Gender Outlaw in Nonbinary Space

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The "tyranny of gender," as Petra Doan calls it, is hard to escape when you are transgender (Doan, 2010, p. 635). It exists everywhere you go, in every interaction. It even exists in purportedly safe spaces such as those coded queer or feminist, like LGBTQIA resource centers. Little has been written about the experiences of transgender people in their day-to-day lives under the tyranny of gender and how they experience space and place. This research is an effort to increase awareness of the unique ways that trans people experience the presence of exclusion, marginalization, and violence whenever they leave the relative safety and comfort of their own private dwelling. This research uses theories developed in feminist and queer geographies as well as sociological theories of gender.

For the purpose of this paper, genderqueer is defined as "an identity label used by many people who view their gender as falling outside of the male/female or man/woman binaries" (Serano, n.d.). Transgender is used as a social and political umbrella term for people who transgress gender norms or otherwise defy traditional gender categories in some way and encompasses a wide range of identities such as agender, bigender, genderfluid, genderqueer, nonbinary, female-to-male, and male-to-female. There are literally dozens of terms that cover the infinite variety of genders that exist. The term cis-heteronormativity is used to denote people who are comfortable with their birth gender and engage exclusively in heterosexual relationships.

Because this research project has an autoethnographic component, I feel the need to share that at the time this research was conducted, I was identifying as genderqueer and presented as mostly male with some obvious feminine traits and expressions. For a very long time, I did not feel comfortable as either male or female, as I am a bit of both, somedays more one than the other, though inwardly

I have always considered myself very feminine. Thus, genderqueer was the term I was most comfortable with, and I embraced it because it also spoke to my sense of self as someone on the outside: activist, autodidact, explorer, and outlaw.

As I progressed through my undergraduate work into my graduate work and my research grew more focused on transgender issues, I consciously sought a deeper understanding of the ways transgender people suffer exclusion, marginalization, and violence. Using tools gained in the study of the geography of gender and sexuality, these new lenses were used to observe gender phenomena and provided tremendous insight into how trans exclusion, marginalization and violence play out in day-to-day interactions with people, places, and spaces in a way the most careful reading of the available academic literature could not.

Academic work in feminist, queer and trans literatures is essential to understanding the role of gender, particularly patriarchal norms, and how they form the basis of that exclusion. Intersectional analysis is crucial to understanding the legal and public policy frameworks that sanction transgender marginalization, as well as the role of identity and identity politics in shaping debates around trans rights. Feminist and queer geography illustrate how the experiences that trans people have in public, semi-public and even private spaces are much different than those of cisgender people and that almost all space and places are coded as cis-heteronormative (Namaste, 1994, p. 225). Geographic research from transgender subjectivities offers a window into the stories of transgender life in an often-hostile world, illuminating the practical, mundane, and spatial ways the "tyranny of gender" (Doan, 2010, p. 635) asserts itself in everyday life.

Dr. Petra Doan's and Julia Serano's auto-ethnographic accounts of their experiences as transgender women inspired me during the nascent stages of my transition to write about my own. Doing so compelled me to think back to when I knew something wasn't quite normal about my relationship to being male. For

me, it started in earnest with the closets and bureau drawers of my maternal Grandmother's collection of clothes. Her house had four bedrooms and every closet was filled to the brim. During a pre-pubescent summer spent there I began playing make believe games dressing up as a woman. It was something done in secret, hidden away, and only done when it was "safe." I've been crossdressing ever since.

In my late twenties, I got married and for the most part my wife was okay with my desire to wear women's clothing within the confines of our physical relations; privately I was still doing it frequently. During the latter part of my marriage, my inner feelings about my femininity became sharper, and the impulses to express myself more frequently as feminine in outward appearance became intense. The pain caused by my inner gender not matching my outward appearance regularly manifested as physical as well as mental suffering. As Doan (2010) writes, "I buried my gender deep in my bodily core and struggled mightily to maintain a bearded façade, the increasingly brittle outer shell designed to protect masculinity" (p. 637). Presenting as male, including facial hair, while not particularly identifying with men and inwardly loathing much that society imposes and codes as appropriate "masculine" behavior or interests became unbearable.

With the dissolution of my marriage and my return to therapy after a considerable absence, I began to reassert and embrace my femininity, my feminine feelings, and began working through the complicated issues surrounding my gender and sexuality. This also marked the beginning of my playing with my gender expression in public and semi-public spaces. I took on a more ambiguous outward appearance and became less guarded about some of my feminine mannerisms and interests. When I left my wife, the space I moved into and the people I shared it with were safe, loving, respectful and encouraging, and as a result I began living mostly as a woman at home.

Like most transgender people early in their coming out, I turned to a local LGBTQIA resource center to find community, information and support. It is often within these interactions that individuals build relationships to the wider queer community (Doan, 2007, p. 64). While I was engaged in the LGBTQIA community for over a decade, and volunteered for three years, I recognized that I had not come out within my natural affinity group, transgender people. Additionally, I had been out and doing feminine presentation with my friends the same length of time, as well as a few public performances at events like the annual Pride celebrations. This research project was my coming out within my natural affinity group, transgender people in the Puget Sound region.

In order to better understand why I hadn't come out as transgender, I decided to conduct research and personal analysis of the spatial practices of transgender space to try to answer the following questions:

1. Would my experiences of non-binary space transcend Doan's "tyranny of gender?"

2. Would being out in the open as genderqueer at social events run and organized by transgender people allow me to relax and be comfortable in my own skin, or would familiar patterns of subtle and not-so-subtle forms of gender policing creep in?

3. What kinds of dynamics emerge when various genders are being simultaneously performed in a "safe" non-binary space?

In this essay, I refer to the concept of "queer space" to denote something that is situated on the margins of society, but is folded into normative areas and is purposefully structured along alternative lines to serve those outside cis heteronormativity. The notion of "queer space" was born from the understanding that most urban spaces are by their very nature heteronormative and that a different kind of space was needed to support queer individuals and communities (Bell *et al.,* 1994). In response to this need, organizations created queer focused community resource centers that "through overt action create a safe place for

people who identify as queer" (Doan, 2007, p. 57). Even though these spaces exist for the purposes of providing "safe space" for queer and gender nonconforming people, do they really function that way or do they only exist as a theoretical construct as Rushbrook argues (Rushbrook, 2002, p. 204)?

Whether presenting as ambiguous, feminine or masculine in just about every queer space I have encountered, with the exception of the annual Pride events, I have noticed that people who are gender variant are often put into a position of having to pick a side of the gender binary or risk being excluded. We are largely invisible to the wider community. People look at us and don't know how to include us, love us, hear us, see us, have sex with us, or value us, because they've been taught to instill value and worth in the polar ends of the binary and the safety of rigid gender roles (Alxndr, 2018). Transgender people whose expression doesn't easily fall into normative and/or recognizable female or male patterns are a challenge because people inevitably have to spend some time trying to decipher where on the gender expression spectrum they fall. As someone who was clinging to their beard, albeit in a half-hearted way, I got it. It is visually disorienting to look at a "man" with a beard who is wearing hoop earrings, purple nail polish, a bra under a sweater and a velvet skirt with stockings and heels, even for the most accepting progressive people.

It is a radical act and takes a tremendous amount of courage and a bit of a devil-may-care attitude to walk into a room and try to be yourself while almost everyone looks at you and wonders things like: Creep? One of us? Confused? Dangerous? Predator? Potential sister in the struggle? Needs help? Nice dress! Even in this post-modern era there are few spaces that are safe for us; many genderqueer people are either too masculine for the femme spaces, or too feminine for the masculine spaces, and often disconcerting to those who must have black and white or few-to-no shades of grey.

While it has become much more acceptable to be an openly gay person in America, and they have made huge gains in recognition of their right to exist,

gender variant people are still not nearly as free to create themselves as they see fit and still be seen as authentic and valid, even within feminist or queer spaces (Serano, 2007: 233-245; Kennedy, 2017; Halberstam, 2018). Transgender people in general, but particularly those on the feminine end of the spectrum, experience space and place differently than cisgender gay and lesbian people because of cissexual privilege (Lubitow et al., 2017, p. 4). These experiences are not dissimilar with cisgender women's experiences of sexism (Lubitow et al., 2017, p. 17). But further, most transgender people are acutely aware that visible transgressions of binary gender norms have a social stigma attached to them that renders them uniquely vulnerable and unprotected when out in social spaces (Doan, 2007, p. 61; Lubitow, et al., 2007, p. 17; Namaste, 1994, p. 231).

Trans people, like other marginalized groups, seek meaning, purpose, friendship, support, and the ability to relax that only comes when they feel they are in a safe space, with safe people. Within the Puget Sound region there were multiple avenues to explore my identity and seek connections with people like me. As I began exploring, I observed that the dynamics of a room full of gender variant people are little different than my previous experiences of other social and affinity groups overall. While the hierarchies were less rigid, they broke down along familiar lines. There were elders—people who had been there since the beginning of the group and were obviously well-respected by the community. The people who held leadership positions were easy to pick out because they talked the most, moved in and out of sub-groups frequently, and took the time to introduce themselves. They were democratic in their socializing both before and after the meetings as well as during the breaks.

Because these were my first experiences attending transgender specific events as an openly trans person, I felt vulnerable in these spaces and traveling to and from them—though I am somewhat ashamed to admit it, since my female friends have reported this feeling for decades and while qualitatively different, it took my own first-hand experiences to viscerally understand it. This feeling did

diminish somewhat over time as I became more confident in expressing my genderqueerness publicly. However, it was replaced by a never-ending heightened sense of vigilance whenever I was out in public, particularly as my appearance grew more androgynous to feminine.

Secondly, because gender is a never-ending cycle of regulated performances of the moment, how others act and perceive your gender as well as their own dictates how those moments unfold (Butler, 1990). At my first meeting, introducing myself in a circle of 25 plus people, few of whom looked or presented like me, though I suspect I was not the first middle-aged person to walk in who came to their own gender truths later in life and still looked ambiguous to distinctly male was a very intense experience. Being genderqueer and partly presenting as male made several people visibly uncomfortable with my presence -- beards are not the norm among male to female trans people. While overall, I was warmly accepted, and in most cases shown great respect as a newcomer, these early impressions colored my experience. Only a few acted in this way, but it led me to momentarily question the authenticity of my identity, as well as my right to be there. To me, it represented a form of policing my gender presentation.

Newly out in public as genderqueer, it was disconcerting to feel somewhat excluded -- this despite not having gained a deep enough well of experience with these people to understand their particular rituals, language, or dynamics. Neither had I had too many encounters with hostility towards my gender transgression in public. Given my experiences in public spaces since and time to reflect about my first few months after coming out within the transgender community, it becomes more obvious to me that I misread most of the cues at the time. I questioned my identity because my assumptions about the nature of the space and the organization providing it were a bit unreasonable considering my lack of experience with them. While the discomfort of some people with me was real enough, the lack of awareness I brought with me also contributed to making the experience more disconcerting than it needed to be.

This was one powerful example of the felt presence of my experience having more meaning than words on a page, no matter how brilliant the theory or argument. I began to understand Judith Butler a bit more personally, how and why Dr. Doan came to the conclusions she did, and why Julia Serano takes such pains to unravel and clarify the language of gender and particularly the transgender experience.

My conclusions are that while it is not possible to escape from gendered thinking or spaces entirely, it is quite possible to spend several pleasant hours being entirely yourself with little to no judgment and quite a bit of acceptance of your identity. Through engagement with local transgender social and support groups you can enter into what is as close as it gets to safe nonbinary space outside of private ones. When there is intent and a welcoming space, gender variant people can come together and find common ground and something like a respite from the non-stop gendering that takes place outside of the confines of the spaces and the groups that use them. They also serve an important community building and resource function as points of contact for gender variant and queer people.

Despite that, I also conclude that the "tyranny of gender" makes its presence known even in intentional "safe" spaces. As noted above, there was some gendering, and subtle othering, that did take place during my experiences in my local community. I attribute this to the inherent fear and suspicion that male to female transgender people feel towards men. While I found it disappointing as I feel and think most of the time like a female, this really is the only major complaint I had with my multiple experiences. As someone who themself transgresses gender binaries in public and has recently known fear because of it, I understand where that suspicion comes from and feel it is not without some justification (Namaste, 1994, p. 229).

Ultimately, I came to understand in a tangible way that the relationship between gender and space is complicated, fluid, and often dependent upon

the spatial context and the degree to which an individual transgresses cisgender and heteronormative roles**.** I directly experienced this with my local group by transgressing the overwhelming norm of the male to female trans people who attended by presenting as feminine with a beard. Once I became a slightly better known quantity, most of that wariness fell away.

My experiences in field research confirmed Doan's assertion that by adding a spatial dimension when analyzing gender, the tyranny of it is revealed. Despite transgressing the gender binary themselves, it explains why some transgender people "cling to highly dichotomized conceptions of gender" (Doan, 2010, p. 648). Not only does this happen in everyday practice in society, but also in spaces coded transgender and gender nonconforming "safe spaces." It really is nearly impossible to escape it entirely.

I'm left with several questions as the result of this project: what might a less transphobic world look like, and what forms would it take (Knopp, 2007, p. 51)? Also, how do we queer gender in more spaces, particularly ordinary spaces like public transit, parks, academic and work-related spaces, neighborhoods, your local coffee shop or microbrewery?

On a personal level, through this research project I came to see how my own gender performance is adjusted moment to moment by both the people observing my gender and the space in which we interact. No amount of reading in feminist, queer, or trans theory could have prepared me for the impact it had when I saw it play out in real time in a queer and transgender friendly space. I wish I could say it did not affect my own sense of gender, but it did, profoundly. However, I learned to recognize it for what it was, and now see the "tyranny of gender" as an opening to educate people in the moment. My visibility as a gender outlaw (Bornstein, 2016) not bound by the binaries can be an example and starting point for conversations around the tyranny of gender.

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