

Gender Work: Survival, Subversion, and Subjectivity for Queer and Trans Youth

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ABSTRACT. Gender play as a mode of exposing hegemonic gender norms has become over determined and circumscribed within queer discourse. Subversion becomes only possible through hyperbole, drag, and performance. We play with gender, we fuck with it, and that's that. What would a different framework, one that accounts for the very real labor of gender, look like and how would this redefine resistance? Discussions of "gender play" leave some things to be desired: an intersectional understanding of how people negotiate gender presentation, and a way to talk about how gender can be intentional, strategic, and still subversive. These considerations become even more pressing for queer and trans youth who perform extensive labor to navigate through and between hostile spaces. With these gaps in mind, I introduce the term gender work. Gender work describes the often unseen negotiations with gender that LGBTQ youth are constantly managing in order to balance identity and queer subjectivity with systems that seek to eradicate them. Culture, race, and class create differing and shifting hurdles for queer and trans youth; often, "invisibility" can be an intentional, agentic decision. This paper argues that gender work, despite its subtlety relative to gender play, is a crucial form of survival and subversion for LGBTQ youth.

Gender theorists (Butler, Geertz, and Thorne, to name a few) have used the idea of gender "play" to describe a process of gender disruption through non-normative presentation. Gender play most often occurs in public and

includes crossing or maneuvering across or between genders, mixing gendered markers, or performing a parody of gender (Pascoe 2007). Because of its confrontational, theatrical style and explicit critique of the gender binary, gender play has been offered as a site of social change and activism. Especially for youth, gender play can be a tool for thinking critically about gender presentation, binary, and fluidity, as well as developing a sense of agency and activism. Cris Mayo offers an example of queer and trans teens engaging in gender play by going to a local Wal-Mart store after an LGBTQ meeting in drag, confronting bystanders with their presentation and later uploading photos online (2014). Gender play should not be mistaken to include the fairly regular occurrences of straight, cisgender male teenagers engaging in female drag, as these performances usually employ (trans)misogynistic tropes and serve to bolster the performer's masculinity in contrast to his abject display. Gender play is primarily informed by an understanding of gender inequality, which lends it its political cogency.

It is not my intention to completely dismiss gender play as a conceptual tool, but instead to point to its shortcomings and suggest another framework for thinking about gender presentation: gender work. Gender play can be useful but its theory relies on false assumptions of how race, class, and context affect gender presentation and visibility. It overwhelmingly produces white, middle-class subjects and erases the logics of commodification and capitalism that render gender play visible or subversive (Hennessy 2000). Gender play does not attend to the daily labor queer and trans youth expend on their gender presentation, nor the issues of context or survival that demand such labor.

Discussions of gender play do acknowledge the difference between public and private space, in that a public, heterosexual audience is assumed in order to give

the act of play its subversive quality, but fail to understand that these are not discrete boundaries. In Mayo's Wal-Mart drag example, she emphasized that the teens knew others working at the store that could defend them if they were challenged (2014). These private connections are inextricable from their public action, complicating the easy distinction.

Not only are the public/private boundaries not discrete, they are rarely static. Queer and trans people learn early that every situation must be carefully read for possible dangers or potential allies (Mayo 2007). Shifting spaces, cohabitants, experiences, traumas, and intersecting identities of the queer/trans subject complicate the ideas of "public" and "private" spaces. It is more accurate to describe the landscape of spaces as a unique patchwork of rules, whether explicit or unspoken, that each LGBTQ person has memorized. Even in this patchwork categories are dynamic, and moments of negotiation "may freeze play," (p. 186). A framework solely focused on gender play oversimplifies the context and the ambiguity that such subversive action necessarily occurs in. Instead, I would like to offer the term gender work.

Although the idea of subversion appears throughout this paper, it should not be understood as indicating merely exposure of the constructed nature of gender. In a gender work framework subversion looks like many different things, or it might look like nothing at all. In this world that seeks to eradicate queer and trans youth, subversion is any process of self-love and survival that endures.

Gender work deals in negotiations. Gender work understands that for queer and trans youth every moment, no matter how mundane, is a negotiation of gender presentation and audience. To some extent all youth begin engaging in gender work by learning and navigating gender expectations and dynamics (Mayo 2014). Straight and cisgender youth (particularly girls) also face consequences for transgressing these norms, but their humanity is less often contingent on their gender presentation. For queer

and trans youth, careful and deliberate execution of gender work is compulsory for survival in hostile spaces that view their bodies as deviant, contaminated, and in need of correction or punishment (Cruz 2011).

Disidentification, as discussed by José Esteban Muñoz (1999), is a useful corollary to this definition of gender work. Here are just three of his descriptions of disidentification:

- 1) "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere," (p. 4)
- 2) "Disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology," (p. 11) and
- 3) "Disidentification is about managing and negotiating trauma and systemic violence," (p. 161).

These three descriptions were chosen because they closely mirror my idea of gender work and its utility. Gender work is a strategy of navigating hostile spaces as "minority subjects", namely queer and trans youth. In some ways gender work uses dominant ideology, normative gender presentation, to achieve survival in spaces where nonconformity (queerness and transgender) is severely punished. At the same time, using normative gender presentation is working against dominant ideology in that it allows for the thriving of queer and trans youth. Finally, like disidentification, gender work is precisely about managing systemic violence and collective (or personal) trauma inflicted upon queer and trans people.

A core component of gender work is the struggle to recognize one's self, to be recognized (or not) by others, and to maintain a sense of privacy or safety. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993), what she calls gender free play is mediated by the desire for self-recognition, especially for those "who experience their bodies as not just problematic, but stigmatic," (p. 18). Queer and trans students have exactly this kind of relationship to their bodies, exacerbated by the efforts, in school or at home, to contain or control them. Gender work is both

circumscribed by this matrix of self-recognition and institutional suppression and the very thing that makes it navigable for queer and trans youth. Queer and trans youth, especially youth of color, are continually inventing a language and iconography for themselves that allows them to recognize themselves and others like them while enjoying a modicum of privacy. A lot can be expressed through things like slang, a handshake, gesture, or a rainbow bracelet, which might seem insignificant to the untrained eye (Decena 2011; Cruz 2011). These tools straddle the public/private binary and are examples of gender work in small spaces, serving as signals for LGBTQ teens in unfamiliar or unsafe environments.

How can a concept of gender play be applied to the daily labor of trans youth? It surely cannot. Though trans youth may engage in a theatrical form of gender play, trans lives are dominated by constant deliberations about when, where, and how they can present. Trans lives are “about the banality of buying some bread, of making photocopies, of getting your shoe fixed...not about making a critical intervention every waking second of the day,” (Namaste 2005, p. 20). Sometimes being trans *is* about making critical interventions, but privileging this function of gender presentation (as gender play discourse does) forgets trans people whose survival depends on subtlety. “Passing” isn’t about conforming to oppressive gender expectations, but taking advantage of those expectations in order to exist. José Esteban Muñoz (1999) tells us that “At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere,” (p. 5). Gender work complicates and complements ideas of gender play. Neither one is definitively the best tool for gender disruption, but by remembering both we can arrive at a clearer picture of the complexities of performing gender in different spaces.

Trans youth and students face particular challenges and complexities navigating between home and school, public and private spaces. Any given trans student could

experience varying degrees of outness and acceptance in different spaces. Leaving for school, going back home, hanging out with friends, and going to work are just a few possible moments where a trans teenager is forced to ask themselves, “Who am I going to be around? How can I present?” Trans students may face considerable pressure to present as their assigned gender at school, or, if they are out to some degree, to present as a normative version of their identified gender (Mayo 2014). Some students may have a change of clothes on them at all times so they can switch outfits as they switch spaces. The only generalization that can be made in good faith about trans students is that they all must engage, internally or externally, with the daily considerations of gender work.

In light of how this labor is often erased, it is important to consider that gender work may be happening even when we don't see it on the surface. A high school classmate and friend of mine, a white trans man, used processes of gender work in an unexpected way to survive the emotional demands of presenting as a woman in school. After coming out, when asked how he could handle dressing up in the hyper-feminine dresses that were uniform for choir performances he said lightheartedly that he thought about it as performing in female drag. By reimagining it in this way, the choir performance becomes no longer a triggering or conformist space but one of reclamation. Even though he was forced to present as his assigned gender, the gender work he accomplished enabled him to retain agency. This experience is illegible to a gender play framework because there were no crossings of boundaries or confrontations, in fact almost no visual clues that a struggle with gender was occurring internally. But Rosemary Hennessy (2000) reminds us that what is deemed legible or visible is not indicative of what exists, but of the way visibility is created—in this case through the commodification of conspicuous gender play and the erasure of the gender labor of certain people. Attention to small victories of gender work renders the invisible visible.

Just as trying to “pass” should not indicate a conformist desire in a trans person, gender work aimed at preserving familial and cultural ties should not indicate a conformist desire in a queer or trans youth of color (QTYOC). For QTYOC, home and family become at once safe and unsafe spaces; home is a safe space from racist, colonialist institutions, but potentially hostile to their queer and/or trans identities. These spaces must be traversed carefully, so as not to lose the support network they offer. While all trans and queer youth learn to read and navigate spaces in complex ways, QTYOC often learn to exist in even more fraught spaces out of a need for their community and respect for cultural, familial, and religious beliefs (Mayo 2014). Potential economic ties become an especially prominent influence for queer and trans immigrants, who may need to depend on their families for economic support, job opportunities, or resources to learn English (Decena 2011). Engaging in gender work to maintain these relationships allows for the survival of QTYOC in the practical sense, in the procurement of resources, but also in the personal sense, in the strengthening of familial bonds that could decrease feelings of isolation. It is crucial to remember not only these practical or sentimental ties to family and culture, but also the different ways being “out” manifests in different spaces. For families of various nationalities, faiths, and races, a queer or trans youth may be out in all but name. In these families, respect and love can mean leaving the issue ambiguous and uncontested (Decena 2011). A nuanced gender work paradigm is attentive to these cultural differences and complications, and resists the idea that coming “out” in a space necessarily makes that space better or more real for queer and trans youth.

C.J. Pascoe’s book *Dude You’re a Fag* offers a prime example for critiquing gender play discourses and distinguishing between gender play and gender work. As part of her study of masculinity in high school Pascoe compares the masculine presentation of two groups of girls at her research site, the GSA Girls and the Basketball Girls,

and the subversive potential of what she calls their gender play or gender maneuvering. The GSA Girls, a largely white group, embodied the traditional idea of gender play by dressing in non-normative ways, mixing masculine and feminine markers, and coupling their presentation with an explicit social justice agenda. The Basketball Girls, by contrast, were a group of girls of color who were not involved in activism within the school but dressed and acted in masculine ways on a daily basis. Their specific form of gender play leads Pascoe to conclude that the GSA Girls hold the most serious potential for subversion of the gendered order within their high school. She states that the Basketball Girls reinscribe gendered power and uphold misogyny in their gender maneuvering. This analysis fails to understand the complexity of gender presentation by privileging a particular definition of “gender play” and ignoring the kind of gender work that the Basketball Girls, and doubtless other students, executed. Furthermore it fails to understand factors of race, class, and culture in any meaningful way.

The Winter Ball is a good place to examine and expand on Pascoe’s gender play analysis, or gender play discourse in general. Pascoe states that the GSA Girl’s used this and other heteronormative school rituals as a “time to challenge gendered norms,” by wearing gender-bending outfits such as Genevieve’s combination of a feminine dress and a more masculine tie choker (p. 145). While this is a moment of subversion and gender play, at the same time Pascoe’s analysis overlooks the gender work that the Basketball Girls must undergo. Many of the Basketball Girls are unable to present in the masculine way they usually do due to familial or financial restraints. One of the girls, Michelle, wanted to go to the Winter Ball in a tuxedo but couldn’t afford to go. This is one instance in which, by locating subversion in the act of theatrically non-normative presentation, gender subversion becomes inaccessible to those who can’t afford to engage in gender play. A gender work framework acknowledges the daily gender decisions

someone like Michelle makes; a gender play framework renders her labor invisible.

Rebeca, a Latina Basketball Girl, faces pressure from friends and family alike and forsakes her masculine presentation for a dress and makeup at the Winter Ball. Pascoe finds Rebeca's claims that her mother prohibited her from wearing a suit "unconvincing," (p. 130). This conclusion is disrespectful and simplistic. In order to navigate the space of the school dance, Rebeca faced conflicting feelings of discomfort with what she was wearing, familial pressure, and the obvious social rewards for presenting normatively. With this in mind, Rebeca's feminine presentation is not an act of conformity or secret feminine desires, but an act of survival. As a young queer girl of color, Rebeca's power to present in the way she desired is limited by financial, familial, and community ties. Wearing a dress and makeup is gender work, the labor necessary to survive in a hostile space.

Pascoe's GSA Girls/Basketball Girls dichotomy and her rendering of the Basketball Girls as non-subversive makes the gaps in gender play discourse all the more glaring. The Basketball Girls are engaging in daily gender work, negotiating female masculinity and presentation, in a way that should not be read as anything but subversive for themselves as students and queer girls of color. Pascoe could have benefited from Cindy Cruz, who writes that a researcher must look for queer youth resistance in small spaces (Cruz 2011). The Basketball Girl's method of resistance may have been less organized or planned than the GSA Girl's, and the intentionality of their gender work may have been easy to undercut, but it does not erase the meaning of their resistance. The Basketball Girls were subversive in their mere existence as masculine girls of color navigating a highly heterosexual, white supremacist space like a school.

Gender play is not a strategy without utility. Especially for LGBTQ youth in a space such as a school, gender play can be a tool of public gender disruption and personal experimentation. But the discourse surrounding

gender play inevitably, misguidedly ascribes particular motivations and conclusions to a wide range of public action. Drag and other forms of play are nearly always viewed through a paranoid lens; they are said to denaturalize, expose, and critique gender as a process. Consciously engaging with gender means always exposing, critiquing, and subverting. Even recent scholarship on gender play and subversion that do acknowledge transgender identities privilege expressions like drag, genderqueer, and genderfuck because of how they expose and hegemonic gender norms (Rupp, Taylor, Shapiro 2010). Surely there must be other modes and motivations that are no less critical nor subversive. Especially in the context of youth, it should not seem so outlandish to suggest that those engaging in play might be doing just that—playing. But Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) warns that claiming so would mean admitting a “self-hating complicity with an oppressive status quo.” (p. 26). Trans youth (and adults) are accused of as much for their gender work.

Outside of the academy, we can't all be the perfect post-modern subjects. For queer and trans youth, negotiating gender is not always about critical interventions—it's about playing, surviving, struggling, thriving, and so much more. Sometimes play can be fatally serious and work can be blissfully fun. Gender work recognizes the complicated relationship of public/private and the difficulties of navigating hostile spaces. Gender work resists the dichotomy of subversive visibility or conformist shame. Gender work understands that daily decisions about gender presentation are about safety, privacy, and culture, but they are also about the resiliency and transgressions of LGBTQ youth.

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