Genderforking

Identity, Ambiguity and Diversity within a Community Blog

Abstract

This essay examines how androgyny, gender ambiguity and gender variant identities are explored, managed and promoted by an online community. I report upon research conducted through the means of participant observation within Genderfork, a blog that is concerned with gender variant issues. Most of the content on Genderfork is contributed by its users, meaning that the blog is effectively an active, community-driven meeting point for different experiences and understandings of gender variance.

I draw upon Genderfork content, and the idea of 'forking' gender, in order to examine what androgyny and gender variance mean to members of the Genderfork community, and how they negotiate these meanings in their everyday lives. In doing so, I demonstrate that multiple identities (with different investments in gender variance) intersect within the blog. I also analyse the processes by which Genderfork users challenge queer hierarchies and identity boundaries, binary conceptions of gender and gendered language. I examine how the blog acts as a site of identity perpetuation, in which new non-binary gender understandings – such as genderqueer identity – are celebrated and reproduced. In my concluding remarks, I argue that the experiences of Genderfork users reflect a new paradigm of gender variant understanding and expression that is of consequence to the literature of trans and queer studies, as well as gender liberation movements.

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Contents

Introduction

Within this space, we'll be exploring androgyny and other gender intersections [...] I have two personal goals for this project:

1. To compile all of the genderforking resources, imagery, and ideas that I come across on the web into one beautiful repository. I want to experience a sense of cohesion with these concepts — they all too often feel scattered and disparate.

2. To encourage a conversation around the grey areas of gender with friends, with strangers, and with strangers who need to become friends.

    - Sarah Dopp, first post on Genderfork, 2007

In this essay I examine issues of gendered identity and expression within the context of Genderfork, an online space which employs a blog format and describes itself as 'a supportive community for the expression of identities across the gender spectrum'. The multi-media content disseminated by Genderfork – which is mostly contributed by the blog's readership – draws upon a myriad of different positions from which gender ambiguity, androgyny and gender variance may be understood and experienced.

Genderfork functions as a meeting point in which trans[1] phenomena intersect with other understandings of gender and sexuality. Genderfork users describe themselves using terms such as androgyne, butch, femme, female, gay, genderqueer, queer, intersex, lesbian, male and straight, as well as trans and transgender. The meanings of such identity labels – as well as their importance and relevance – are regularly discussed and contested within the blog. In researching gender identity and expression within Genderfork's written content, I seek to explore what founder Sarah Dopp describes as the 'grey areas of gender', and investigate the different ways in which gender might be 'forked'.

In the following chapters I draw upon existing literature and research data (produced through participant observation) to explore these issues of identity, meaning-making and lived experience. I open with a literature review, in which I provide an introduction to gender variant phenomena. I also examine how online spaces – including blog-based communities – enable individuals with similar interests to share their thoughts and experiences. The methodology chapter offers an introduction to the Genderfork blog, and a discussion of the methodological decisions taken in the research process which includes an examination of the ethical implications of my research and a reflexive positioning of myself relative to the project.

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1   By 'trans' I refer to those individuals who, to whatever extent, do not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth (I refer to this as their 'assigned gender').

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I dedicate three chapters to a broad discussion of my findings. 'When Narratives Collide' examines how, in seeking to explore gender ambiguity and androgyny, Genderfork discursively draws upon ideas of trans, queer, and gay/lesbian identity. I demonstrate that multiple understandings of gender experience and gendered embodiment are reproduced and negotiated, and investigate how these processes blur borders even as they point to the emergence of new categories of gender and sex. 'Queerer-Than-Thou' relates how hierarchies of trans and queer identity are discussed and, to some degree, perpetuated within Genderfork. 'Escaping the Binary' centres on strategies employed by Genderfork contributors to move beyond the female/male gender binary. The difficulty of escaping this paradigm is set against strategies for redefining gender and aiding the emergence of new gender identities. I conclude with a reflection upon what it might mean to 'genderfork' in the context of my findings, and the consequences of such for trans theory and gender liberation.

Literature Review

> [...] how is it that the abjected come to make their own claim through and against the discourses that have sought their repudiation?
>
> - Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter,* 1993

In this chapter, I provide an introduction to gender variant phenomena. I begin with an exploration of how contemporary trans identities represent a multitude of possibilities that fork from an unlikely fusion: the discourse of transsexualism, (which prioritises internal identity, an innate gendered sense of self) combined with postmodern understandings of gender shaped by feminism and queer theory (which point to the social construction of binary gender norms). Trans theories of gender intersect with other queer possibilities to enable the recognition of non-binary gender identities.

This chapter also examines notions of community within online spaces. I introduce the concept of the blog, and explain how online spaces are particularly beneficial for the study of gender variance.

Expanding the borders of 'trans'

'Trans' is a contemporary term which marks a significant break from the more prescriptive terminology of transsexualism and transvestitism; it is in theory

accessible almost anywhere, to anyone who does not feel

comfortable in the gender role they were attributed with at birth, or

has a gender identity at odds with the labels "man" or "woman"

credited to them by formal authorities. (Whittle, 2006: xi)

This idea of trans identity emerged from what Feinberg (1992) recognises as

the unifying potential of 'transgender': a term which – despite having

originally been coined in the 1970s – only really gained popularity in the

1990s (Etkins & King, 2006: 13-14). Whilst debate exists over the exact

meanings of 'trans' and 'transgender', these terms are often used

interchangeably. For the sake of consistency, I primarily use the stand-alone

descriptor 'trans', and employ it in the overarching sense outlined by

Whittle.

Contemporary understandings of 'trans' refer to and re-narrate the gender

variant phenomena described in the work of nineteenth century sexologists

and twentieth century psychologists, medical ethicists, feminists and queer

theorists (Stryker, 2006: 13-14). Many trans people continue to draw upon

the technologically mediated medical discourse of transsexualism in order to

justify their desire to transition: that is, to undertake a process which

involves a physical and/or social move from one gender to another (Butler,

2004; Etkins & King, 2006). Feminist writers such as Raymond (1979) and

Hausman (1995) argued that the transition process implicitly upholds

traditional gender roles and helps to propagate misogynist medical cultures.

Commentators such as Stone (1991), Bornstein (1994) and Prosser (1998) respond by drawing upon feminism, queer theory and postmodern sociology to re-imagine trans subjectivity in a manner that acknowledges the social construction of gender.

There is a significant tension between the postmodern deconstruction of binary expectations and the reality of trans gender expressions. Normative gender performances 'simultaneously sustain, reproduce, and render legitimate the institutional arrangements that are based on sex category', but it is the individuals who fail to 'do gender appropriately', rather than these institutional arrangements, that are called to account when gender norms are subverted (West & Zimmerman, 1987: 146). Trans people are consequently at risk of severe harassment and violence (Whittle *et al*, 2007): it is no wonder therefore that many prefer, where possible, to pass as normatively gendered cis[2] men or women rather than put themselves at risk.

Contemporary trans theorists such as Serano (2007) criticise essentialist gender norms from a feminist perspective whilst simultaneously promoting the idea of 'subconscious sex' to account for transsexed desires for bodily change (77-93). This apparent contradiction is addressed by Monro (2005), who argues that postmodern and poststructuralist analyses of trans phenomena must acknowledge common accounts of an essential self or

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2   'Cis' (in contrast to 'trans') refers to those individuals for whom assigned gender, gender
     identity and preferred gender expression are aligned.

innate gender. In doing so, she responds to criticisms raised by participants in her own research and theorists such as Namaste (2000), who argue that many academics effectively erase trans experiences and undermine political efforts to fight discrimination. Monro (2005) therefore proposes a 'pluralist' theory of gender that 'draws understanding of the constructedness of sex and gender from postmodernism', recognises the existence of a subjective sense of gender, and inserts 'a certain amount of biological foundationalism' by acknowledging research into the impact of physical sex characteristics upon embodied experience (16-17). Gender pluralism recognises a complex relationship between physical factors, social factors and individual agencies, and thereby enables a wide spectrum of gender possibilities. It also aptly reflects the inclusive approach that is taken by many trans/queer groups and spaces, which increasingly acknowledge non-binary gender categories such as genderqueer, androgyne, genderfluid and bi-gender (Pearce, 2008; Stewart, 2009).

Non-binary gender identities have only very recently begun to receive academic attention beyond dedicated collections such as *Genderqueer* (Nestle *et al*, 2002). Examples of this in social theory and research tend only to be found in the work of those who explicitly respond to calls from the trans community for wider acknowledgement of genderqueer and other non-binary identities (as in Connell, 2010: 36). Interestingly, even the excellent *Transgender Studies Reader* (Stryker & Whittle, 2006) yields nary

a mention of genderqueer, genderfluid or bi-gender identity among its 52 articles and 752 pages.

Multiple Investments

It is important to note that trans communities and subcultures do not have a monopoly on gender diversity. For instance, Munt (1998) notes that within certain lesbian subcultures, 'butch/femme, like masculinity and femininity, become genders which carry their own imperatives, and thus, ambivalences'. She argues that butch/femme is therefore 'a liminal state' (8); the butch confirms the possibility of female masculinity, whilst the femme demonstrates that femininity may be embraced beyond the heterosexual matrix. However, like trans terminology, the meanings of terms such as 'butch' and 'femme' are highly contested (Rubin, 1992). Those who label themselves as butch or femme may construct these identities in very different ways. Moreover, there is a marked contrast between those who embrace the butch/femme model as a subversive repudiation of the heterosexual matrix and binary gender categories (as in Butler, 1990), and radical feminists who instead argue for the eradication of all gender roles (Hemmings, 1998: 92). Also invested in gender diversity are many intersex activists who, like trans people and feminists, fight for greater personal autonomy in the personal determination of identity and 'challenge the principle that sexual dimorphism should be established and maintained at all costs' (Butler, 2004: 6).

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It is no accident therefore that *Genderqueer* (Nestle *et al.*, 2002) contains the stories of those who identify into butch/femme, feminist, gay/lesbian, queer, intersex, transsexed and transvestite identities and cultures alongside those who explicitly identity as as 'genderqueer'. As Cole & Cate (2008) observe,

> When identities now most often considered to be based in the realm of the sexual (gay, lesbian, and so forth) are reconsidered in light of their *gender* deviance [...] many more people become eligible to benefit from increased freedoms of gender expression and identity.
> (283)

Within contemporary queer youth cultures, these identities may sit alongside one another and jointly constitute a complex account of self (Driver, 2008). Wilchins (2002) illustrates this with her account of 'Jesse, the football-throwing ex-Lesbian Avenger who personally identifies as a queer tranny boy but politically identifies as a dyke' (295), an example that demonstrates how queer youth can hold dear the 'right to be who and what they are, whole and complete and without omission' (292).

By contrast, 'assimilation remains the preferred option of many' gender variant individuals (Etkins & King, 2006; 224). This further complicates the picture: gendered identities both old and new currently co-exist, sometimes in harmony, sometimes with friction. The vaguely defined

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borders of today's trans communities include many but have the potential to offend those who do not wish to to be included. Whilst the success of the trans movement depends in part upon building 'effective connections' (Cole & Cate, 2008: 283), this will always be a complex exercise.

Internet communities

Online spaces often 'provide a [...] vivid sense of "place"', (Kendall, 2002: 6); internet users may come to regard them as locations, and can expect to encounter different cultures and social norms within different spaces. This does not, however, necessitate that internet users adopt a suitable persona for each space they frequent; as Gies (2008) observes, 'the appeal of the Internet is not invariably that it allows us to be someone else but also that it allows us to be ourselves' (317-318). Gies further asserts that 'bodily discomforts, pleasures and identities are a prime incentive for users to go online and share their experience with others', showing that everyday concerns can impact upon online habits (312). This argument reflects the findings of Kendall (2002), Rak (2005) and Karlsson (2007), who all note that online personae tend to reflect stable offline identities. In many spaces, 'the presence of substantive characteristics' such as 'a strong symbolic or 'imagined' sense of group identity, [...] intense and intimate communication among participants and resolute commitment to coherent sets of values and norms' offer a convincing justification for 'use of the notion of community' to describe groups within online environments (Hodkinson, 2007: 635).

Internet publications tend to retain properties in common with traditional media, such as archives. However, online archives differ analytically from traditional media archives by constituting some part of a hypertext, in which the role of visual (or even aural) elements may be amplified within the text, and readers may follow links within/between sites in a non-linear fashion (Papson *et al.,* 2007). Papson *et al.* argue that hypertextuality 'shifts the power from author to reader' by offering readers the opportunity to decide how they will navigate a site (310). This shifts the experience of the reader from that of a passive consumer to a more active role as a user. The boundary between producer and consumer is further broken down within publications where users are able to publicly comment upon content (Cavanagh, 2007).

One such form of hypertextual publication is the 'blog': a rapidly evolving media platform with origins in both the online diary and the 'filter weblog', where the author links to and comments upon external web content (Cavanagh, 2007: 122). The exact nature of the blog is hard to define: as Sorapure (2003) notes, 'it is difficult to determine the object of analysis when it is constantly changing' (19). Karlsson (2007) states that the platform is best defined by its format:

> [...] a website displaying dated entries in reverse chronological order,
> most often containing links and other kinds of interactivity between

websites and frequently featuring conversational features on the individual blog, for instance, a comment section (138).

Internet users tend to gravitate towards spaces where others share their interests and views (Cavanagh, 2007: 91). Blog readers 'often describe their first stage of engagement with the blog as a moment of recognition' (Karlsson, 2007: 148). Blogs are therefore useful sites for research into communities where individuals have a broad but deeply-felt interest in trans issues and gender variance.

Indeed, online spaces have played a key role in the development of gender-variant communities during the last two decades. Internet-based gender variant communities have facilitated a greater tolerance of gender diversity within the trans umbrella, which has further resulted in the increased flexibility of trans identity (Whittle, 1998). However, research into gender variant phenomena online remains relatively rare; indeed, it is telling that researchers such as Gauthier & Chaudoir (2004), who examine FtM ('female-to-male') transsexual internet cultures, make little reference to contemporaneous trans literature. This research therefore represents a timely investigation into gender variance within the context of a contemporary, blog-based community.

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Discovering Genderfork: methodological considerations in context

this is a neat… blog… community… THINGEY

- Anonymous Genderfork user, 2009

What is Genderfork?

Genderfork is a single blog, which acts as both the site of my research and the source of my data. As of 2010, Genderfork is updated with three posts a day. Updates are posted by a small team of volunteers overseen by Sarah Dopp, the blog's founder. The content of these posts may include: questions or thoughts about gender or gendered experiences; personal profiles; photographs; videos; and 'recommendations', which may involve various media such as fiction, web pages or art projects. The majority of the written content in particular is contributed by a community of individuals who read the blog (whom I refer to as 'Genderfork users'). The blog volunteers select which community contributions will be amongst the daily posts. Past entries are automatically archived after a period of time, with archived entries classified by categories such as date and topic.

Genderfork users may comment upon posts, either anonymously or under a registered username. Comments may consist of reactions to the posted content or responses to previous comments; indeed, extended conversations

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between users exist within many comment threads. Whilst there is a fair degree of international diversity amongst users, the blog's content is almost exclusively English-language and a large proportion of users reside in the USA. Genderfork is an open-access community in which all material is publicly accessible and any visitor may participate without having to register any details.

Genderfork thus exists as a hypertext which combines an editorial approach with considerable community input. Users may navigate it at leisure in a manner of their choosing, comment upon existing entries or contribute material. My analysis is primarily concerned with the meaning and impact of community-contributed content. I therefore focus upon the written content of the blog, as this is usually contributed by users, whereas photographs and videos tend to be selected by Genderfork volunteers.

Self-contextualisation

Due to the hypertextual nature of Genderfork, my research has effectively been a form of participant observation. Although at the time of writing I have not personally contributed to or commented upon the blog, I have acquired a personal connection to the space and am effectively a Genderfork user. To use internet terminology, I am a lurker: one of the many visitors who choose not to post anything, thereby remaining invisible to other users.

As a young, bisexual trans woman, I have a history of involvement in queer and feminist communities and a personal experience of transition from male to female. This endows me with a certain understanding of and investment in trans gender experiences; I aim to draw upon this to counter the typical absence of gender variant voices from empirically-driven sociological accounts of gender issues (as discussed in Namaste, 2000). In doing so, I attempt to privilege the voices and analyses of Genderfork users themselves in my analysis.

There are two reasons why my individual agency is as much a limiting factor as a source of insight. Firstly: I ultimately position my identity within the binary of female/male. By contrast, many Genderfork community members adopt identities such as 'androgyne' or 'genderqueer' and consider themselves to be between, beyond or without gender. Secondly, Genderfork is a highly diverse space, with users originating from a variety of different backgrounds. I write as a white, middle-class, abled and neurotypical person resident in the UK. By remaining aware of my own presence as an agent within the research, I recognise that my personal experiences impact on my perspective, and ultimately inform my interactions with Genderfork.

Methods

The Genderfork blog acts as the virtual 'field' for my research. My primary data was therefore entirely obtained from Genderfork. The extensive and

(mostly) unedited Genderfork archives enables a retrospective study of the blog's history from its founding post in September 2007. The blog's archives did not remain static during my period of research. The update schedule and hypertextual medium ensure that new content (including comments on past threads) are constantly being added to Genderfork by volunteers and users.

To collate and exhaustively analyse all of the potential data within this large sample would ultimately have been impossible in the two month time frame within which I conducted this research. I therefore took extensive notes during this period as I surveyed the entire content of the Genderfork archives up to the end of May 2010. This cut-off point was selected upon contingent grounds as it was the month in which I began my research. I made note of recurring social features, common practices and events of analytic interest, and saved hyperlinks to relevant content. Initial coding of the notes took place during the research process, with further coding undertaken following the completion of the research. This enabled me to identify and analyse recurring themes and issues within the blog's content, as well as changes over time.

Ethical concerns

Considerable debate exists over anonymity within internet research. Kendall (2002) notes that whilst many researchers argue that it is always

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necessary to anonymize online locations and individual usernames, others

point that the fact that some spaces are more 'public' than others, and some

suggest that virtual content should be appropriately referenced in order to

credit the author (241). Moreover, where material was originally posted in a

publicly accessible area of the internet, the employment of pseudonyms to

anonymize individuals and locations does not necessarily prevent readers

from using quotations from the research as search terms in order to uncover

the original location of this content (242). Ultimately, the best approach

would seem to be a contextual one, whereby the researcher acknowledges

the unique features of their chosen site of online research.

Any Genderfork post or comment may very easily be found by feeding the

appropriate content into a search engine. Genderfork users are aware that

contributed content is publicly available; a number of discussions in

comment threads have centred around the issues raised by the open nature

of the blog, and users may contribute content anonymously for this very

reason. Moreover, the blog's purpose is a very public one: to openly

celebrate gender diversity.   I have therefore not anonymized the location of

Genderfork, and where users are not anonymous I attribute content to them

by the usernames they have chosen to refer to themselves.

I have followed ethical guidance for research, including general guidelines

(such as British Sociological Association (2002)), and trans/queer-specific

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guidance (such as Green & Dickey (2009)). I also strive to use appropriate

language within my analysis: for instance, I refer to members of the

Genderfork community with their preferred gender pronouns (including

gender-neutral pronouns such as 'hir' and 's/he') where possible, and with a

gender-neutral singular form of 'they' where desired pronouns are unknown

to me.

When Narratives Collide: forking with identity

> [...] there has also been a growing recognition of another response
> though coalition – affinity, not identity.
>
> > - Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto,* 1991

> the reason I couldn't figure out my sexual orientation was because I
> didn't know my gender.
>
> > - Anonymous Genderfork user, 2010

Genderfork is a meeting point for multiple understandings of identity and gendered embodiment. In this chapter I explore how various narratives are reproduced and negotiated in blog posts and user comments, bringing together individuals with different interests in gender variance. I begin by examining how a number of Genderfork users refer to elements of transsexual narrative in order to express a desire for a gendered transition, be it social or physical. This leads into a case study which draws upon a conversation about menstruation in order to illustrate some of the many ways in which users understand their own gendered embodiment. I also look into how gender variance intersects with sexuality, and examine how adopting an identity label such as 'lesbian' or 'dyke' might have gendered connotations.

Forking the transsexual narrative

In exploring gender ambiguity, the Genderfork community inevitably appeals to many people who describe themselves as trans. A number of these individuals are transsexed men or women who identify their gender in relation to binary identity categories, but the majority would seem to identify elsewhere on the trans spectrum.

Many Genderfork users who are living in a new gender role and/or utilising medical interventions such as hormone therapy in order to facilitate a physical transition do not subscribe to traditional ideas of transsexual subjectivity or behaviour. Some individuals transition without a gendered end point in mind:

> Were I to choose a label, the most accurate one would be "Ft?" The woman-identified part of my life is over, I'm on my way to a place that I don't know. I got the "F," the "t," and heading into unknown territory. (anonymous)

> just because I'm taking T, doesn't mean I'm a man[3] (Joie Rey)

For others, an apparently female or male state might mark a mid-point (rather than an end-point) within their transition. Some transsexed users relate how they have come to identify as genderqueer or non-gendered

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3   Testosterone supplements are commonly referred to as 'T' within trans communities.

during their transition. In doing so, they come to embody a possibility suggested by Bornstein (1994): transition does not have to entail adherence to normative gender categories, and nor does it have to 'end' in any meaningful fashion.

A number of users express their desire for a body that mixes or is free of gender cues:

> I am not a boy. I do not wish to be a boy. But I'm not really a girl. I def do not want a penis… but I wouldn't mind having the rest of a boy's body. (Caitlyn/Cato)

> I identify as... a genderqueer I suppose because I am a gay male that wants to have a vagina but is not transsexual. (Caleb)

It is a difficult to describe non-binary possibilities, and hard (if not impossible) to escape gendered terminology. Caitlyn/Cato does not consider herself to be a 'boy' or a 'girl', but ultimately describes her preferred body as 'a boy's': a body that ultimately has 'male' characteristics, but one that is perhaps not as masculine as a 'man's' body might be. Caleb labels themself as genderqueer with some reservation: 'genderqueer I suppose'. They identify 'genderqueer' as a descriptor which will suffice in the absence of a more appropriate language: 'transsexual' certainly isn't a term that has

resonance for them. Indeed, many individuals living in a new gender role reject the terminology of transsexualism altogether. Several contributors describe how they strive to pass as cis men but prefer not to describe themselves using terms such as 'FtM' or 'trans man'. Others echo Caleb's desire for an explicitly genderqueer transition or androgyne surgery.

There is no common reason for Genderfork users to desire a physical transition. The simplistic concept of being 'born in the wrong body' (typically associated with transsexualism) is usually rejected. However, some users are inclined to transition more in order to alleviate bodily dysphoria than for the opportunity to engage in behaviour associated with their 'new' gender:

> I used to be a boy. Now I'm a woman, living as a man. My shrink, and my parents, can't understand why I would need to do such radical things to my body in order to find comfort with masculinity. (anonymous)

> I have a sneaking suspicion that my favorite parts of being post-op (MtF) will include wearing a strap-on, and the ability to wear boxer shorts without feeling weird (anonymous)

Conversely, alleviating bodily dysphoria may not necessarily involve a

physical transition, replete with hormone treatment and/or surgery. Advice

regarding what Etkins & King (2006: 27) describe as 'concealing' processes

is often offered on Genderfork. Concealing practices such as breast-binding

and tucking[4] allow individuals to hide bodily features which conflict with

their intended gender presentation without their having to make a permanent

physical change.

Genderfork users who may or may not identify as trans therefore commonly

draw upon the idea of transition – a concept heavily associated with

transsexualism – in order to describe the way in which they desire to

reconfigure their gendered appearance. These users typically refuse to be

bound by the discursive limits of transsexual possibility, and instead

imagine new options which transcend binary gender norms, thereby forking

the transsexual narrative.

Putting the 'men' into menstruation

A lengthy comment thread created in March 2010 serves to further illustrate

diverse attitudes towards embodied gender and physical transition amongst

Genderfork users. This discussion originated in a post asking for personal

stories relating to 'queer genders [and] menstruation'.

A number of individuals report ultimately remaining relatively comfortable

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4   Tucking is a process whereby the testicles are moved up into the abdomen and the penis

    is 'tucked' under the crotch in order to avoid a genital bulge.

in themselves during their period, even though the actual experience of menstruation itself is a 'massive pain [...] and a physical inconvenience' (ChairmanWow) for most. For others, however, the experience triggers intense bodily dysphoria by offering a graphic reminder of how their bodies are gendered as 'female':

> it reinforced the fact that my biological sex was incompatible with my mental sex. (micah)

> I hate getting or even talking about my period because of how it made me feel like a female. (cyk)

The status of menstruation as a gender indicator also impacts the attitude of many of trans women and male-assigned intersex individuals:

> I'm intersex, and my particular condition (complete androgen insensitivity syndrome) prevents me from having a period, since I don't have the internal equipment to make it happen. When I identified as female when I was younger, I sometimes desperately wanted my period not because I really wanted to BLEED, but because I wanted to be able to identify with biofem[5] individuals in a way that I couldn't. (Claudia)

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5 'Biological female': i.e. female-assigned individuals.

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A number of individuals on the FtM spectrum express their pleasure at the fact that testosterone treatment halts menstruation, but other approaches are also discussed in relation to this end. Several genderqueer users explain that they are content to minimise the impact of (or stop) their periods using birth control pills. Others alleviate or avoid dysphoria by redefining menstruation as a gender-neutral or masculine experience. In doing so, they effectively utilise conflicting gender cues in order to deconstruct essentialist understandings of gendered experience.

> I see it more as something my body does, then as something females do [...] And I think bleeding for a week is pretty savage (thesnakegod(dess))

> I'm a trans guy, and I actually like menstruating. It's kind of cool, if you think about it, just this monthly reminder of all the biological processes at work in my body. [...] I like to think that it's pretty manly. I mean, it involves blood and it has the word 'men' in it. What more could you ask for? (Gene)

Queer investments

The intersection of sexuality and gender variance is highly visible on Genderfork. In particular, many users describe themselves using terms such

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as 'butch', 'femme' and 'dyke', which are typically associated with lesbian identity. Sometimes these labels are adopted with confidence; however, such descriptors are likely to be qualified. For example, Ajay draws a distinction in hir profile between how s/he identifies and how s/he is defined by others:

> I identify as... generally a butch genderqueer. A fagboi. Though, I am normally defined as a butch lesbian and a dyke.

Others are inclined to express some ambivalence in describing themselves, such as in JB's profile:

> I identify as... A lesbian who doesn't know whether she should be butch, femme, or a gay boy who likes girls.

These ambivalences arise from the myriad of connotations and interpretations that may be associated with any given term or identity. By drawing upon several identity labels, Genderfork users such as Ajay aim to carefully define themselves in terms of multiple aspects of their gendered subjectivity, achieving a complex specificity which JB seems to aspire to.

Complexities associated with specificity are illustrated in a discussion that takes place in response to a post contributed by Shonne Elijah, who asks

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what the terms 'boi' and 'boidyke' mean. Users respond with suggested

definitions in the comment thread. Many comments draw a distinction

between the different masculinities of a 'boy' and 'man', whilst allowing

space for alternative interpretations:

> I describe it as a female bodied person who is "boyish" compared to
>
> butch which is more "mannish" (if that makes sense). Bois can be
>
> genderqueer, bigendered, etc., trans, or a lesbian. I reckon anyone
>
> can be a boi if they want to (I don't want to limit anyone)…
>
> (Keanan)

Elsewhere, users draw a distinction between 'lesbian' and 'dyke' due to the

gendered connotations of such terms. Lanthir suggests that 'lesbian' has

more feminine connotations than 'dyke':

> once I realized I'm genderqueer, it suddenly made sense to me
>
> why I've always preferred the word dyke to the word lesbian when
>
> referring to myself.

This distinction illustrates a connection between sexual orientation and

gender identity that is important within Genderfork; the gendering of

sexuality has an impact upon personal identity. Lanthir attributes greater

genderforking possibility to 'dyke' than to 'lesbian', suggesting that the

former term particularly implies gender diversity in addition to queer

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sexuality.

 In contrast to those who strive for specificity, a considerable number of Genderfork users simply describe themselves as 'queer'. Where these users are female-assigned, they often share Lanthir's view that being a 'lesbian' implies something about their gender as well as their sexuality. In labelling their sexual orientation as queer, these users recognise a non-heterosexual attraction to others whilst acknowledging that they do not fit into straightforward gender categories.

> Before I started to figure out I was androgynous (I'm XX chromosomed), I knew I liked girls pretty much exclusively, but I couldn't figure out why the word "lesbian" made me so very, extremely uncomfortable. And yet queer feels just fine. (S)

It might seem paradoxical to adopt 'queer' as an identity label, insofar as the term stands in opposition to any form of absolute categorisation. For many Genderfork users, however, the very vagueness of 'queer' allows them to name the manner in which they reject binary paradigms in an appropriately non-prescriptive manner; this powerfully reflects Driver's (2008) recognition of the polyvalence of queer identity within emerging queer cultures. There are, however, Genderfork users who decline to label themselves at all. Rather than adopt a partially appropriate identity

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description with some resignation, these users actively embrace a more ambiguous sense of self.

> I don't even know what gender I am anymore… but I'm learning to be okay with not knowing. (anonymous)

Straight androgyny

The majority of Genderfork users ultimately do not define as heterosexual The experiences of the comparatively few who do define as 'straight' further demonstrate how relationships may be constructed between sexuality and gender presentation:

> I identify as... a straight girl (often mistaken for gay) who enjoys wearing men's clothes and being androgynous. (Rhiannon)

> I'm a woman. I am straight. I just don't like wearing "women's clothes". I like baggy jeans and baggy hooded sweatshirts. [...] I don't wear makeup. [...] My hair is short, and I have a mohawk. I have piercings and tattoos. It seems that most people have a box in their mind where they put "butch" women and that box is labeled "lesbian". I even had a doctor ask me once "Are you sure you're not a lesbian?". Lady, I think I'd know if I fell in love with women and/ or wanted to have sex with them. (anonymous)

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In describing themselves as straight, users such as Rhiannon position their gender identity as male or (more commonly) female: this is usually backed up with an explicit clarification (e.g. 'a straight girl', 'I'm a woman'). In contrast to users who describe their gender *identity* as 'androgynous', Rhiannon and the anonymous user embrace androgyny as a form of self-expression which doesn't necessarily indicate anything further about their gender identity or sexuality.

Summary

Genderfork users often wish to dress or change to their bodies in a manner that displays some kind of non-binary gender identity; a conception which positions the self as neither entirely female nor entirely male. Furthermore, the experiences of Genderfork users highlight the manner in which styles, bodies and identities which do not conform to gender norms are often associated with queer sexuality, and show how non-heterosexual identities may be differently gendered. However, a gender variant appearance does not necessitate gender variant identity: there are users who are perfectly content to describe themselves as female or male.

The Genderfork community embodies Monro's (2005) idea of gender pluralism, thereby forking the very notion of gender variance. Genderfork is a space within which users may explore and celebrate gender variant

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appearances and lifestyles without being restricted by prescriptive

boundaries of identity: it is therefore a meeting point for a wide variety of

individuals with quite different investments in androgyny, ambiguity and

gender variance.

Queerer-Than-Thou: is all genderforking equal?

> I feel like a fraud when I hang out with the gay community because I
> am not gay, and I feel like a fraud when I hang out with the trans
> community, because I am not sure that I want to transition.
>
> - Anonymous Genderfork user, 2010

Hierarchies and boundaries frequently exist within trans and queer spaces. In the first part of this chapter, I examine how Genderfork users reflect upon these social borders. Some users choose to challenge prescriptive tendencies within such spaces, whereas others prefer to re-define their identity in a way that recognises their own exclusion. The fact that users feel comfortable engaging in these discussions within the blog demonstrates the success of Genderfork's inclusive ethos. However, the space is not entirely without its own border conflicts[6]. In the second part of this chapter, I examine how femme-identified individuals call the boundaries of androgyne and genderqueer identity into question.

Trans exclusivity

Border conflicts within gender variant spaces often revolve around the disputed inclusiveness of the 'trans' umbrella. Feinberg (1992), Whittle (2006) and others define 'trans' and 'transgender' in a manner that

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6   I follow Steinberg *et al.* (1997) in using the notion of a disputed border.

encompasses a broad spectrum of gender diversity: a gender pluralism

which is inclusive of those who define themselves into non-binary identity

categories such as genderqueer, bi-gender and androgyne, as well as

transsexed and transvestite people. However, not all trans communities are

so all-encompassing. Samson notes that such communities often prioritise

the interests of transsexed individuals:

> it still feels like it takes a lot of courage to come and represent those
>
> of us who aren't transitioning toward a fixed gender/sex, or maybe
>
> not physically transitioning at all. [...] sometimes I feel like I'm not
>
> taken seriously–just because I don't look all that "non-cis." [...] I
>
> think the genderqueer among us sometimes feel like we're just "trans
>
> lite."

Samson's account evokes Bornstein's (1994) 'unspoken hierarchy' of trans

expression (67-68). It highlights the difficulties faced within many trans

spaces by individuals with non-binary identities, where members are often

expected to conform to cultural standards that arise from narratives of

transsexualism. Those who fail to conform are often made to feel that they

do not belong within trans spaces, as illustrated in an anonymously

contributed post:

> Sometimes I feel like a fraud because I didn't grow up wanting to be a boy like other trans men did.

This post sparked a discussion about the need to fit within a particular narrative (or to be perceived as doing so):

> I identify as genderqueer and I am always questioning if I am really trans or a butch lesbian. (Keanan)

> I don't feel like a fraud as much as I feel terrified others will decide I am one (Nom)

The existence of what some users refer to as 'binary privilege' within many trans communities lead a number of users to reject the possibility of identifying as trans. Others come to equate 'trans' or 'transgender' purely with transsexualism:

> I think I'm bi-gendered. I used to think I was transgendered, but I know without a doubt certain parts of me are masculine and at the same time other parts are female.(cowgirlumhum)

> Too often "Trans" subtly equals "transitioning", which is why I usually just use "queer" (Idgie)

In spite of these tensions, Genderfork users seem to feel comfortable talking about such issues. The broadly inclusive nature of Genderfork ensures that most individuals may disclose their own self-categorisation (or lack thereof) and converse about problems within wider trans/queer communities in a mutually respectful fashion.

Do femmes fork gender?

One overt border conflict has occurred within Genderfork. It mostly took place within a heated comment thread, following a November 2009 post by Sarah Dopp about the possibility of creating a 'new community expression space that specifically focuses on and celebrates femme identity'. Several users responded positively to this suggestion, but a number asked why femme identity shouldn't be celebrated within Genderfork itself. Others questioned the place of femme-identified individuals within queer spaces altogether:

> I also don't consider it entirely relevant to genderqueer, because in society, a female being femme isn't queer (Cat)

> Don't get me wrong, I'm all for feminine beauty and I support it. I just don't feel it belongs on a genderqueer site. One of the reasons I visit this site so often is because it acts as a refuge from the

mainstream. I think it's more socially acceptable for a woman to

wear a skirt without shaving than to be a genderqueer who binds.

(Pibb)

The disagreement centred around the status of female-assigned femmes, as

opposed to 'femme boys' (anonymous) or 'bio males' (Cat). There was broad

agreement that:

as it pertains to bio men, I think that Genderfork is completely

welcoming to femme identities, though I do see fewer of them than

bio fem andro/masculine identities. (Cat)

Two central issues were contested within the comment thread: the meaning

of femme identity, and whether or not Genderfork should celebrate queer

gender identity as well as gender variant presentation. Users did not suggest

explicitly that femmes should be made to feel unwelcome within the

Genderfork community, but a number of individuals argued that the blog's

volunteers should avoid posting female-assigned femme content.

Users such as Cat and Pibb understood 'femme' as indicative of an

individual who ultimately fits within the existing paradigm of female gender

norms. Those users who championed femme inclusion argued that femme

identities represent a queer possibility that is inherently at odds with

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normative gender categorisation:

> femmes can be ambiguously gendered & I say this from a lifetime of personal experience. Femme is something inside of you, something you put out to the world- NOT what the world puts on you.
> (Francie)

> If you look at traditional queerness, there is a tendency in the community to present androgynous or butch…therefore, by me playing with my femme side, am I not queering my sexual identity by not following the traditional outward expression that is expected and accepted by my community? (tara)

These users highlight not only the inherently queer manner in which femmes may perform femininity, but also the possibility of femme gender presentations coinciding with a queer and/or trans gender identity. They thereby imply that Genderfork is ultimately a space in which diverse gender identities *should* be explored and celebrated, as well as diverse forms of gender expression.

This particular disagreement did not cause major turmoil, and users broadly exercised restraint in their comments. However, Sarah Dopp closed the thread, and asked for further input into the debate via email (i.e. outside the

blog itself). Following this discussion, profiles, prose and images that represent female-assigned femme identities have been posted on Genderfork.

Summary

Border conflicts demonstrate that the subversive forking of identity may be perceived as a threat even within gender variant communities. Genderqueer people tend to threaten the boundaries of 'trans': their very existence is liable to undermine prevailing ideas of how trans people should look, act and feel. Similarly, femmes have forked Genderfork itself: in achieving a more femme-inclusive editorial approach, they have highlighted the importance of identity to many Genderfork users. For these individuals, androgyny and gender variance are about internal identity as much as social roles and physical appearances, an idea which in turn draws upon forked ideas of trans possibility.

These conflicts also attest to the importance that gender variant spaces hold for those who access them. Users commonly explain how such spaces in general – and Genderfork in particular – offer a respite from loneliness, a place in which they can encounter others with similar feelings and experiences. Groups such as genderqueer people and femme queers threaten to redefine the essence of such spaces by forking their meaning and purpose, opening them up to new possibilities. Meanwhile, these

possibilities enable such spaces to accommodate a wider variety of individuals who share the experience of being marginalised due to their gender differences: individuals who might previously have felt that they had no place to go.

Beyond Female and Male: escaping the binary

[...] the question of what it is to be outside the norm poses a paradox for thinking, for if the norm renders the social field intelligible and normalises that field for us, then being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it.

- Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2004

My gender isn't complex. It only becomes complex when I try to explain it in terms of the binary.

- Anonymous Genderfork user, 2010

A large proportion of Genderfork users wish to avoid being defined by their gender. Some actively attempt to define their gender in terms other than 'female' or 'male', whilst others desire the freedom to mix gender signals at will. In this chapter, I examine the difficulties encountered by those who are unable to find an easy place within the monolithic social reality of binary gender, and outline various strategies that fork gender itself by endeavouring to move beyond this paradigm. These strategies include the redefining and mixing of gender cues, the emergence of new, non-gendered language, and the promotion of new gender identities. Within the context of this latter phenomenon, I investigate different understandings of the term 'genderqueer'.

Thinking in binary

The powerful impact of social norms and physical cues within society ensure that any attempt to escape binary gendering is very difficult indeed. However, gender attribution is a complex process, with certain physical and social gender cues outweighing others (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). One consequence of this is that some individuals appear to have more physically androgynous bodies than others. Genderfork users with more androgynous bodies find it easier to pass as the 'opposite' gender, but in doing so they are usually still boxed into one of the two binary gender categories. Meanwhile, Genderfork users with bodies that possess stronger female or male cues find it considerably more difficult to pass as a different gender.

Gender cues often relate to factors such as size, disability, race and religion, which are likely to impact upon how individuals describe themselves to others and how they expect to be treated. For instance, Bek explains in their profile that they are unlikely to be referred to by anything other than female pronouns:

> I think, due to my size and appearance, it would be hard to avoid anything female-oriented.

Passing as female or male has different meanings for different Genderfork

users. Transsexed users who identify as female or male usually indicate that they prefer to be recognised as such. This does not mean that transsexed individuals necessarily uphold gender norms through choice, however: many Genderfork users express disappointment at the compromises necessary for them to pass as cis men or women, echoing the experiences of transsexed individuals in studies such as Connell (2010).

> I'd prefer not to be mistaken for a girl but don't hate it enough to cease my genderfuck style. (Elliott)

Passing is often about safety as much as identity affirmation, as noted by William, a trans man:

> I try to think about where it is and isn't "safe" for me to present as a femme man. My home town and my partner's home town = not safe. There I NEED to pass as male to stay unharmed

Non-transsexed Genderfork users usually have no desire to live as the 'opposite' gender, but may work towards passing as such in order to avoid being identified as their assigned gender.

> Does anyone have tips for looking more masculine/androgynous for someone with feminine features? This androgyne is getting more

than a little sick of looking so feminine all the time (ZZ)

I've rejected the "girl" box and identify as a genderqueer, but my gender presentation isn't masculine enough for me to be perceived as male, so everyone assumes I'm female (Naomi)

Etkins & King (2006) observe that feminisation and masculinisation practices (e.g. wearing different clothes, binding or tucking) can be used to neutralise existing gender cues. The experiences of Genderfork users seem to demonstrate that it is difficult, if not impossible, to shift the gender implications of physical appearance without some degree of feminisation or masculinisation. This troubles many users:

I finally realized that I intentionally wear [jeans] because they are made for males. But does this make me a gender rebel, or just someone who cares more about the intended gender of clothing than she would like to admit? (anonymous)

If the only way a person's gender is validated as queer is by them embodying the "opposite" gender of the sex they were assigned at birth, we are still operating within a restrictive and faulty binary logic, and I would argue that very few, if any of us subvert that logic 100% of the time. (Ashley)

In response to these problems, Genderfork users employ a number of strategies to resist binary gender. These include redefining gender indicators, mixing gender signals and the use of new language in an attempt to express ideas about gender without the restriction of binary limitations.

Redefining gender

Redefining gender indicators involves extending and shifting the meanings of gendered language, thereby subverting gender norms and deconstructing gendered boundaries. Etkins & King (2006) describe redefining as a 'transgendering' process, in which 'selves, body parts, and gendered accoutrements' take on new meanings (38). For example, trans women on Genderfork may describe their bodily features as 'female' prior to any hormone treatment or surgery. Similarly, female-assigned, femme-identified individuals may prefer to be referred to with male or gender-neutral pronouns, in recognition of a gender identity which is not reflected in their socially gendered appearance. Terms such as 'female' and 'masculine' become elastic and ever more contingent through these practices.

The language of redefining often bears a discursive resemblance to transsexual narratives. For example, d, who describes themself as 'a non-transitioning feminine person with XY chromosomes', argues that:

even if people look like their birth genders, they can still have

something different on the inside.

Britni, who identifies as a 'kinky, queer, fabulously high femme' insists that:

Just because I might look like the feminine girl next door doesn't

mean that I am.

d and Britni reproduce the transsexual concept of gender/sex – mind/body

dualism, whereby individuals are defined by their internal identity, which

may in turn be used to (re)define their body. This demonstrates how

redefining tends to prioritise internal identity over physicality and/or the

perspective of third party agents, as 'the inside' is self-identified rather than

defined in line with the individual's social and (socially mediated) physical

statuses. d identifies as more female than male despite normally being

perceived as male by others. Britni embraces a femme identity and uses

female pronouns, but identifies as queer and describes herself as 'radically

unique', refusing to define her gender in a straightforward fashion.

 A number of Genderfork users complain of a genderqueer homogeneity

arising from appearance-based hierarchies that rely upon visual deviance

from (rather than conformity to) gender norms. Genderfork users are

inclined to criticise this behaviour, and instead highlight the emancipatory

effects of separating identity from physical appearance. Redefining may hence resist gender norms within queer communities as well as the wider world.

> what bothers me is the idea that seems to be unspoken but prevalent in my community that to be an androgyne/genderqueer/queer, you must look androgynous. Sick of it. We shouldn't have to change our bodies to fit someone else's idea of our identity. (Samson)

Genderfork users therefore tend to prioritise personal identity in determining gendered subjectivity. A second form of resistance to binary norms draws very much upon physical cues.

Mixed signals

A large number of Genderfork users seek to undermine rigid gender categories, represent their internal identity or simply express themselves by mixing-and-matching gender cues. Some users deliberately mix gender signals on a casual, everyday basis:

> I remember in high school paring my grease covered workboots with a pink Little House on the Prairie-esque dress I bought from Goodwill. I love paring the ultra-masculine with the ultra-femme. (Taylor Trash)

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Alternatively, mixing gender cues may be an overt act of rebellion against family or peers:

> I like boots [...] I've been accused of "stomping around" in them, of being un-ladylike.[...] The more aware I become of how I have pushed down my gender noncomformity in my life so far, the more I wear [my] boots. [...] Wearing non-girly boots = facing my fears and finding joy. (anonymous)

Genderfork users may deliberately employ mixed gender cues in order to alleviate discomfort arising from being boxed into an absolute gender category. For example, many female-assigned users find it easier to wear feminine clothing if they reject other culturally imposed gender expectations, as evidenced in this anonymously contributed post:

> I shied away from dresses for a long time… but since growing out my armpit and leg hair, they don't nearly seem so bad.

A number of comments demonstrate that other users share this feeling, with Michaela explaining:

> I like the oppositeness of it.

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Genderfork users may also mix signals in order to break down cultural boundaries and celebrate personal intersectionalities of race and ethnicity in a gendered context.

> I love giving mixed signals about gender and culture. Like letting the top of my boxers show above the waist of my sari. (anonymous)

In this sense, mixing signals enables individuals with complex personal backgrounds and identities to embrace a holistic sense of self, in opposition to social boundaries which might otherwise pit different aspects of the self against one another.

Language

A third important form of resistance to binary gender involves the emergence of new language which explicitly recognises new genders and facilitates understanding of non-binary gender phenomena. With Genderfork written almost exclusively in English, discussion on this topic broadly centres upon expanding the gendered possibility of the English language.

Two of the most clearly gendered aspects of the English language are names and pronouns. Many of the usernames within Genderfork deliberately

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combine possible gendered equivalents (e.g. thesnakegod(dess), Caitlyn/Cato) or avoid overt gender indicators (this is particularly clear when users name themselves after letters, e.g. d, ZZ). When users mix or avoid gendered indicators within their usernames, it becomes harder to gender them online.

Some users choose more apparently obvious gendered usernames (e.g.William, Naomi). This may dramatically symbolise the rejection of an individual's assigned gender: for instance, William explains on numerous occasions that he is a trans man. Alternatively, users may seek to transcend the gendered implications of their username by redefining their own gender: for instance, Naomi has registered a username on Genderfork that might typically be regarded as female, but they assert their genderqueer identity in opposition to this.

Pronouns are important to Genderfork users. The template for user-contributed profiles includes a section in which contributors may state their preferred pronouns. Some have a preference for exclusively female or male pronouns. However, users more commonly express ambivalence, or state a preference for gender-neutral pronouns and/or a mixture of gendered pronouns:

I prefer to not have people use any pronouns, but if they must, then

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gender neutral "ze" and "hir," or just "they." (Ishi)

Preferred pronouns often represent a move away from an individual's assigned gender, as well as a move into a liminal or differently gendered space. For instance, Spook – who describes himself as a 'third-gender pansexual biofem who presents as male', writes that they're happy with:

> Anything that isn't a female pronoun — female pronouns make me itch. Gender-neutral are fine, as are male pronouns. If I'm dressed and presenting as a male, male pronouns are preferred. (Spook)

There are a number of different gender-neutral pronoun systems, varying from those that adapt existing linguistic conventions (such as the singular form of 'they') to those that introduce entirely new words that may or may not draw upon or combine existing gender pronouns. There is a somewhat bewildering range of gender-neutral pronoun systems[7]; this, along with their status as neologisms, ensures that they do not appeal to all. Some Genderfork users explain that they dislike the available gender-neutral pronouns, whilst others express a desire for a universally accepted system.

> I hate that the binary is so rigid that there isn't a recognized gender-
> neutral pronoun, and I find the ones somewhat available difficult for

---

7   An extensive list of gender neutral pronoun systems can be found in Wikipedia (see
     Wikipedia contributors, 2010).

myself and others. (Sen Holiday)

New Gender Possibilities

The most overtly dichotomous aspect of our gendered language is the
terminology of gender (and sex) categorisation itself: female/male,
feminine/masculine. Genderfork promotes numerous alternatives to
traditional gender categorisation, with many users describing themselves
using epicene referents such as androgyne, bi-gender, pangender, or (most
commonly) genderqueer. In the final part of this chapter, I draw upon the
example of 'genderqueer' to examine how new gender categories are used
and understood within the Genderfork community.

None of the non-binary identities used within Genderfork have a
particularly fixed meaning; indeed, Genderfork users are themselves
inclined to ascribe various different meanings to each of these categories.
This equivocality seems appropriate given the liminality of the identities
referred to by such terms. Genderqueer is arguably the most indeterminate
of these ambiguous identities: unlike terms such as 'androgyne' and 'bi-
gender', it implies possibilities that may lie entirely beyond female and
male. This very elasticity probably accounts for its popularity on
Genderfork:

One thing I love about the label 'genderqueer' is that it's very loose

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> [...] I would say that if you feel like you don't really fit into the male/ female binary, you can call yourself genderqueer. Genderqueer is a term loose enough that if you learn more about your gender identity, you can evolve but still probably fit under the genderqueer umbrella. (Marion)

This allows Genderfork users to embrace apparent contradictions, and thereby avoid the policing of identity boundaries. Descriptions such as 'genderqueer lesbian' (Brit/Sky) and 'bio. male genderqueer transdyke/boidyke' (Chase) allow individuals to acknowledge complex relationships between identity, appearance and sexuality. The genderqueer label can itself acknowledge a mixture of feminine and masculine traits:

> Accepting my own genderqueerness is about accepting my masculinity as wel as my feminity. [sic] (Jørgen)

Although non-binary identity categories are therefore loosely defined, they facilitate the establishment of new gendered spaces which don't necessarily reference the binary gender categories of female or male. For many Genderfork users, terms such as genderqueer represent a deep-seated feeling of identity and gendered subjectivity. In this sense, genderqueer might even be regarded as a gender in itself.

I'm genderqueer. My gender is not neutral. It takes sides.

(anonymous)

My androgyny seems to mess with people's heads, but it's just

natural to me. I'm a genderqueer, not a genderfucker. (Naomi)

Genderfork users mostly accept and embrace the ambiguity of terms such as

genderqueer. This can be seen in comments posted in response to a post

contributed by Meike, who asks how 'genderqueer' is defined, and how an

individual might 'know' that they are genderqueer.

Genderqueer is a very nonspecific label. It's more a philosophy or a

way of life. Identifying as genderqueer simply means that you see

no reason to conform to traditional ideas of gender, and other than

that there aren't any guidelines (Chase)

You're genderqueer if you feel genderqueer. Today you might not

be, tomorrow you may be… Honestly, I'm not sure… I believe that

whether or not I feel like identifying as something matters much

more than if someone thinks that label should be attached to me

(Andy)

These comments are indicative of a general tendency amongst Genderfork

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users to reject any dogmatic adherence to a particular theory of gender or understanding of terminology, in favour of an approach which recognises the reality of subjectively gendered experience:

> gender may be a social construct, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't impact our lives in a huge way. It's all fine and well to say that you don't believe in gender, but that does not change the way that non-normatively gendered people have to walk through the world. (Smith)

Summary

Resisting binary gender is a difficult task, particularly for those who do not identify as female or male. The sheer scale of the binary gender paradigm within the English-speaking world ensures that it is difficult to even conceive of non-binary gender identities. Despite this, Genderfork users utilise a variety of strategies that challenge gendered thinking, and share new ways of understanding gender which point to the possibility of forking gender itself by moving beyond binary limitations. These strategies tend to affirm the importance of individual gender autonomy and personal identity, wherein the individual has a right to assert how they identify their own gender without necessarily referencing traditional understandings of femininity or masculinity.

Conclusion: A fork in the road

> I know the names of lots of genders, but not the name of my own. I
> have no idea what it is. And I'm not interested in deciphering it,
> justifying it, or figuring it out. I don't want to theorize about it or
> discuss its social implications. I don't want it written down or
> thought through. Not being female and not being male — it's not
> exotic, cool, post-queer, postmodern, a philosophical conundrum, a
> sociocultural guinea pig. We are common and real.
>
> - Anonymous Genderfork user, 2009

The very idea of a 'genderfork' is evocative of the multiple gender
understandings explored within the Genderfork space. As a noun, a
genderfork implies new options, new ideas and new possibilities: new routes
forking from an existing road. The traditional order plays an implicit role in
this process: the new inevitably arises from the old. New understandings
and gender possibilities found within Genderfork ultimately acknowledge
the looming presence of the binary gender system that so impacts the lives
of Genderfork users. Genderforkers do not try to ignore this system but
instead play with its possibilities and draw upon its tenets in order to
deconstruct it. As a verb, to genderfork is to envisage a spectrum of
possibility both within and beyond binary gender, and to acknowledge one's
own subjectivity when choosing which road to follow. In respect of this,

Genderforkers value the concept of identity, albeit as an autonomous assertion of a deeply-felt sense of gendered selfhood rather than a strictly defined category of being.

Genderfork is more than a trans space but it is nevertheless aligned with the trans movement. It is a site for exploring the possibilities of gender liberation, a cause which touches all but is perhaps more urgent for those who most seriously transgress gender norms. A large proportion of Genderfork users consider themselves to be trans or genderqueer within the broadest sense; others draw upon trans discourses in exploring their own gendered embodiment (such as in the discussion of menstruation) and sense of self (such as in the assertion of non-binary gender identity). However, users also refer to other narratives of gendered subjectivity and discourses of identity to describe themselves and their gendered experiences. As Wilchins (2002) and Butler (2004) recognise, trans and genderqueer communities share an interest in gender liberation and personal autonomy with the women's, intersex and gay/lesbian/bisexual movements, demonstrating the power of affinity and coalition.

Genderfork is not any kind of campaigning group nor does it espouse any particular ideological position, but it is ultimately a space wherein the personal is inherently political. In celebrating their own lives, users imagine a different world. Genderfork is just one blog amongst many, but its

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popularity and diversity are of consequence. Moreover, it does not exist in a vacuum, but is instead a hypertext which draws upon and contributes to the wider gender movement.

The literature of trans, feminist and queer studies currently does little to acknowledge the revolution in gender understanding represented by this movement. There are few theoretical explorations of non-binary gender identities, and little research examining the increasing popularity of genderqueer identity. Significant empirical studies of trans populations such as Whittle *et al.* (2007) (the largest research project into trans experiences conducted in the UK to date (Mitchell & Howarth, 2009: 28-29)) presuppose that individuals ultimately regard themselves as broadly female or male by employing exclusively binary language that fails to properly unpack the experiences of those who seek to move beyond binary gender possibilities. The field of trans studies in particular would benefit a great deal from a wider acknowledgement of non-binary gender identity.

Genderfork offers a fascinating insight into both the subversive possibilities and the current limits of gender-variant spaces on the internet. In regards to these limits, it is important to note how particular groups may be marginalised by conflicts centring around the borders of trans and queer identity. Moreover, it should be recognised that whilst genderforking is an outlet for many, offering an affirmation of gendered subjectivity, it remains

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more accessible to those who are already privileged: a fact that is not always immediately obvious to those who embrace it. Online spaces such as Genderfork enable international communication and exploration of issues that might otherwise remain private, but due to external power differentials they are somewhat divisive nonetheless. For instance, it is the well-educated (and hence also the white, the middle-class and the neurotypical) and the young who are most likely to access Genderfork, even within English-speaking countries. This is because Genderfork users require an internet connection in the first place, and need to have a good grasp of the English language as complex issues are regularly grappled.

Genderfork is therefore very much about the offline world of individuals who subvert gender norms. Experiences of gendered subjectivity, gender identity, gender confusion and gender-based discrimination are very powerful and very real for the blog's users. In celebrating gender diversity and gender variance, Genderfork highlights the challenges faced by individuals whose very existence might be otherwise invisible.

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