

4-2015

# Deconstructing and developing gender: the nonbinary search for identity

Jasmine Xie  
*Carnegie Mellon University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.cmu.edu/hsshonors>

---

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Research Showcase @ CMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dietrich College Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Research Showcase @ CMU. For more information, please contact [research-showcase@andrew.cmu.edu](mailto:research-showcase@andrew.cmu.edu).

**DECONSTRUCTING AND DEVELOPING GENDER: THE NONBINARY SEARCH  
FOR IDENTITY**

**Jasmine Xie**

**Carnegie Mellon University, Dietrich College: English w/ Linguistics '15**

**Senior Honors Thesis '15**

## **Introduction**

The ways in which open internet access has enabled queer identity formation have changed significantly over the past ten years. Prior to the genesis of widespread, interconnected internet communities, people were restricted to local sources of information - sources that were often dated, biased, and required a physical component of access, whether through another person or through a local library. This localization allows for the disproportionate representation of a few dominant perspectives on queer issues, skewing discourse surrounding the question of what defines queerness, and the closed community can make it difficult for questioning youth to overcome gatekeeping behaviors, such as the holding of queer events in 18+ spaces. The physical component, whether it be a library book or a LGBTQ+ mentor, carries with it the risk of outing - one's search history is considerably easier to keep hidden than visits to the local GSA. In comparison, with the introduction and widespread acceptance of personal computing devices, youths are able to connect to one another and discover camaraderie through online communities in a way previously unimaginable. Meeting people no longer requires them to live within one's town, or even one's country, while even barriers such as language can be easily overcome with translation services. In addition to the ease of finding queer communities, the vast variety of choices means that the chances of finding one that services one's personal interests is significantly higher - a queer knitting club, while difficult to establish in the offline, can have hundreds of members spread out over North America when organized online. Online often also means anonymous, and while anonymity has been one of the double-edged swords of online interaction, for people just starting to explore their sexual and gender identities, it can often be a way to safely voice their concerns and questions without the repercussions that 'experimentation' can have offline. This ability to carry in-depth discussion, unrestricted by issues of embodiment

or temporality, has led to significant amounts of discourse generated about queer issues, one of which includes queer identities. Queer identities - a category whose turbulence can easily be seen in debates over whether LGBT or MOGAI<sup>1</sup> or 'Queer' are the most inclusive terms - are experiencing a proliferation through the open access that internet-based communications have allowed, and online debates center around the validity and means of creating improved terminology.

One online community, in which such debates occur, is Tumblr - a social microblogging website frequented often by members of marginalized groups. A significant amount of queer, nonbinary, or otherwise unconventionally gendered youths have established within themselves a community of likeness<sup>2</sup> on this website, and within that community, a new kind of transgender discourse. In defining and negotiating the bounds of their nonconventional gender identity, the nonbinary youth appear to be focused more on questioning the current social conception of gender rather than on the medicalized discourse common to older, more traditional transgender discourse. While some of their ways of speaking about gender have been predicted in the past by gender theorist J. Jack Halberstam, and act to create new gender terminology, others pursue a direction previously unseen and unallowed in transgender discourse. Rather than simply clarifying and defining existing gender identities, or even plainly expanding the current definition of gender, nonbinary Tumblr users are also deconstructing and challenging current notions of gender through the proliferation of self-determined 'nonsense' genders. By examining the discourse of nonbinary users on Tumblr and comparing it to previous evaluations of transgender discourse by theorists such as J. Jack Halberstam and Judith Butler, we distinguish a

---

<sup>1</sup> Marginalized Orientations, Gender Identities, and Intersex

<sup>2</sup> Some tumblrs dedicated to nonbinary and queer issues include: <http://nonbinarycuties.tumblr.com/>, <http://nonbinaryresource.tumblr.com/>, <http://genderqueer.tumblr.com/>, <http://askanonbinary.tumblr.com/>, <http://transsupplies.tumblr.com/>, <http://transgenderteensurvivalguide.tumblr.com/>,

gap within the theory, wherein it not only fails to account for some of the current discourse, but also actively predicts against the creation of such discourse. As such, I theorize that while some nonbinary discourse on Tumblr acts as a continuation of past transgender ways of speaking, other parts contradict past hypotheses about how transgender ways of speaking function on a fundamental level due to the increasing inadequacy of the current conception of gender for encompassing emerging gender identities. Furthermore, nonbinary ways of speaking problematize and destabilize current popular notions of gender, as well as past transgender notions of gender.

## **Tumblr**

Tumblr, a social microblogging site founded in 2007<sup>3</sup>, has developed a reputation among online communities as a site with an unusual density of young, marginalized, activist users, compared to other popular websites like Facebook and Twitter. Tumblr users have been noted for being young and “incredibly engaged”<sup>4</sup>, with 46% of its 34 million active users aged between 16-24<sup>5</sup> and 64% of them viewing it as a source of information about social causes<sup>6</sup>, and is linked to starting or propagating social activism movements such as #Blackout<sup>7</sup>, #blacklivesmatter<sup>8</sup>, and #tdov (trans day of visibility). Moya Bailey, a postdoctoral fellow at Northeastern University in women’s studies and digital humanities, states “You can create your own identity via Tumblr... I see many more diverse images on Tumblr than I see anywhere else. It’s one of the few places

---

<sup>3</sup> "About." Tumblr. February 2007. <https://www.tumblr.com/about>.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, Cooper. "Tumblr Offers Advertisers A Major Advantage: Young Users, Who Spend Tons Of Time On The Site." Business Insider. December 13, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Safronova, Valeriya. "Millennials and the Age of Tumblr Activism." The New York Times. December 20, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Bergado, Gabe. "How #BlackOutDay Is Empowering People of Color." The Daily Dot. March 6, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Safronova, "Millennials and the Age..."

where I see fat people, trans women, and trans women of color who are celebrated”<sup>9</sup>. I suspect that this unusual skew towards diverse representation and activism is partially due to how Tumblr is structured, as a website. Users are semi-anonymous, in that their identities are linked to a username rather than their legal name, and are able to control which users they follow, allowing them to essentially experience a microcosm of Tumblr rather than be exposed to Tumblr as a whole.

From my observations as a user of several years, Tumblr users can use this function of ‘following’ other users to create safe spaces within which they can discuss issues particular to their community, without as much out-group interference as other platforms may have. For example, following the widespread success of #Blackout on March 6th, which was dedicated to celebrating diversity within the Black community and promoting pride in Black features, there was debate over the validity of analogous movements such as #Whiteout, #Brownout, and #AsianInvasion. To discuss the potentially appropriative nature of #asianinvasion, several Asian Tumblr users started conversations on blogs with relatively high visibility, such as the *thisisnotjapan*<sup>10</sup> and *angryasiangirlsunitied*<sup>11</sup> tumblrs, to elicit responses from other socially active Asian bloggers. Similarly, nonbinary users can reach out to blogs such as *genderqueerid* to discuss issues within the queer community, such as whether the term ‘boi’ should be used by white genderqueer people<sup>12</sup>. While the blogger in question may not have the ability, knowledge, or resources to provide a ‘correct’ answer, asking a blog dedicated to discussing genderqueer

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> "Also-im-not-saying-you-cant-do-anything-for." We Shouldn't Have to Be Telling You This. March 7, 2015. <http://thisisnotjapan.tumblr.com/post/113002400782/also-im-not-saying-you-cant-do-anything-for>.

<sup>11</sup> "What Are Your Opinions on #asianinvasion?" Angry Asian Girls United. March 7, 2015. <http://angryasiangirlsunitied.tumblr.com/post/113004328651/what-are-your-opinions-on-asianinvasion>.

<sup>12</sup> "Hello!, I Once Heard Somebody Say the Term 'boi'..." GENDERQUEER AND NON-BINARY IDENTITIES -. June 4, 2013. <http://genderqueerid.com/post/52144260437/hello-i-once-heard-somebody-say-the-term-boi>.

issues opens up the discussion to the blog's followers - essentially allowing other genderqueer people to join the conversation. Between tagging posts with content tags, such as #gender, #ftm, or #nsfw, and allowing commentary on posts, Tumblr's interactive blogging interface has the possibility of enabling the easy facilitation of conversations.

### **The Difficulty with Gender| Gender: The Current Conceptualization, and How it Came to Be**

The modern two-sex model of gender, which first emerged in the 18th century<sup>13</sup>, has long been a source of controversy. This model, which situated the social division of gender as being dependent on the biological division of sex<sup>14</sup>, has been used to justify and rationalize “all manner of claim[s] in a variety of specific social, economic, political, cultural, or erotic contexts”<sup>15</sup> as being scientifically sound and biologically determined. The woman's “natural” role as a caretaker and homemaker, for instance, could be scientifically justified as being due to her female brain and reproductive structures<sup>16</sup>, which may incline her to domestic tasks, rather than being due to historically determined social roles. Although this biologically-determinant model of gender emerged out of a flawed understanding of biology, it significantly shaped popular Western understandings of gender and its role in affecting one's identity, and formed a dominant narrative which has since been repeatedly contested by various social movements.

In the 1960s, second-wave feminism, or the women's liberation movement, emerged in the US. Books such as *The Feminine Mystique* and political organizations such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) challenged the societal expectations that restricted women to

---

<sup>13</sup> Laqueur, Thomas Walter. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990. 150.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 151

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 152

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*,

being homemakers or employed in a select few professions, and pushed for gender equality both in and out of the workplace<sup>17</sup>. Although second-wave feminism initially maintained the concept of binary gender, it challenged the role that gender played in restricting women in society, and groups campaigned for gender equality through legal and social reform such as anti-discrimination laws. The phrase “the personal is political” pushed the idea that “women’s political inequality had equally important personal ramifications”<sup>18</sup> and social points of inequality, such as reproduction rights, beauty expectations, and marriage roles became points of contention. Under this movement, feminists attempted to minimize the role that gender played in shaping one’s social being. Similarly, the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s through 1980s revolted against social expectations based on sex and gender and the idealized nuclear family structure<sup>19</sup>, and utilized the personal-political relation popularized by the women’s liberation movement. A key aspect of the movement was the pressure to move from ‘discrete’ homosexuality to ‘visible’ homosexuality, as captured by campaigns to “come out of the closet” by gay activists<sup>20</sup>, alongside campaigns for anti-discrimination laws and public awareness of non-heterosexual orientations. Although equality, whether based on gender or on sexuality, has yet to be successfully achieved in the US, the ideal of being visible and accepted as part of society has persisted as goals.

While the transgender movement that emerged in the 1980s also campaigned for visibility and social and legal equality, it was particularly notable due to its underlying challenge of the gender binary. Judith Butler’s highly influential book, *Gender Trouble*, coined the idea of

---

<sup>17</sup> "The 1960s-70s American Feminist Movement: Breaking Down Barriers for Women." Tavaana.

<sup>18</sup> Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000. 196.

<sup>19</sup> Shelley, Martha. *Gay Is Good*. New York: Gay Flames, 1970.

<sup>20</sup> "The Gay Rights Movement since the Mid-20th Century." Encyclopedia Britannica Online.



gender performativity - that is, that the social roles attributed to gender and repeatedly challenged by various liberation movements are not inherently natural, and are “manufactured through a sustained set of acts”, creating an expectation of ‘gender’ that is then referenced and reproduced according to these expectations<sup>21</sup>. She notably used the example of drag performers as an example of the “three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance”<sup>22</sup>, and claimed that their identifying and performing of contradictory roles implicitly revealed “the imitative structure of gender itself”<sup>23</sup>. This separation of gender performance, gender identity, and anatomical sex was further propagated by the emergence of the term transgender - used to describe “somebody who permanently changed social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation”<sup>24</sup> - in response to the terms transvestites, which described crossdressers, and transsexuals, which described those who changed gender through physical, genital transformation<sup>25</sup>. Although much of the practices discussed centered around ftm and mtf transitions - that is, transitions from one side of the gender binary to the other - distinguishing ‘social gender’ from ‘physical gender’, or sexed gender, allowed for the acknowledgement of there being some possibility of gender ambiguity. These ‘gender blurrings’<sup>26</sup>, practiced long before the emergence of the term ‘transgender’, could now be constituted as being neither man nor woman, rather than being framed as violations of the binary in the form of ‘butches’, ‘sissies’

---

<sup>21</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity: Tenth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2002. xiv-v

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 175

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 175

<sup>24</sup> Stryker, Susan. "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 4. Vol. 1. New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> "Introduction: The Guarded Body." In *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, edited by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, 11. New York: Routledge, 1991.

and ‘masculine women’<sup>27</sup>. This reframing, discussed in essays such as “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto”<sup>28</sup> and “Transgender Liberation”<sup>29</sup>, in turn allowed for a form of transgender politics that refused the constraints of binary gender, and demanded visibility in constituting an identity that lay outside of the binary.

Socially, increased transgender visibility has come in the form of documentaries about trans individuals such “Boys Don’t Cry”, legal protective groups such as the Transgender Law Center, and the ‘coming out’ of trans celebrities such as Laverne Cox and Janet Mock<sup>30</sup>. The public at large is, on average, better informed about transgender identities today than it was twenty years ago. On the academic side, theorists such as Jack Halberstam and Kate Bornstein have written about new gender divisions or taxonomies, such as the masculine continuum<sup>31</sup> or “gender outlaws”<sup>32</sup>. However, despite all of these advances, transgender individuals have yet to successfully overcome the dominant narrative of the gender binary. In common language, the gender-neutral pronoun of they/them<sup>33</sup>, to complement he/him and she/her, is only just gaining traction, and there continues to be a gap in accepted gender identities beyond ‘transgender’. Nonbinary-identified individuals, who fall under the transgender umbrella but do not identify as one side or another of the binary, are thus attempting to develop new gender terms and ways of

---

<sup>27</sup> Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction..." 4

<sup>28</sup> Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." In *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, 280-304. New York: Routledge, 1991.

<sup>29</sup> Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*. New York, NY: World View Forum, 1992.

<sup>30</sup> Townsend, Megan. "Timeline: A Look Back at the History of Transgender Visibility." GLAAD. November 19, 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Halberstam, Judith. "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 294.

<sup>32</sup> Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>33</sup> Petrow, Steven. "From 'he' and 'she' to 'they' and 'ze,' a Shift to More Gender-neutral Pronouns." Washington Post. October 27, 2014.

speaking to denote a more inclusive model of gender, and are using Tumblr as a platform to constitute their identities.

### **The Ways of Speaking**

While all of the Tumblr posts that I examine discuss the nonbinary user's gender to some degree, they frequently differ in tone and content depending on the context in which they are used, and create meaning in vastly disparate ways. To better analyze the data, I distinguished three distinct varieties, or categories, of discourse according to how the posts were structured and how the user's gender was being constructed in the post. For example, a post may be an introduction post - featuring the user's selfie alongside a blurb detailing their name, gender identity, pronouns, and location - submitted to a community blog such as [fyeahqwoc](http://fyeahqwoc.tumblr.com/)<sup>34</sup> (celebrating queer women of color), to signify their inclusion in such a community. On the other hand, the post may be a face post - uploaded to their personal blog, visible only to their subscribers, and comprised of a selfie combined with a semi-relevant caption. As may be expected, users 'talk' differently according to the context - formal vs. informal, public vs. private - and this effect passes along to what aspect of their gender identity that they feel relevant to name in the moment. By creating these artificial divisions, I enabled the evaluation of different kinds of discourses on their own terms without the flattening and loss of details that would occur if they were analyzed as a single phenomenon. I named the categories that have emerged as: the new gender terms, the fantastic gender terms, and the null gender terms, all of which are used differently according to context and user intention within online discourse.

New gender terms are primarily gap-filling - they contribute new entries to the current gender lexicon, offering names for identities more specific than the vague umbrella term of

---

<sup>34</sup> Fuck Yeah Queer WoC.<http://fyeahqwoc.tumblr.com/>.

‘transgender’, and can be used similarly to current gender terms. Although they are ‘new’ and unfamiliar to the general public, they minimally disrupt the current gender paradigm and transcend the online/offline barrier. On the other hand, fantastic gender terms are highly disruptive, as they disrupt not only the gender binary but also assumptions about what gender is and can or cannot be. Fantastic gender terms encapsulate not only the fact that gender exists, but also the temporal and cultural constraints on gender - that is, that gender exists in the moment, and is affected by a personal narrative of gender embedded in everyone’s mind. As a result, fantastic gender terms attempt to describe a gender identity that is subjective and contextual. Although they describe the user’s gender, they are complementary to new gender terms, and don’t function in the same contexts. Instead, fantastic gender terms are kept almost entirely on Tumblr, and used casually among friends. Finally, null gender terms are reactionary rather than productive, and are a means of expressing nonbinary users’ frustration with the dominant gender narrative. They interrogate the assumed necessity of having a ‘public’, or knowable gender, and react to the pressure of ‘needing’ to be ‘out’ to cisgender people. Null gender terms, like fantastic gender terms, do not substitute for new gender terms - rather, they are used to express frustration with the gender paradigm. As a reactionary rather than productive term, null gender terms exist almost entirely on Tumblr, and are used only semi-seriously. While these categories are not comprehensive, they cover a significant portion of the ways in which gender is currently being discussed, and provide a productive taxonomy for analysis through existing theoretical frameworks.

### **The Theory**

The theoretical frameworks that I situate my work within are those formed primarily by Judith Butler and J. Jack Halberstam. Judith Butler’s early notions of gender performativity,

combined with her later work on language and its role in constituting precarious identities, helped shape the current transgender politics that prioritize visibility and integration over assimilation, and similarly provide a means through which nonbinary identities can be creatively accounted for. J. Jack Halberstam, on the other hand, articulated some of the trans identity work at hand among trans communities that Butler theorize, and grounds research in trans practices. This, combined with his acknowledgment of the potential for new identities, described with new terminology, makes Halberstam's work particularly well suited for analyzing and accounting for current nonbinary practices. Both Butler's and Halberstam's work are thus primarily concerned with the language of trans individuals, and how it is used to navigate, validate, or negotiate their identity as members of an ill-defined space. I therefore derive my analysis of nonbinary practices on Tumblr out of Butler's work on negotiating power relations with language, and extend Halberstam's work to encapsulate the phenomenon as it is happening online. In addition to extending Butler and Halberstam's work, I also argue that some of the more creative practices by nonbinary individuals on Tumblr depart from Halberstam's predictions, suggesting a gap within the current picture of transgender practices.

Butler describes, in *Undoing Gender: The Question of Social Transformation*, a crisis of gender in which some people, including transgender individuals, can have their gender be perceived as 'wrong' or 'inauthentic'. This misreading places the individual at risk for 'correction' for their violation of the 'norm' from outsiders, while diminishing the validity of their identity. To counter this problem of misreading, Butler emphasizes the role of language in constituting and validating 'precarious', or invisible identities, and proposes a process of altered reproduction of existing language to name these identities. While the inequalities that affect 'inauthentic' identities cannot be solved by simple language changes, the implementation of

more inclusive language, Butler argues, can go a long way towards leveling some of the most basic inequalities.

The crisis of gender begins with the problem of normativity. Butler claims, in *Undoing Gender*, that “certain norms, ideas and ideals hold sway over embodied life, provid[ing] coercive criteria for normal ‘men’ and ‘women’”<sup>35</sup>. The criteria, which are normally ‘unspoken rules’, become perceptible and explicit when they are violated and a person is perceived to be non-normal. In the case of gender norms, violations thus emerge in cases such as drag performances and other conflicted performances of gender, and the performer is judged as doing ‘inauthentic’ gender. These points of conflict are discussed further in *Gender Trouble*, in which Butler uses them to demonstrate performed gender’s constructed nature. Although these gender judgments are based on socially constructed gender norms, and are usually unchallenged, they can create problems when they are challenged and a person is judged as ‘inauthentic’ or non-normal. That is, when a person ‘fails’ the judgment that would determine them to be a normal man or woman, they are then placed in the position of the unintelligible subject - they are unable to be truly integrated into common society, as they are perceived to be dysfunctional in some way or another. In the case of the nonbinary individual, their gender is not recognized. Instead, they are judged to be abnormal and, therefore, disordered. Although they and other unintelligible subjects are clearly human, they don’t fit within social roles assumed to be common to humans, and so can be judged as being less human than ‘normal’ people. Even the simple problem of which bathroom to use becomes an issue when the person doesn’t ‘belong’ in either bathroom. This, and other social practices, reveal the difficulties that arise when one is ‘culturally

---

<sup>35</sup> Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 206.

unintelligible<sup>36</sup> and unable to be fully integrated into society. The failure of nonbinary individuals to attain personhood as either a man or woman makes it “unclear whether [they] are still living, or ought to be, whether [their] lives are valuable, or can made to be”<sup>37</sup>, as they are unable to be socially accommodated. Essentially, the personhood of non-normatively gendered individuals is put under question due to their inability to be ‘normal’, and they are judged to be non-subjects under the current structures of power.

These non-subjects, Butler argues in “Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics”, are faced with unique difficulties that place them within a state of precarity. Although they may physically exist, their identity is perpetually at odds with the socially established and internally held list of possible identities, and so they are continuously misread or overlooked - the trans man read as a deviant, crossdressing woman, or the intersex person read as a malformed man in need of correction. The misreading, while risky on a social level, continues on a legislative level as non-subject identities fail to be recognized as legitimate, which forms the basis for their ‘precarious’ state. That is, they are forced into a “politically induced condition for which the social networks of support fail”<sup>38</sup>, because their existence is ‘outside’ social networks and unaccounted for by the state. Within this state of precarity, the individual is subject to conditions that “threaten life in ways that appear to be outside of one’s control”<sup>39</sup> - for example, if the state does not believe that transgender identities are legitimate, then transgender individuals cannot lobby against discrimination, as there is ‘nothing’ to be discriminated against according to the state. Non-subjects are thus forced outside of systems both legal and social, and are unable to

---

<sup>36</sup> Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and...* 30.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Butler, Judith. "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics." *AIBR* 4, no. 3 (2009): ii.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., i.

participate within the systems to change their status. As a result of this exclusion, non-subjects are not only oppressed, but also invisible within the system. To protest their oppression, Butler argues, non-subjects “must first become intelligible”<sup>40</sup>, as otherwise they are immobilized in their position as unintelligible - “the other against which human is made”<sup>41</sup> - and must struggle for the acknowledgement of their personhood, rather than for equality. The problem of being a non-subject, or unintelligible to the state, becomes evident in the case of the overarching legal and social systems that determine basic personhood, and can be seen in the continuous addition of new kinds of discrimination to protective laws. Without the acknowledgement of race-based discrimination, for instance, race-based hate crimes have no footing upon which to stand, placing victims of those crimes in a state of precarity. Similarly, I argue that the nonbinary gender nonconformists that I study exist in a state of precarity, in which they are largely invisible and ‘culturally unintelligible’.

In this bleak framing of the identities of gender nonconformists, Butler offers a framework through which they can overcome illegibility and attain personhood. She argues, both in *Gender Trouble* and in *Undoing Gender...*, that the governing norms “are called into question and reiterated at the moment in which performativity begins its citational practice... these norms can be significantly deterritorialized through the citation”<sup>42</sup>. That is, by visibly performing a non-normative gender, gender nonconformists can create moments of gender crisis in others by making evident the presence of gender norms. Butler claims that, by making others aware of the presence of gender norms, gender nonconformists make the norms become open for reevaluation and negotiation. “The norms themselves... become rattled, display their instability, and become

---

<sup>40</sup> Butler. *Undoing Gender*. 30.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 218.



open to resignification”<sup>43</sup> in the moment of visible unintelligible gender, and viewers are theoretically forced to reevaluate their parameters for what is intelligible and ‘real’ as evidence of the ‘unreal’ emerges. While Butler primarily focuses on the physically tangible gender performance exemplified in the embodied practices of the drag queen, she also addresses the underlying linguistic maneuvers necessary for illegible subjects to gain legibility. Stating “it is a question of developing, within law, within psychiatry, within social and literary theory, a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have always been living”<sup>44</sup>, Butler predicts a method of resignification and altered reproduction through which non-normative gender identities can seek validation and integration. Through developing a legitimate language for themselves, especially a lexicon which cites the existing norms and alters them in the reiteration, one gains a place within cultural practices, and lifts oneself out of the state of precarity into the state of the oppressed - not necessarily yet in a position of power, but within a position to negotiate one’s place in society having proved one’s existence as a member of society and as a subject of the system. This process of legitimation, involving the establishment of a self-descriptive language and the widespread acceptance of such language, has been iterated through several times in the history of identity politics, and can be seen currently happening in the case of transgender identities. Just as bisexuality and bisexual have emerged as legitimate sexual identities, after long battles over how to identify ‘people who like both’, so to speak, so is transgender emerging. The highly public claiming of transgender as a valid identity, as practiced by celebrities such as Janet Mock and Laverne Cox, is a means through which the public norms

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 27-8.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 31

can be rattled as they are forced to face those who are unquestioningly that which they claim, and contribute to the eventual acceptance of such identities.

J. Jack Halberstam builds on the theoretical work done by Butler by focusing on the role of terminology in constituting transgender identities, and frames the emergent struggles of transgender individuals as being “present in the midst of a Foucauldian “reverse discourse” on transsexuality and transgenderism”<sup>45</sup>. That is, Halberstam claims, by “assuming and empowering a marginal positionality”, transgender individuals “produce creative new forms of resistance”<sup>46</sup>. These forms of resistance take the form of making visible non-subjects, or culturally unintelligible identities, such as the existence of Laverne Cox’s character in *Orange is the New Black*, who like the actress herself, is mtf trans. However, Halberstam is careful to stress the necessity of coalition - while the Butlerian production of precarious genders allows for the establishment of a subculture, Halberstam claims, to truly enact radical political change, one must participate in “prolonged, intensive political and cultural struggle against real enemies”<sup>47</sup>. For a political movement to be successful, members of the precariat<sup>48</sup> must relinquish some of their identity politics to form a coalition under which they are united as a singular political force - in the case of Halberstam’s examples, the banners of transgender and transsexual. As discussed in Susan Stryker’s essay “(De)Subjugated Knowledges”, the term transgender refers to “somebody who permanently changed social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation”<sup>49</sup>, whereas transsexual is more biologically based -

---

<sup>45</sup> Halberstam. "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM..." 301.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 303

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 306

<sup>48</sup> Precariat referencing the group constituted by individuals made precarious for similar reasons - in this case, gender nonconformists made precarious for their inability to satisfy social expectations for gender.

<sup>49</sup> Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction..." 4

transsexuals “permanently changed genitals”<sup>50</sup> to achieve their social transformation. Halberstam argues that if transgender and transsexual individuals maintain the political division between their different approaches to changing their gender, they will be unable to amass enough political power to enact actual change. Thus, Halberstam, in exploring the terminology that Butler gestures towards in her work, directs the precariat towards a means for meaningful political empowerment. That is, after non-subjects determine and develop terminology for themselves and achieve basic subjecthood, Halberstam argues that they should unite politically, perhaps under the banner of gender nonconformists as with transgender and transsexual individuals, to achieve maximum political clout.

As Halberstam directs the ‘subject’, so to speak, and advises them to enact political change, he also directs those who study the subject. He stresses the importance of “going[ing] back into subcultural venues to find out how [trans identity] terms arise... [how] they’re contested; and how they resolve in relation to the formation of new forms of identity and new communities”<sup>51</sup>. He also explicitly predicts the production and emergence of new terminology to “delineate what the current terms cannot”<sup>52</sup> - that is, a potential gap exists within the terminology, occupied by trans practices that continue to emerge and change and will eventually escape current terminology. The process of repeatedly returning to study trans practices, according to Halberstam, is one such way to address the gap between established terminology and emerging identities, and one way to secure ‘specificity’ in definitions, without which identities would be blurred, misread, and overlooked. As transgender individuals are still sometimes misread as deviant cisgender individuals, so nonbinary individuals are blurred into

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Williams, Jeffrey J. "The Drag of Masculinity: An Interview with Judith "Jack" Halberstam." *Symploke* 19, no. 1-2 (2011): 377

<sup>52</sup> Halberstam. "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM..." 306.

the primarily binarized language of transgender individuals, obscuring their identities.

Halberstam thus calls for the creation of that ‘legitimizing lexicon of gender complexity’ that Butler mentions, as a preventative measure against identity erasure and to bridge the gap between old and new identities.

However, despite this fairly open-ended method for accounting for emergent gender identities, Halberstam still claims a restriction on legitimate gender identities. In response to the criticism that “the desire to celebrate and proliferate individual performances as a way to destabilize ‘gender’ at large is based on liberal humanist assumptions of self-determination”<sup>53</sup>, Halberstam claims that “transgender discourse in no way necessarily argues that people should just pick up new genders and eliminate old ones or proliferate genders at will simply because gendering is available as a self-determining practice. Rather, transgender discourse asks only that we recognize the nonnormative genders already in circulation and at present under construction”<sup>54</sup>. Criticism such as the above and other, more informal claims, often claim that allowing for the free exploration of gender or for the unrestricted creation of gender identities will result in gender becoming meaningless, or that the exploration itself is meaningless. Halberstam’s response attempts to draw a separation between transgender discourse and the ‘willful proliferation of gender’, and situates the fears of Hausman (and much of the public) in the latter category. However, I take exception to this division in my research, and argue that Halberstam, by drawing this division, is artificially limiting transgender discourse. Halberstam essentially argues only for the existence of such transgender identities as predicted by Butler - he limits the scope of potential genders, with the effect of simply moving the line of

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 303

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

normative/nonnormative gender to a further point, rather than challenging the basis upon which the line stands. While this defense of transgender discourse allows for the justification and validation of transgender discourse, in legitimating one form of trans discourse and not another, Halberstam invalidates other forms of gender identity that are highly self-determined and often disparaged within older trans communities. Thus, although Halberstam predicts and defends one way of speaking about gender, he unintentionally predicts against the emergence of other ways, which I argue will be contested by the results of my analysis of nonbinary practices on Tumblr.

From this review of Butler and Halberstam's theories, we find a variety of concepts useful for analysing trans or gender nonconformist discourse, as well as specific frameworks in which to integrate our findings. Butler creates the space of the precariat, and places at risk the problem of becoming a non-subject, or being 'culturally incoherent'. In addition to positioning the gender nonconformists as being non-subjects, she also establishes a framework for mediating this relationship of the coherent/incoherent. She claims that the non-subject is able to negotiate with existing power frameworks to gain cultural coherency, through a process of recitation and altered recitation of existing cultural norms. Halberstam similarly prescribes a path to power through political coalition, and evokes Foucauldian reverse discourses to achieve precisely that negotiation of positioning. Halberstam then predicts the emergence of new gender terminologies, and prescribes for the careful observance of such practices; however, he enforces a division between legitimate trans practices and the willful proliferation of genders, against claims that the latter is vacuous, self-serving, and humanist. By situating my data within these frameworks, I am able to productively frame the practices of my target group - nonbinary individuals on Tumblr - and argue that while new gender terms are indeed following the Butlerian practice of altered reproduction for the purpose of eventual political coalition, as Halberstam predicts, others

deviate from the expected path. In particular, I argue that the production of fantastic and null gender terms, which could be read as the feared willful proliferation of genders due to their operating in different contexts than new gender terms, is actually a highly productive source of meaning-making, and should not be overlooked when accounting for trans practices and identities. While fantastic and null gender terms are not directly analogous to existing gender terms, as new gender terms are, they serve to denote other perceived aspects of gender, such as the potentially fluid nature of gender, and the culturally-dependent aspect of gender identity.

### **Methodology**

The corpus making up the data was constructed over the course of the past year, through an archiving process that allows for examination of the data without loss of privacy on the part of bloggers on Tumblr. The archive is hosted on a private Tumblr blog, which is password-protected so posts preserved on the archive are not accessible to other users. The posts themselves are manually archived from searching within the following tags on Tumblr: #nonbinary, #agender, #gender, #trans, #nonbinarycuties, #genderfluid, #queer, and #nb, and are archived if they explicitly referenced the gender of the nonbinary user (ex: “I am X”). While the archiving process was not exhaustive, the corpus captures over a hundred instances of nonbinary gender identity work, and the depths of the tags, which are several hundred posts long, indicate the pervasiveness of the practices that I am analyzing. In addition to searching the tags, I archived posts as I came across them, with the effect of drawing results from the 1000+ bloggers whom I follow. After amassing the first fifty posts, I created a tagging system that described the category of gender identity talk, a system which I describe below. By creating a private tumblr, the posts that are to be referenced here can be accessed indefinitely, even if the original user has since changed their url. In addition to having data security, it also allowed for the

implementation of a custom tagging system, which makes accessing sorted posts for comparison and analysis much easier. Last of all, hosting the posts on a private tumblr makes it possible to have a stable url for each post, thus enabling easy reference for citation. Although it is impossible to guarantee web-hosted information, creating a private tumblr makes it possible to bypass some common web-related concerns.<sup>55</sup>

### **Distinguishing the Data**

The first category of gender terminology is ‘new gender terms’, named as such because they function as new entries in the existing gender lexicon. New gender terms most closely follow Butler and Halberstam’s predictions about emerging trans terminology, and they are used in ways similar to how current gender terms, like male and female are used. Some examples of new terms include: “genderqueer”, “transmasculine”, “nonbinary” and “demigirl”<sup>56</sup>, and although they may be unfamiliar to the public, they are relatively linguistically easy to parse. This ease of use is reinforced by their social similarity to existing terms - essentially, they operate within the accepted gender paradigm, and violate only the binary aspect of normative gender. The gender described by new gender terms is intrinsic to the user’s identity, and stable regardless of time or context. They are also used in the same contexts as existing terms, making them relatively easy to integrate on a social level. New gender terms are constructed through the combination of terms from the current accepted gender vocabulary, such as ‘boy’, ‘feminine’ or ‘dude’, with derivative prefixes to constitute new terms with compositionally derived meanings. That is, the meanings of the constituents of the terms are additive, and modify each other. Due to the easy integration that new gender terms afford, they are considered supplementary to the

---

<sup>55</sup> Thesis Quotes. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/>

<sup>56</sup> Thesis Citations. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/tagged/new>

current gender lexicon, and minimally challenge the current gender paradigm. Of the existing gender categories, new gender terms most explicitly name the ‘gender’ of the user, and offer a way for nonbinary users to represent themselves and their gender identity without overly disrupting the existing system of gender.

In the context of the theory, new gender terms constitute the “new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity”<sup>57</sup> - they are the means of signification through which nonbinary users are identifying themselves and each other, rendering each other ‘legible’ and ‘authentic’ to themselves. They form the basis for the construction of an in-group, made up of other nonbinary users, which allows the terms to gain traction through repetition and affirmation by other nonbinary users. In addition to in-group legitimacy, the way in which the new terms are developed can arguably cause members of the target group to become more ‘knowable’ to members of the dominant out-group, both through their altered reiteration of ‘real’ identity terms and through their function as gap-fillers for naming previously ‘unintelligible’ identities. An example of how these terms are constructed and function can be found in the following description by one Tumblr user, presented in an introduction post along with a picture of their face: “[I’m a]... nonbinary/ bigender-queer demigirl”<sup>58</sup>. “Demigirl” is one instance of ‘altered reproduction’, as the user cites the historical meaning of ‘girl’ and prefixes it with the modifier ‘demi-’, meaning ‘half’, thus evoking a sense of a half-girl. ‘Girl’ already occupies a category known to the broader society, and so ‘demigirl’ presents itself as a breaking of the boundaries of that category - simultaneously ‘girl’ and ‘not-girl’. “Bigender-queer” is a more complex iterating of the same process of testing and breaking boundaries of established categories, combining the

---

<sup>57</sup> Butler. *Undoing Gender*. 31.

<sup>58</sup> "nonbinarycuties-hey-yall-im-actually-feeling" Thesis Citations. April 22, 2014.



term ‘genderqueer’, referencing a queered experiencing of gender, with the concept of bi-gender, or simultaneous two-gendering. It also functions to include in the concept of a gender identity the concept of flexibility and instability, or the blurring of categories being inherent in the user’s identity. “Nonbinary” similarly functions as a contrast to the binary system of gender by referencing the concept of binarism and negating it with the prefix ‘non-’. Another example of new gender terms can be found in the following description - like the first example, this description was attached to an introduction post made in the nonbinary selfie community ‘nonbinarycuties’. The post reads “The name is R----, gender non-conforming trans masculine demiboy, they/them pronouns”<sup>59</sup> and includes their name and preferred pronouns along with their gender. The first term that they use, “gender non-conforming” is descriptive of their gender identity - it does not conform to expectations for gender. R---- also describes themselves as “trans masculine”, which references the existing terms ‘transgender’ and ‘masculine’. By citing transgender, which is ordinarily used to describe a social gender transition from one side of the binary to another, and combining it with the descriptor ‘masculine’ rather than ‘male’, R---- disrupts the expectation that they are changing from one gender to another. Rather, they are changing their social gender from one that isn’t masculine to one that is masculine - they are masculine, but not necessarily male. “Demiboy” reinforces this partial male-ness, and as with ‘demigirl’, R---- asserts a partial affinity with a socially accepted gender, ‘boy’, while disavowing the constraints of ‘boy’-ness. R----, in the end, is not quite within the constraints of the binary gender system; however, they are able to describe their gender by reproducing and altering terms referencing the gender binary to better describe their actual gender. This practice of altered reproduction of accepted terminology shown in the previous two examples functions,

---

<sup>59</sup> "yooo-whats-up" Thesis Citations. December 29, 2014.

according to Butler, as a method by which non-normative gender identities can seek validation and integration. By explicitly mentioning their gender identity, the gender of nonbinary users becomes, literally, legible to any Tumblr user who sees the post - regardless of whether they are in the in-group of nonbinary users or not. Thus, it allows nonbinary individuals to gain visibility, after which they have a grounds from which to propose personhood under the state. Additionally, by making themselves visible and legible to other nonbinary users, nonbinary Tumblr users can form communities, share resources, and otherwise support and preserve the validity of their identities.

The second category of gender terms, unlike new gender terms, is minimally public and specific to the individual. These terms, labeled by me as “fantastic gender terms”, reference their components from literary, cultural, and narrative sources, extracting terms rich with cultural history and imbued with valences of gender complicated beyond simple gender identity to compose semi- contradictory phrases that specify temporary identities which do not fully conform to any of the component parts. Unlike the new gender terms, the meaning of fantastical terms don’t benefit from the productive combination of their contradictory parts. Rather, the phrases have highly ambiguous, non-concrete meanings. These forms of signification often connote gender, but are not explicitly descriptive of gender, and carry other dimensions of meaning - they actualize a different aspect of gender identity, free from the structure implicit to taxonomies, and demonstrative of the emerging instability of gender identity as experienced by some nonbinary Tumblr users. This lack of concreteness is further realized by the potentially limitless corpora from which component parts may be drawn, resulting in a gross lack of standardization-of-use across users, unlike the more restricted (and therefore more widely applicable and relatable) new gender terms. In addition to the seemingly limitless possibilities for

arrangements of fantastic gender terms, they also change from use to use, user to user, further gesturing to the fluctuation of gender that they signify. ‘Fantastical’ terms, while difficult to distinguish from arbitrary self-namings akin to those used by children at play, tend to follow a pattern: they modify a gendered word (such as queen, boy, prince) that, while gendered, isn’t conventionally used to describe a gender or sexual identity, with differently-gendered or gender-neutral terms. Examples of ‘fantastical’ terms include: “little miss cat prince”, “anime robot boi”, “boy princess”, and “small witch boy”<sup>60</sup>. When a user calls themselves a “small witch boy”<sup>61</sup>, their language choice evokes several meanings simultaneously. “Witch” is a strongly gendered term marked for ‘female’, but the production of the word also derives meaning from the history of the word as it is used by the Norm, carrying connotations of the occult, malignancy, and mysticism - the user is marking themselves as female, but also as otherworldly and pagan. “Boy” operates on a simpler level, in that it is more clearly associated with gender, however the deliberate choice of ‘boy’ over ‘man’ or ‘male’ connotes not only the immaturity of youth, but also the historical attachment to ‘boy’ - recklessness, potential, and dominance. By modifying ‘boy’ with ‘witch’, the user suggests that their gender is contradictory and impossible to understand, while simultaneously suggesting an otherworldly, non-human aspect of their identity. Similarly, when user m--s-- posts, captioning a series of selfies, “i put red lipstick on right when i wake up because i’m a celestial trans femme god”<sup>62</sup>, they are claiming themselves as ‘trans femme’, which is a new gender term when presented alone that describes the person’s gender presentation, but modifying it with ‘celestial’ and ‘god’. Both of the modifier words are culturally rich, and imply that the user is a superior, otherworldly being. Again, although viewers

---

<sup>60</sup> Thesis Citations. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/tagged/fantastic>

<sup>61</sup> "wyldenfennec-witch-boy-level-reaching-dangerous" Thesis Citations. January 21, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> "mad-sad-tender-i-put-red-lipstick-on-right-when" Thesis Citations. February 25, 2015.

of their post know that m--s-- presents femininely, they are unable to determine what m--s--'s 'actual' gender is - what they would put down on a survey, so to speak. The user's cultural background, as well as that of the viewer, both play a role in shaping the meaning of the fantastic gender term as well - an Asian blogger's 'dragon' is significantly different from a Western blogger's dragon. Thus, using fantastic gender terms can be ways in which nonbinary users express cultural aspects of their gender, as their cultural background almost definitely influences their social perception of gender identities. Although users of fantastic gender terms are perfectly reproducing single terms, unlike the altered reproduction of terms used in constructing new gender terms, the meaning for this form of signification emerges from the 'altered reproduction' of contradictory juxtaposition. Fantastic gender terms also manage to capture the elusiveness of gender for some nonbinary people, who may find it fulfilling to identify with non-human beings in their struggle with attaining personhood.

The illegibility of fantastic gender terms is intentional, in part because they are used to describe a gender identity that is subjective to the user, and contextualized by all the factors affecting the user in the time of posting. Fantastic gender terms are ephemeral and personal, often used only on a user's personal blog, and reflect the user's perception of their gender and being in that moment. While it may reflect their 'actual' gender, as described by new gender terms, fantastic gender terms are also able to reflect the user's mindset at the time of posting - are they feeling powerful, or disconnected from the world? Are they performing their gender using a particular cultural trope? All of these aspects that make up an individual's perceived social gender can be referenced in fantastic gender terms, while new gender terms can only denote the explicitly gendered aspect of their identity. In addition to the flexibility afforded to nonbinary bloggers by fantastic gender terms in describing their gender identity, these terms also allow for

the discussion of gender identities that are indistinct and transitory. By referencing terms that imply, but do not explicitly denote a gender, such as ‘witch’ and ‘god’, or by juxtaposing multiple terms with gender implications, nonbinary bloggers are able to capture the conflicted aspect of their identity as neither a man or woman, while distancing the deterministic aspect of gendered terms from the referents. While having an illegible, indistinct social gender, as perceived by members of the out-group, is often detrimental for nonbinary individuals, the semi-exclusive use of Tumblr as a deployment site for fantastic gender terms means that it is almost always members of the in-group who see fantastic gender terms. Thus, while fantastic gender terms can be construed as the willful proliferation of gender that Halberstam fears, as they are not as socially productive as new gender terms, they can serve as a sort of in-group discourse, in which nonbinary Tumblr users articulate more nuanced interpretations of their gender than new gender terms allow for. I argue that, through the use of fantastic gender terms, nonbinary Tumblr users can articulate a different model of gender than the one sustained by new gender terms, that is very conceptual, highly subjective, and uniquely suited to in-group discussions of gender, whereas new gender terms are meant to be socially accessible.

The third, last major category is that of null gender terms. Unlike new and fantastic gender terms, null gender terms reference a single object or phrase, rather than the combination of multiple objects. As the most abstract way of talking about gender, null gender terms are used to express nonbinary users’ frustration with aspects of the dominant gender narrative. The conventional perspective on gender is that it is readily obvious, affects intrinsic aspects of the bearer’s identity, and should be legible to those outside of the bearer. Null gender terms rebel against these assumptions on all levels, prioritizing instead the right of the user to ‘deny’ access to their gender. On the internet, in particular, users can often control how much of their identity

is revealed to other users. Thus, someone who has not stated their gender anywhere on their blog may find inquiries after their gender irrelevant to their online persona, or frustrating. To convey their frustrations with this perceived necessity for having a ‘legible’ gender then, nonbinary users may use null gender terms.

Null gender terms take the form of single statements, describing a single image or idea, and may be juxtaposed with a relevant visual. The corpus from which the term draws images is limitless - literally anything can be a null gender term - and can range from descriptions such as “the creepy mouse animatronic in the corner” to concepts such as “Mind the Gap” to statements, like “No.”<sup>63</sup>, with complementary images. Due to the infinite corpus of possible terms, null gender terms, like fantastic gender terms, are highly unstandardized in their usage, and there is no group consensus use. However, unlike ‘fantastic’ terms, which derive meaning from the juxtaposition of contradictory identities, null gender terms have completely opaque meanings due to their lack of provided context or framework with which to understand the null gender term, and their lack of reference to a pre-established form of identity. Essentially, when nonbinary users use null gender terms to respond to inquiries about their gender, they are giving an incoherent answer that denotes nothing about their gender identity. By refusing to reference culturally-accepted forms of identity, null gender terms reframe gender to exist outside of the user’s identity, and thus fail to answer queries for user-gender-identity. The act of framing an image-phrase that has no meaningful connotations of gender identity as “my gender” may seem initially nonsensical; however, it is a way through which nonbinary individuals can protest the social expectations surrounding gender, while revealing nothing about their own gender.

---

<sup>63</sup> Thesis Citations. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/tagged/void>

An example of null gender terms in use is referenced in a post from the blog *genderoftheday*, which collects and creates instances of null gender terms, primarily for humorous purposes. In this post, we see the anonymously asked question “are you a grill[sic] or a boy?”<sup>64</sup>. The answer, an image of two fictional characters featuring the caption “We are Sonic Heroes!” is functionally meaningless - it fails to directly answer the question on a syntactic level, and on a semantic level it fails to provide the information requested. The asker is expecting an answer on the same level as that of new gender terms, and is rebuffed by a sentence that contains no indication of gender. It is gender-void. In responding in this way, the answerer refuses the right of knowing their gender to the asker, and refuses to allow their gender to act as a determiner for their identity. Similarly, on another blog, *f----* is asked “which direction r u transgender?”<sup>65</sup>. The question, while using informal and incorrect language, is clearly asking whether the user is ftm or mtf - which direction, so to speak, are they moving across the gender binary. *f----*’s answer, “I mostly transgend to the northeast” only nominally answers the question. While *f----* provides a direction, they deliberately misinterpret the question and offer a cardinal direction, rather than one referencing the gender binary. In stating that they ‘transgend to the northeast’, *f----* is using a form of null gender term, in that their answer is meaningless for determining any information about their gender. Again, in responding with a ‘genderless’ answer, *f----* is able to acknowledge that they have received the question while simultaneously criticizing the question’s intent. Thus, I argue that, through the adoption of null gender terms, nonbinary users are able to negotiate the degree to which gender affects their identity, especially

---

<sup>64</sup> "genderoftheday-todays-gender-of-the-day" Thesis Citations. January 21, 2015.

<sup>65</sup> "which-direction-r-u-transgender" Thesis Citations. April 05, 2015.

as they resist the inclination of members of the out-group to gender them (and therefore potentially apply preconceptions of gender to them).

Although all of these ways of speaking about gender differ in the contexts in which they are used, and in the ways that they produce meaning, they are all means through which nonbinary or gender nonconforming people can talk about their gender identity, in ways that previously may have required reliance on a less inclusive, binary model of gender in language. Due to the differing contexts of use, single nonbinary users can and do use all varieties of gender terms to communicate different frameworks of gender in which they are currently placing themselves. New gender terms are supplementary, and allow nonbinary individuals to have gender terms for themselves like the gender terms available to those who are binary. The use of new gender terms allows users to accurately claim their gender identity, but also allows for the possibility of political coalition and systematic integration through the establishing of nonbinary spaces and communities. Fantastic gender terms allow nonbinary individuals to express the multifaceted aspects of their gender identity, that may be obscured by the use of more explicit gender language such as new gender terms. They allow for temporal and subjective expressions of how the user is experiencing their gender, and also enable users to express gendered affiliations without necessarily committing to being that gender - one can be 'boy-ish', without having to be a boy. On the other hand, null gender terms are a way for nonbinary users to reject the current expectations surrounding gender, by refusing the imperative of being known or 'legible'. Null gender terms gesture to the privatization of gender identity, and are reactions to the often voyeuristic impulse of out-group people to ask after non-normative people's gender. It frees the nonbinary user, who is a point of gross curiosity to many, from the imperative of their gender, and allows them to self-determine how they are perceived. From this analysis, it



becomes clear that there is a purpose to the ‘willful proliferation of genders’ that Halberstam decries - both fantastic and null genders may initially read as arbitrary demands for attention, or meaningless self-indulgence, however they merely operate in different contexts from new gender terms, and by analyzing them within these contexts, their meanings can emerge. Even the mere popularity of fantastic gender terms and null gender terms, of which there are easily thousands of instances on Tumblr, hints at the social significance that they hold for nonbinary users, even though it may not be immediately obvious. Although fantastic and null gender terms may not be as socially productive offline as new gender terms are, they still are means through which nonbinary genders are expressed online. An important point to note is that many aspects of these ways of speaking are dependent upon the idea of self-determination. As with most identity politics, empowerment comes from the ability to name oneself adequately. In the case of nonbinary gender identities, while some ways of speaking, notably new gender terms, may be more ‘productive’ both politically and functionally, other ways of speaking still have value as they allow for the discussion of gender that nonbinary individuals necessitate. By virtue of their existence, the currently popular, binary system of gender necessarily struggles. As such, new systems of gender, that can accommodate the existence of these individuals, are arising across different platforms and with different levels of social permeation. The establishment and validation of these terms then is a means through which nonbinary individuals are able to be accounted for and adequately described.

### **Implications of the Data**

The implications of my account of nonbinary practices on Tumblr are both practical and theoretical - by accounting for these practices, I both validate their usage and record them so that they can be situated within existing accounts of transgender discourse. The emergence of

increasingly descriptive terminology has been long predicted - Butler discusses the need for such terminology to overcome precarious states, while Halberstam directly predicts new gender terms that “delineate what the current terms cannot”<sup>66</sup>. The development of new gender terms is reminiscent of past processes of naming, including the emergence of lesbian and transgender as valid identities, and while difficult to create, is not impossible. Indeed, it’s historically preceded. The main point of interest, however, is when the data departs from the theory.

Halberstam’s separation between transgender discourse and the ‘willful proliferation of gender’, while useful for validating the position of new gender terms in transgender discourse, artificially limits transgender discourse and frames fantastic and null gender terms as being meaningless. I argue that, given my account of the purpose of using fantastic and null gender terms, these ways of speaking about gender deserve a place in transgender discourse. My account of these terms positions them as means of meaning-making, like new gender terms, and simply manifested in different contexts. Fantastic gender terms can be used to express the sociocultural aspects of a person’s gender, and enable nonbinary users to talk about their subjective experience of gender in the moment, while null gender terms are used to criticize the current model of gender. Both of these ways of speaking, while not necessarily as politically productive as new gender terms, allow nonbinary Tumblr users to talk about aspects of their gender that are not covered by the explicit, relatively formal, new gender terms. Thus, while these initial claims are only in their formative stages, as the ways of speaking about gender shift with the increasing visibility of nonbinary people, we must be careful not to blithely dismiss the wide variety of gender talk as it emerges. Through immersion in the subcommunities, as Halberstam prescribed, I was able to distinguish patterns of use and analyze them to develop a formal account of

---

<sup>66</sup> Halberstam. "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM..." 306.

informal nonbinary discourse. Although these gender categories and their corresponding models of gender are sure to evolve in the future, and even have evolved between the current writing of this paper and the initial conception of this course of study, it is important to pause and reflect, so that those exterior to the movements of the online nonbinary communities are exposed to their practices, and those within the movement are validated and acknowledged.

On the more practical level, having a formal, academic account of the value of these nonbinary practices, rather than a Tumblr-held discussion, can go a long way towards reassuring the nonbinary users using these terms by validating the terms as meaningful. Nonbinary Tumblr users, while able to connect with each other for support and discussion, often appear to find support only on Tumblr, and insecurity about the legitimacy of their identities abounds in the form of asks such as those featured on the tumblr nonbinary-support. One such ask reads “For a while now I've felt like I'm nb but I'm worried that if I tell people, they'll just think I'm labeling myself for attention, especially since I'm not dysphoric and the way I dress is not what they think being nb is”<sup>67</sup>, while another reads “So I've finally found some pronouns I'm comfortable with and one of my very best friends flat out told me they're not going to respect them”<sup>68</sup>. Both of these questions express concerns that are related to problems of social legitimacy, and in both cases, the asker struggles with the potential that their identity will be read as illegitimate by offline people, outside of the relative safe space of Tumblr. Ideally, the work done in my analysis of nonbinary practices can contribute to existing resources through which nonbinary individuals can ‘prove’ the validity of their identities to others. In addition to validating new gender terms, my work also reframes more creative gendering practices, described as fantastic and null gender

---

<sup>67</sup> "for-a-while-now-ive-felt-like-im-nb-but-im" Nonbinary Support. April 22, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> "so-ive-finally-found-some-pronouns-im" Nonbinary Support. May 14, 2014.

terms, as being productive and meaningful. This can be reassuring to users of these terms, who face criticism both online and offline for ‘making things up’ or ‘making a joke out of gender’, and validates their practices for formal study.

That said, despite the potential productiveness of these various ways of speaking about gender, a significant portion of them are still situated in the online and as such are restricted by the reality of the offline, physical world. Although nonbinary individuals can seek validation online, and can discuss the finer nuances of their gender online, the transgender movement for social equality and visibility has yet to fully take effect. While the visibility of transgender individuals to the general public has increased significantly over the past ten years, the public understanding of transgenderism is primarily constrained within the binary. The validity of the most commonly accepted gender-neutral pronoun they/them is still debated in public forums such as the classroom, indicating the difficulty that the public is having with accepting nonbinary genders. Thus, although nonbinary individuals may denote the complexities of their gender identity online, they often must simplify their gender identity to ‘nonbinary’ in offline contexts, and rally behind the umbrella term of ‘nonbinary’. Halberstam’s recommendations for motivating successful political change really come into play here - to effect significant social and political change, multiple identities must compromise and form a coalition, in order to amass enough political weight. The macro nature of social change, which often lags far behind individual practices and cultural theory, necessitates the compromising of the ‘micro’ nature of nonbinary divisions on Tumblr. As such, current nonbinary, offline concerns include the necessitating of gender-neutral bathrooms, the recognition of nonbinary gender as a valid gender, and the funding of medical treatment for gender dysphoria, which is a common problem for nonbinary individuals. In the future, as transgender and nonbinary rights movements advance,

the finer details of nonbinary identity, such as those accounted for here, can take priority and gain widespread recognition. Until then, they remain constrained within the limits of the online.

## Bibliography

- "About." Tumblr. February 2007. <https://www.tumblr.com/about>.
- "Also-im-not-saying-you-cant-do-anything-for." We Shouldn't Have to Be Telling You This. March 7, 2015. <http://thisisnotjapan.tumblr.com/post/113002400782/also-im-not-saying-you-cant-do-anything-for>.
- "for-a-while-now-ive-felt-like-im-nb-but-im" Nonbinary Support. April 22, 2015. <http://nonbinary-support.tumblr.com/post/117126731642/>
- "genderoftheday-todays-gender-of-the-day" Thesis Citations. January 21, 2015. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/post/108722172128/>
- "Hello!, I Once Heard Somebody Say the Term 'boi'..." GENDERQUEER AND NON-BINARY IDENTITIES -. June 4, 2013. <http://genderqueerid.com/post/52144260437/hello-i-once-heard-somebody-say-the-term-boi>.
- "Introduction: The Guarded Body." In *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, edited by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, 11. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- "mad-sad-tender-i-put-red-lipstick-on-right-when" Thesis Citations. February 25, 2015. [http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/post/112078874098/mad-sad-tender-i-put-red-lipstick-on-right-when#=\\_](http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/post/112078874098/mad-sad-tender-i-put-red-lipstick-on-right-when#=_)
- "nonbinarycuties-hey-yall-im-actually-feeling" Thesis Citations. April 22, 2014. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/post/117105201633>
- "so-ive-finally-found-some-pronouns-im" Nonbinary Support. May 14, 2014. <http://nonbinary-support.tumblr.com/post/85748303093/>
- "The 1960s-70s American Feminist Movement: Breaking Down Barriers for Women." Tavaana.
- "The Gay Rights Movement since the Mid-20th Century." Encyclopedia Britannica Online.
- "What Are Your Opinions on #asianinvasion?" Angry Asian Girls United. March 7, 2015. <http://angryasiangirlsunited.tumblr.com/post/113004328651/what-are-your-opinions-on-asianinvasion>.
- "which-direction-r-u-transgender" Thesis Citations. April 05, 2015. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/post/11555397782/>
- "wylderfennec-witch-boy-level-reaching-dangerous" Thesis Citations. January 21, 2015. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/post/108720260853/>

- "yooo-whats-up" Thesis Citations. December 29, 2014.  
<http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/post/117107209633>
- Bergado, Gabe. "How #BlackOutDay Is Empowering People of Color." *The Daily Dot*. March 6, 2015.
- Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Butler, Judith. "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics." *AIBR* 4, no. 3 (2009): ii.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity: Tenth Anniversary Edition*. New York: Routledge, 2002. xiv-v
- . *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 206.
- Feinberg, Leslie. *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come*. New York, NY: World View Forum, 1992.
- Fuck Yeah Queer WoC. <http://fyeahqwoc.tumblr.com/>.
- Halberstam, Judith. "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 287-310.
- Laqueur, Thomas Walter. *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990. 150.
- Petrow, Steven. "From 'he' and 'she' to 'they' and 'ze,' a Shift to More Gender-neutral Pronouns." *Washington Post*. October 27, 2014.
- Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2000. 196.
- Safronova, Valeriya. "Millennials and the Age of Tumblr Activism." *The New York Times*. December 20, 2014.
- Shelley, Martha. *Gay Is Good*. New York: Gay Flames, 1970.
- Smith, Cooper. "Tumblr Offers Advertisers A Major Advantage: Young Users, Who Spend Tons Of Time On The Site." *Business Insider*. December 13, 2013
- Stone, Sandy. "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto." In *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, 280-304. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Stryker, Susan. "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 4. Vol. 1. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Thesis Citations. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/tagged/fantastic>

———. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/tagged/new>

———. <http://genderquotes.tumblr.com/tagged/void>

Townsend, Megan. "Timeline: A Look Back at the History of Transgender Visibility." GLAAD. November 19, 2012.

Williams, Jeffrey J. "The Drag of Masculinity: An Interview with Judith "Jack" Halberstam." *Symploke* 19, no. 1-2 (2011): 377