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# Not Trans Enough: The Intersections of Whiteness & Nonbinary Gender Identity

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“Not Trans Enough: The Intersections of Whiteness & Nonbinary Gender Identity”

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## **Introduction**

Since the institutionalization of transgender in the 1990s, transgender studies has exploded in sociological literature. In the past twenty years since its conception, numerous works published in the trans studies field have rapidly become outdated among the changing social landscape, and yet, trans studies has yet to devote any significant attention to nonbinary gender identity. Nonbinary, or not identifying as either a man or a woman, can constitute either a distinct gender identity or act as an umbrella terms for all those who fall outside of the gender binary. In this study, I attempt to lay the groundwork for nonbinary gender identity to have space in the growing field of trans studies by looking into how nonbinary identity is affected by intersectional paradigms. By intersectionality, I am referring to the crossroads of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other modes of identity, which cannot be understood as discrete categories, and must be understood collectively (McCall, 2005). In my study, I specifically look into whiteness as a racial category that influences specific identity experiences. Drawing on interview data from both white people and people of color, I examine how whiteness and nonbinary gender identity interact in identity formation and how this affects the lived experiences of my respondents.

I frame this study with Emi Koyama's concept of transfeminism. Transfeminism, Koyama states, "is not about taking over existing feminists institutions. Instead, it extends and advances feminism as a whole through our own liberation and coalition work with all others. It stands up for all trans and non-trans women alike and asks non-trans women to stand up for trans women in return. Transfeminism embodies feminist coalition politics in which women from different backgrounds stand up for each other, because if

we do not stand up for each other, nobody will” (Koyama, 2003:245). I use transfeminism as a guiding framework for my study in order to highlight that “diversity is our strength” (Koyama, 2003:244). The goal of my study is not to divide nonbinary identified people and trans-identified people, but rather to advocate for coalition building that recognizes that we make decisions “in the context of the patriarchal binary gender system” (Koyama, 2003:246). Even though I analyze my respondents through a lens that is highly critical of race, I do this in order to “confront social and political institutions that inhibit or narrow our individual choices,” (Koyama, 2003:246) rather than to impose any moral judgments on my respondent’s decision-making. In the end, I too am fighting to build alliances between all marginalized communities.

## Literature Review: The History Of Transgender

In order to understand my respondents' experiences, it is important to understand how the landscape of transgender has changed over time. Even the meaning of the word "transgender" has changed drastically over the last 40 years. Virginia Prince's term, "transgenderist," introduced sometime in the 1970s, referred to individuals like herself who lived full time as a gender they were not prescribed at birth, but without surgical intervention. This separated 'transgender' and 'transsexual' into two separate categories, as well as distinguished a separate category from cross dressers, which rooted 'transgender' away from sexual deviance and towards perceived normality (Valentine, 2007). In the 1990s, Holly Boswell adapted the term to signify an alternative to a binary mode of gender (Valentine, 2007). Sandy Stone, another trans woman, echoed this call in *The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto* (1992), describing a similar move away from binary gender categories and instead advocated for transgender as a "genre" of identity. Both of these radical notions of being transgender, however, were quickly overshadowed by a third conceptualization of transgender, which was put forth by Leslie Feinberg in their "Transgender Liberation," published in 1992. Feinberg created the transgender collective, often referred to as the trans umbrella or the trans spectrum (Valentine, 2007), and this collective sense of transgender has permeated more thoroughly in the United States' social consciousness than any other definition. This is due to an increasing amount of transgender activism and larger communication platforms, such as the Internet, which created a groundswell of publications, intellectual, and political projects (Valentine, 2007). These projects specifically relied on coding transgender as a collective identity to be read as socially viable, similar to the ways that

feminist movement, the civil rights movement, and the gay and lesbian rights movement gained traction (Valentine, 2007). However, despite this fact, “transgender” is still under dispute, as discussed by Susan Stryker—“the border wars that transgender activists fought within queer communities of the 1990s had important consequences for shaping contemporary transgender politics and theorizing”—these border wars carved out transgender as a distinct identity category, like race or class, rather than a deviant sexuality, and this paved the way for more radical and intersectional forms of activism (Stryker, 2008). Valentine postulates that many feel the institutionalization of the term, which Stryker is referencing, has led to certain inclusions and exclusions, which I will now discuss.

Depending on who is doing the defining, transgender can mean a multitude of things. Valentine contests that these definitions produce a range of tensions in the inclusion and exclusion of certain identities under the transgender umbrella, and that these tensions have important implications. One tension to note is the instances of inclusion of butch lesbian woman and effeminate gay men. Several scholars, including Henry Rubin, include these individuals under the trans umbrella, even though many of these people do not label themselves as transgender. Yet another tension exists with the exclusion of FTM and female-bodied masculine people. Many scholars, such as Viviane Namaste, never explicitly mark crossdressers and transsexuals as FTM or MTF. These exclusions, when put in conjunction with drag queens, reassert the male-to-female trans experience as the center (Valentine, 2007). These inconsistencies give rise to a tension among what the transgender umbrella actually entails, and the narrowing of transgender via institutionalization is vital to understanding the daily grapplings with gender that my

respondents describe. Each of my respondents explained their own gender and how they conceptualized transgender differently in ways that are directly relational to the institutionalization and subsequent narrowing of the definition of the term transgender, and these differences in narrative directly impact their daily lives in various ways.

These inconsistencies also push transsexual women to the center of the trans umbrella while giving the impression of a collectivity of trans individuals (Valentine, 2007), and for assigned female at birth (AFAB) individuals, this creates a whole new slew of negotiations to consider. FTM identity and lesbian identity underwent similar historical processes of narrowing due to the institutionalization of these terms. Prior to the 1970s, MTF transsexuals hugely outnumbered FTM transsexuals; some historians cited as large as a one-to-eight-ratio difference between FTM and MTF transsexuals (H. Rubin, 2003). However, during the 1970s, this gap significantly narrowed, all the way down to a one-to-one difference in the number of FTM and MTF transsexuals seeking gender affirmation surgery (H. Rubin, 2003). This narrowing was the result of the identity work lesbians underwent in the 1970s in order to align themselves with a mainstream feminist movement of primarily heterosexual middle class white women so they could be perceived as more politically viable (H. Rubin, 2003). In order to accomplish this, lesbians constructed the lesbian-feminist. Leading this movement was Rita Mae Brown, who was the primary instigator of *The Lavender Menace Zap* in 1970. This historical moment, where self-proclaimed “Radicalesbians” rushed the stage of *The Second Congress to Unite Women*, caused the social recognition of the lesbian-feminist (H. Rubin, 2003). The lesbian-feminist was a “woman-identified-woman” who renounced any claim to gender roles and distanced themselves from the “old gay life,” or those who

practiced butch/femme gender roles, which dominated the social landscape of working class lesbians (H. Rubin, 2003). While this did accomplish the de-sexualization of lesbians in the name of political viability, it also had profound effects on those who still had a stake in masculinity. These “Radicalesbians” believed the old reliance on butch and femme gender roles was subversive to the mainstream gender order—in order to gain access to true gender liberation, gender roles needed to be completely abolished. Thus, working-class lesbians were shut out of second-wave feminism, and any lesbians who wanted to retain their masculinity had to seek out new spaces (H. Rubin, 2003).

This gave rise to the number of FTM transsexuals in the early 1970s, and also resulted in a consolidation of FTM experience, where FTM identified individuals sought to distinguish themselves from butch lesbians in order to maintain a stable definition of FTM (H. Rubin, 2003). These negotiations were somewhat less successful. Scholars throughout the last 40 years have continued to ask what the difference between FTM identified men and butch lesbian identified woman really are: Jacob Hale in 1996 asked if lesbians are even women, Jack Halberstam in 1998 broke down the masculine continuum in regards to FTM identified men and butch lesbian identified women, Nan Alamilla Boyd in 2006 grappled with the effects of the lesbian nation-state and its relation to trans bodies, Jamison Green also in 2006 discussed the visibility issues for FTM identified men, and Gayle Rubin in 2011 once again returned to the question of what constitutes butch lesbian experience. The fact that so many scholars have continued to focus on what constitutes the FTM experience shows how this subject position is still under dispute. The consolidation of lesbian experience coupled with the rise of the FTM subject position (H. Rubin, 2003) creates a grey space of identity, where lesbian is too narrow and FTM is too

narrow to encompass what my respondents experience nearly 40 years after these borders came under dispute. This history makes it difficult for my respondents to both internally figure out a label for themselves as well as be socially viable in claiming said label. Even if a person does end up aligning with a transgender or nonbinary gender identity, yet another historical process plays a role in their negotiations: the institutionalization of transgender-related medical care.

Transgender is often paired with gender identity disorder, which was first introduced in the DSM-III in 1980. Several factors influenced the inclusion of this disorder. The first was the phasing out of ‘homosexual’ as a mental disorder in the DSM-II in 1973 due to work by mainstream LGBT activists. These activists began the homophile movement in the 1950s, whose main goal was assimilation into the gender order. According to Stryker (2008:150), “homosexual communities in the mid-twentieth century... redefined themselves as political minorities, they distanced themselves from older notion of ‘inversion’ that collapsed gender transposition and homosexual desire into one another.” The shifting definition of homosexual, moving from a form of “pathological personhood” (Valentine, 2007) to a “political identity” (Stryker, 2008) meant that a new identity needed to be constructed and institutionalized in order to contain gender transgression (Valentine, 2007). The second factor was that academic gender dysphoria clinics, particularly Harry Benjamin’s clinic in San Francisco, began operating on an experimental basis in the early 1960s in “western Europe and the United States, where feminist debates about transsexuality have also been centered,” (Connell, 2012:858). Stone outlines this particular history in the United States in her *Post-Transsexual Manifesto*. This history centers itself around “male-to-female transsexuals...

[who] were most, though not all, white and they were drawn from a spectrum of working- and middle-class backgrounds,” (Connell, 2012:859). At first, the university clinics struggled to decide who should have access to gender confirmation surgery, as “no simple and unambiguous test for gender dysphoria syndrome could be developed” (Stone, 1992:227). Thus, these clinics, who were run primarily by white men, decided who was accepted on the basis of if they had “the best chance at success” for passing as “gender(ed) women” (Stone, 1992:228). These clinics were invested not only in providing services to transsexual women, but also reproducing gender roles. Then, in 1966, Harry Benjamin published his book, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, which gave clinics “customary and traditional lines to construct plausible material for acceptance” (Stone, 1992:228). However, transsexual women had equal access to this textbook, and thus, they were “only too happy to provide the behavior that led to acceptance for surgery” (Stone, 1992:228). These constructions of gender dysphoria both created a standard for which gender identity disorder is based as well as created a standard that many trans people are still held against to this day. Harry Benjamin’s 1966 textbook led to the creation of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) and in 1979 they put out their Standards of Care, which is currently in its seventh version. Then in the 1980s, the “neoliberal economic climate... [shifted] gender reassignment into the private sector of the economic market,” (Connell, 2012:868), which further put physically transitioning out of reach for a vast amount of trans identified individuals. “Class and global inequality, rather than patriarchal gatekeeping, has become the crucial filter” (Connell, 2012:869) for determining access to trans medical resources.

The conflation between transgender and gender identity disorder causes serious identity negotiation issues for my respondents, as not all trans people experience gender dysphoria. Connell (2012:863) states that a new form of identity politics following deconstructionist feminism “made gender change the practical demolition or refusal of gender identity.” These new identity politics are embraced by many nonbinary trans folk who identify as agender, and it complicates their negotiation and acceptance of a trans identity. This conflation of transgender and gender identity disorder also has important implications when considering the race, class, sexuality, and gender backgrounds of trans people—the basis for gender dysphoria came from MTF white transwomen who were of working- and middle-class backgrounds and invested in heterosexual scripts, and this is not representative of most of the respondents in my study. Even for nonbinary trans folk who do seek out physical transition and tell narratives about the body and self that are not true to their identities, that transition may be out of reach due to the current neoliberal privatization of healthcare.

### **Theories of Whiteness**

Another important aspect I considered when analyzing my respondent’s experiences was whiteness. The majority of the respondents in my study were white identified, and in order to fully understand their experiences, I could not ignore their racial subject position. Amanda Lewis advocates for the increased focus on whiteness in sociological literature. In her paper on whiteness, Lewis argues “whites are, in fact, a social group or social collective, and that, if we are to understand the role race has had in shaping the life experiences and life chances of [white people] ... sociological research need to pay more serious attention to the role of whites as racial actors” (Lewis,

2004:624). However, “the very nature of ‘white experience’ today makes it difficult to study” (Lewis, 2004:624). This is due to the “increasing prevalence of color-blind ideology,” which causes white people to have an “inability to talk coherently about their racial identity and their sometimes denial of having any identification with white as a collective reality” (Lewis, 2004:626).

This inability to talk coherently about their racial identity comes from what Joe Feagin calls “the white racial frame,” which is an “overarching world view, one that encompasses important racial ideas, terms, images, emotions and interpretations” (Feagin, 2009:3). It is a frame in the sense that it “structures the thinking process and shapes what people see, or do not see, in important social settings” and it creates a “positive orientations to whites” and a “negative orientation to those racialized others” (Feagin, 2009:10-11). Basically, the white racial frame is a “tool-kit” that has “routinely defined a way of being, a broad perspective on life, and one that provides the language and interpretations that help structure, normalize, and makes sense of society” (Feagin, 2009:11-13). This kit comprises of “sincere fictions” that center around “collective memory” and “collective forgetting” (Feagin, 2009:3-17). Collective memory is the notion that “how we interpret and experience our racialized present depends substantially on our knowledge and interpretations of our racialized past” (Feagin, 2009:17). Collective forgetting, on the other hand, is the way that “historical events may stay in the collective records of memory, or they may be allowed to deteriorate, slowly or rapidly, through the overt choices of the powerful” (Feagin, 2009:17). Thus, through the white racial frame, not only do white people come to view themselves as racially neutral, but it also makes invisible the social inequality and subsequent power white people experience

from said inequality (Feagin, 2009). This is why Lewis advocates for whiteness research to “engage with issues of power—how larger historical patterns, institutional processes, and everyday practices that make white identities even possible” (Lewis, 2004:625). Through my analysis, I specifically looked for threads where the white racial frame presented itself in my respondent’s answers. Even though my white respondents rarely brought up race explicitly, the white racial frame is constantly shaping the way they experience their gender non-conformity.

One specific function of whiteness that I draw on in my analysis is whiteness’ ability to allow gender transgression. Amy Wilkins, in her research on Goth subculture and Black college-age men, illustrates this point in a fairly clear way. In *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status* (2008), Wilkins illustrates how Goths can transgress gender norms while retaining access to the power of whiteness. According to Wilkins, Goth style “revels in gender-blending” (Wilkins, 2008:35), and this “Goth aesthetic,” was central to their identities. However, this gender transgression was something that didn’t affect the Goths’ upward mobility. Despite the Goth’s deviant identities, they were still able to retain access to middle class jobs and cultivate middle-class skills that were the gateway to upward mobility (Wilkins, 2008). Wilkins goes on to say “race privilege buys white youth more latitude in their appearance” and includes gender transgression (Wilkins, 2008:40). In contrast, her study “Stigma and Status” (2012) found that Black men only had access to one form of gender expression, that of the Black athlete, who is hyper-masculine, aggressive, and relies on heterosexual gender scripts. “The invisibility of alternative Black masculinities . . . leads most students to assume that all Black men are athletes, and compels all Black college men to negotiate

their identities in the athletes' shadow” (Wilkins, 2012:10). Failure to live up to the Black athlete stereotype stigmatized Black men who were already at a disadvantage in their social system (Wilkins, 2012). While white people can engage freely with multiple identities and transgression, people of color experience stigma for doing so, and this is incredibly important for the respondents in my study, and is directly tied to the invisibility of whiteness that my respondents are operating under.

While examining this specific function of whiteness, I found it useful to draw from Judith Butler's notions of intelligible and abject bodies, which she outlined in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Intelligible bodies, according to Butler, are socially understood, while abject bodies are not, and by being unintelligible, abject bodies are worthy of violence (Butler, 1993). When my white respondents adopt a nonbinary gender identity and outwardly express it, whether it be through their appearance or in their communication with people, they do not experience the same repercussions that my respondents of color face because their bodies are understood as intelligible due to their whiteness. My respondents of color were more likely to have bodies that were read as abject, which shaped their experiences. This disparity manifests itself in the perception of threat, which I will define and describe later in my analysis.

### **Nonbinary Trans: A Gap in the Literature**

Very little research exists regarding nonbinary gender identity—so far, only one publication has looked into the experience of nonbinary trans-identified people. Harrison and colleagues in “A Gender Not Listed Here” (2012) look into the specific demographics and factors of discrimination faced by nonbinary transfolk and found several important trends in the quantitative data, which I will now briefly discuss.

Harrison and colleagues found that 73 percent of those who identified as a nonbinary gender were assigned female at birth (versus 40 percent of the entire sample), that respondents who identified as a nonbinary gender were significantly more likely to be under the age of 45 (89 percent compared to 68 percent of the full sample) that respondents who identified as a nonbinary gender were less likely to be white (70 percent versus 77 percent), and subsequently, more likely to be multiracial (18 percent compared to 11), black (five percent compared to four) and Asian (three percent compared to two), and less likely to be Latin(x) (four percent compared to five percent) (Harrison et. al, 2012). They also found that respondents who identified as a nonbinary gender had significantly higher educational attainment than respondents who identified as a binary gender, and yet were more likely to be living in extreme poverty than those who identified as a binary gender (21 percent versus 14) (Harrison et. al, 2012). However, in the case of extreme poverty, this may be due to the disparity of younger people versus older people in the nonbinary category.

When it came to discrimination, those who identified as a nonbinary gender experienced various forms of discrimination differently than binary transfolk. Respondents who identified as nonbinary were more likely to have been harassed in k-12 schooling and been sexually assaulted in their lifetime (Harrison et. al 2012). In terms of the workplace, respondents were less likely to lose their jobs due to their gender identity and more likely to be out in the workplace, while still experiencing the same level of harassment as those who identified as a binary gender (Harrison et. al 2012). In terms of healthcare, respondents were less likely to be refused medical care on the basis of gender identity, but were more likely to avoid seeking healthcare for fear of being discriminated

against (Harrison et. al 2012). In terms of police encounters, respondents were more likely to be harassed by the police and feel uncomfortable about going to the police (Harrison et. al 2012). Respondents were also more likely to have engaged in non-traditional forms of work (sex work, drug sales, or off-the-book work), more likely to have attempted suicide, and more likely to have been victims of both physical and sexual violence (Harrison et. al 2012).

As this study was the first publication to give even preliminary data on nonbinary trans people, I kept it in mind as I interviewed my respondents. Questions I considered included: are people who are assigned female at birth really more likely to identify as a nonbinary gender, and if so, why is this? Are non-white people more likely to identify as a nonbinary gender, and if so, why is this? How much discrimination are my respondents experiencing? What kinds? Are experiences of discrimination distributed evenly among race, class, and gender? However, I used Harrison's findings cautiously, as all this is based on one sample of trans individuals and further replications are necessary to validate and expand on any of these claims. This study did provide a good starting point for questions I considered when structuring my interview schedule.

Even fewer studies focus on how racial subject position influences transgender experience, let alone nonbinary experience. Kylan Mattias de Vries aimed to address the lack of people of color in trans narrative research and to highlight the intersectionality of transfolk's experiences in his 2012 study. During his interviews, de Vries found that respondents' racial identities influenced their experiences in embodying transgender (Mattias de Vries, 2012). However, Mattias de Vries' research did not look into the white experience with transgender identity, nor did it look into nonbinary gender experience.

My research will attempt to fill these gaps, as I investigate how nonbinary gender identity affects individuals who are white differently than people of color.

## Methods

The data presented in this study comes from ten informal interviews with subjects who identified themselves as having a nonbinary gender identity. In order to recruit respondents, I initially contacted people from within my own queer circles both in Boulder and Denver, asking through informal means of communication whether or not they wanted to participate. From there, respondents who agreed to interview with me recommended individuals from their own social circles to participate, creating a snowball sample. In terms of gaining *entrée*, my insider position as a person who identifies as a nonbinary gender aided me in the recruitment process, as respondents felt more comfortable interviewing with someone who was already well versed in nonbinary trans experience, and this made the data collection process much smoother. However, my outsider position as a white person made several of my respondents of color wary to participate. In this situation, my strategy of snowball sampling worked to my advantage, as their white friend who had previously been interviewed felt comfortable vouching for me.

Of my respondents, nine individuals were assigned female at birth and one was assigned male at birth. The age range of respondents varied from 19 to 27 years old, with the majority of respondents being of traditional college age. All of my respondents were either currently enrolled in university or had completed some university schoolwork—seven were current undergraduate students at the University of Colorado Boulder, two were graduate students enrolled in the same university, and one had dropped out of college in the south and relocated to Denver. Seven of the respondents identified

themselves as white, one respondent identified as black, and two respondents identified themselves as biracial.

Name	Age	Assigned Sex	Race	Gender/Pronoun	Schooling
Casey	20	AFAB	White	Agender (they)	Undergraduate
Sam	20	AFAB	White	Gender-Neutral (they)	Undergraduate
Caden	23	AFAB	White	Genderqueer (they)	Graduate
Andrew	26	AFAB	White	Nonbinary (he)	Graduate
Kris	23	AFAB	White	Nonbinary (she)	Undergraduate
Alex	20	AFAB	White	Agender (they)	Undergraduate
Kiera	20	AFAB	Black	Nonbinary/Agender (they)	Undergraduate
Nick	19	AFAB	Biracial	Genderfluid (he)	Undergraduate
Oliver	20	AFAB	White	Transmasculine/Nonbinary (he/they)	Dropout
Max	27	AFAB	Biracial	Genderfluid (they)	Undergraduate

Interviews lasted between a half an hour and two hours long, on average taking about 50 minutes. I then recorded and transcribed each of these interviews. I focused the semi-structured interview schedule around how the respondents conceptualized their own identity, gender and otherwise, and how their identity affected their own lived experiences. To answer these questions, I prompted respondents to describe their own narrative in regards to coming to terms with their identity. For example, I asked, “how did you come to understand your gender identity?” and “why this particular identity term over others?” Depending on how in-depth respondents went into their answers, I asked additional questions to better understand their narrative. Then I asked respondents to describe their lived experience in regards to work, school, social, and family life, asking questions such as “are you out at work?” or “is you family aware of your pronouns?” Toward the end of the interview, I then asked respondents to consider their other identities in relation to their understandings of gender and how they conceptualized transgender as a whole. This proved to be the most difficult part of the interview for my

white respondents. Rather quickly in the interview process, I realized I needed to better clarify what I was asking, and thus, I decided to prime my respondents with race in order to force them to think about their own racial identities. The most common way that I asked this was, “Do you feel like any other aspect of your identity affected the way you started identifying as nonbinary? For example, I talked to another person who talked about being Latino and how that really affected their gender experience.” By doing this, I was able to get much more productive answers from my white respondents rather than outright asking them about race and ethnicity. Overall, I structured the interviews to make the respondents think about gender in regard to individual experience before being asked about collective identity, and I yielded rich results from my white respondents.

During data collection and analysis, I had to address outsider status as a nonbinary white individual. When I interacted with my respondents of color, I struggled to negotiate this status and ensure that the data I collected was not only rich, but also reflected the realities of my respondent’s lives. On one hand, I did have partial insider status, considering that I also identified as a non-binary gender, but on the other hand, making sure I had established enough rapport to gain access to the “real” story (Winddance Twine, 2000) was a concern. However, I believe the interview structure and my ability to establish rapport made my respondents feel comfortable during the interview process—my respondents of color had no qualms telling me about their frustrating interactions with white people in various locations and we had long discussion about the ways race affected our lives. In the end, I obtained ample rich data from my respondents of color.

After transcription, I coded the interviews in order to pull out themes related to race experience. In order to analyze my data, I used an inductive intersectional approach.

I first coded each interview individually, looking for instances of identity work, discrimination, and experiences in community building. Then, I took those codes and grouped them in various ways that drew out themes of race, class, and gender difference. This created the general structure of my analysis, where race turned out to be the most salient coding theme. However, I have grouped the various sections of my analysis as such: first, I will discuss themes centering on the identity work involved in adopting a nonbinary gender, second, I will discuss the discrimination faced by my respondents in various spaces and institutions, third, I will discuss whiteness and how the white racial frame shaped my respondents construction of the self, and finally, I will end my analysis discussing how my respondents negotiated a transgender identity and emotions surrounding feelings of being “trans enough.”

### **Analysis: Becoming Nonbinary**

But what does it mean to be nonbinary? For the majority of my respondents, this meant something different, even among those who used the same nonbinary label to describe their identities. For some, the explanations for their identities were intelligible and well practiced. For example, Casey described being agender as a “rejection of gender itself” rather than “moving between genders,” while Max described genderfluid as, “float[ing] around the masculine and feminine spectrum.” Caden, on the other hand, described being genderqueer as “an in between that takes different aspects from the expected of both sides [of masculinity and femininity].” Another respondent Sam, who identified as gender neutral described “hav[ing] a gender identity” but also finding that “it [doesn’t] associates with either masculine or feminine to any significant degree.”

When prompted, most respondents had no problem describing how they conceptualized their gender identity, and gave me highly intelligible answers that were obviously honed to a significant degree—my respondents were very used to explaining their gender identity to people who were relatively clueless when it came to gender. It was clear that my respondents, in order to have their identities be respected, had to constantly play the role of the educator. However, several respondents gave much less intelligible responses that were more in-depth and less straightforward. Kris is one example of this—when I asked her to explain nonbinary to me, she responded with: “I don’t know, I really like – I like the idea of an egg. Just like a little amorphous blob that doesn’t really mean anything. Cause like I just really don’t care about like, gender in terms of how it’s socially constructed.” Kiera, who identified as agender and nonbinary, when prompted with the same question, responded with:

Keira: I think I kind of feel more like a uh... like a steel slab. I think that's my gender [laughs] Yeah, I like that, because... I don't know... like, when I first started considering maybe switching my gender identity, a lot of it was born from me not having a very strong connection to like, my body or being a person much less a woman, it just sort of, a lot of it just came from, I just have a very disconnected relationship to my body. And since gender and a lot of that stuff like, can't be tied to bodies, I just felt like I wasn't in the mood for that, to embody that, embody womanhood, cause it didn't feel right for me.

Here, my respondents had a more metaphorical understanding of their genders. Kiera and Kris were friends who helped each other gain deeper understandings of their gender identities by discussing gender more regularly than my other respondents indicated they did. Sam, for example, told me that they rarely ever talked to other people who identified as a nonbinary gender, and Casey was the only genderqueer person in the GSA they were involved with. The fact that my respondents all had different ways to express similar feeling surrounding their gender indicates the constructed nature of gender identity and understanding, and some identities were constructed based on collective experiences.

Even for those who did not know other nonbinary people in their social circles nearest to them, introduction to nonbinary identity was still a collective process—almost every single one of my respondents indicated that they had first heard of nonbinary gender identity on some kind of Internet platform, usually Tumblr, a micro-blogging website. Not only did some of my respondents construct their nonbinary identities collectively, but also online communication and community proved to be an instrumental

tool in adopting a nonbinary gender, especially when in-person communities were not as readily present.

Pathways to identity were often convoluted, complicated, and complex—even though most individuals found nonbinary identity in similar ways, very different processes took place in order to fully adopt a nonbinary gender identity. Casey, Sam, Andrew, Alex, Nick, and Oliver all described first identifying as transmen before adopting a nonbinary identity, and for many, this process came with confusion and frustration. Sam described thinking they were “binary trans, I thought I was a trans man.” Casey described struggling with their gender identity for a long time, eventually seeking out help from a “trans therapist” before they started identifying as agender. When my respondents tried to adopt an FTM identity, most of them felt it did not fit their gender identity, as the FTM experience was too narrow, which was just as uncomfortable as being read as non-transgender. For many, nonbinary identity proved to be an important in-between gender category.

The amount of resources available to my respondents during this identity negotiation period varied; some, like Casey, had a multitude of resources, but this is definitely not the case for everyone—some individuals were blocked from adopting a nonbinary gender identity based on race, class, or family home life. Andrew, for example, came out to his parents as a transman at a young age and “they were shitting bricks over it, they actually had me committed to like, a psych ward for ten days.” Here, Andrew’s parents’ extremely transphobic lack of acceptance not only blocked him from further developing his identity, but also caused significant harm to his personhood. Another

factor influencing access to resources is class, which is something Kiera talked specifically about in terms of transitioning:

Kiera: I was like, just really in to men's wear but then I was like, that's money that I have to spend to sort of revamp my wardrobe, and the more I thought about the money the more I was just like, you know what, [laughs] like me, this is fine I can wear a blazer now and then with some slim fitting pants but like this is alright, the things that I'm wearing don't necessarily like... clothes have no gender so like, I can wear dress and full face of makeup and my highest of heels and I'm still nonbinary, and that, that's just sort of the truth that I came to eventually. Yeah, there are some days where I wanna feel super femme and then there are days that I just wanna be more androgynous, but... I think I still felt those ways before I even identified as nonbinary, just wanting to mess around with dress and stuff and while I never had the resources the thought was there.

Me: Do you feel like if you would've had the financial resources to try and change your wardrobe, do you think you would still do it now or is it something that's just like, I have decided that clothing is not gendered and I don't wanna have to change my presentation like that, maybe like a few things but not anything radical?

Kiera: Yeah, I think I might do a few things, like I still totally wanna have like, cool suit, matching slim fitting pants, a cool tie, like I could totally see myself rocking that and I wish I could, but like, some really cool shoes too, um, but yeah, even if I had those financial resources it probably wouldn't be like a radical thing, I wouldn't try to swap out everything that I own for that.

Not only did Kiera face a significant financial barrier in terms of trying to transition, but in response, they altered the way they constructed their identity, focusing instead on internal negotiations rather than external validation. The fact that Kiera specifically cited financial situation as a reason they changed the way they thought about their gender points even more to the constructed nature of my respondent's gender identities, as they are directly relational to social position.

This class difference is also tied up in race due to the conflation of race and class issues. Among my white respondents, money was not something they talked about when I asked about transitioning. Andrew, in order to transition, spent ten thousand dollars on top surgery. "In high school I started saving up for top surgery so I saved up for nine years and then I did it, and then of course a year later it was covered under medical insurance." Casey was thinking about a potential transitional surgery, but as something that was way later down the line.

Casey: I think about maybe getting a hysterectomy, mostly cause of the annoyance of having a period, and having really painful periods, so then um... yeah but that's it.

Me: Something way later down the line?

Casey: Yeah, I need to really think about that, for like five years, or something.

Me: Just to make sure it's something you want, especially since you've already changed your mind on other things?

Casey: Exactly.

Caden also echoed this line of thinking, with physically transitioning as something to seek out later in life.

Caden: I do actually plan to get top surgery but... I don't, I just thought about hormones and I would like the voice but I don't want anything else so I don't know how to do that.

Me: Gotcha. So some plans but probably something that's more in the future?

Caden: Yeah.

Me: Not something that's on your mind like immediately I need to do this now, type thing?

Caden: I was actually planning to get surgery this summer and I've decided that I'm like, graduating actually cause I switched my master's and getting a job and it's too many things up in the air.

Here, both Casey and Caden imply that with time passed, both of them would be able to attain the expensive physical transitions that they wanted, either through insurance coverage or personal finances. This perception of upward mobility is something specific to my white respondents, while my respondents of color focused more on their current financial situations.

In addition to the gender negotiations my respondents had to undergo, many also had to reconceptualize their sexualities with the adoption of new gender identities. Most of my respondents, after adopting a nonbinary gender identity, switched to identifying as queer, simply because it was one of the only labels that made sense. Kiera describes this negotiation rather clearly:

Kiera: Well if I'm nonbinary then what am I now? With my sexuality? And the best thing that I can think of is, just queer. Because, like, regardless of who I'm attracted to, I can't... can't really be, like, technically I can't really call myself

gay all the time, I can't be gay, I can't be straight, can I... I can be pansexual, but, or bisexual, but like... yeah, like I told you, I just do this when somebody asks me what my sexuality is? Like what? Just, yeah, just, squint and shrug.

In adopting a nonbinary gender label, my respondents became more aware of label implications and how these labels had constricted them in the past. Casey also touches on this:

Casey: I first came out as bisexual, then I came out as a lesbian, then I went back in the closet, then I came out as a lesbian again, then I thought I was trans, and then I thought I was genderqueer, then I thought I was trans and now I'm agender. Like, it literally has changed so many times, just cause I didn't have the language, and it might change again in the future, like labels are useful I think to feel... to just feel okay, but I hate the way that sexuality labels are intertwined with your gender labels, a lot. And I hate that your identity politics in groups are structured around sexuality that's structured around gender.

Here, Casey is commenting on the frustration of gender and sexuality labels—so many of my respondents identified as queer specifically because it enabled them to better validate their gender identity. Where sexuality labels like straight and gay are tied to the subject's gender position and the object's gender position, queer is not. Identifying as queer thus allows my respondents more viability in claiming a nonbinary gender identity.

### **Discrimination: Employment & Campus Life**

The respondents in my study constantly navigate a variety of situations in which just their appearance can make hostilities arise. In this section, I will explore the spaces where my respondents had to actively work through both perceived and actual hostilities

and assert nonbinary-gendered selves. For my respondents, places of employment and campus were the spaces where gender salience came up the most.

In the work sphere, my respondents faced varying levels of discomfort, discrimination, and harassment, depending on different factors. Many of my respondents reported not having any issues at work in regards to their identities—Max, for example, worked in an alternative concert venue, where they felt comfortable cross-dressing due to the “punk” environment. Sam, who worked for an outdoor company, never had any gender issues come up either, saying “honestly because of the nature of the work, like social issues aren’t really brought up. So it’s just never been a problem. I mean, [my boss] can barely tell a person from a kayak in the first place so it’s sort of, that’s fine.” Others were not so lucky. Andrew, for example, had to quit his job due to his identity. “I got outed by the staffing computer and so, my coworkers never got over it, people couldn’t handle not using female pronouns, and it was just really awkward, and after—I was there for like a year and I left, cause I hated it.” Oliver described a similar experience in the food service industry, where the new head cook was “a raging asshole” who “would not gender [them] correctly,” and eventually they quit because they felt they were “constantly being harassed and manipulated.” These were the most extreme examples, where individuals felt their work environment was unsafe and quit as a result.

More often than not, respondents described being misgendered as annoying but something they knew they would have to deal with. Caden worked on campus in a TA position, describing that “[faculty and students] don’t understand and you just have to correct your pronouns constantly. That’s—no one’s ever been like I don’t agree with this—but they’ve sort of argued about [it].” Kris also had similar experiences in their

work on campus in the environmental office. “I was never once asked, cause I started working there with they/them/their pronouns, never once asked pronouns. If I try to bring up anything about pronouns, like we had a big staff retreat and we had nametags so I wrote my pronouns on it and nobody respected them and nobody even looked at them or wrote it.” Others had to create an environment that respected their identities. Andrew, in a later job, addressed some of the issues with his work environment.

Andrew: At my current job there was some questionnaire we were supposed to fill out and like they asked for demographic information, and it was like, what gender are you, male or female? And so I replied and I was complaining about the lack of options and an executive, like, emailed me back and was like, well if that’s how you feel then you should start an employee resource group. So I did, and everyone’s, like, the company’s been funding it and it’s really cool, the site has been funding it and people have been getting really involved and it’s just really positive and affirming.

In order to be in a workspace that Andrew felt safe and comfortable in, he had to create a resource group in order to foster an accepting environment. Andrew runs this group entirely by himself, and even though he’s grateful for the atmosphere he’s created he did say that “it’s just a lot of work, like I don’t get paid to do it so I get to take it home with me.” Despite this fact, Andrew also told me, “I’ve been really out at my job, cause I dunno I can’t help it, people are so supportive that I don’t have a reason not to be out.” Casey told me about an instance where they didn’t agree with a forced dress code at a summer camp they worked at in the past. “I was finally like, I’m not wearing these capri leggings, I’m gonna wear black pants, but they were like pretty good about it cause I was

a good employee, so once you're a good enough employee people are like, okay we need you here." Casey also told me about their current job as a nanny. "I feel like I could do anything, with myself, I could like, pierce my entire face and I'd walk in and they would be like, as long as my child is fed and goes to sleep, do whatever you want." Here, both Casey and Andrew are expressing a certain amount of freedom in their jobs, as long as they are "good employees" and take charge to demand what they want. Andrew and Casey's ability to actively shape their job environment was directly tied to their racial identity—because they already possessed the whiteness that gave them latitude to be gender non-conforming in the workplace, they also had the latitude demand what they want in the workplace with little fear of repercussions. Kiera, when I asked about correcting people misgendering them in various spaces, told me "I can't fight the good fight all the time." My white respondents were much more likely to call people out when they were misgendered, while my respondents of color were more likely to combat misgendering with internal self-validation rather than vocalizing their frustrations, as people of color are more likely to be stigmatized when expressing their gender non-conformity.

In contradiction to Casey's early remark about nannying, they also talked about the threat of discrimination as a motivator for freelance work. "I plan to keep nannying, for as long as I can, because of like, avoiding work rights and stuff, as like a queer person, without—you know that's just such a... dangerous, the corporate world is such a dangerous place for queer people." Here, Casey is operating under the perception of threat—rather than actually basing their claims on their own experiences, they are judging their chances for discrimination and harassment from a general knowledge of

what it is like to be trans in the workplace, without realizing that this discrimination is much less likely to happen because Casey is white. Despite this statement, later on in the interview Casey admitted that most if not all of the discrimination they face is related to being misgendered.

Me: Yeah, gotcha. So you said like, trans issues, things that affect your daily life, what do you feel like, what trans issues do you connect to or relate to, or that you experience?

Casey: Probably mostly misgendering, or just like, you can tell when someone is uncomfortable with you, or like moves away from you, or they can't facilitate a conversation with you cause they don't even know where to place you, those sort of things affect me the most.

This perception of threat comes up continually for my white respondents, which will be more thoroughly discussed in later sections.

Another place of discrimination for my respondents was on campus at The University of Colorado Boulder. Of my respondents, nine were students at CU, and seven of the nine discussed some type of discrimination, harassment, or feeling unsafe or unwelcome on campus. Kiera had multiple negative experiences associated with telling professors to accommodate their pronouns.

Kiera: I have six professors now and I've told two of them, and so... in the moment, cause you know they have that on the syllabus, like if you use, or if you have gender pronouns that you would like me to acknowledge just let me know, um so, when they call roll I'll be like, hey, I'm here, and I use these pronouns since you just talked about that on your syllabus, um, and one professor asked me

to repeat myself once, like, what did you say, and another professor honestly asked me to repeat myself like five times, and each time it was like a dagger in the heart, like, oh my god it was so embarrassing, and mortifying, to have to repeat myself so many times, but those two professors, one of them talked to me face-to-face after one class, and the other one who asked me to repeat myself even more, she sent me an email because it's a language class and since languages often relies very heavily on binaries, she said like, 'it hasn't come up yet, but I just want you to know that I want to do whatever possible to accommodate your pronouns and make you feel validated in that respect and if there's any research on gender neutral pronouns in French, maybe you could do that research and let me know, so that we can use them in class,' So yeah, but that's like two out of six, they still really struggled in the moment, and that's like four other teachers that have absolutely no idea.

Here, Kiera's experiences in the classroom have not only been dehumanizing, but even when professors were trying to be accommodating, the professor still relied on Kiera to do the research, rather than going out and doing it on their own. Caden described a similar experience with their professors. "All my professors I haven't even mentioned it to. The one that I did, just like, I've never heard them gender me or try to do anything about it. So there wasn't anything negative but it didn't feel like, 'oh they're making an effort and validating' as it just felt like, 'okay well let's just avoid that.'" Casey spoke to me about their experiences with professors as well. "I feel like I've always had this issue with professors where they always bring up, anything queer related, they almost like, default to me to like, co-teach with them. And this happens all the time to me." Both

Casey and Caden are describing similar experiences as Kiera, where professors do not get pronouns right or don't even ask, and professors look to nonbinary students to be advocates for themselves. Kris told me about a trans student they knew of who dropped out of the university. "Do you remember this trans girl, she would come in here, like, a lot and she actually ended up like, transferring out of like, out of CU because like, the transphobia she faced at like, the queer spaces in here?" Even the queer spaces, not just classroom settings, are un-welcoming and openly hostile to transgender students, especially trans students of color as the girl Kris described to me.

Another on campus space my respondents brought up is the on-campus student health center, Wardenburg. Caden described to me their experience seeking services from Wardenburg.

Caden: I was just at the women's clinic, which already is obnoxious that it's called that. And they were like, "oh the bathroom is there" and there's like, I had to do a pee sample thing. And they're like "there's instructions" and so the... there's the women's bathroom and the gender-neutral bathroom. I went into the gender-neutral bathroom and there weren't instructions in there.

Caden's experience at the clinic was constantly being misgendered and being forced into situations where they were misgendered, despite the fact that the clinics seemed to be trans-friendly. "But there are posters everywhere that say 'what are your pronouns?' No one ever asks you. These are my pronouns!" Casey also described seeking out health-related services other than the student health center. "I typed in LGBTQ friendly therapist that can accept a student, um, I didn't really wanna go to someone on campus, cause I had heard like, kinda bad things about that." Casey avoided the student health center

altogether just from a bad reputation, which illustrates just how bad the campus climate is for nonbinary and trans identified students.

### **Whiteness and Nonbinary Identity**

Toward the end of my interviews, after talking to my respondents about daily experiences and negotiations in regards to their gender identity, I tried to probe for how they conceptualized their racial identity and how it potentially interacted with their gender identity. This proved to be a difficult question—my respondents could easily tell me their negotiations around their sexual identity, however, once I brought up race and ethnicity, my respondents just glazed over the question. Casey is the best example of this.

Me: How do you identify race/ethnicity wise, do you feel like that has affected your experience at all?

Casey: Oh yeah, well I identify white but also Jewish. So it's like, um... in ways like... it's interesting because most of the people that I talk to that are trans and stuff come from Christian backgrounds or Catholic backgrounds, and then my experience as a Jewish person, I don't know how to like, I've never met another trans or queer Jew.

For the remainder of the interview, Casey did not bring up whiteness again, and instead elected to talk about their religious upbringing. After my interview with Casey, I decided to reword the question, where I didn't outright ask my respondents to tell me their racial and ethnic identity, and instead primed them to think about race and ethnicity to see if it would come up. Even after rewording my question, I had similar experiences with Sam, Caden, and Oliver, where my white respondents did not engage with identity issues

surrounding race. Caden talked about Paganism and how they felt it affected their gender identity.

Me: Do you feel like any other aspect of your identity affected the way you started identifying as trans? For example, I talked to – I talked to a person yesterday and they actually brought up paganism and how being a pagan they felt was really related to their gender experience. Or I talked to another person who talked about being Latino and how that really affected their gender experience. Anything like that?

Caden: I've struggled with my religion, also paganism, because to me there was always this very feminine connection to nature that kind of goes with it and the way I knew how to connect in that way was witches and the power of the moon and cycles. I was like, I don't know how does this fit into my life?

Later on in the interview, Caden went on to say this when I probed further for identity negotiations:

Me: So just like religion [and sexuality] though, you don't feel like anything else about your identity affected how you identify?

Caden: I'm sure there's other things. I have to think of it... What other aspects of identity are there?! [laughs]

Here, Caden, in assuming that gender, religion, and sexuality are the only aspects of identity, illustrates just how invisible whiteness can be under the white racial frame when it comes to constructing the self in regards to personal identity. Sam gave me an even more abstract answer.

Me: Any type of identity. For example, I talked to someone earlier today who talked a bunch about being Jewish and how that kind of influenced the way that they conceptualized themselves. I've talked to another person, they talked a bunch about being Latino and how that really affected their identity and how they conceptualized themselves. So just something along that type of line.

Sam: Sure. Yea, actually, you know I am – I associate myself very very closely with scientific groups. People who think scientifically, that way of thinking, I was raised by it. I was raised with a sort of, okay what's your evidence?

For Sam, being a scientist came up before their race when I asked them about alternate identities. The white racial frame works so well in hiding whiteness that for Sam, being a scientist was more central to their personal identity than being a white person.

Others when asked this question couldn't think of any response at all. Andrew, for example, couldn't give me anything when I asked him about his alternate identities. "Um ... I don't really think I have anything I could answer for how I feel right now."

However, later in our interview, Andrew talked to me about an experience where he was mistaken for a transwoman in college and how that affected his gender experience now several years later. At the end of that conversation, after explaining his gender privilege, he told me this:

Andrew: Me being an adult, there's a lot of things I don't have to put up with.

Like, you know, no questions asked when I go into a restroom, right, like um, you know no one is ... trying to guess my gender. I just don't feel like I'm treated differently.

Andrew is acknowledging his passing privilege in bathrooms, but also implicitly makes a statement about his whiteness: ultimately, he doesn't feel like he's treated differently because of his gender identity. Here, his whiteness, even though Andrew doesn't realize it, gives him more room to be gender variant and still be read as having an "intelligible" body. In relation to this, gender non-conforming people of color have "abject" bodies, worthy of violence. Kiera told me about an experience when they had been involved in hookup culture:

Kiera: The vagina comment. Yeah, right after I'd hooked up with this dude I was like telling him, hey I'm non-binary, you know, if you're gonna refer to me maybe don't use things like girl or woman cause I'm not those things, and he was like, well you have a vagina right? Uh... yeah he knows full well I have a vagina, but it was kind of like, okay this was the really disgusting gross essentializing stuff that I'm gonna encounter, but in the moment it was just, it just made me feel so terrible and unsafe and invalidated... Yeah, it was so scary. It was honestly like—I was honestly terrified. Because like, that was a moment where I was like, okay, he doesn't respect who I am as an entire human being, also I'm in an unfamiliar place, I can't see where I am, I'm just scared, it was just scary.

Kiera, once they revealed to their partner that they were nonbinary, was immediately dehumanized and put into a situation where they felt unsafe, and this is directly related to Kiera's identity as a person of color. None of my white respondents reported any situations where they felt unsafe due to their gender identity, which indicates that feeling unsafe is at least partially tied up in racial identity. The reality of threat faced by Kiera, in contrast to my white respondent's perception of threat, is an important difference in

nonbinary embodiment between various racial subject positions. This will become clear in the final section of analysis.

Two of my respondents, on the other hand, did acknowledge their whiteness, but were not able to talk about how it affected their gender identity and experience. Kris is the best example of this.

Kris: Yea, I think, I mean I think probably the biggest aspect of my identity is my whiteness and trying to figure out how that and gender works. Especially because being transgender as a person of color is way different than being somebody who's white and non-binary. There's so much to sort of deal with there. Try to think about it and then feel, I don't know.

Me: Do you have any feelings about it or is it just something that's like, I know that it's a thing but I haven't quite been able to think about it in a way that makes me draw connections?

Kris: No, I mean I had thoughts about it. Like totally, I don't, I don't know how it would relate to me, specifically besides the fact that I am always in my whiteness. Holding a great amount of privilege, you know? And then just trying to – spaces that I'm in with, I don't know, just like queer people of color – always trying to be like, respectful. But I don't know how that relates to me specifically so I don't know if I can draw a connection between that and other things.

Even though Kris is aware of her whiteness, she was unable to draw any connections of how this related to her personally. Both her and Alex, the other respondent who talked with me about whiteness, were more aware of their racial identity than other respondents. Kris is friends with several nonbinary people of color, and she regularly engaged with

conversations about race; Alex took a college course on whiteness that they mentioned to me during our discussion. This means that the only white respondents who talked with me about racial identity already had an awareness of their whiteness brought to the forefront of their identities in college. However, just being aware of whiteness and the white racial frame doesn't mean that Kris and Alex's stories aren't still shaped by it. This indicates the pervasiveness of the white racial frame, which made most of my white respondent's racial identities invisible. In reality, my respondent's whiteness allows them to feel safe and comfortable in their gender transgression—Kris, after we talked more in depth about whiteness, told me this: “I can just honestly do whatever I want. So I try to be aware of that and then just not go around doing whatever I want.”

### **“Not Trans Enough”**

One area of discussion that came up for all my respondents was the notion of being “trans enough,” or feeling like they had the right to adopt a transgender identity. Depending on race, my respondents either included or excluded themselves from adopting a transgender label. For my white respondents, feeling “trans enough” was mostly dependent on spatial orientation. Casey, like most of my white respondents, talked about being in queer/trans versus non-queer/trans spaces, and feels more comfortable in queer/trans spaces versus non-queer/trans spaces assigning themselves a transgender label. “I feel no problem stepping into a trans space, for like trans people, like, yeah, that's where I belong.” Kris, like Casey, felt they were more supported in queer/trans spaces. “Spaces where I don't feel supported or like, if it would be ridiculed then I wouldn't feel great about it. And I'd feel more awkward.” For Kris and Casey, feeling supported was the primary factor that influenced whether or not they felt they were trans enough.

Not all of my white respondents echoed this sentiment. Caden, for example, felt exactly the opposite.

Me: Yeah. So you feel, do you feel more comfortable identifying as trans in spaces where people don't understand trans stuff or spaces where people do?

Caden: Where they don't.

Me: Where they don't. You're more comfortable being trans there, or calling yourself trans but when you're around other trans people it's just like, I'm not sure where I fit in now?

Caden: Yeah, cause like I feel more representative of the community with people who don't understand it but then in the community there's so much diversity that it becomes less obvious and solid.

Caden felt more comfortable assigning themselves a transgender label in non-queer/trans spaces, where they had more freedom to construct what being transgender meant. Sam agreed with Caden's statement: "So in spaces where it's a lot fresher, I guess. Where the discussion hasn't been around for quite as long or where it hasn't been as established." For Sam and Caden, the institutionalization of transgender made the definition of trans too narrow, and as such, they only called themselves transgender in spaces where this institutionalization was less present. Alex also reflected this notion, saying they "didn't feel trans enough" in queer spaces. Sam, Caden, and Alex felt that they needed the freedom to construct what trans meant to them rather than support from others to assign themselves a transgender label. Being "trans enough" meant that they wanted to have a space where they could define themselves. Even Casey, who did feel comfortable

assigning themselves a trans label in queer spaces, recognized the need to be able to self-define what transgender meant to them.

Me: So trans you feel, even though it's an umbrella term, that it's constricting, as far as your identity goes?

Casey: Yeah, only because of the way that the media has taken to it, and everyone that doesn't really know more than binary genders would assume that transgender is actually like, transsexual.

Alex spoke similarly about the media and social perceptions, saying that "trans is basically either FTM or MTF" and that's it. For my white respondents, even though they felt that the transgender label was restricting in many ways, in the end they still felt comfortable assigning to themselves in one way or another.

My respondents of color, however, spoke about the feeling of not being trans enough in a very different way. Kiera, during a discussion about being black and nonbinary, told me this:

Kiera: Yeah, and then I also like, don't want to define trans-ness as like, how much violence do you face, cause I find that single story also gets on my nerves in regards to my blackness, a lot of people when they look at me only wanna hear about my experiences being black, they only wanna hear about the negative like, tell me about the racism you faced this past Tuesday, like, you know, black people still experience joy and laughter and love and pleasure and all of those things, and I don't wanna take that away from like, binary trans people, but yeah I'm still just saying that, like, I guess... in terms of like, marginalization, like I still... like I don't find that I am pushed to those margins on the basis of my

gender identity or who I am in that regard, so, because of that, like... I don't think it would be proper for me to identify as trans. Um, and yeah not to say that trans is defined by solely marginalization, but like, binary trans people do face so much of it, and I don't wanna like, co-opt anything that I haven't, like, in the likelihood that I will face anything like that is very low. Cause yeah ... Just for me personally, I'm not speaking for all nonbinary people, cause yeah, we're all different ... There are nonbinary people who will still face that because they're seen as threatening, but...

Me: You feel like you don't face it personally?

Kiera: Yeah, personally, I don't think that I'll ever be perceived as a threat, um, so... based off of technical trans-ness, so like, it's just something that I, that doesn't really, that I won't allow to resonate with me, because it just feels improper for me to do so.

In addition to Kiera, both Max and Nick told me a similar story of not wanting to coopt a trans identity. Max felt that “MTF and FTM [trans people] experience more oppression, more brutality than nonbinary folks,” that it would be “rude to adopt the trans label without experiencing some of the worst parts of the social repercussions [of that label]” and that they “didn't want to take power away, pull the spotlight away from the troubles of certain types of trans bodies by saying that all nonbinary people are trans.” Nick, while comfortable calling himself trans, did not want to adopt a Two-Spirit identity because he had had “very little contact with any tribes” and felt that “it wasn't [his] right to do so.”

The respondents of color in my study did not want to coopt a transgender label they felt had power that did not belong to them. My white respondents, on the other hand,

felt differently about this label—they felt that by identifying as nonbinary, they were entitled to claim transgender for themselves. This entitlement is based on a perception of threat, which Kiera explicitly states in their answer—“I don’t think that I’ll ever be perceived as a threat.” For Kiera, they do not feel that they will face any violence or oppression based on their gender, and instead feel that if they did face violence or oppression, it would be because they are black—“I don’t feel like I am pushed to those margins on the basis of my gender identity.” The experience of oppression because of their racial identity meant that Kiera had a different way of thinking about what it means to identify with a social group. In contrast, Oliver told me this when I asked them about how they felt assigning themselves a trans label in non-queer/trans spaces: “It’s hard, like, if I don’t feel safe in a space I definitely won’t be like, ‘Hi I’m transgender, please don’t kill me.’” Oliver, who had never been oppressed on the basis of their race, felt that the perception of threat that went along with being transgender meant that they were entitled to co-opt a transgender label. My respondents of color, in contrast, had experiences of actual threat based on their racial identity, which ultimately led them to not adopt a transgender label based on a perception of threat that Oliver is drawing from. Between Oliver and Kiera, there are completely different perceptions of what trans bodies are threatening because of the difference in their racial identity. Oliver perceived their body would be read as abject despite their whiteness. Kiera perceived that they would not be seen as abject specifically for their gender transgression because of their experience with actual threat based on their race. My respondents of color recognized that race is a more visible marker of social difference than gender identity. This difference in threat perception is largely due to the way the white racial frame allows white people to view

themselves as individual actors rather than part of a race-based collective. Because of this, my respondents who were white did not make the same identity negotiations when considering the perception of threat as my respondents of color.

Many of my respondents, regardless of their racial identity, felt that queer spaces were not inclusive of their nonbinary identities, but once again, for different reasons. For white respondents, feeling included in queer spaces was oriented on being trans enough, and because of this, my respondents felt that certain queer spaces were hostile to them. Andrew, for example, explained he felt that “not being trans enough [lead] many people [to be] pushed out of the community.” Sam echoed this, saying that the queer community “feels competitive sometimes.” In contrast, Kiera talked about how the queer spaces they had encountered excluded them on the basis of their racial identity. “If I were to isolate my queerness, like I could still find people here at the resource center, but, like, a lot of the queer spaces in Boulder are very white dominated, and terrible to be in, so that’s why I don’t hang out in them.” Nick also told me a similar story—that “as a person of color ... white gay cis men that are like, I have a sassy black woman inside of me, I’m secretly a sassy black woman, like stuff like that is what makes me not feel comfortable in queer spaces.” Here, my white respondents and my respondents of color felt excluded based on different factors—for the white respondents, it was because of their nonbinary identity, for respondents of color, it was because of their racial identity. For my respondents of color, race ended up being a more important factor for feeling excluded than gender identity. For both my white respondents and my respondents of color, this exclusion from queer spaces furthered the feeling of not being trans enough.

Another negotiation that my respondents had to navigate when thinking about being trans enough was coming from an assigned female at birth (AFAB) perspective. For Kiera, this gave them privilege.

Kiera: Transwomen get murdered at such high rates than other groups, but then also like we have this societal understanding of anything relating to womanhood being inferior, less than, don't wanna ascribe to that, so like somebody who's AMAB, like wants to present in like what we would consider to be more feminine ways, like they're perceived to be relinquishing their privileges as men, sort of like, be this inferior being, and since you're inferior, worthy of violence, you're worthy of resistance, you're worthy of all these negative things, and so yeah, I would say so, and that's like AMAB nonbinary people, and definitely transwomen. Like, they face so much more, and like, they get called into question a lot, which is why I don't necessarily identify with the term trans for myself, cause I feel like that's just me sort of encroaching on some things, like, I am a nonbinary person like, I get read as feminine, sure, I'll experience sexism because people see that I'm a woman and that's, like, they'll treat me based off of that, but like, I still, like the danger and the violence that trans people, especially transwomen face, that's just something that I won't ever have to like, encounter, so I don't wanna encroach on their label as like trans people, because, like I feel like that would just be me coming from this privileged place, sort of like, identifying with a marginalized community that I'm not, that I don't necessarily consider myself a part of.

For Kiera, this directly related to their feelings about not wanting to co-opt a transgender label that I discussed earlier—because Kiera experienced what they perceived to be

gender privilege, they ended up feeling not trans enough. Kris also felt this in a similar regard.

Kris: I also think there's a fairness, like, yeah with like, a lot safer cause like, if you've been assigned female at birth, to feel more comfortable experimenting with your gender because it's not as, like, dangerous, and also there's more like, there's just more taught to you about gender, so if you start questioning it, like, at all, like if you starting getting into gender politics at all, then it's just kind of like, this cascade of like, and then you're gonna learn this and this and this and this, and then like, you know, dudes are never told anything about gender and so like, they're never told this and this and this, and then it's just like—I dunno, I think feminism is like a really good intro into this kind of stuff,

Kris felt that, because they had experienced gender-based oppression and learned about feminism, that they were more comfortable exploring nonbinary gender identities. At another point in my discussion with her, she told me that she was “feeling like [she's] co-opting other peoples' experiences because [she's] not enough” Ultimately, because of her heightened awareness of her whiteness and in considering the ways she interacted with her gender oppression, Kris came to consider the same label-coopting dilemma as my respondents of color. However, in the end, Kris did say that she felt mostly comfortable assigning herself a transgender label in some spaces.

In response to the feeling of not being trans enough, my respondents came up with different ways to conceptualize their gender experience while existing in a multitude of spaces that invalidated them. These responses varied from person to person. Casey, for example, internalized their trans-ness as something that was “deeply rooted” in their

personhood. By labeling trans-ness as a core aspect of their biological and social experience, Casey was in the end, able to feel trans enough. In general, my white respondents were more likely to find ways to be trans enough, while my respondents of color took a different approach. Kiera, for example, decided to favor internal validation in spaces where they didn't feel trans enough.

Kiera: Like no matter how many times somebody uses she/her/hers to refer to me or call me a woman that doesn't make me any less non-binary. And it can be frustrating at times, for sure, but that doesn't do anything to change how I identify and I'm gonna identify as non-binary until I either change my mind or I die, like nobody outside of me is gonna dictate that.

Kris had a similar experience in feeling like she was trans enough. "It's, honestly it's all internal and I think that's something that I realized. It's all completely what's on the inside ... If I'm going to accept what I want to be as a non-binary person, it's totally one hundred percent within me, my identity. It has no outside influences, this is just me, and I get to do whatever I want." Nick took this route as well—"no matter what anyone called me, I know who I am and I don't give a fuck what you think." Kiera, Kris, and Nick all decided to redefine their trans in order to combat the lack of external validation they were getting. However, they were only able to do this with support from their other nonbinary friends. This indicates that in order to facilitate positive identity work, nonbinary transfolk must band together in the face of potentially hostile spaces.

### **Discussion: Perception, Reality, and Opportunities for Resistance**

By asking my respondents how they conceptualized their identity *and* about their real lived experiences in this study, I uncovered the tensions in my respondent's perceptions and realities. The white respondents in my study perceived themselves to be under the threat of violence due to their nonbinary gender identity, despite the fact that their stories did not indicate any significant source of physical harm. This is not to say that all white trans and nonbinary people never experience violence for gender transgression, as we know this is not the case. Rather, I am saying that for white people, the experience of *perceiving threat*, rather than *actually experiencing threat*, is central to how to how they conceptualize their nonbinary and transgender identities. For my respondents of color, the *actual experience of threat* was the central factor in how they organized their nonbinary and transgender identities. For them, the perception of threat was not enough to constitute adopting a transgender identity.

My white respondents and my respondents of color experience this perception of threat differently because of the nature of whiteness and the way the white racial frame normalizes the abjection of bodies of color. When individuals are already under the threat of violence due to their racial identity, gender transgression is not nearly as salient in identity formation. Because white people do not experience race-based oppression, the perception of threat is enough for them to adopt a transgender identity. Without a collective white identity that organizes itself around racial experiences, white people are more likely to claim marginalized labels without making the same negotiations people of color make in deciding to claim those labels. This difference in the ways individuals decided to adopt or not adopt a transgender label ultimately upholds the white racial

frame and white hegemony, as “not being trans enough” divides communities all operating under the system of oppression that they are disadvantaged in and prevents them from uniting for liberation against the white racial order.

This has important implications for how activism should be centered in order to fight for transgender liberation. Trans liberation is implicitly tied up in the liberation of people of color, as it is the same system of oppression that subjugates people of color, nonbinary people, and transgender people. In order to achieve liberation, white nonbinary and transgender people must align themselves with communities of color and follow their lead. We must break down the identity politics that act as barriers to political organizing. In the fight for liberation, all nonbinary people must be trans enough.

## **Conclusion: Stepping Back, Moving Forward**

This study addresses the gap in sociological research concerning nonbinary identity and how race shapes these experiences. Nonbinary gender is experienced differently depending on the various intersections of individual identity. I outlined how race, class, gender, and sexuality can shape these negotiations. In particular, whiteness for my participants was not a conscious aspect of their identities, and yet, it played a huge role in how they conceptualized their nonbinary and transgender status. White respondents had different negotiations than respondents of color in regards to adopting and embodying these labels. The perception of threat, versus the lived experience of threat, proved to play an important role in how my respondents conceptualized their experiences—my white respondents ended up feeling more comfortable adopting a transgender label than my respondents of color.

Despite perception of threat, all my respondents reported discrimination in some aspect of their lives. Of note is the discrimination in workplaces and college institutions. While experiences of discrimination are shaped by intersectional identities, this should not take away from the fact that these institutional agents, *especially* the university, should be doing more to create inclusive spaces for nonbinary people. In addition, queer spaces were particularly unfriendly towards my respondents of color. Queer spaces must address the inherent racism within them in order to facilitate better coalition building.

My findings add to existing bodies of research on gender construction, identity formation, whiteness, transgender embodiment and the lived experiences of trans individuals, as well as create a foundation on which future studies should look into nonbinary gender embodiment. While my study is limited by a lack of participants,

particularly participants of color and participants assigned male at birth, it still lays the groundwork for further research into nonbinary gender identity.

To conclude, I'll return to Koyama's concept of transfeminism. This research, in alignment with Koyama and other transfeminism bodies of work, seeks to integrate transgender individuals into mainstream feminist activism in the name of coalition building. My work in particular addresses some of the problems with Koyama's original *Transfeminist Manifesto*— where Koyama's paper overly focused on transwomen and did not incorporate an intersectional analysis, my study emphasizes the experiences of people who embody nonbinary gender identities and integrates an intersectional analysis (Koyama, 2003:258). By building on Koyama's original notion of transfeminism, I extend the call to action beyond transwomen—"it is through our persistence and commitment to action that transfeminism will transform the scope of feminism into a more inclusive vision of the world" (Koyama, 2003). It is through the coalition building between all marginalized people that we will achieve true liberation.

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