionary (2005). By fighting for the right to use a men's restroom, the right to have M imprinted on legal documents, and being addressed with male pronouns is not liberation but, rather, survival. These measures are a means of passing in a society that depends on binary sex/gender systems to function. The efforts to use cross-sex public restrooms or advocating for cross-sex markers of identification on legal documents are in line with liberal feminist ideology that emphasizes equality between men and women. By focusing merely on assimilation in the name of equality, patriarchy is given the opportunity to thrive by reinventing itself under the guise of "liberation" and "choice". While, I do not cast blame upon the trans*community for attempting to attain these passing privileges in relation to their immediate life experiences, the acknowledgement must be made that these efforts are merely short-term goals. Assimilation within mainstream binary society will not set anyone free. Merely surviving in a world that seeks to destroy you is not a long-term success. We all deserve more than 'tolerance' or 'just getting by.' We must strive for a world that does not necessitate a constant looking behind one's shoulder, a fear of being 'clocked,' a fear of eradication because to live in fear is to live a half life (Luhmann, 1992).

As a long-term goal, Lorber calls for a systematic process of degendering. Similar to the concept of assemblage theory, degendering is the process by which identity is

perceived to be a conglomeration of social positions rather than understood in relation to the polarized concepts of identity that form the patriarchal gender spectrum as a means of entirely eradicating gendering (2005). Lorber states that degendering cannot simply occur on a personal level, but must happen structurally throughout society. Degendering means eliminating gender entirely as a facet of one's selfhood. This concept is correlative to mosaicism in that if there is a scientific understanding of the components used to understand human identity as varied, heterogeneous, and fluid—which is encompassing of environmental impact on anatomical and psychological structures—gender becomes obsolete.

CONCLUSION

Bridging Gaps Through The Coordinated Management of Meaning

“Language is the single most powerful tool humans have ever invented for the creation of social worlds” (Pearce, 2004)

In order for systemic degendering to occur, our biological and social understandings of ourselves must radically shift. In addition to removing the concept of gender from societal institutions, our communication must reflect such alterations. To do so, it is useful to employ the theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM).

CMM frames communication as generative and transformational in the way we construct our social worlds (Pearce, 2004). While communication has commonly been understood as the transmission of concepts and ideas, recent studies have expanded their inquiry to include examination of factors affecting the nature of communication, the roles of disputants and dynamics between them, and what impacts these all have on conflict (Fisher-Yoshida, 2012). Throughout this section, I will implement CMM as a mediation tool and means of analysis regarding the debate between radical feminists and the trans* community. In doing so, I plan to facilitate productive conversations that actualize the collective needs of both parties and potential resolutions for positive change.

CMM is a practical theory that was developed in the late 1970s by W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon E. Cronen (1980). This theory of communication focuses on all sides of a conflict as part of a coordinated process of meaning management. CMM provides insight on the creation of contexts that can sometimes result in conflict and subsequent tools for developing informed relational exchanges with the aim for building better social worlds (Pearce, 2004). CMM relates to dynamic systems theory in that it conceives of communication as a ‘complex web’ of interaction that constitutes reality and is in constant exchange with social contexts. Through the use of several tools, CMM seeks to bridge distance between conflicting parties, open narratives up for interrogation, and facilitate reconciliation (Spies, 2006). CMM becomes relevant to this given context of the debate surrounding gender identity as it analyzes communication from a utility perspective. Often, discussions involving identity politics focus on representational language instead of creative communication. However, through the lens of CMM the

narratives that are cited to justify each side's claims can be unpacked and actualized for their content as opposed to simply the repercussions.

CMM is centered in three foundational tenets: coherence, coordination, and mystery. Each component of CMM plays a vital role in assessing conflicts and developing resolutions. Coherence refers to the narratives that are called upon to derive meaning from our lives. CMM states that narratives serves as a means of creating intelligibility of ourselves and others. In other words, it is how one makes sense of the world (Pearce, 2007). As earlier noted by Friedman, our desire to maintain coherence often results in the need to categorize and identify ourselves and others. Due to our need for certainty and predictability, the stories we construct align with our world views, ideologies, and sense of self. When these stories becomes disrupted, our coordination with others can become disconnected.

Coordination, the second tenet of CMM theory, highlights patterns of communication and behavior that shape our social worlds (Pearson, 2007). Coordination implies that our actions and language do not occur in a vacuum but rather are interactive with other subjects and objects. In relation to coherence, the lack coordination can trigger discontent, feelings of isolation, and pressure to establish a middle ground (Fisher-Yoshida, 2010). This miscommunication can often result in frustration, aggression, or rejection. Situated within the debate between the trans* community and radical feminists, it often can result in silencing and the refusal to permit the other to speak (whether in public or private forums).

A predominant example of this is the prohibition of allowing critical inquiry of gender identity to occur in many public forums. Contemporary radical feminists who are

‘gender critical’ (i.e. believe gender is a hierarchy and, thus, disagree with the expansion of gender as an identity marker), are limited in their range of audience and can be disqualified from speaking engagements or academic conferences (Martin, 2017). Yet, as transgender individuals, we fight ardently to amplify our voices and needs. However, ‘no-platforming’ perspectives that differ from our own perpetuates tools of oppression that we ourselves are subjected to. Silence is the unifying factor between the unwillingness to recognize variant social realities and the lack of awareness of the interconnections of oppression.

This notion ties into the third component of CMM which is mystery. Mystery suggests that the ‘great unknown’ of the universe is ever present and influences our creation of social worlds (Pearce, 2007). Thus, Pearce and Cronen note that it is essential to ask how concepts are made through communication and how can they possibly be remade (Pearce, 2004). Beth Fisher-Yoshida explains that through CMM alternative frameworks for understanding concepts and constructs become perceptible. Fisher-Yoshida further states that this enables us to release the stagnant narratives we carry in exchange for more informed perspectives of ourselves and others (2010).

CMM outlines certain rules that occur within communication. There are constitutive rules of meaning, which are used to interpret messages based on ideas about appropriate behavior certain contexts. There are also regulatory rules of action which guide how to respond or behave, based on expected interactional behaviors. These rules of meaning and action are always chosen in a context, which is rendered more complex by the understanding that any communication always takes place within in a multi-layered context. This is relevant to the unpacking of communication in a conflict setting,

where parties have certain ideas about what they want to communicate and what they demand in response from the other side.

CMM can be applied in order to ‘make sense’ of both parties narratives in order to find ways to coordinate a mutual understanding. In doing so, there is a potential to disrupt communication patterns that create distance and, thus, conflict. In other words, CMM can be utilized to identify how concepts surrounding gender are used to keep the trans* community and radical feminists separated. Questions can be raised about what kinds of communication will clarify the messages that they want to convey and the impact they wish to have on the creation of their social worlds. Since CMM conceives of communication as a meaning-making process that includes the participation of all actors involved, each side will benefit from developing clear messages and lines of communication. It is in this way that the narratives and subsequent behaviors that are received can be heard and coordinated in a way that is relevant and productive (Fisher-Yoshida, 2010).

To accomplish this form of communication, Pearce and Cronen call for ‘cosmopolitan communication’ (Pearce, 2007). Cosmopolitan communication focuses on the ability to live among one another despite incompatible backgrounds and narratives. Pearce notes that cosmopolitan communication utilizes the tenet of mystery to apply to understanding that all interaction and communication is partial. Since our individual perspectives are never truly complete, we must acknowledge that there is always ‘more to the story’ than what appears directly applicable to our lives (Pearce, 2007). That being said, this does not discount the fact that our perceptions of the world are “real” and influence the creation of our social realities (Pearce, 2007). For example, within the

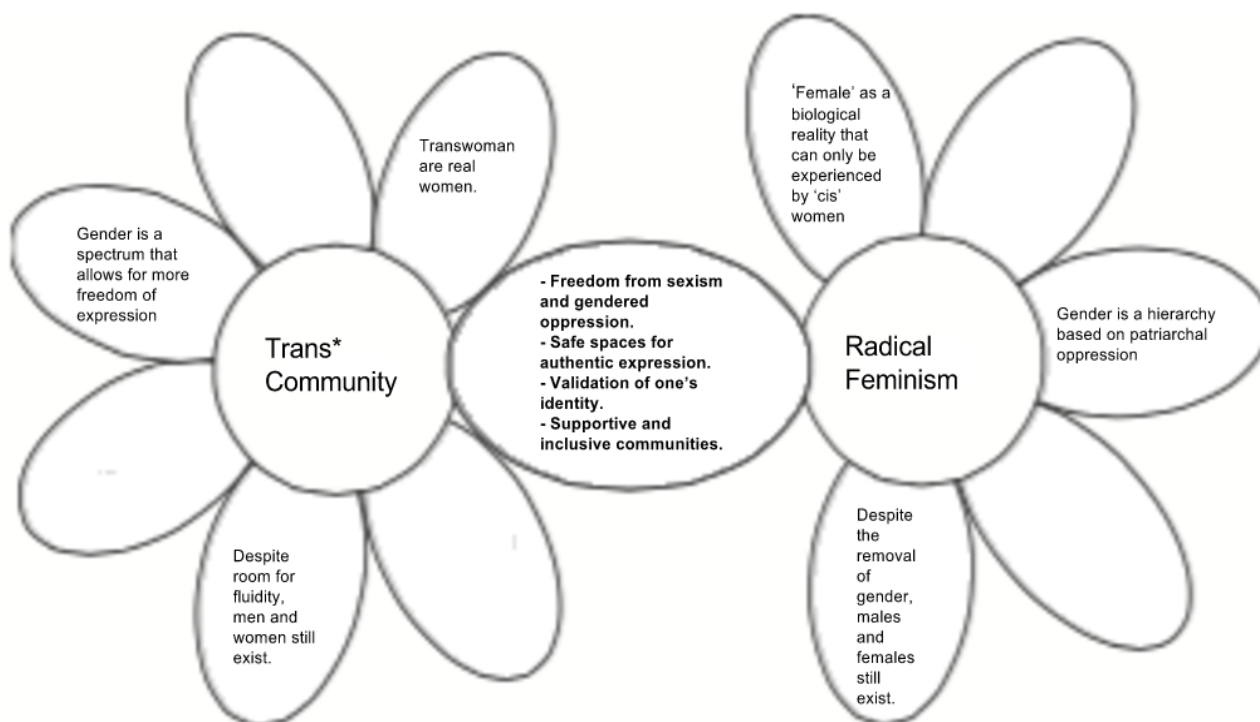
context of this analysis, the emotions and embodied perceptions experienced by trans* individuals are real and valid. Cosmopolitan communication does not inherently attempt to fix or alter one's worldview but rather expand one's perspective to embrace different viewpoints (Fisher-Yoshida, 2010). This framework encourages mutual respect and open communication. In doing so, root causation of certain perspectives and subsequent needs can be identified and fulfilled.

The analysis of the debate over the utility of gender requires the intervention of CMM in order to establish a means of cosmopolitan communication. By addressing the perspectives and needs of each party, a collective understanding can be developed. CMM implements several tools to facilitate conversations with the objective of mediation between conflicting parties. Two models of mediation that CMM uses are the Serpentine Model and the Daisy Model.

The Daisy Model provides a visual representation of the multiple interests and concerns relevant to the conflict. The Daisy Model helps explore the richness of a communication situation, designed to remind the parties of the multiple interests and background concerns featured in the conversation (Pearce, 2004, 46), as the two parties come together in a joint facilitated dialogue. The Daisy Model shown below (Figure 6) centers the needs and desired outcomes of both parties.

Figure 6 - Daisy Model, derived from CMM theory (Pearce, 2004).

This model incorporates established knowledge based on my analysis throughout this thesis in order to illustrate the similarities between the desired outcomes that radical feminists and the trans* community advocate for. As stated in the model, both parties strive for the freedom of oppression based in sex and gender. In doing so, each community aims for the development of safe and supportive spaces for authentic



existence. These spaces serve as a foundation for inclusive community building and to validate one's social identity. However, the other divergent 'petals' can often detract from the acknowledgement that "both flowers have petals" (i.e. their common goals and interests). Additionally, this model acknowledges the unique 'stories' that each community experiences in order to create their own social contexts. For example, one can see that the trans* community aims to expand the concept of gender as a strategy to defy oppression, while radical feminists call for dismantling the gender hierarchy altogether. Yet, collectively both want to abolish sexism. It is in this way that the Daisy Model also lends to empathic understandings of each perspective because ultimately it demonstrates that both parties have similar end goals.

When collective objectives are shrouded by difference, the process of 'othering' occurs. Others are excluded for contravening the scripts within our social contexts, resented for reminding us that our way of living is not in fact the only way to live. We

have strived to silence those who remind us that it is possible to live in ways that diverge from or even contradict the social contexts that we create. Aggression and contempt often gets misdirected toward ‘others’ because it is more accessible and seemingly less personally disruptive to express rather than harness the same energy in a generative (though also revelatory and introspective) way. We are routinely pitted against each other because if we were to focus on the true sources of dissonance (i.e. biopower), we would question and quite possibly, challenge the very fabric of our existence. We would soon realize that we are all subject to biopolitical governance, which would inevitably lead to questioning the basis upon which anyone holds power over anyone else (Jensen, 2002). Through acknowledging that all power relations are laden with contradictions that lead to injustice, new sites of strategy can emerge. We must dare to ask what narratives would look like if they led us toward the acknowledgement of subjectivity and realization of relationships opposed to the objectification and vilification of all ‘others’.

The second CMM mediation model I will use is known as the Serpentine Model. This model shows how patterns of communication construct episodes of meaning over time, shaping their relationship as well as the conflict, and determining the quality of the social worlds that the parties are creating (Fisher-Yoshida, 2010, 23). At each turn depicted in the Serpentine Model there was a choice to be made by the parties about how to understand and respond to what was taking place. These bifurcation points determine what happens next, the nature of the relationships and in turn, the social worlds that are created (Pearce, 2007). The Serpentine Model highlights the path of contributions to the conflict, with each action or turn presenting an opportunity to choose if and how to respond to what has come before, with the sum of these choices and their corollary

consequences ultimately determining the path that the conflict takes. By identifying these critical moments and analyzing the communication (actions as well as speech) before and after that point, it is possible to ask about the intelligibility and coherence of path-ways of meaning-making.

Figure 7 below outlines the pivotal moments in history that possessed the potential to dismantle binaric understandings of humans through several scientific discoveries. While these points have been discussed within the body of my analysis, it is useful to map out the chronology of the discoveries and the subsequent responses in order to better inform our current context and, thus, how we can constructively shape our realities moving forward.

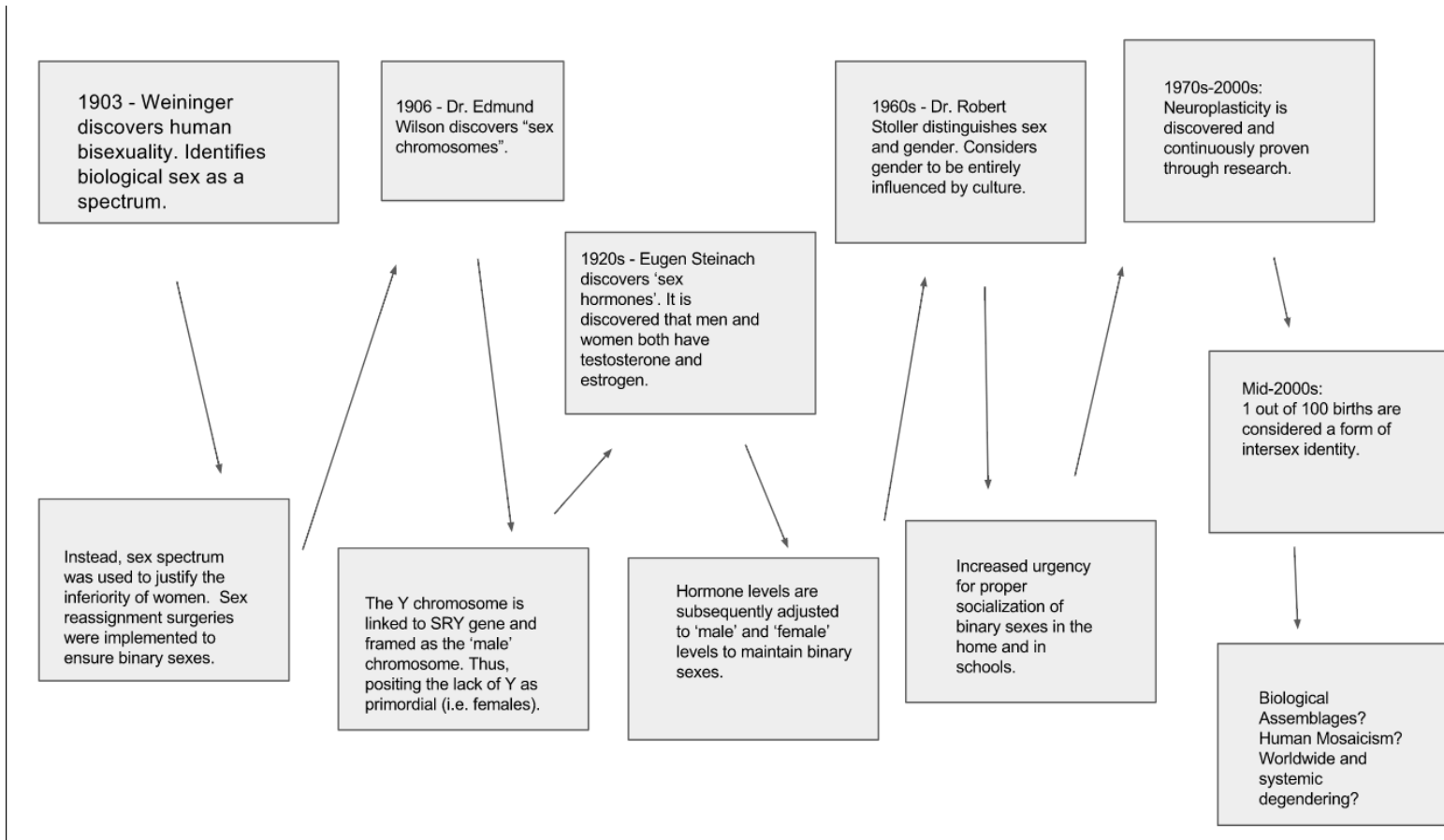


Figure 7 - Serpentine Model of pivotal moments in history to dismantle binary sex/gender system.

As this figure depicts, there have been several moments throughout recent Western history that had the potential to uproot the widely held beliefs about the naturalness of binary sex and gender. However, each time a discovery was made that challenged the validity of the two-sex model or the constructed nature of gender, swift and fierce backlash followed. Instead of disrupting and radically altering the way human beings are conceived, these findings were used as justification for stricter social policing. It is particularly important to recognize this pattern now, as we are currently amidst a pivotal moment in time. As I have discussed throughout my analysis, the discovery of neuroplasticity and biological mosaicism has the strong potential to drastically change

our understandings of human development. However, the pervasion of gender identity as a ‘natural’ and inborn concept, risks further sealing notions of masculinity and femininity as embodied and, thus, ‘normal’.

It is critical to situate this within the debate between radical feminism and the trans* community as this sort of permeation of gender identity fundamentally equates to a different outcome than each party strives for (indicated in Daisy Model). The point must be made that the expansion of gender does not mean equality, equity, or liberation. Instead, gender is a system that itself is tangled in concepts of how to discern and register which humans are men or women. In order to affect a true revolution in regards to sexuality, we must let go of underlying binaries and hierarchies, such as those associated with the bi-gendered system of patriarchy. The same rhetoric should be applied to radical feminist theory.

While radical feminists acknowledge that feminine gender norms are developed in accordance with the marginalization of women in the patriarchal hierarchal system, they nevertheless fail to let go of understanding that oppression through the interplay between categories of male and female. In reality, studies of intersex individuals demonstrate that our fallacy of manhood and womanhood reside on unstable ground. This includes radical feminist efforts to tout the notion of a universal womanhood that is essential to assessing one’s experience and embodiment within rigid definitions of womanhood.

It is this refusal to let go of either side that makes the debate between the mainstream trans* community and radical feminists stagnant and limited in their assessment of human agency. As Jacques Derrida staunchly notes, in order for a true revolution to occur the binaries guiding the very systems of oppression that the revolution

is challenging must be dismantled—in this case, either in favor for or against the concept of gender identity. Merely opposing one side of the binary while favoring the other will only result in a reversal of the system toward the favored side (Lodge, 1988). In order to liberate ourselves from the institutionalized and embodied constraints of masculinity and femininity, we must be willing to let go of tools that are no longer serving us - this means not only gender but sex itself.

Through the lens of assemblage theory and dynamic systems theory, humans can be reconceived as uniquely constituted (recognizing that no two human experiences, exposures, and environments are identical) while simultaneously understanding the vast interconnection of all life facets we are each a part of a wider relation with one another and our environments. By detaching from our current understandings of gender and sex, it will enable more room for unbridled individual expression, yet, a clearer sense of collective identity as humans unbound from the sex and gender binary. It is within this collective experience that the opportunity for intersectional coalition building exists. Each individual possesses a fractured identity and belongs to various social communities. By tapping into the intersections of identity that are present within each of us, a wide network of coalitions can be rendered possible. By forming unlikely coalitions, alternative realities can be conceived and developed. In a collective force, narrative can be resisted and redefined. It takes a community to enact effective change. We must open our minds to alternative realities and possibilities in order to enact the change we wish to create.

While I acknowledge the limited scope of this brief research, it is my hope that I've raised points of interest that will invite critical inquiry and explorative conversation

among the trans* community and radical feminist circles. While my transition has assisted me in accessing so many opportunities and insights, I am eager for the day that fluid experiences such as mine becomes rather commonplace. It is in this sentiment that I often reflect back to the concept of epidemic of social eutrophication. What parts of ourselves are we quite literally suffocating in an attempt to present as ‘whole’? What parts lie beneath the surface? Are we brave enough to find out? What visions can be actualized within the shadows of oneself?

As I write this, I am nearing two and a half years since I started hormone replacement therapy. I have witnessed my voice deepen in tone and in tenacity. While prior to starting this journey, I often wondered what my ‘after photo’ would resemble, I have come to realize there is never truly an ‘after photo’. We are endlessly ‘becoming’ ourselves, despite if we identify as ‘cis’ or ‘trans*’. It is in this becoming that I hope we can collectively embrace our continual evolution - as a species, societies, local communities, and as individuals.

In that regard, there is seemingly copious amounts of work to be done, both on personal and communal levels regarding this debate. However, let this analysis serve as an offering - of compromise, of compassion, and of cohabitation between the trans* community and radical feminism(whether in the same safe spaces, or in my case, the very same skin). Let us take on our innate responsibility as human beings to take care of one another instead of perpetuating the “individualist cult” we reside in today. We need to rediscover what it truly means to be a human inhabitant of this world. We must permit ourselves to exist authentically while utilizing our entire bodies to convey such intentions. We must not fear our embodiments, but embrace and cherish them.

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