

**(IN)VISIBLE BODIES: LESBIAN WOMEN NAVIGATING GENDER,
SEXUALITY, AND RACE**

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ABSTRACT

Fifteen feet tall and clad in a three-piece suit, a giant image of Ellen DeGeneres keeps watch over a major highway that skirts Philadelphia. She smiles off in the distance, looking past lines of commuting cars, seated with her knees wide and one arm casually resting on her leg. Advertising her 3pm talk show, this image is part of a complicated past of lesbians embodying masculinity (Kennedy and Davis 1993; Faderman 1991). At the same time this image is clearly part of this specific historical moment in which gender is increasingly recognized as a malleable project of the body (Butler 1993; Halberstam 1998). This dissertation works to understand the ways that bodies become gendered bodies and conversely to understand the sense-making activities that individuals use to explain their bodies and bodywork. Because lesbian women already sit outside of traditional feminine norms, their femininity is already excised from their bodies. As such, the ways that lesbian women experience gender can be one path of inquiry to the ways that gender and other identities get mapped onto bodies. While academic scholarship has been increasingly addressing issues of sexual identity at a macro level, with particular attention paid to the same-sex marriage debates, there is a lack of consideration of the ways that individual gay bodies, identities, and embodied experiences are affected by the recent social and political attention to “gay issues.” This billboard of America’s most beloved lesbian is also symbolic of the ever-increasing visibility of the gay body. In this climate of unprecedented gay visibility and social action relying on that visibility, how are individuals assigning meaning to their own

bodies and identities? Whose bodies and what identities are able to reap the benefits of this new climate of visibility, and which are still excluded?

Drawing from 45 open-ended interviews with lesbians of color and white lesbians, my dissertation examines the ways that non-straight women enact, imagine, re-imagine, and narrate their experiences of gender. I have found two distinct rhetorical strategies used to talk about gendered performances of the body: essentialism and play. Whether women are describing their embodiment of femininity or masculinity, both, or neither, they overwhelmingly draw from one of these two narratives to make sense of their experience. However, I will argue that the choice of narrative is not a neutral or made in the absence of power relations. Instead, my research suggests that women are making these choices within larger webs of racialized political discourses that make available or constrain corporeal possibilities. This becomes most clear when examining the racial differences in the adoption of these narratives. While white lesbians comfortably used both rhetorical strategies, none of the women of color I interviewed invoked narratives that described their gender work as “play.”

Mainstream LGBT activism has been based on the civil rights model of single-axis politics that relies on subsuming other identities for the dominant strategies and goals (Cohen 1999). This single focus has become crystallized in the past two years as same-sex marriage has become virtually the only issue that gay activism has addressed. Queer politics in theory was a great alternative to these sexual identity politics. For folks experiencing marginality from multiple axes, this shift seemed promising. Unfortunately, queer theory and activism has not been the liberating force it promised to be for many queers of color and non-middle class queers (Cohen 1999; Ferguson 2003). As a result,

the liberatory promise of identity deconstruction and destabilization that postmodernism has promised appears to be a liberation reserved for white bodies.

To Gabriel and Maya,
who still think I have all the answers.

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We do not *have* bodies, we *are* our bodies.

—Trinh T. Minh-haⁱ

Sexuality is not simply a biological function; rather, it is a system of ideas and social practices that is deeply implicated in shaping American social inequalities.

—Patricia Hill Collinsⁱⁱ

CHAPTER 1 IDENTITY, NARRATIVE, AND EMBODIED CARTOGRAPHY

At this particular historical moment, sexual identity is perhaps more salient than ever before, both as a category of self and as a way to understand the boundaries of citizenship. As I am writing these sentences, the U.S. Supreme Court is listening to arguments on two “momentous” marriage cases. The first case is a challenge to the constitutionality of California’s Proposition 8. The court will be asked to decide if voters in California had the legal right to vote on same-sex marriage after the State Supreme Court had already ruled to allow it (Liptak 2013a). The second case is a challenge to DOMA, the Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage at the national level as only legal unions between one man and one woman. The effects of this act are the exclusion of same-sex couples from accessing the federal rights and benefits that come with a marital relationship, even if they are legally married in states that allow such unions (Liptak 2013b).

At the center of the DOMA case has been the figure of Edith Windsor. Windsor and her lawyers have sued the national government over a “sizeable estate tax bill” that was levied on her after the death of her wife and partner of more than 40 years, Thea Spyer (Peters 2013). An 83-year-old white woman, Edith has shoulder length gray-

blonde hair styled in a neat bob. Often photographed with smiling pink lips and wearing suits, soft blouses, and pearls, she appears both soft and strong. The New York Times refers to her as “the calm center in a political and legal storm,” (Peters 2013). Her white, middle-class lesbian image has become the symbolic body on which LGBT activists, politicians, lawyers, and many gay Americans have pinned their hopes of what mainstream gay rights organizations are calling “marriage equality.”

Steven Seidman (2002) argues that we are in a “post-closet” era of gay visibility. The narrative of the closet and the idea that one is either “in” or “out” of the metaphorical closet no longer carries the same level of significance it once did. Instead, individuals negotiate queer identities situationally and most live significant portions of their life out of the closet. The wedding pictures of power lesbians Ellen Degeneres and Portia DiRossi made the cover of *People Magazine* (August 2008). Films and television are increasingly including gay and lesbian characters. According to the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the 2012-2013 season will see 4.4 percent of actors in series-regular roles on prime-time network television will be playing gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender characters (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation 2012). It seems as if the gay liberation call for visible gay bodies has been achieved.

However, as Seidman and others are quick to point out, while there may be increased opportunities for and visibility of gays and lesbians, American society is still organized around heteronormative ideas of love, family and citizenship. Nowhere is this clearer than in the battle over “gay marriage.” Three years after San Francisco began issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples, Proposition 8 was passed by popular vote, creating an amendment to the California state constitution limiting marriage to a contract

between one man and one woman. Similar ballot initiatives passed in other states. As of April 2013, the California decision remained in legal limbo, but nine additional states joined Massachusetts by legalizing civil marriage for same-sex couples. While LGBT and queer activists are largely divided on this subject, it has catapulted issues of gay rights, gay citizenship, and gay families into the national spotlight.

While academic scholarship has been increasingly addressing these issues at a macro level (e.g. Warner 1999), there is a lack of consideration of the ways that individual gay bodies, identities, and lives are affected by the recent social and political attention to “gay issues.” In this climate of unprecedented gay visibility and social action relying on that visibility, what are the meaning-making activities that individuals use to navigate the relationship between the body and identity? Whose bodies and what identities are able to reap the benefits of this new climate of visibility, and which are still excluded? Sociologist Brian Turner argues that contemporary Western life is lived within a “somatic society” in that “major political and moral problems are expressed through the conduit of the human body” (Turner 1996:6). If the body is increasingly a social body, it must be central to the ways we understand not only interpersonal relationships but also larger social issues of inequality, power, and privilege.

Drawing from forty-five open-ended interviews, my dissertation is an examination of the narratives that non-straightⁱⁱⁱ women use to talk about and explain their bodies. Particular attention was paid to the meaning-making activities around embodied experiences of race, gender, and sexual identities. The data collection was organized around a series of questions:

- What narratives do non-straight women tell about their bodies? In what way do these narratives draw on discourses about lesbian identity both from within and without lesbian communities?
- In what situations are embodied identities made more salient?
- How and when do bodies also become more or less imbued with racialized meanings? With gendered meanings?
- How do non-straight women describe their experiences of bodily regulation and what is the relationship between that regulation and their sexual identities?
- How do they embody resistance?

This project borrows from and contributes to a number of academic discussions. First and foremost, I locate this work at the intersection of sexuality studies and sociology of the body. Both intellectual traditions have been enlivened by the critiques levied by feminist and queer theorists. Integrating the key tenets of an intersectional approach to identity with the contributions of queer theory, I propose an approach to identity work that I call *embodied cartography*. Embodied cartography is the process by which the body becomes the site of identity negotiation and the meaning-making practices in which individuals engage to make sense of embodied identities. It is through an examination of embodied cartography that we can better understand how gender, sexual, and racial identities are always co-constructed, deconstructed, and reassembled. The women in my project overwhelmingly drew on two distinct narratives to describe the relationship between their bodies and gender and sexual identities: an essentialist narrative or a play narrative. Women with essentialist narratives framed their bodies as expressions of internal gender and/or sexual identities; their bodies reflected their true selves. In contrast, women with play narratives explained their bodies as the site on which they were able to act out gender and sexuality. For these women, gender and sexuality were performances, often ones in which they took great pleasure. However, neither narrative

was without conflict, and each narrative explanation of identity came with its own benefits and limitations for the women invoking them.

In *Disidentifications*, Munoz (1999) argued that, “the use-value of any narrative of identity that reduces subjectivity to either a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of self is especially exhausted,” (p. 5). Instead of the dichotomy of essentialist/antiessentialist, he asserted that accounts of identity happen in the space between fixed ideas of self and social constructions of self, between constructivism and essentialism (Munoz 1999:6). Disidentification is the process by which individuals, particularly individuals navigating minority identity locations, work *within* existing identity categories and ideologies to break them down (Munoz 1999:12). While the idea of disidentification is a powerful one, it does not negate the utility in recognizing other forms of identity work. Given the cultural ubiquity of the essentialist narrative of sexuality in everything from the mainstream LGBT civil rights-based activism^{iv} to pop music^v, essentialism was an important identity resource for the women in my study. By no means is this project an attempt to reduce subjectivity to either essentialist or playful, but it does take seriously those narratives as important ways that people make sense of embodiment as they navigate multiple identities.

In the following review, I will briefly survey the scholarship on sexuality and embodiment with particular attention paid to the influences of queer and feminist theories. I will then look at our current knowledge about the relationship between lesbian identity and bodies and suggest that while useful, this information is ultimately incomplete. Finally I will present the theoretical and methodological approach of

embodied cartography, which combines queer and intersectional approaches and centers the body as a primary site of social meaning-making.

Sociology and the Sexual Body

Sociology has taken a narrative turn (Berger and Quinney 2004). Researchers are increasingly recognizing the role of narrative in the sense-making activities of social actors. We explain our selves through narratives. It is in fact through these stories that we construct the self (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Furthermore, narratives of identity are often also narratives of the body. The body is experiencing a revival within sociology (Turner 1996; Shilling 2007). Once cast aside as the lesser sidekick to the more advanced (and masculinized) mind, the body is now considered the key to understanding issues as diverse as social movements, consumer culture, and technological developments in health. For sociologists, the body is not a pre-social, physical fact but instead is always mediated through and given meaning by social forces. Any biological or physical realities of bodies are given meaning by social discourses about the body (Foucault 1990, Butler 1993). It is particularly important to consider the meaning of the body for sexuality and identity given the importance placed on the body as the site of desire (Butler 1993). While the body has always been an absent-presence within the theoretical antecedents to contemporary sociological thought (Shilling 2007), more recent developments, both within and outside the discipline, can be credited with sociology's increased interest.

The increased attention to Foucauldian philosophy within sociology and feminist studies of the body has contributed to more thorough inquiries into the body^{vi}. For Foucault (1990), the body is both the site on which socio-cultural power is enacted and

the physical manifestation of that power. Foucault is particularly useful for thinking about the body as not simply socially constructed but as socially disciplined. The body itself is shaped through social mechanisms in service of maintaining appropriate sexuality and citizenship. Sociologist Brian Turner (1996) argues that economic transformations characteristic of post-industrial capitalism have changed the meanings of the body for individual social actors and that Foucault's suggestion of complete corporeal discipline is inadequate. Instead, a theory of the body must consider its fluid nature. The consumerism, uncertainty, and fragmentation that characterize this historical moment also create a self that is similarly fragmented and uncertain. Once the site of ascetic control and discipline, the body is now the locus of pleasure, leisure, and consumption (Turner 1996). Given the centrality of pleasure for new theories of the body, studies of sexuality and sexual desire should consider the role of the body and the ways that the body is implicated in the negotiation of desire and sex-based identity.

This postmodern version of a fragmented selfhood resonates with feminist and queer theories of identity that privilege multiplicity and partiality. The malleability of the body has profound implications for identity. Not a fixed biological given, "the body can indeed be restructured and refashioned to bring about profound changes of identity, including changes of gender" (Turner 1996:21)^{vii}. While these dramatic identity changes (such as woman to man) are relatively rare, every day the body is used to represent an internal self. Individuals shape, change, and adorn the body to convey specific identity locations (Turner 1996). Erving Goffman theorized almost 50 years ago about the importance of corporeal "presentation of self." The originator of the dramaturgical approach to sociology, Goffman (1959) suggested that individuals actively construct and

work to present particular images of themselves to the world, analogous to actors on a stage. These performances rely on all actors sharing a “definition of the situation” that gives meaning to the props, dialogue, and actions of each actor. Lesbian and gay individuals are often navigating identity in both postmodern and Goffmanian terms. On one hand, many lesbians, particularly those in urban areas, are part of local or extra-local queer communities. In these settings, all members would share the definition of the situation and share a common social goal of performing non-straight identity. On the other hand, given the realities of homophobia and heterosexism, most gay men and lesbians are able to modify their appearance and actions in situations when the presentation of a queer identity is unnecessary, undesirable, or unsafe^{viii}. While Goffman’s dramaturgical approach is particularly useful for thinking about the ways that agentic individuals work to construct presentations of self on and through their bodies, it has been feminist theorists who have made visible the ways that these performances are always constrained by relations of power. Queer theorists have taken the very ideas of the self and identity and challenged their usefulness as ways of understanding sexuality and desire.

Queer theory has emerged most recently as the unstable and decentered offspring of critical constructionist theories, lesbian and gay studies, and postmodernism. This approach begins with the assertion that sexuality, like other identity categories, is socially constructed. However, as Esterberg (1996) argues, queer theory also works to disrupt and decenter the very concept of identity itself. “Moving beyond the constructionist/essentialist debates, queer theorists have begun to re-theorize lesbian/gay identity. Drawing heavily on postmodern and post structuralist strains of thought, queer

theorists seek to problematize the very notion of lesbian/gay identity and challenge the essentializing nature of identity itself” (Esterberg 1996:260). Queer theorists argue for a reconceptualization of sexual identity and sexuality and for a theoretical approach that allows for plural *sexualities*. The homo/hetero binary is challenged and “queer” becomes the critical nom de plume for all non-normative sexual acts, experiences, and consciousnesses (Rubin 1983). Queer theory seeks to disconnect sexuality from gender (Sedgwick 1990; Warner 1993), and calls into question the assumed line from sex to gender to sexuality to desire to practices and creates the space for these things to align in unexpected ways.

While current sociological work is in the process of “discovering” queer theory, some of its theoretical roots can be traced back to sociological frameworks. By examining the treatment of homosexuality within sociology and the rise of queer theory through the door created by constructivism, Stein and Plummer (1994) critique sociology’s treatment of gay and lesbian identities and also the tendency of queer theory to ignore larger social forces. Ultimately, they call for a queer revolution in sociology that would bring gay and lesbian concerns to the center and borrow from the critical theorizing of the emerging interdisciplinary field of queer studies.

Sociology’s interest in “the homosexual” began as an investigation of deviance (e.g. Goffman 1963) and shifted to empirical examinations of gay life and gay social spaces. Plummer and Stein argue that these studies are problematic because they “tend to be unreflective about the nature of sexuality as a social category” and they therefore “replicate social divisions, implicitly reasserting the erotica of difference” (1994:130). However, some sociologists did challenge the assumption of sexuality as “natural” and

proposed instead a model of sexuality as socially constructed (Epstein 1994). Sexuality was dethroned from its protected location and moved to the realm of the ordinary. Additionally, Epstein traces the sociological questioning of the very notion of what sexuality is and the meanings it has for individuals through the tenets of symbolic interactionism. Labeling theory borrowed from studies of deviance also challenged the fixed nature of sexuality by arguing that homosexual identity comes not from behavior but instead through the social negotiation of the label “homosexual.” Feminist theory’s influence did little to change sociology’s fatal flaw of essentializing identity categories in the study of sexuality and simply shifted the boundaries of difference from sexuality to gender (Stein and Plummer 1994).

Queer theory, on the other hand, “embraces the indeterminacy of the gay category” (Stein and Plummer 1994:133) that sociology has taken for granted. Beginning from the argument that sexuality is socially constructed, the benefits of queer theory for sociology can be identified through four primary characteristics: 1) the assumption that sexuality is organized along axes of power that rely on borders and binaries; 2) the problematizing of identities, specifically sexual and gender identities; 3) strategies of liberation including transgression and parody; and 4) a commitment to critique areas that are not “sexual” and therefore outside of the usual realm of sexuality studies (Stein and Plummer 1994). In addition, Epstein (1994) argues that the “queer” of queer studies is not just a complex linguistic shift but also marks a significant theoretical shift from lesbian and gay studies. A critique of identity (although not necessarily a complete rejection of notions of identity) is at the heart of queer theory. Through its attention to text and discourse, queer theory uses the margins as a way to illuminate the center and

expose its workings (e.g. Gamson 1998). Sociologists need to begin incorporating these methods of inquiry into our work and our discipline. In turn, sociology has much to offer queer theory in terms of its ability to account for institutional forces and attention to inequality (Epstein 1996; Stein and Plummer 1996).

My project begins at this critical juncture of queer theory and sociology. Bodies become a useful site to consider *both* the ways that identity in this postmodern moment is shifting and partial *and* the ways that social structures and systems of meaning shape life chances. Bodies are at once malleable and subject to systemic regulation. Nowhere is this clearer than in the examination of women's bodies.

Docile Bodies—White Women and Corporeal Constraint

Feminist scholarship on the body, while largely focused on the bodies of white women, has uncovered the varied and multiple ways that bodies become sites of regulation serving to uphold, recreate, and perpetuate gendered hierarchies and material inequalities. More than the canvases on which individual choices are played out, women's bodies are powerfully shaped by institutional forces in ways that create differential life chances, opportunities, and realities. As is now well-documented, the beauty industry has not only created an idealized image of the female body that is unattainable, but it draws upon the core American belief that it can be attained with the right amount of effort, discipline, and money (Kilbourne 2003). Susan Bordo (1993) argues that the implications for women's bodies go beyond simply the beauty industry. Messages about bodily regulation and self-control are used to sell everything from kitty litter to eyeliner. Moving beyond the observation that the bodies of women presented in magazines are unrealistically thin, Bordo finds that these images are governed by an

“ideology of hunger.” Women are told that happiness and fulfillment come through maintaining control over their bodies. Any indulgence, whether epicurean or sexual, must be limited and guilt-ridden. Men, in contrast, are largely encouraged to indulge in bodily pleasures. Ultimately, these images create a climate in which women self-regulate their own bodies, and this self-regulation helps maintain social order. Sandra Bartky (2000) describes this phenomenon in terms of Marxist “alienation.” Women are at once only their bodies, constantly seen as bodies first, while at the same time, they “must exist perpetually at a distance from [their] physical selves, fixed in a permanent posture of disapproval” (Bartky 2000: 324).

The medicalization of women’s bodies, particularly issues of menstruation and reproduction, both reflect and recreate a similar alienation for women. Anthropologist Emily Martin (1987) argued that the treatment of female bodies in both medical and popular discourse is imbued with cultural assumptions about femininity and creates a sense of alienation between self and body that is particularly acute for women. Drawing from 165 in-depth interviews and content analyses of medical and popular texts, Martin argued that hegemonic medical models of the female reproductive system rely on a “production model.” The ovaries, uterus, vagina, and hormones are presented as if designed solely for the production of babies. This model has serious implications for the ways in which women experience their bodies. Martin found that women have internalized the discourses of control theorized by Bordo, which create a climate of alienation of the self from the body. The women interviewed often described their bodies as separate from the self and the body as in need of management. Menstruation and menopause are problems of the body that they must endure and control—not something

that women actively do (Lee 1994; Martin 1987). Lee (1994) found that young women also experienced the onset of menstruation as linked to a [hetero]sexualization of their bodies, both by themselves and others. Similarly, birth is described as an experience that happens to women, and rarely do women describe their active role in the birthing process (Martin 1987).

While medical and beauty discourses do shape the experiences of women, they are not simply passive dupes of the cultural marketplace (Lee 1994; Martin 1987). Instead, women find pathways to resistance. Lee (1994) described the processes by which teen girls use menstruation as an impetus for bonding with other girls or adult women. Martin (1987) discovered a variety of tactics used by women to resist medical intervention during childbirth, from delaying their trip to the hospital, to inhibiting the ability of medical personal to monitor their bodies and perform medical procedures, to forgoing the hospital all together and giving birth at home. In addition to performing resistive acts, some theorized that women can also physically embody resistance. In her examination of fat bodies on the screen, Stukator (2001) argued that the fat female body sits in opposition to the thin, toned ideal feminine body. However, this resistance appears largely hypothetical and reserved for the screen, as there are very severe cultural and material sanctions for the fat female body, often marking her with accusations of laziness, greed, and self-absorption.

Given the tenuous relationship that lesbian women have with traditional femininity (they are often defined as un-feminine, masculine, or inappropriate women for defying the essence of the feminine, which is to have sexual relationships with men), it is important to understand how women who already sit outside of traditional models of

femininity make sense of their bodies in the face of these hegemonic discourses. Do they similarly discipline their bodies? Already traitors to their gender, are lesbian women able to enact greater resistance against these discourses from their location outside? Or do lesbians tap into these models of femininity in efforts to self-consciously mark their bodies as female bodies?^{ix}

Threatening Bodies—Women of Color and Corporeal Oppression^x

Much lip service has been given to the black feminist demand of attention to intersectionality. Theorized by Patricia Hill Collins (1990) as the unique experiences of individual actors based on their locations within matrices of racial, gender, and class-based oppression, complete considerations of intersectionality have proven difficult to enact in practice. However, a recognition that race may shape experience is not enough for projects of the body. Racial theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) defined race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to *different types of human bodies*” (p. 55; emphasis added). In a society such as the contemporary U.S., for which race is a primary organizing force, bodies are *always already* raced.

Just as women have been historically theorized as more directly connected to the body, Patricia J. Williams (1991) argued that the enslavement and social subjugation of blacks has also always involved a shared belief that women were more fundamentally “bodied” than men and that black men and women were both more fundamentally “bodied” than white men and women. Chattel slavery is literally the forced labor of black bodies. A legacy of the sterilization of women of color reflects the importance of bodies when examining the intersections of race and gender. In order to fully understand

this practice, the sexual-racial politics at work must be considered mutually constitutive. The forced sterilization of black women relied on and upheld the social beliefs in the moral and intellectual inferiority of blacks. At the same time, it crystallized the connection between black women and the body and reaffirmed the link between white men and the mind. Moreover, the history of black women's forced sterilization in the U.S. reflects a deep anxiety around black female sexuality. In fact, as early as the 19th century, the sexuality of black women has been quite literally on display. Sarah Bartmann, named the "Hottentot Venus" by white European scientists, was taken from southern Africa and studied. Particular attention was paid to the size and shape of her genitalia and buttocks, which were deemed irregular and indicative of her recent (in relation to Europeans) evolution from animals (Schiebinger 1995). Black women's sexuality was constructed as primitive and uncontrollable, the antithesis of European sexual refinement (Hammonds 1997). These ideas about the sexuality of black women have been recycled over time and have been central to the maintenance of white, male privilege in the U.S. during slavery, reconstruction, and today (Hammonds 1997). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) described four "controlling images" of black women: the mammy, the matriarch, the welfare queen, and the Jezebel. The latter three all rely on a view of black women's sexuality as uncontrolled or uncontrollable; the matriarch is a socially and sexually domineering woman who emasculates the men in her life while the welfare queen is unable to regulate her own reproduction, making her a burden to the state. These images rely on the underlying assumption that black female bodies are reproducing bodies and draw on the historical link between blackness, fertility, and

promiscuity. Within these images, lesbian sexuality is assumed impossible and made invisible because same-sex practices would not result in reproduction (Collins 2005).

In the face of these state sanctioned and sponsored images of black female sexuality, many black women have adopted a political strategy of silence around their sexuality (Higginbotham 1992). However, as Evelyn Hammonds (1997) noted, “the most enduring and problematic aspect of this ‘politics of silence’ is that in choosing silence, black women have also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality” (p. 97). There are notable exceptions to this silence. Audre Lorde’s writings^{xi} centered her experiences of desire and the erotic in ways that highlighted agency and resisted silence. Because black feminist writing on sexuality has been largely devoid of any discussion of same-sex desire, it has ignored “even the possibility of black lesbian sexuality or of a lesbian or queer subject” (Hammonds 1997:101). This omission mirrors the almost complete exclusion of race as an organizing force among writings by queer theorists^{xii} and within projects that address the construction of lesbian identity. Furthermore, Collins (2005) argued that even those who have taken up race and sexuality in their research have assumed heterosexuality and ignored the ways that racism and heterosexism “mutually construct one another” (p. 89).

My project is in part an attempt to answer Hammonds’s call for black lesbian sexual subjectivity. Black lesbians always negotiate their bodies within the context of racist systems of inequality that shape their experiences and possibilities. If I am to truly understand the ways that same-sex desire and lesbian identity is negotiated through bodies, I must understand the ways that other primary social discourses, like racial discourse, also shape bodies. Given the importance of understanding racism and racial

discourses, we cannot know the role they play in fashioning lesbian bodies and same-sex desire unless we also consider white women. While they share marginalization based on the social requisites of heterosexuality, white women simultaneously experience racial privilege within a system that values their bodies over those of black women.

The Invisible Femme and the Transgressive Butch

A Review of the Literature

While lesbian bodies are female bodies, lesbian-identified women negotiate their identities within a different set of constraints and possibilities than heterosexual women. There is some evidence that with their increased and ever increasing visibility, lesbian bodies are becoming mainstream (Griggers 1992). At the same time, while this visibility has offered a degree of freedom for lesbian-identified women by opening up the category “lesbian” (Griggers 1992), representations of lesbian bodies still largely rely on one of three historical images “so threatening they cannot easily be applied to the body of the non-lesbian” (Creed 1999:112). The first is that of the masculinized lesbian body. This is the most recognizable lesbian body and is socially threatening for her ability to challenge the boundary of difference separating men and women (Creed 1999). It is this lesbian body that dominates the scholarship on lesbian bodies. For example, sociologists of sport have considered the ways that the athletic female body is often read as a lesbian body. In addition, lesbian-identified women must negotiate the assumption of lesbian desire that gets marked on to female athletes and the simultaneous regulation within sport to closet lesbian identity (Caudwell 2007; Sykes 1998).

The animalistic lesbian body is similar to the masculinized lesbian body in its aggression, but this image specifically characterizes the lesbian as non-human (Creed

1999). The lesbian vampire is a popular example found in literature, film, and television. Within the realm of fantasy, social commentary about the taboo and ultimately destructive nature of lesbian desire is made through these images (Weiss 1993). While the animalistic lesbian body is not a particularly useful category in which to place actual women, it is a powerful regulatory image that serves to demonize lesbians as predatory and sexually destructive women.

Finally, the narcissistic lesbian body suggests that the lesbian couple is the consummate example of vanity and auto-eroticism (Creed 1999). In this image, the social threat of lesbianism does not lie in the lesbian's similarity to a man; instead she is threatening because she has excluded men completely. While it is unclear if these three images are particularly salient for lesbians off the screen, Creed's (1999) argument that images of the lesbian body perform the ideological function of "warn[ing] the 'normal' woman about the dangers of undoing or rejecting her own bodily socialization" (p. 122) does suggest that these images create a troubling climate in which lesbians must negotiate their bodies. Lesbian bodies on film and television are becoming increasingly common and diverse. However, how are lesbian women internalizing these images, if at all? Empirical research with lesbian and queer-identified women is necessary to understand the actual relationship between the socially available images after which lesbians can fashion their bodies. In what ways are actual women constructing lesbian identities that embody or resist these images? This question becomes particularly important for lesbians of color, as the mainstream representations of lesbian bodies are almost exclusively white.

Gay and lesbian communities have historically created and used systems of signs and signifiers to navigate visibility to those within the community but not outside. In his work on gay male communities in turn-of-the-century New York City, George Chauncey (1994) argued that “gay men developed an elaborate system of subcultural codes—codes of dress, speech, and style—that enabled them to recognize one another...[but] was unintelligible to potentially hostile people around them” (p. 4). For the men in Chauncey’s historical work, visibility was a careful negotiation, as they worked to perform non-normative sexuality for other gay men to read, they also necessarily had to make their bodies and actions *unreadable* to the hostile others.

Kennedy and Davis (1993) suggested that lesbian identity was also deeply connected to a shared community, and bodily manifestations of identity were fundamentally shaped by the gay and lesbian culture that resided in these communities. They found that the white working-class formations of butch and femme lesbian gender identities in 1950s lesbian communities were central to the gay and lesbian liberation projects of the coming decades. More specifically, they argue that while femme identity was less concerned with visible difference from straight femininity, the butch as visibly different, marked as other, was responsible for the public work of defining lesbian identity within the context of dominant straight culture (p. 374).

The butch^{xiii} lesbian body seems to be the primary genesis of inquiry into lesbian bodies. The butch body, traditionally figured as a masculinized female body, not only represents the public, visible lesbian subject, but it also does important gender work. Gender has been at the core issue around which lesbian body scholarship has organized itself. Lesbian bodies complicate traditional sociological notions of gender in several key

ways. Some theorists argue that “butch” and “femme” represent the two distinct genders adopted by lesbians (Case 1993; Munt 1998). As women, lesbians fall into a single sex category, but within that category there are at least two distinct gender possibilities— butch and femme. Lesbian feminists of the 1970s actively resisted butch/femme roles and appearance in favor of more androgynous bodies, arguing that butch/femme reproduced the inequalities inherent in heterosexual relationships (Stein 1996). More recent scholarship suggests that while butch and femme gender presentations are still meaningful for lesbians today, they have lost their monopoly on lesbian gender identity. With the influence of the lesbian feminist movement (Stein 1996), queer theory, and increased lesbian representation (Griggers 1992), an almost limitless range of possibilities exists for lesbian gender expression. However, in one of the few empirical works on black lesbian bodies, Mignon Moore (2006) suggested that the black lesbian communities in New York City rely on three distinct gender expressions: femme, gender-blender, and transgressive. Moore identified each of these gender expressions using a scale of one to ten, with one representing the most feminine appearance and ten the most masculine appearance. Key markers of appearance included clothing, jewelry, hairstyle and cut, and physical movements of the body. The gender-blender scored between four and six on the gender scale, indicating that she “blended” elements from both traditional masculinity and femininity^{xiv}. The transgressive gender presentation scored the highest on the gender scale and adopted many traditionally masculine markers, such as men’s clothing and cornrows or short hair. Significantly, masculine and feminine markers are not racially neutral. Instead women construct lesbian bodies that actively draw on racialized versions of masculinity.

Moore (2006) repeated a common pattern in this literature. While the femme was explained away as simply expressing traditional femininity, the gender-blender and transgressive were of key importance for Moore. Because they displace hegemonic masculinity by re-grafting it onto the female body, they challenge the idea that men own masculinity. Moore's discussion of the decoupling of masculinity from men suggests the second key way that lesbian gender expression has challenged traditional theories of gender. The butch body, or what Judith Jack Halberstam calls "female masculinity," has complicated the relationship between masculinity and male bodies. Masculinity is now no longer the sole domain of men. By decoupling masculinity from men, women performing masculinity suggest that masculinity (and femininity) is just that—a performance (Halberstam 2002; Moore 2006). While this is a key and important insight, these authors largely fail to recognize their own work in reproducing gender hierarchy. By suggesting that masculinity is the only avenue for social transgression of gender, the feminine lesbian body becomes simply a reproduction of traditional feminine oppression. Despite this limitation, it is precisely the theory of the exposure of gender as performance that draws scholars of sexuality to the work of Judith Butler.

Literature on lesbian bodies has taken Butler's notion of gender and desire performativity^{xv} (Butler 1990; 1993) seriously and applied it to a variety of research questions. For example, Case (1993) examined the butch/femme aesthetic and the ways that masculinity is performed and re-worked by women in the context of parodied masculine/feminine presentations. However, some scholars suggest that gender performance is not simply play and parody. In her ethnographic interviews with lesbian and bisexual women, Esterberg (1996) found that while the performances of masculinity

and femininity contained elements of playfulness, the women themselves did not see their lesbianism as a role from which they could step in and out. Instead, it was often in the course of these bodily performances of lesbian identity that they felt most connected to themselves and community. Similarly, Moore (2006) argues that gender presentations significantly organize lesbian social lives and romantic/sexual relationships. While Esterberg's study is important as one of only a few empirical works on lesbian identity, her respondents are primarily white and she does not make explicit connections between racialized bodies and the body as a site of lesbian identity negotiation. In addition, while she is attentive to the ways in which performances of lesbian identity are constrained, it does not play a central role in her analysis. Without this critical piece, lesbian identity research can become simply a catalog of signs and signifiers instead of an examination of processes always mediated by cultural forces. Moore's work is more attentive to the material constraints on lesbian bodies, particularly the ways that "women's sense of sexuality is structured as much by raced cultural norms as by lesbian standards." In addition, she argues that femininity and masculinity are not universal ideas but instead are both raced and classed, particularly when performed by non-white women.

While Moore's (2006) work is an important corrective to the dominant lesbian scholarship that locates white lesbians at the center of inquiry, she falls into the same trap that has plagued the bulk of lesbian body scholarship. In privileging female performances of masculinity as the ultimate threat to both hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, Esterberg (1996), Halberstam (2002), and Moore (2006) all create and uphold a hierarchy of lesbian bodies. At the top, is the masculine lesbian body. Not only is this the most visible lesbian body, but the masculine lesbian is the most socially and

politically progressive, transgressing and challenging social rules about gender-appropriate behavior; Moore (2006) even terms this lesbian body “the transgressive”. At the bottom of this lesbian body pyramid is the femme. She is almost indistinguishable from the heterosexual female body in appearance and behavior and as such, is rendered largely invisible both within and outside lesbian communities. Moreover, she is usually at least partially, if not solely, characterized by her partnership with a more masculine lesbian body. The lesbian body that appears to enact a more traditional femininity thereby is not only invisible but comes to represent an unenlightened identity, one that has not yet seen that true liberation and transgression can only come with the adoption of masculinity. However, as Creed (1999) and Nestle (1992) have suggested, the femme lesbian body can be just as disruptive and threatening as the butch body, because it is this body that suggests all women could be potential lesbians. She is not immediately recognizable as a lesbian and therefore challenges the boundaries between straight and queer that we are so invested in upholding. Moreover, this literature largely ignores the existence of other corporeal possibilities. Is the butch/femme continuum the social metric against which lesbian women today make sense of their bodies and identities? If not, it is important to understand what other ways lesbian women are negotiating their bodies. For example, do lesbian women find themselves in contemporary images of athletic female bodies or more androgynous bodies?

This review of theoretical and empirical work suggests several imperatives that inform and direct this research project. First, lesbian bodies must be understood within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts. While attention should be paid to the ever-shifting nature of these contexts, we cannot assume that there is a single lesbian

body or that lesbian identity is ahistorical. Instead, lesbian bodies not only act as a set of signs and signifiers but can only be rendered meaningful if we understand the socio-cultural matrix of meaning in which they are located. Secondly, while lesbian bodies have never before experienced such a range of possibilities, material inequalities still shape experiences of corporeal lesbian identity. In her analysis of the commodification of lesbianism, Griggers (1992) argues that while the commercial availability of silicone phalluses challenges the “natural” connection between men and the penis, it does not automatically suggest gender or sexual equality:

If working class and middle class urban lesbians and suburban dykes can't afford health insurance and don't yet have real national political representation, they can nonetheless buy a 10-inch 'dinger' and a matching leather harness, and they can, with no guarantees busy themselves at the task of appropriating for a lesbian identity the signs of masculine power (Griggers 1992:120).

This passage suggests that while the gender-disruption work done by increased lesbian visibility is important, we cannot be so concerned with postmodern re-appropriation that we ignore the material realities that shape lesbian lives. Finally, the dearth of empirical work on the embodied experiences of lesbian-identified women, and more specifically lesbians of color, must be addressed in order to move beyond a theoretical understanding of bodies to a more grounded knowledge of the relationship between bodies, sexuality, oppression, and social control. By examining the ways that bodies are negotiated by lesbian or queer women, made visible or invisible as “bodies that matter” (Butler 1993) by the social forces that value whiteness and appropriate expressions of masculinity and femininity, and regulated within the confines of heteronormative social power, we take seriously the body as a site of identity production and political action.

Embodied Cartography—A Methodological Approach

Like many young sexuality scholars of my generation, I am drawn to queer theory. Its fragmented decenteredness resonates with me. I was academically raised on a steady diet of Butler and Foucault and Sedgwick. When I first read Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal* as a 19-year-old undergraduate, I happily turned everything I thought about sexuality and identity upside down. The potential of queer theory is amazing. It has created the conceptual space to break apart sex, sexuality, and gender, to disconnect them from one another and to allow them to re-align in new and unexpected ways. It has created the conceptual space to imagine that sexuality and gender do not align at all and instead maybe sexual difference is more about class or race than gender (Sedgwick 1990). "In queer politics, sexual expression is something that always entails the possibility of change, movement, redefinition, and subversive performance—from year to year, from partner to partner, from day to day," (Cohen 1997:439). But Cathy Cohen goes on to argue that queer theory is doing a poor job of theorizing (and acting) outside of sexuality. She argued that sexuality becomes the primary axis of engagement for queer political action. Furthermore, other identities become sublimated under the "queer/heterosexual" dichotomy that queer theory and politics seems to be creating. In attempting to de-center any notion of fixed identity/identification, it has largely made invisible the ways that queer is a discourse organized around whiteness, privilege, middle classness (Cohen 1997, Ferguson 2003).

By contrast, intersectionality as a theoretical approach is firmly located within identity politics, but multiple identities. Theorized by Collins (1990) and Crenshaw (1992) as the unique experiences of individual actors based on their locations within

matrices of racial, gender, and class-based oppression, intersectionality is the theory that accounts for the ways that gender and sexuality are always mutually constructed and experienced. In her analysis of the intersection of race and gender in the legal and cultural views of violence against black women, Crenshaw (1992) laid out her argument that one's location at the intersection of race and gender creates an experience unique and "qualitatively different" from others who are differently located. Crenshaw was particularly interested in fighting against the single-axis theory of oppression by outlining the ways that black women's experiences were significantly different from the experiences of both white women and black men.

Both queer theory and intersectionality are a critique of identity politics that rely on essentializing identity categories and they can be most successful if used together^{xvi}. We need to both account for the powerful identity categories that shape individuals' lived experiences, while also allowing for those identities to align and re-align in varied and various ways. Centering the body becomes one way to do this. Individuals shape, change, and adorn the body to convey specific identity locations (Turner 1996). If we focus on the body, and more specifically on narratives of the body, as a site of gender, sexual, and racial identity work, we listen for both the material realities of intersecting identities and hear the ways that these multiple identities come together and push apart. My data suggest that gender and sexuality are co constructed. This claim is not meant to universalize the category "lesbian" as some truth about femaleness and same-sex desire. Quite the contrary. My project begins with the assumption that there is no fixed path between gender and sexuality. Instead there are only narratives of the body.

Research on transgender identities and bodies further complicates and illuminates the importance of the body for understanding identities, particularly gender and sexuality, and the multiple ways they are mapped and remapped onto each other. In their study of both public and private sexual(ized) interactions between transgender people and “gender normals,” Schilt and Westbrook (2009) highlighted the ways that gender and sexuality are always co-constructed. Furthermore, our understanding of the structural social mechanisms that shape identity are incomplete when we ignore the ways that they interact with one another. “The sex/gender/sexuality system rests on the belief that there are two, and only two opposite sexes, determined by biology and signaled primarily by the shape of genitals,” (2009:458). It was during sexual and sexualized encounters that Schilt and Westbrook found that the challenges to the two-sex system that trans bodies enacted were most salient. This complicates the idea that transgender identity is simply about gender. Instead, it lies at the intersection of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, the gender system is based on the maintenance of exactly two sex categories and heteronormativity. In the introduction to *GenderQueer*, an anthology of collected theoretical and personal writings on gender beyond the binary, Riki Wilchins (2002) made a similar argument for attention to gender and sexuality as always connected:

The instinct to control bodies, genders, and desire may be as close as we have to a universal constant...And here I mean gender in its widest sense—including sexual orientation, because I take as self-evident that the mainspring of homophobia is gender: the notion that gay men are insufficiently masculine and lesbian women somehow inadequately feminine (p. 11).

While Schilt and Westbrook argued that gender relies on (hetero)sexuality, Wilchins suggested that homophobia and sexual oppression relies on a gender system that regulates

bodies. Furthermore, this embodied regulation of appropriate gender manifests itself as the control of sexuality and sexual desire. Trans literatures emphasize the importance of theorizing sexuality and gender and always attending to the ways that they intersect, overlap, and rely on each other to create social bodies.

Embodied cartography as an approach to understanding identity draws on the significant contributions of queer theory, black feminist intersectionality, and the emerging transgender literatures. The stories you will hear within these pages are the meaning-making activities of lesbian and queer-identified women as they narrate their embodied experiences of race, sexuality, and gender. To center narratives of the body is to listen for the ways that sexuality, race, and gender are mapped, unmapped, and re-mapped onto one another. I call this mapping process *embodied cartography*. To borrow from Cathy Cohen, “I want to be clear that what I and others are calling for is the destabilization, and not the destruction or abandonment, of identity categories,” (1997:459). Identities are too important to not only our own sense of self but also to the ways we navigate the world as embodied beings.

Research Design

This project is rooted in postmodern, queer, and feminist epistemologies, which demand that we reject meta-narratives of identity, locate our own positionality within the work, and take seriously the meaning-making and constructive activities that go into the research and writing process. With this in mind, I interviewed forty-five women between 2008 and 2011. Twenty of the respondents were women of color and twenty-five were white women. All of the women self-identified as “lesbian” and one identified only as “queer” and actively resisted the identity term “lesbian”. While flyers were posted in

local coffee shops, bars, and other social venues in the areas of the city known for large gay and lesbian populations, most respondents were recruited via personal contacts and subsequent snowball sampling. I sent out initial emails to any personal contacts that I knew were lesbian-identified or might know other lesbian-identified women. I received some responses from individuals in my own social circle, but received many more from women who were friends, colleagues, or coworkers of those in my own networks. After each interview, I asked the respondents if they had friends or acquaintances who might also want to participate. Two of the women in my project produced relatively large “snowballs,” each connecting me with four to five other women that I ended up interviewing. However, most contacts only resulted in one or two additional interviews.

The timing and location of all interviews were scheduled with attention to the comfort level and ease of the participants. Most interviews were done in respondents’ homes although several were conducted in my university office and a few were completed in coffee shops. Each respondent choose her own pseudonym, which was used throughout the analysis. Informed consent was obtained from each respondent, and consent forms, the only document to identify respondents’ real names, were kept in a locked file drawn in my university office. I used a semi-structured interview format and all interviews were recorded and fully transcribed by myself and an undergraduate research assistant.

Following the “constant comparative” method of analysis set forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967), I made sense of the narratives I collected through a process of coding and memo writing. “[T]he constant comparative method is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (but not provisionally testing) many categories, properties, and

hypotheses about general problems,” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:104). Unlike quantitative data analysis, which often involves the statistical analysis of data that falls within predetermined categories, this method of data analysis relied the formation of categories and meaning from the data collected (Altheide 1987). I used Atlas.ti, qualitative data analysis software, to track the quotations, codes, and analytical memos. Whenever possible, the actual narratives are presented throughout in an attempt to privilege the voices of my participants.

Although efforts were made to obtain a diverse sample of lesbian respondents, those efforts were only partially successful. All but one respondent self-identified as a lesbian. While several women included queer as one of several identities they might adopt under particular social situations, only one refused other sexual identities and preferred queer. This distribution might be the result of some combination of the snowball sampling and the mandate from the Institutional Review Board at Temple University that recruiting materials may not contain the word “queer.” Other than identification as a non-straight woman, the only other criterion I used to include or eliminate possible participants was race. As a result, the sample, while small, was 44% women of color and 66% white.

I made every effort to ensure a range of ages for both the white and non-white respondents. Stein (1996) suggests that generation is an important contributor to lesbian identity, for a series of historical changes have had an impact on both the identities available for lesbian women and the expressions that are considered appropriate for lesbians. These events include the lesbian-feminist movement of the 1970s and the rise of queer theory in the 1990s. Respondents ranged in age from nineteen to forty-five and

were approximately equally distributed between white respondents and respondents of color. Despite this, I did not find significant differences between age groups.

Finally, although I worked to recruit an approximately equal number of women who were college educated and who had little or no experience in college, I was not successful. I anticipate that college may provide increased access to a variety of images and discourses around which lesbian women can imagine their own identities. In addition, college education may serve as a proxy for the more amorphous concept of social class. Unfortunately, all of my respondents either had college degrees or were in the process of obtaining degrees. Many had graduate degrees. Despite these limitations, this sample still offered rich variation in narratives used to construct gender and sexual identities. Because I was particularly concerned with understanding the ways that systems of inequality work at the level of individuals, this project design allowed me to understand, for example, the ways that certain discourses of identity may not be equally available to or effective for all women.

CHAPTER 2

“IT’S JUST WHAT’S COMFORTABLE FOR ME. I’VE ALWAYS BEEN MORE COMFORTABLE IN MEN’S CLOTHES.”: NARRATIVES OF ESSENTIAL GENDER

I heard the slow and deliberate steps of Toni’s black leather riding boots on the linoleum floor before she actually appeared at my office door. At five-feet two-inches, she is not tall, but she has a visible presence and she takes up space. Her tight curls are cut in a large Afro that frames her clean face. She is wearing dark jeans, loosely fit but clinging to her round hips. Her tie and button-down shirt are mostly hidden by a zip-up jacket that she keeps on during our entire interview. After a firm handshake, she lifts her large messenger bag over her shoulder with one smooth movement despite its apparent heft and sits across from me. A 29-year-old black woman, Toni views the ways that she works to embody masculinity as part of a fundamental and fixed gendered self. Her clothing is a central part of her butch performance.

I don’t associate wearing men’s clothing with wanting to be a man. It is just how I identify. It’s just what’s comfortable for me. I’ve always been comfortable in men’s clothes. Always. I always wanted to wear my dad’s clothes. I never wanted to be my dad but I always wanted to dress like him. I never wanted to dress like my mom.

Toni illustrates a key element of the essentialist gender narrative—a belief in an appearance that reflects a fixed internal self. Not only does Toni explicitly connect clothing to her identity, but she also traces the desire for men’s clothing as far back as her childhood and frames it as something she has always felt. Naming the experience of gender as something that has always existed within the individual, in its current form, was a defining factor of this narrative.

The essentialist narrative of gender was the most common way that the women I interviewed made sense of the relationship between their bodies and their sexual identities. For women who invoked this narrative, their bodies demonstrated to others who and what they were. The pervasive nature of this narrative is not surprising given the ubiquity of gender essentialism at this historical moment. “Essentialism is most commonly understood as the belief in the real true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness’ of a given entity,” (Fuss 1989: xi). Essentialist views of gender posit that masculinity and femininity are fixed states of being, often derived from some source internal to the individual. Feminists have long refuted essentialist notions of gender by arguing that the use of biological difference is a false justification for social difference and an impediment to liberation. Joined by social constructivists, many feminist sociologists have seen it as a primary goal to critique this “false” understanding of gender, i.e. that gender is a given based on one’s immutable sex. The canon of feminist sociology is full of empirical and theoretical projects that work to expose the constructed nature of gender. In this chapter, I explore and interrogate this essentialist gender narrative by looking at the ways and reasons that lesbian women employ it. I argue that the issue is more complicated than some previous feminist sociologists have allowed; we need to understand the value of this narrative for projects of the self. This essentialist narrative resonated for many of the women I interviewed and became an important way for them to buttress their sexual and gender identities against attack from both within and without lesbian communities. By looking at the ways that lesbian women employ narratives of both masculinity and femininity and the meanings

they attach to these narratives, we take seriously the voices of these women as they struggle for community, visibility, and authenticity.

Toni is one of the few women I interviewed who actively embraced the term “butch”^{xvii} as a self-identity:

For me, as a butch, I am the masculine person in the relationship, but I am not the dominant person in the relationship. Like I don’t have to take out the trash, but it’s cool if I do, right? It’s also a dynamic of who puts their arm around who. That’s really important to me...I always wanted that, because that to me is like I’m protecting you, but I’m not protecting you in a way that is dominating. It’s like I’m protecting you, because you depend on me, because I depend on you. Right? A butch is no one without a femme for me.

For Toni, the categories of butch and femme are essential categories that not only mark and describe bodies but that also suggest particular relational dynamics.

Toni tells a complex narrative about the role masculinity plays in both her own identity and her relationships with other women. For Toni, masculinity is about her body in relationship to her partner’s body—she wants to be the one to physically put her arm around her partner, to “spoon” her partner, to be tall enough for her partner to put her head on her chest. Toni laments at the fact that she is shorter, making her unlikely to experience this corporeal relationship she craves. Toni explicitly connects masculinity to her identification as a butch lesbian and to her enactments of desire. Toni’s narrative reminds us that bodies are an important site through which we negotiate identity and relationships.

At the same time, Toni reveals the ways that she is not simply mimicking hegemonic masculinity but instead wants the ability to pick and choose the parts of masculine gender presentation that feel the most comfortable for her. “I was confused

that if I dressed like a man, identify as a butch, does that mean that I have to be a misogynist? Because I didn't want that." Toni wants to enact a visible masculinity but resists the domination and oppression that she links with men. Toni's narrative is particularly important because it demonstrates one way that gender and sexuality are mutually constitutive. One way to connote a lesbian sexual identity is to position oneself within the recognizable lesbian genders of butch and femme. At the same time, Toni wants to disconnect masculinity from misogyny and realign her gender and sexuality in ways that challenge traditional relationships of power and inequality.

Clothing, part of the costumes that we wear as we present ourselves to the world (Goffman 1959), played a significant role in the narratives women told about their bodies and in the ways they embodied gender. In contemporary American culture, all pieces of clothing are always already gendered, and this gendering was significant for the women interviewed. Toni's wardrobe was made up exclusively of men's clothing. "I don't even think I have any women's clothes, except for sports bras, because they don't make them for men." Clothes were used in a variety of ways by women with essentialist narratives: to highlight either femininity or masculinity; to create a visible lesbian identity; and to express externally an internal sense of self. Clothes, along with hair, were seen as key ways to reflect, express, and maintain a particular gendered aesthetic. The women with essentialist narratives of gender most often described their clothing choices as reflective of personal style, what felt comfortable, or as authentic reflections of how they felt inside. The lesbian women, like Toni, who felt that masculinity was a key part of their body and identity always described clothes as a significant part of their sexual and gender identities. This masculine aesthetic was seen as a fundamental part of who they are and

how they want others to see them. Consider Toni's distinction between lesbians wearing men's clothing as "just a fashion thing" and her wearing of men's clothing:

I go to [the] Pride [parade], and I see the little dykelings in their shirt and tie and their little jeans and keys, and it's funny, because to them it's a fashion thing. It's like, "I'm trying to look cool." Wearing a shirt and tie is very much a part of every day for me.

Toni's use of the infantilizing term "dykelings" to refer to those she sees as "trying on" masculinity rather than expressing a genuine masculine nature serves to distance Toni from them and reinforce her essentialist claim. For Toni, gender is not something that gets tried on and taken off. It is a fixed state. However, despite these claims, she goes on to describe how her own dressing preferences have taken shape over the course of many years.

Unlike my other respondents, Toni was living overseas when she first trying to understand her attraction to women and her own personal sense of gender. She cites Japan's more flexible fashion aesthetic as key to her ability to move away from women's clothing as she was navigating her own shifting ideas about her sexuality:

I was trying to figure out what was going on with me and being in Japan was really interesting because Japan is the kind of place where you could put on a freaking trash bag and really expensive heels and walk down the street, and everyone's like, "You're the bomb." You could wear anything in that country. So there I was really able to explore with fashion.

Significantly, Toni maintains the idea that her appearance was fixed throughout this time.

When I asked her how her appearance changed as she was coming out, she replies:

But I don't think my appearance changed. I cut my hair. I had short hair, and then I had long hair, then a 'fro, which I have now. And my appearance really didn't change. It stayed the same. I never tried to look gay or anything like that.

Toni illustrates a key element of the essentialist gender narrative—a belief in an appearance that reflects a fixed internal self. There doesn't seem to be a dissonance for Toni when maintaining that even though she cut off her hair, her appearance has not changed. Despite this evidence, she maintains the narrative of a consistent and fixed gender presentation. It seems that to acknowledge the shifts, particularly in conjunction with the coming out process, would be to suggest that working or changing one's appearance to “look gay” somehow devalues the personal experience of coming out. Given the mainstream cultural importance placed on the narrative that one is “born gay” rather than chooses a gay lifestyle or constructs a gay identity, an essentialist view of gender as fixed and not influenced by sexuality makes sense. It seems that for women like Toni, gender essentialism becomes a way to reinforce mainstream cultural ideas about identity through their own bodies. Furthermore, we see how narratives of gender become narratives of sexuality and back again.

Another common feature of the narratives of essential gender was the idea of early discovery. Many women pointed to ways that their current embodiment of gender had roots in their childhood, and they described themselves as having discovered it or accepted it through some key event. Toni pointed to just such a time in her past that marked a shift in her ability to reflect externally her internal sense of self.

Actually, what allowed me to really embrace [the masculine style of dress that I experimented with in Japan] was a woman I was dating who I met at my job. I used to wear a shirt and tie every once in a while. She had said, “I really like you in that,” so I decided to wear it more often.

This shift was marked by two key stages. First, she recognized her comfort with certain aspects of masculinity and a desire to embody her version of that. “I really tried to

emulate my friend, who was really butch, and I tried to dress like she dressed.”

Secondly, she received permission and external validation of her masculinized presentations.

I shouldn't have worn it as many times as I did, because it was like the middle of summer in Philly. I sweat my ass off for this woman! But it was the first person who I was sexually attracted to – not a friend and not an associate – the first person who I wanted to have a relationship with who encouraged and validated what I was wearing, who really was like, “I like this look on you.” So then I started to buy more.

Here Toni is describing the process of learning to dress in men's clothing and the particular interactional feedback she received as a result. We can clearly see the ways that Toni's identity is being actively constructed through her interactions with this other woman, a possible sexual partner. It is through sexuality that Toni comes to make sense of her gendered desires. At the same time that Toni is constructing her gendered performance, she maintains the narrative of gender as natural and fixed. Even when Toni encounters resistance from others and social structures that make her gender choices difficult, she reiterates an essentialist narrative. Consider for example her experience of shopping for men's clothing:

It was the challenge of where do you go? What's your size? What do you do when people stare at you in the store, or when they say, “The women's is on the second floor.” And there were times, when I would go, “Oh, okay,” and go upstairs and then leave the store. Now I'm like, “Uh, yeah. I know.” I definitely would say was the beginning of who I am today...I could finally be who I was. I mean, it's who I am today.”

It took the validation of a potential sexual and romantic partner to help Toni transition to men's clothing, a move that she described as a significant part of “who [she is] today.”

Thus, even women who invoke an essentialist narrative of gender point to ways that their gender presentations are learned, validated, and reinforced.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the essentialist gender narrative was more pronounced for the lesbian women who embodied masculinity than for more normatively feminine women. This finding suggests that women whose gender presentation does not align with gender norms, feel a greater need to explain that apparent disconnect. Essentialism becomes a way to buttress oneself against potential social backlash for failing to embody appropriate femininity.

In contrast to Toni's willingness to live with the discomfort of wearing ties in the middle of a hot Philadelphia summer, comfort was the primary criteria Vaughn used to select clothing. She sits across from me on her sofa during our interview, one jean-clad leg crossed under the other at a right angle, hiding her thick heathered-brown sock. Her flannel shirt is open, revealing a plain white t-shirt and adding to the casual feel of our conversation and Vaughn herself. "This is my favorite thing to wear," she tells me. "If it were up to me and if it were always cold outside, I'd probably only wear soft, comfy shirts and jeans. On weekends I literally never wear anything but jeans." The home Vaughn shares with her partner of four years is located on a quiet residential street colloquially known as "Sapphic Circle," for its reputation as the road on which local lesbians buy houses. With cropped graying hair, a tall and thin runner's body, and no visible jewelry except for a silver ring on her right hand, I was not surprised when Vaughn described herself as "more masculine than my female peers, in stereotypical kinds of ways, in appearance, body language." However, unlike Toni, who actively resisted describing their gender presentations as evolving or shifting, Vaughn was aware

of the ways that she enacted masculinity in stronger or weaker ways over time and in different situations. Furthermore, she was able to clearly articulate those shifts to me and simultaneously maintain an essentialist gender narrative. Her practice of embodied cartography allowed for situational shifts in her gender presentation without sacrificing her core sense of a gendered and sexual self.

Vaughn has been at her job in university administration for about ten years and her work appearance has changed over that time. While she interviewed in a skirt and heels and continued to wear that on-and-off to work for the first several years, “the longer I’ve been there, and the more established I’ve been with that community, the less I worry about how I look, the less pressure I feel to conform.” On the surface, this is not an experience that is exclusively or even primarily about gender. Becoming more familiar with a social environment often leads to a relaxing of vigilance around appearance. Once we become more familiar with corporeal norms in social situations, it stands to reason that we have less concern about not meeting them. But Vaughn’s experience is also about gender. As Ridgeway and Corell (2004) would have predicted, Vaughn does think about her own appearance in relationship to other gendered bodies in her office. The men in her office tend to “wear jeans to work all the time,” while the women “wear more conventional officey things.” At this particularly moment, Vaughn has settled on what she calls an “in-between zone,” which consists primarily of khaki pants and t-shirts. “I’m still more dressed up than my boss, even if I’m less dressed up than my colleagues. And that seems to work for me at the moment.” When more formal attire is required at work, Vaughn describes silk pants suits in a classic style that she feels comfortable in. While

she recognizes that these suits are perhaps more feminine than she would wear on other days, “they don’t feel overly feminine for me.”

While Vaughn would prefer more relaxed, traditionally masculine clothing, she is able to shift her gender presentation without sacrificing her core sense of gendered self. Vaughn’s statements make visible the ways that her work wardrobe is not a reflection of a fixed sense of self but instead is the costume of social conformity, subject to change, shift, evolve, and even revert back. Her gender and sexuality are sufficiently fixed to allow her the comfort of corporeal gender presentations that may feel less authentic without damaging her sense of identity. She is enacting Goffman’s (1959) model of presentation of self by performing “professional.”

Sociologists of gender researching issues of work, gendered divisions of labor in the home, and other issues of structural inequality between men and women have been some of the most explicit about the situational nature of gender. They argue that gender is primary social structure (Lorber 1994) and as such organizes much of our social lives. Hegemonic beliefs about men and women translate into powerful cultural expectations that are attached to gender (Ridgeway and Corell 2004). For example, men are expected to be aggressive and women are expected to be nurturing. Then according to West and Zimmerman’s theory of “doing gender,” we act largely according to these shared cultural expectations in order to be appropriately recognizable to others. Gender is a constant iteration and an interactional (re)production (West and Zimmerman 1987). Ridgeway and Corell (2004) further argue that:

since hegemonic beliefs are institutionalized in many settings, there are often real social costs to behaviorally challenging them. Consequently, while many occasionally resist in small to large ways, most people most of

the time largely and often unwittingly comply with the pressure of gender-based expectations in the bulk of their behavior.

However gender becomes more or less salient in different social situations (Ridgeway and Corell 2004). According to Ridgeway and Corell (2004), gender, and the cultural expectations around it, are most significant in mixed-sex situations and same-sex situations where there are gendered expectations. The authors offer the example of a same-sex math class: if the cultural belief exists that women are bad at math, that belief will have an impact in that social situation even if the math class is all women. The assumption then follows that gender will be enacted in more normative ways in these two scenarios than in other situations, making gender a situational expression. The usefulness of embodied cartography is its ability to allow for gender and sexuality to map onto each other in temporary, partial, and unexpected ways, like we see here.

Unlike work, back-to-school night and other events at her children's schools lead to a different enactment of gender for Vaughn and a different negotiational process. "I definitely think a lot harder about what I'm going to wear going to the back-to-school night [than to work]." Not only is back-to-school night a less familiar environment than the office where she spends five days a week, but she also points to her perception that "most parents are straight." This feeling of being an outsider, a gay parent among mostly straight ones, is compounded by the fact that Vaughn is also a non-custodial parent. She feels further marginalized even within the category of gay parent as a parent who doesn't live with her children. "There are areas of my life in which I feel like there are no images or role models. Being a non-custodial mom sucks. I have a great relationship with my ex and I see my kids all the time. But there are no images out there of good, non-custodial

mothers.” As she perceives increased marginalization, Vaughn becomes more and more vigilant about her appearance work. Here Vaughn complicates the mapping of gender and sexuality. For women who fail at femininity by not having sexual relationships with men, some lesbian women find motherhood as a path back to normative femininity and a way to build bridges across sexual identities (Muzio 1999). However, Vaughn’s identity as a non-custodial mother further marginalizes her experience of womanhood in the face of regulatory discourses that define appropriate motherhood. As a result, she relies more heavily on embodying normative femininity to be read as a legitimate woman.

Just as Vaughn moved from a more casual masculine presentation of self to a more formal and somewhat more feminine presentation in social situations where she deemed it necessary, Vaughn also suggests that gender operates beyond just clothing. Even though she has a sense of herself as more masculine than her peers, she is quick to point out that “in other ways I think I am hyper-feminine by tradition definitions...very attentive to relational stuff.” Furthermore, she was not initially able to think about herself in these both/and terms—as embodying both traditionally masculine and feminine qualities. “It took me a long time to figure out the funny different ways stereotypes play out for me,” she told me. Many of the women I spoke to also struggled with the widespread cultural belief that masculinity and femininity are mutually exclusive traits that are tied to male and female bodies, respectively. They lacked the language to talk about this in ways that felt truthful for them. The language of stereotypes was regularly invoked, as Vaughn does above. Although she is not explicit about the ways the false dichotomy of masculinity/femininity is problematic for her, she does suggest that it has taken her some time to navigate where she fits within the cultural constraints of the

binary. Vaughn's narrative offers a model of how essentialism does not have to mean either/or, masculinity or femininity.

While Vaughn found work situations to require the most situational gender-expression management, Paige pointed to time with her family of origin as when she was most strategic about gender. In many ways, Paige, a 19-year-old black college student, looked like the typical undergraduate. She came to our interview wearing straight-legged jeans, not tight, not loose, and a hooded-sweatshirt with a large appliquéd logo on the front. Her dark brown hair was straightened and pulled back into a low ponytail at the base of her neck, but the small curls at her temples revealed that her straight locks were temporary. She wore lots of gold jewelry that at first seemed in contrast to her otherwise very casual attire and her self-identification as a "masculine stud":

I love my bangles, even though a lot of other masculine studs don't wear bangles. Like gold bangles. I like jewelry. I like wearing rings, earrings. Usually stud earrings, though. Only hoops if I'm going to church or something. Only then, but usually stud earrings, and I wear a watch. And other than that, just bangles, bracelets, rings and necklaces. I wear three necklaces. The initials, which is a typical girl necklace, and I have like the little thin one that I lost, and then I have this one that I've had for a while. My dad got it for me when I was younger. And I've always had a lot of jewelry. I like gold.

Paige is very clear that although the jewelry may appear to contradict others' expectations of what a masculine stud should wear, she wears them for her pleasure. Furthermore, her choice of bangles does not appear to be an intentional challenge to gendered expectations, but instead she frames it as simply a personal aesthetic preference. She has a fixed gender identity as a masculine stud but she likes to accessorize that with gold jewelry. I would also argue that gold jewelry is not antithetical to black masculinities and as a result, what might appear to conflict with white and hegemonic

masculinities is actually an authentic embodiment of masculinity for Paige. Throughout our interview Paige constantly moved between corporeal examples of traditional femininities and masculinities.

I will flick my hair or something like that. Like a girl, acting regular, I would say, because I'm a female. But because I'm gay, and I come off as a more masculine female, some people expect me to act more like a boy or just not have these female tendencies that I do have. So I guess it's part of me. I'm still a girl.

Paige clearly attributes her feminine qualities to her intrinsic female sex and her masculine traits to her gay identity. While one logic seems to be about gender identity and the other about sexual identity, both reflect her belief in an essentialist self (or selves). Paige co-constructs her gender and sexual identities. Like Vaughn, Paige also modeled a both/and approach to essential masculinity by pointing to aspects of her personality that she saw as feminine. Paige was constantly challenging the idea of essential gender as monolithic.

When I [first came out], my clothes were really big... Then I was like, "I don't like the way this looks on me." But even though I still do shop now in the men's side, I just make sure the shirt fits me... and if I find a female shirt that fits me, I'll buy a female shirt.

Paige seemed one of the most confident women I interviewed. Although she described constant gendered negotiations, those negotiations never appeared to be at the expense of her core sense of self. In fact, Paige described two specific moments when she ignored her personal sense of style to try out other gendered expressions. The first was when she was coming out in high school and she was explicitly navigating attraction for the first time. "When I first came out, there were these other girls who were more boyish than me and they were attracting girls that I was attracted to." As a result, she moved to a more

masculine appearance and tried to align herself with these women in order to attract the “girls they were getting.” But “then after that, after that I just got comfortable being myself, because I realized that’s all I could be. I can’t try to perform somebody else.” Paige’s language of performance suggests she was trying to imitate a gendered ideal that felt inauthentic. The concept of gender performance will be used in a different way by women in the next chapter.

While Paige seemed strongly guided by her personal sense of style, she did quite a bit of appearance management for her family. While she guessed that her entire family knew that she was gay, she was acutely aware of the importance they placed on the invisibility of her gay identity. She has heard the family rumors about her sexuality, but she avoids either confirming or denying them, and she worries specifically about her grandmother:

My grandmother really doesn’t want me to be gay. Like she really doesn’t want me to be gay. And I don’t know how to break it to her. Like, “Oh, Grandma, well I’m actually gay.” I don’t know how to break it to her, because that would just crush her heart, and with all of these medical problems, that would actually just be the flat line. But my mom, she’s fine. My dad, he knows because there’s been talk. There’s been talk within the family, but I never confirmed it.

As far as Paige can tell, it’s not her sexuality that most concerns her family but her potential to embody masculinity, to appear too masculine and therefore visibly revealing her sexual identity. In this case, hair becomes the bodily marker that links gender and sexuality. Once again, we see how the body is used as the narrative thread connecting gender identity and sexual identity.

He didn’t want me to cut my hair. I was like, “Dad, my hair is going to grow back.” He’s just like, “No you want to look like a boy.” I was like, “That’s not why I did it, but okay.” “What is your family going to think?”

I was like, “Well honestly, you and Mom are the only people who pay my tuition, so those are the only people I’m worried about, because other people aren’t, and what are they going to do for me while I’m trying to get ahead in life, and if they want to talk about me, then that’s fine.” And I said, “You shouldn’t be worried about it, because I’m your daughter.” He’s like, “I love you regardless, but I just don’t want...” I’m like, “I know, Dad. But I don’t know what you want me to do.”

However, despite her frustration at her dad’s inability to accept her haircut and her explanation that the rest of the family shouldn’t matter, Paige still works to change her appearance when with her family to be appropriately feminine. As a result, she has a separate wardrobe she dons for family visits:

So when I go home, I don’t wear these jeans. I’ll bring a pair of, maybe some GAP jeans or something like that. A couple of GAP jeans. Just so he won’t say anything.

When I asked her what is different about GAP jeans she explained:

Well my GAP jeans, they’re female skinny jeans. So you’ll see me go out to the club as I dress on a regular basis, but when we have to go to family functions, just so he doesn’t have to feel it or somebody has to question it, because I don’t want to make him uncomfortable, because I think that’s what my dad’s more worried about: people asking “Is Paige...?” So I’ll do it more so for him, because I don’t want to make him uncomfortable with my decision.

As with Vaughn, Paige’s clothing decisions are strategic micro-negotiations of gender.

In her case, enacting traditional femininity becomes a political strategy for familial peacekeeping. At the same time, she recognizes it as a temporary performance, and not an embodiment of her “true” gender. Paige strategically navigates social structures in ways that do not betray her core sense of self.

The most common narrative among women in my study, essentialism was a way to express a consistent and strong sense of self. Furthermore, the ways they invoked this narrative illustrated the ways that gender and sexuality both overlap and diverge as

lesbian-identified women engage in embodied cartography. At the same time, we see in their narratives the ways that these women also work to construct their gendered identities, even while claiming these identities are pre-social and immutable. While Toni, Vaughn, and Paige navigated their gendered identity confidently, other women with essentialist narratives struggled when their sense of self came into conflict with hegemonic social norms of gender and sexuality.

CHAPTER 3
“I NEVER GO ANYWHERE WITHOUT MY EARRINGS.”:
ESSENTIALISM IN CONFLICT

“I feel completely visible and exposed,” Monica explains. “Sometimes I feel like I’m taking shit for everyone else because of the stuff that I want to wear or the way I cut my hair.” Tall and thin with broad shoulders, Monica is a white woman in her late 20s who works as a personal trainer and yoga instructor. “I’m five-seven,” Monica explains, “I’ve even looked at my BMI [body mass index] and it’s like an 18 or 19. I mean, it’s low.” Her dark hair is cut short and during our interview she wears a fitted tank top and track pants. Her bare arms and shoulders are muscular, reflecting her commitment to exercise and strength training. It was acutely apparent during our interview that Monica struggled against hegemonic gender ideals, to which she felt she did not fit. Furthermore, she framed these struggles largely as a struggle of visibility and overexposure. This chapter examines the ways that essentialist narratives of gender can be challenging for some lesbian women. While some women, like Monica, found themselves to be too visible, either because of gender or sexual non-conformity, others found themselves frustratingly invisible.

Embodied cartography as a framework centers narrative threads of the body as one sense-making activity used to navigate gender and sexual identities. The women in this chapter suggest that some of the available narratives actually become controlling discourses that serve to regulate bodies and create social and interpersonal conflict as lesbian women work within them. Authentic visibility, both within and without lesbian communities, was a common source of tension for women with essentialist narratives.

While normative femininity felt authentic to some women, they felt invisible as lesbians. For others, non-normative feminine embodiment felt authentic, but that put them at risk for censure, sanctions, and even violence.

Visibility was a particularly relevant idea for this group of women because they have largely adopted essentialist explanations of both gender and sexuality. For example, when talking about coming out to her dad, Monica was worried that she “would lose his love because of who [she] was, which [she] couldn’t change”. Essentialist narratives such as Monica’s rely on the idea that there is an immutable internal self. And going further, it stands to reason that this self would also be reflected externally, on and through the body. While historian Joan Scott (1991) warns researchers about the dangers of placing subjects into essential identity categories based on their visible difference, the women in my project who claimed an essential gender narrative also expected their authentic selves to be seen and correctly read by others. Essential narratives rely on the external matching up with an internal essence, at least most of the time. It then stands to reason, that visibility was a primary source of stress and constraint for women with these narratives.

Monica described various struggles she felt in relation to her body, gender, and sexuality. Her narrative was fraught with the tension she experienced when navigating interactions with others. When coming out, she struggled to navigate disordered eating, clothing, and her body. “I was definitely into baggy clothing. I was playing lots of sports and baggy clothing was where I was at. There was no part of me that wanted to be presenting as a feminine body for sure.” Clearly, Monica recognizes her gender presentation as a performance but an inauthentic one. While she did identify as athletic

and wanted an athletic body and clothes that matched, she also said that the clothes were a way to hide, hide both her body and her eating disorder. Not surprisingly, Monica navigated her eating disorder^{xviii} and her gendered self in tandem with one another (see Bordo 1993 and Atkins 1998 for discussions of the complex relationship between weight, eating, sexuality, and gender).

I wanted to be a muscular body, you know? It's not that I was rejecting my breasts or the fact that I was a woman, but I also didn't want to—or should I say I think the way I pictured myself was more—*masculine* is the only language that I have, but broad shouldered. Like, thin waist, not curvy, lean.

Monica chose clothing, such as A-frame tank tops and thermal shirts, to specifically accentuate the masculine muscular frame she wanted to present. Interestingly, her language “to be” the body, suggests the strength of the connection between bodies and identity for her. Her embodied cartography here is a project of navigating a version of femininity that she did not want, and through her embodiment of masculinity, she is able to align her body with her sexual identity and attract the women she was attracted to. Ironically, she internalized a decidedly feminine version of disordered eating to obtain that masculinized body (Bordo 1993).

On one hand, Monica recognized that she is performing a certain version of masculinity with her exercise routine, food choices, and clothing preferences. In fact, she discussed the ways that she received positive feedback for her appearance by attracting particular kinds of women. “Some of the feedback that I got was that [my appearance] was very attractive to who was around...Other women thought I was attractive, so I actually gave a shit to continue to look that way.” However, she is quick to point out that

she felt “stuck in that way of existing.” Today, she buys more women’s clothing and feels like she no longer makes aesthetic choices for her body based on external feedback. “I don’t have any objection to the fact that I have a woman’s body. I’m much more in touch with that, that it’s something that can be appreciated.” Here we can see a common sense-making activity among a woman who had an essentialist narrative. She frames her current presentation as more authentic, more reflective of a true internal self while dismissing her past gender enactment as simply an inauthentic performance.

Monica felt that she was visible as a lesbian, a trait that frequently made her cringe. She said she was often correctly identified as a lesbian by others and was able to find a community of other lesbians who looked like her. “I’ll go to a gay parade and I’ll be like, ‘Why does everyone look this way?’ We all look the same. Everyone looks like such a homo. We can all recognize each other.” But Monica also struggled with this visibility. She felt that because she visibly did not embody traditional femininity, she became the subject of violence. One day at a stadium concert, Monica and her sister were verbally attacked on the stairwell.

There was a long stream of people walking down, so we came up the stairs, and a guy, as he was going down, turned around, looked up right as we passed and was like, ‘You fucking dyke!’ I felt so stunned by it and disempowered by it. I felt that just for existing I had to take someone else’s abuse.

It’s important to make clear that gender identity becomes a proxy for sexual identity. Every woman I interviewed pointed to the shared cultural image of the mannish lesbian. Gender and sexuality are always co-constructed. From *The Well of Loneliness*’ Stephen Gordon to Ellen DeGeneres, lesbian women embodying masculinity is a common trope. Masculine-presenting women are often mistaken for lesbians, and the

visual cues of masculinity are used to presume a lesbian identity. When I first began presenting this research at conferences, I was often questioned by women in the audience asking me about straight women enacting masculinity who were often mistaken for lesbians. While I have no data on this, it is clear from the women I interviewed that masculinity is used as a way to mark lesbian bodies. As a result, lesbian visibility is always also a gender story.

This might be an extreme case. Monica was the only woman in my study who explicitly spoke about her struggle with weight and food in this way. However, Monica's struggle against social constraints of proper femininity and lesbian identity were not unique. This narrative of essential gender became increasingly salient when gendered bodies came up against the wall of social norms of corporeal appropriateness. The essentialist narrative became a way for some women to buttress their sense of self against social worlds that do not value their bodies and their gender performance. For masculine women, the potential rejection came from mainstream American culture. For feminine women, the attack on their bodies often came from within lesbian communities.

I met Rasheeda, a 23-year-old black woman who had recently graduated from college, at her friend's apartment in the suburbs of a large east coast city. Tall and curvy, Rasheeda had the quintessential hourglass shape, and her clothes highlighted it. She wore hot pink velour sweat pants that sat low on her hips and hugged her thighs before flaring out over her sneakers. On top she had a black spaghetti strap tank and her long hair was plaited into hundreds of micro-braids that hung to the middle of her back. "I mean I dress casually, but I'm very feminine," Rasheeda explained. "My clothes fit

snugly. I like to show off my shape. I'm not into super baggy clothes unless I'm bumming.”

A key component of the essentialist narrative is the idea that the current gender presentation is not only fixed but has always existed within the individual in some corporeal form. When I asked Rasheeda about any appearance shifts she has experienced since coming out, she invoked this part of the essentialist narrative:

I think that I have always been pretty feminine. I mean unless we had a dress-down day or some day I just felt like, okay, say I want to dress in my baggy clothes and see how many girls I can talk to. But I didn't tend to do that.

But significantly, she described the ways that desire maps onto this narrative. While she feels she maintained a constant femininity, her appearance did shift based on her sexual partner at the time.

I think that if I'm with a more dominant woman, I definitely want to be ultra, ultra feminine, "Oh, you know, okay, you're my daddy, and here I am." (laughter) This one girl that I was dating, she looked like a dominant girl, but she was a femme. She was like, "Come dress me. Pick out something for me to wear." And then I felt like in that case I could be a little more, sort of, relaxed. I even maybe kind of fall into a little bit of a tomboy role, but not -- it would be more so attitude, as opposed to outward dress. Because I just like tight clothes. It's just what I'm into.

In other words, despite shifts in the performance of femininity over the course of her relationships, Rasheeda holds on to her essentialist narrative as a feminine woman. Furthermore, this once again shows the connection between gender and sexuality identities and the ways they are used together to construct the self.

While Monica described her struggles with constant visibility, Rasheeda described feeling invisible within the lesbian community, particularly during her

pregnancy and immediately after her son was born. Her pregnant body was the ultimate mark of femininity, which was translated into heterosexuality within lesbian spaces:

Okay if you're pregnant, it's obvious you've had sex. Okay, first of all, you've had sex with a MAN. Like, "Ooooh, she's had sex with a man!" And then you're pregnant, so it's like, "There it is! The product of having sex with this man." Your scarlet letter. So it's like you spend all of your time taking care of a baby, and I feel like there's a certain magical age, like three or something, when then it's okay—you can re-integrate yourself back into the lesbian community. It's like, "Okay, you have a child, so sometime in the PAST you had sex with a man, and you know, we don't like to think about that, but it's so far into the future that we can just overlook that point.

In some ways it shocked me to be having this conversation in at this particular historical moment, when many lesbian couples were choosing from a variety of reproduction strategies to get pregnant and have children. However, her experiences of exclusion from the lesbian community were so salient for Rasheeda, that we spent a significant amount of time discussing them. Rasheeda felt punished not for embodying hegemonic femininity but instead for failing to embody femininity appropriate to be recognized as a lesbian.

However, race also played a part in Rasheeda's experience. While it is true that more lesbian couples than ever before are choosing to create families via assisted reproductive techniques that do not involve sex with men, this is not happening across all lesbian communities. Unfortunately, there is little broad-based statistical data to help us understand the racial differences in the ways that lesbian couples create families and raise children. However, in her qualitative study of 100 black lesbian families in New York City, Mignon Moore (2011) found that black lesbian women who are immersed in black communities, like Rasheeda, are more likely to be parenting children who were

conceived through previous relationships with men than to be parenting children conceived with a female partner. Given this evidence, Rasheeda's belief that her pregnancy made her lesbianism invisible within her black lesbian community is not unfounded. Pregnancy became the narrative thread that Rasheeda used to connect the embodied experiences of gender and sexuality. Her pregnant body sat at the ideological intersections of straight and black and feminine that made Rasheeda feel uncomfortable and inauthentic.

Like Rasheeda, Camille also struggled to navigate an authentic sense of self within lesbian spaces and to deal with the invisibility she experienced there. Camille worked at a small liberal arts university on the East Coast, and during our interview, she was dressed professionally in slacks and a light blue blouse that flowed away from her body in waves. She wasn't wearing any visible jewelry. Her outfit was punctuated with a small neck scarf in a floral pattern that framed her face. She was a white woman, a bit taller than average, with a medium build. Her brown hair was curly and fell down almost to her shoulders. Camille embodied what RW Connell (1995) called "emphasized femininity." Her appearance was normatively feminine and racially white. This allowed her freedom to walk through the world and receive acceptance from strangers in ways that Monica and Rasheeda did not experience, but it was not without a cost. Camille spoke at length about her feelings of invisibility and her sometimes active exclusion from lesbian communities:

I just hate that everybody [conflates] femininity with straightness. I just hate this association between being a lesbian means that you look masculine. And I am so feminine. I mean, my body is curvy, my hair is long. Maybe it's because when I first came out there was this focus, when people were trying to figure me out, it's like "Wow you can't be gay." I'll

never forget, I was at a gay bar and one woman said “You're too beautiful to be in this bar.” And I'm not beautiful but what she meant was “you're too feminine,” I think.

Visibility has been central not only to political movements that relied on a sense of shared identity but also as a way to identify who is part of the community and therefore a potential partner (Chauncy 1995; Faderman 1991; Kennedy and Davis 1993). Being accepted into bar culture has historically been an important rite of passage for lesbians, so it is not surprising that Camille did not like being excluded. As a result, Camille experimented with a more masculine aesthetic:

So to connect [to] the gay community—I feel like such a raging stereotype but it's also true—I cut my hair really short. I hung around with a crowd of younger women, many of whom were butchy or maybe even androgynous, and they were doing this wife-beater, big pant thing and so I did that too. That's the only time that anything's dramatically changed about my appearance.

Although she shortly abandoned this working class masculine clothing, the problem remained. Camille subsequently adopted a kind of situational masculinity as a strategy to foster community around her new lesbian identity during her coming out process. But despite this shift, Camille expressed deep ambivalence about both her invisibility as a lesbian and the changes she made in her appearance to be seen as more of a lesbian.

I don't really care about other people as much but I just don't like myself, I'm not being authentic to myself. I don't know where it all comes from but I know that, it's not that I worry about it but I feel like I need to just be clear.

I think it's because people perceive me as straight and I think I don't want to be misperceived that way. This whole passing thing...I'm not judgmental about it because I do it. I know I do it. But I feel uncomfortable doing it. And you know thinking about it, maybe it's because my wife is so clearly butch that I get uncomfortable with that...like I'm constantly comparing our situations. Even before she and I were together I still resent that you look at me and you think that I'm with

men or that I'm straight. I feel like my body screams something that I'm not.

Explicit in Camille's narrative is the connection between bodies, identity, and the struggle for authenticity, a term that is commonly used by women with essentialist narratives. She struggles with the tension between her own authentic sense of who she is and the identity that others graft onto her body based on her appearance of femininity. She feels that her body is repeatedly read as straight by others. For Camille, it is not the fear of being seen as an inauthentic woman but the fear of not being seen as an authentic lesbian. And she resents this.

Visibility played a very different role for women with essentialist narratives that centered on masculinity. While these women never spoke of their rejection from lesbian spaces, they often expressed deep ambivalence about their failure to embody expected normative femininity. Kris's story was emblematic of this conflict. I interviewed Kris in her office where she works for a local non-profit foundation. At 5 feet 8 inches tall with thick thighs and calves, she had an imposing appearance. Her cropped blond hair had touches of grey around the temples, but her clean face made her appear slightly younger than her 36 years. During our interview Kris wore jeans and a pinkish-orange V-neck shirt with a men's white button-down shirt open over it, almost like a jacket. Her sleeves were rolled up and on her feet were flip-flops, which I noticed as she propped her feet on her desk and leaned back in her large leather chair, a stereotypical masculine performance. Her clothing and stance gave her a relaxed appearance. The only jewelry she wore was a pair of small silver hoop earrings and a silver watch. The watch was clearly a woman's watch, delicate and thin, which struck me as out of place given her

more masculine haircut, clothing, and body language. I learned during the course of the interview that the watch, salmon-colored shirt, and earrings are all reflections of Kris's struggle around her embodiment of gender.

Kris embodied a conflict that many women I spoke with experienced. On one hand, men's clothing was more comfortable for her:

Then in college I got much more into men's clothes. I bought men's clothes, I wore boxers all the time, I got the mullet [hair cut], the flannel shirts, all of that. And there was a definite feeling that I'm not going to be one of those prissy girls and I'm more comfortable in this clothing.

However, despite feeling more comfortable and authentic with a more traditionally masculine appearance, Kris described altering her appearance strategically for different audiences. While she felt more comfortable embodying a masculine aesthetic, she did not want to be seen as male.

When I started teaching I was very conscious of dressing more feminine and part of that was it was in college when often times I would be referred to as a boy, and for whatever reason it always made me uncomfortable. When I became more professional, I became more aware of that. I didn't want the embarrassment in my classroom with my students thinking I was a boy or anything like that. But, while they were women's clothes by this point, they were still khaki pants and a polo shirt or something similar.

This balancing act caused Kris intense anxiety at times. She did not want to be called 'sir' or be mistaken for a man, particularly in professional situations. This anxiety led to a variety of self-policing activities:

I usually never go anywhere without my earrings. And particularly hoops because you can see them from a distance, from behind, from the side. The only time I tend not to wear earrings is when I'm doing yard work or something where I actually have on old jeans and a t-shirt and work boots. And that's more so I don't lose them. But when I'm going down to [the hardware store], I have consciously gone in and grabbed my earrings to put them on.

Clearly for Kris, decisions about jewelry and clothing are not haphazard but are made with significant amounts of emotional labor. This performance is particularly salient for women who already sit outside of conventional norms of femininity by virtue of their adoption of traditional masculine appearance markers.

In the thought Kris gave to the kind of earrings that would most visibly mark her as a woman, we hear Kris's narratives of self-regulation. As Foucault (1990) theorized, no actual laws or sanctions were needed. These narratives were characterized by descriptions of activities, appearance modifications, or other corporeal activities in which women engaged in anticipation of the reactions of others. But for Kris, this self-policing was based on the experience of social sanctioning by others. She was a freshman college student the first time she was "sired":

I was shopping at Hills Department Store with my then girlfriend, Holly. We were in the women's department and we both had ball caps on because pretty much through college I wore a ball cap everyday, everywhere. So we were in the women's department and this saleswoman came over to us and said "Boys get out of here! This is the women's underwear department. You shouldn't be over here!" And I had really only been a lesbian just a couple months. We just shied away and left. She made us feel dirty for being boys in the girls' underwear section.

This encounter and the resulting fear and shame shaped Kris's interactions with her body well into her 30s, as evidenced not only by the extensive gender management in which she engaged, but also in the sense of conflict she experienced. For Kris, gender and sexuality are linked in a complex push and pull of pleasure and shame that play out on her body:

I am very aware of what I put on for work and what I wear when I'm going to conferences and stuff. I wouldn't say that I dress like a femme by any stretch of the imagination, but it's definitely more feminine than what I would wear on a day-to-day basis.

As Goffman (1959) theorized, Kris practiced a front stage/back stage model of self that was particularly salient for her around professional and work situations. However, as Kris discussed, these stages are shifting, not fixed experiences. Over time, her office has become less of a front stage space, but she still feels the pull of appropriately gendered performance when at other professional events.

But since I have become more comfortable here in the office, some of the button downs I wear are men's shirts. But I would never do that if I was at a conference. I think part of it is that I'm not secure enough in a lot of things. It goes back to I don't want to be standing in line and be referred to as a boy. And there's part of me that's like "screw it, I shouldn't care." And often times I don't. It's when I'm in a professional setting that I care. And I don't know why as much.

I am struck by the conflict Kris described. It was almost as if she was being pulled by two powerful socio-cultural voices. The first voice demanded conformity to traditional norms of femininity, which Kris has interpreted for herself through V-neck shirts and bright colors:

So if I'm going to be out and about in a more professional setting, I am aware of what I wear for a casual evening. Like when I am meeting [work colleagues] for dinner I'm less likely to wear a round neck t-shirt or something just like a plain t-shirt. I'm more likely to wear something V-neck or something with a lot more color in it.

The second voice is perhaps one from within a lesbian or queer community demanding a challenging to binary gender mandates, which has resulted in Kris chastising herself for internalizing the dominant ideology of gender conformity.

I know, as much as I don't want to admit this, that the whole reason is I don't want to be embarrassed in front of my professional colleagues. For a server to come up and say "sir" or something. As much as I want to blow it off and be like "ah, it doesn't matter," the bottom line is that it does matter.

Kris's conflict seemed to suggest that she felt she was failing both social mandates. She had a strong sense of herself as a woman who felt most comfortable embodying masculinity, but she was simultaneously stuck in social situations and fears the social rejection of her challenge to how female bodies should look. Lesbian women experience this push and pull both from the mainstream norms of femininity and the separate distinct norms of appearance within lesbian communities. Myers et al. (1999) found that while many lesbian and bisexual women do feel a sense of "freedom" from heterosexual appearance and beauty norms after coming out, they also felt constrained by the mainstream lesbian culture itself. For example, women who are part of the butch-femme subculture, which involves a particular appearance aesthetic that contrasts exaggerated femininity with masculinity within a romantic partnership, struggle against the more androgynous aesthetic of their broader lesbian community (Myers et al. 1999).

Outside of the work setting, Kris occasionally found pleasure in the moments when she was mistaken for a man.

When I'm not in a professional setting, sometimes it entertains me...Just a couple weeks ago I was at [a restaurant] and I had a hat on and I must have just had a plain color on and I walked into the bathroom and a woman was walking out and she glanced up at the sign. I completely saw her do it, glance up at the sign. And then she just kept walking. I just laughed; I thought it was funny. I have no doubt that I looked much more boy-like that day than if I would have not had a hat on or had a different shirt on or those kinds of things.

Still, the department store lesson was salient for Kris twenty years later. The struggles Kris articulates around her masculinity and the public performance of it was common among women with essentialist narratives. This suggests that while the essentialist narrative can be a way to hold onto the idea of an authentic self, it may also make

navigating social constraint a challenge, particularly if the essential sense of self does not conform to sex-gender norms.

While the narrative of authentic visibility became a regulating narrative for Kris, Rasheeda, and Monica, other women found the butch-femme images and narratives to be discursive straight jackets against which their bodies fought. Embodied cartography as a framework centers narrative threads of the body as one sense-making activity used to navigate gender and sexual identities. Amaryllis and Lauren suggest that the pervasiveness of butch-femme identity narratives as a way to understand lesbian identity actually became controlling discourses that served to regulate their bodies and relationships.

Wearing tight jeans, a hot pink shirt with matching ballet flats and a pale pink knit beret on top of long reddish brown curls, Amaryllis exuded the kind of femininity that could perhaps best be described as “girly.” Her light brown skin was colored with pastel eye shadows, her eyelashes were thick and dark, and her lips were Pepto Bismol pink. The daughter of political activists involved in the Black Panther movement of the 1970s, Amaryllis had few problems coming out to her parents in high school:

My mom just called me into her room and was like, "Your friends are looking very masculine lately. You're going out with a lot of basketball players. Is there something you want to tell me?" Basically that kind of thing. It was very easy for coming out. I feel like I may have had it very good. You know, it was very relaxed, and I felt comfortable. I didn't feel like she was judging me or pushing me in any specific direction. Just kind of like, "I noticed..." "Come to me if you need me." You know? So yeah, it was very awesome.

However, she has struggled against norms of appearance and coupling that she feels were strongly enforced in the black lesbian communities of which she was a part. Amaryllis

felt that her attraction was constrained by rules that dictated the kinds of women she was allowed to desire:

For some reason, all of my past relationships, all of the girls have been what you would consider more dominant. I've never dated a really feminine woman. In college I messed around a lot with feminine women, but I didn't really date them and have relationships. I think that's probably because of the stigma. People looking at us like, "Hmmm," you know?

Later in our interview she was able to more clearly articulate how this “stigma” is enacted.

Even in the gay community, I'm not saying that dominant women wouldn't respect us, but they would try any way to weasel their way in [to sexual relationships between two feminine women]—like men, almost. Sometimes I've come across men, and when I say I like men or women, it's like, "Oh yeah!" That's like their cue card to keep it going, like, "Oh great! So am I. Let's see what we can hook up and do." It was almost like no respect there, because to them we were two odds. We didn't belong together. So I feel like, for some reason, the relationships I've had in the past have all been dominant women for some reason. But I've always had this secret attraction to really feminine women. Like, "I want you in stilettos and pumps and lace and in my bed right now," you know? Like very girly. Like pearls. I don't know.

In her experience, both straight men and dominant lesbian women assume that two feminine women together are not a couple in and of themselves but simply for others' sexual pleasure. This is a common cultural trope— the image of two women, often embodying exaggerated femininity. It has been used to titillate men in venues ranging from pornography to car ads. Amaryllis suggests that these images have very real and material consequences. Furthermore, she connects this constraint specifically to black lesbian communities:

I feel like if the stigma wasn't there, they probably would be more comfortable saying, "Well step outside. Let's talk, and I'll get your number," or something. Or taking the lead role and being like, "Let's make out. Let's go out, and let's do whatever." But I just feel like in the

[black lesbian] community it's a lot of judgment and also a lot of boxes that you have to be in. It's not as free as you would think for an "oppressed people." It's very much, you know, taking on all of the things that you are totally against and kind of just turning them into something different and still acting them out and living in the same cycle. It's like I feel like there are a lot of reasons why I haven't, I guess, explored the lifestyle as much as other women is because I'm afraid of those things.

While Amaryllis adopts a distinctly essentialist narrative to explain her own gendered sense of self (there is nothing ironic in her performance of hyper-femininity), she is also frustrated by the rules of lesbian coupling that are based on similar essential ideas about sexuality and desire. Amaryllis's narrative suggests that while gender and sexuality can theoretically map onto each other in an endless array of possible ways, they are constrained by discourses that regulate identity. The appropriateness that is attached to dominant-femme pairings served to constrain Amaryllis and she worked to understand that disconnect between desire and action.

Many women seem to place a great deal of importance on letting me know that they do not fit into the cultural categories provided to us when it comes to gender, and more specifically masculinity. When I raised the question of butch/aggressive/dominant identities, I was surprised by the amount of resistance women had toward these descriptions. Only one of the women I interviewed actively claimed a butch identity, and almost all of my respondents discussed the ways that the hypervisible image of the butch lesbian limited them. For example, Lauren's narrative was typical:

I never understood the labels that people give out...butch, femme. Everyone has general stereotypes that fall into that. I fall so middle of the ground, it's not even funny. I know gay women that go out, and they have to have their makeup, they have to look like they've caked on 500 layers of crap all over their face. And then I see other women go out with absolutely nothing at all on, and they have this hardened, crusted look that they've been in the sun for about 500 years, and just

decided to come into the darkness of a club to come meet their next prey. So I mean like, I fall, I guess more towards the feminine side, but if there was like a middle line, I fall a little bit more towards the feminine side than anything else. Yes, well, certainly more feminine side, you know, I cross my legs, I say please and thank you. I don't think I necessarily come across as slightly more butch, I come across as middle of the road as possible, with just a slightly more feminine edge. You know, just a little bit more feminine.

Lauren's description of herself as "middle of the road" is a common way that lesbian women negotiate the apparent constraints of the visible image of the butch lesbian that is so pervasive in the popular imaginary. Lauren can perhaps be best described as a 34-year-old tomboy. Although her brown hair is long, during our interview it is pulled back in a ponytail and she is wearing mesh athletic shorts and a loose fitting t-shirt. Her face appears to be free of makeup and she is not wearing any jewelry except for a leather-banded watch. She is not thin by traditional standards but her legs and arms are tan and muscular, giving away her athletic hobbies. Lauren describes her routines for me and specifically points out that although she is athletic and has a muscular body, she will wear dresses to business meetings or curl her hair when she is going out. It is the animosity with which Lauren describes her resistance to lesbian masculinity that strikes me. For example, she vehemently opposes the idea that Melissa Etheridge, an openly lesbian musician, is a good lesbian image: "I think people want to see lesbians as, you know, there's no harm as seeing them as feminine. I think it's really hard for people to accept Melissa Etheridge because she comes across a little more butchy than the average woman."

For Lauren, her flexible, middle of the road gender presentation is not a particularly fraught experience for her; it reflects her internal sense of an authentic self.

However, she meets resistance from others. She is frustrated by the ways that others comment on her athleticism as incongruent with her curled hair and makeup, “They're really blown away when I go out, because I look like everybody else. I'll wear the jeans, but I'll wear makeup, my hair will be curled. And everyone's like ‘wow, I've never seen you with your hair down before’. Nobody ever really sees me.” Essentialist narratives rely on the premise that the external reflects some internal, fixed self. If that external presentation is misread, as in Lauren's case, it creates the feeling that others do not see or understand you as a subject. Lauren is resisting the butch-femme discourse that becomes a regulatory narrative for lesbians in particular. Butch-femme is one example of a narrative thread that connects gender and sexuality—perhaps the most popular example, but certainly not the only one.

To be seen by others was also acutely salient for Lisa. During our interview, Lisa, a 26-year-old black woman, talked about the difficulties of navigating multiple visible identities:

Not only are you black, especially for women, it's like we're a triple threat. Not only are you black, you're a woman, two, and you're gay, three. So I think it's probably a little bit harder, just as far as the past and everything that has gone on. It's like you have more things counting against you, more hurdles to cross. Like women have a hard enough time, let alone black women, let alone gay black women.

Like all lesbians of color, Lisa is acutely aware of herself as multiply located within matrices of race, gender, and sexuality (Collins 1990). But while we are all located within these and other social systems, lesbian women of color are always navigating multiple marginalized identities. Furthermore, black bodies have always been negotiated within the context of patriarchy and racial inequality that privileges whiteness. As a

result, black women have the compounded experience of navigating their bodies against a backdrop that devalues them as women and as non-white. In addition, the history of identity politics in the United States (specifically the Civil Rights movement and the Women's Movement of the 60s and 70s and more recently the LGBT movement) has made the visibility of identity categories particularly salient.

A light-skinned biracial woman raised by her white grandparents, Lisa always understood race as an organizing force in her life. “‘Oh, no, you're black.’ I got that all of the time. And I was like, ‘No, I'm not. I'm mixed.’ It's always been very clear to me. The rest of me, like my sexuality, those things weren't very clear to me, but race was always pretty clear.” But despite feeling internal clarity around her racial identity, Lisa struggled as a young adult to maintain an authentic sense of personal style.

Growing up, I used to like skater clothes—like big pants and longer t-shirts and that's what I always felt the best in. And I kind veered out of that when I got to the age where I starting having boyfriends and that was a big deal. So I'm going back to that now. And it think it's just because I'm more comfortable. Because I'm out now, I'm just way more comfortable with myself. So it's ok to wear what I want to wear because I'm more comfortable with myself now...I always liked guys' clothes better but it wasn't an option. Now it's like, if I can find something that actually fits me and it's guys' clothes, I don't think twice about it.

In many ways, the appearance shifts Lisa describes are not unique to black women or lesbian women. Adolescence is widely accepted as a time that American teens experiment with different aesthetics as they begin to solidify the relationships between appearance, identity, and cultural style. But Lisa links these bodily transformations specifically to the increased sense of personal authenticity that accompanied her coming out process. Her increased comfort with herself allowed her to not think twice about purchasing and wearing men's clothing.

Furthermore, although Lisa was committed to maintaining a racial identity that was not black *or* white but both black *and* white, she found white communities were more accepting of bodies that did not conform to gendered and racialized expectations.

When I grew up, I had a mix of friends. I had white friends. I had black friends, but I was more around the white kids with the skateboards and the piercings and rock bands, than I was around – for lack of a better phrase – black groups. They were more accepting of me, because a lot of black people view mixed people as “They should act black,” and because I didn’t necessarily, because I didn’t shop at the same store or wear the same clothes.

Given the strength of racial categories as organizing social forces, Lisa’s encounters with black folks who want her to “act more black” or “dress black” is not surprising. The racial structures of the 21st century United States rely on the creation and maintenance of clear racial boundaries. Multiracial identities by their very nature challenge these boundaries and often necessitate the re-assertion of those same boundaries in order to maintain their power (Spickard 1996). It is this boundary maintenance that categorizes Barack Obama as the first black president, despite his multiracial history. Lisa found that her white friends were less likely than her black friends to police these racial boundaries.

If the black kids saw a kid with green, spiky hair and piercings, they would make fun of him, whereas if I was with the kid with the piercings, I’ve never ever heard any of my [white] friends make those kinds of comments about black people.

Unlike most white lesbians for whom race is not a central part of their lesbian identity, Lisa had to navigate her body in the context of a racialized system that is invested in the ways her already raced body does or does not conform to appropriate blackness. While she did not want to “push [her] black side out of the way or not identify with the Black group”, she had a hard time reconciling her more masculine skateboarder aesthetic with the cultural space carved out for black women. One explanation might be that her

skateboarder identity was more salient for her at the time than her black identity.

Alternatively, her skateboarder identity might have given her a way to explore gender in ways that her black identity did not.

While visibility has long been considered central not only for gay and lesbian social movements but also for identifying other individuals for social, romantic, and sexual partnership, the visibly “other” body also can become a site for social regulation and control. The concept of “hypervisibility” is a useful tool here. Used most significantly by Patricia Hill Collins, hypervisibility is the idea that increased visibility of a group, particularly in media, does not actually suggest greater acceptance but instead can be a way to make invisible continued oppression. I argue that despite increasing images of lesbians on television and in film, these images overwhelmingly present lesbian bodies as traditionally feminine or slightly androgynous. While the lesbian body is experiencing hypervisibility in this specific historical moment, this visibility reproduces traditional ideas about appropriate femininity and suggests that lesbian women should embody this version of femininity. Visibility is at the core of the fluid gender narrative. It is visibility and accountability as an appropriately gendered being, either at work, or with family, or within particular cultural community that often leads to a more situational embodiment of masculinity or femininity. While I have broken out these experiences to highlight their different and similar qualities, it is important to remember that they are overlapping realities for many women. They are all always negotiating femininity while also navigating a lesbian identity and a racial sense of self.

Some women who adopted an essentialist narrative had particularly fraught experiences when their fixed sense of self came up against normative gender ideals.

Kris's struggle around her masculinity is a good example. But Vaughn, from the previous chapter, expressed a complete counter narrative to Kris's struggle. While Kris went to great lengths to avoid being "sired," Vaughn's first reaction when I asked her about the possibility of being mistaken for a man was to think of it as a potential advantage that might offer her increased level of safety in some situations. And even when I push her further, explicitly asking if being mistaken for a man is ever a negative experience, she frames it more as a minor frustration: "Oh, it's annoying to be questioned about being in a women's room or when the person in the checkout line says, 'Thank you, sir.' I don't really care, but that does come up sometimes." In contrast, as we will see in the next chapter, women with narratives of gender play describe going out of their way to elicit responses that indicate that have challenged someone's gendered expectations.

While sociologists have long been critical of essentialist narratives of self, they became a safe place for these women and a way to buttress their own identities in the face of a social world that marginalized their gender-sexual sense of self. I was struck by the narratives of ambivalence and pain I heard over and over from women with this view of their gender presentation as innate and essential. Not surprisingly, these women seemed to struggle more with social constraint than women with other narratives about their gender. Furthermore, black women two to one adopted these essentialist narratives, while white women were more evenly distributed between essentialist narratives and play narratives. Even within essentialist narratives of gender, sexuality and gender can align in varied and various ways. Furthermore, some women with essentialist narratives found that cultural discourse and prescribed specific relationships between gender, race, and

sexuality became regulatory discourses that conflicted with their essential sense of self. While the women in this chapter struggled for and with visibility, the women we will meet in the next chapter intentionally constructed gender in ways to increase the visibility of their own gendered bodies and call attention to the ways that gender is always already a construct.

CHAPTER 4
“IT DOES FEEL LIKE A COSTUME MORE THAN AN IDENTITY.”:
NARRATIVES OF GENDER PLAY

Joan’s red hair is just slightly too red to be believable. It is accessorized with long teardrop-shaped hoop earrings, which look too formal for her form-fitting black yoga pants and a gray tank top. I think to myself that they must be the last relics of her work costume. Her clothes reveal that she is curvy in ways that are probably seen as traditionally feminine. Although she appears to be about average in height and weight, during our interview she tells me that she still has extra weight from her second pregnancy. A 37-year-old white woman, there is something electric about Joan despite the fact that during our interview she is completing mundane household activities like folding laundry and packing lunches. In between these activities, she takes a break and lounges with me at the large wooden table in her dining room, with one knee pulled in close to her chest. Her smile is bright and frequent and her voice is just a bit louder than I expect in a quiet house with two children sleeping upstairs. A social worker, Joan has cut back her hours to do the bulk of the childcare work because her partner has a demanding job as a resident physician at a local hospital.

While in many ways Joan appears to embody traditional femininity, there are subtle clues that hint otherwise; her nails are short and filed round to match the curve of her fingers, her hair is also cropped short but stylish, and a small silver piercing adorns her nose. Except for the oversized earrings and nose piercing, she has no other visible jewelry and her face appears to be clean and make-up free. When I ask her about her short hair, she replies:

I always wear my hair very short. I like something about playing with being a feminine woman and not like, “Hair hair hair!” I like getting creative about what it means to look feminine.

Joan seems to have an acute self-awareness about her performance of femininity, which was relatively uncommon for the women I interviewed. Unlike many others, she not only seems to recognize the constructed nature of gender but also describes her desire to manipulate or play with cultural ideals, such as long hair. While narratives like Joan’s were not the predominant narrative, they deserve extra attention given the importance that queer and feminist theories place on gender performativity and specifically on playing with gender expectations as a way to subvert them.

While not all showing the same level of self-awareness, the women in this chapter shared Joan’s experience of redefining femininity and challenging hegemonic gender norms. Judith Butler (1990) famously argues that it is through drag performance that we can most clearly see the ways that gender is always already a performance with no original referent. In many ways, these women are doing similar work. They are offering up a parody of femininity, a play on and with femininity, which can help illuminate the cracks and fissures in the socio-cultural space allotted to women. I believe this kind of gender work makes the space for expanded definitions of how women, and ultimately all of us, can walk through the world as embodied beings. There is little sense from these women that there is some absolute, core gender identity that will never change; instead it is always up for negotiation. However, the women I interviewed were varied in how explicit they were about this process. While some women I interviewed were intentionally doing bodywork that plays with traditional ideas of femininity or

masculinity, others told narratives of gender fluidity that is apolitical and more pragmatic, and still others try to challenge normative images of a feminine body, but fail.

Although past research overwhelmingly suggests that embodying masculinity is the most significant way for women to disrupt normative ideas of womanhood (Halberstam 2002, Moore 2006), I heard stories of dress, hair, and makeup that suggested more than passive acceptance of gender norms. Like Joan above, several women pointed to a hyper-exaggerated or even satirized version of femininity. These narratives re-imagined what femininity could look like. Here is Joan's discussion of clothing as costume:

If I'm getting dressed up, I like to wear faux fur. You know, I dressed up the other day, and it was high-heeled shoes and a faux fur sweater and huge earrings and big lipstick and pink nail polish - I really like the costume of getting dressed up. It feels very playful for me, skirts and hiking the boobs up, and opening up the shirt, and the big earrings. But it does feel like a costume more than an identity.

Here Joan describes her desire for traditional markers of femininity, but she makes clear that the goal of this aesthetic for her is not about reproducing traditional femininity. Joan's narrative is clearing one of "doing" rather than "being" a particular identity (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Instead, Joan dons these signs as part of a feminine costume that she can, and presumably does, take on and off at will. She is conscious that this is a performance of gender, not a gender identity.

Tertza is a 45-year-old white Jewish woman who lives in the suburbs of an east coast city. She and her partner moved out of the city when their 2-year-old son was born. Her curly dark hair is cut shoulder length and her clothes are relaxed, sweatpants and a loose t-shirt, allowing her to move freely as she cares for her toddler during our

interview. A psychotherapist, Tertza has a flexible schedule that allows her to spend time at home with her son. Today, Tertza is tall and heavy, with curvy breasts and hips, but she describes a time when she was thinner, “In my late teens and early twenties, I was very mainstream attractive. I was think, tall, long hair. I did make up, I dressed seductively, and was really desirous of sexual attention from men.” Tertza connects this presentation with her first few relationships with women but now, twenty years later, she feels as though she embodies a queer aesthetic. “Queer” for Tertza is a “way to do alternative. I like something about being alternative.” She specifically goes out of her way to challenge the normative: “If I’m going to be a fancy place, if I’ve got to be dressed up. Or if I’m going to be with heterosexuals mainly, like synagogue or at his daycare. I want to wear something that is totally femmed up and showing my tattoo.” This is reminiscent of Joan’s playfulness with traditional markers of femininity, although for Tertza, the pleasure seems to be particularly acute when she can use her body to create a visible difference between herself and other straight women.

Tertza recognized the playful nature of femininity not only in herself, but also in her partner. Here she describes her partner Sally’s vacation costume:

She, at home, wears sweats all of the time. You know, I wear more random clothes, but [the difference between us is] more [visible] when we’re leaving the house together. I’ll be more likely to wear jewelry - more jewelry than her, bigger jewelry, more likely to wear makeup. I mean *only*. I mean, she would definitely never wear makeup, except for on vacation. She does like a little lip gloss. Very interesting. We have very interesting vacation dynamics. She does get a little girly when she puts on her sarong and her bathing suit, and it just changes everything. She makes a very pretty girl. I don’t want to have sex with her then, but she makes a very pretty girl.

Tertza clearly views this as a change from her appearance at other times, but she also

notes that this more feminine costume is not what attracts her to Sally, and when Sally plays with femininity while on vacation, Tertza does not desire her in the same way. This highlights the interconnection between gender performance, sexuality, and desire. In this example, vacation seems to be a specific bounded time in which gender maps onto sexuality differently than in their everyday lives.

Sex and desire were at the fore of Tertza's gender politics. "One of two things happens to lesbians. We either get seen as two best friends or two good moms. Either way we get desexualized." As a result of the perceived desexualization of lesbian couples, she felt strongly about not only performing femininity but also performing sexual desire when out with her partner.

Getting femmed up and dressed up is about sexualizing us...When we're around heterosexuals, women are always crushing on my girlfriend, because she's like a man but not a man, and they love that. And I love that. I love that it messes with them because I want them thinking critically about [their heterosexuality].

In one of the earliest empirical research projects on lesbian identity and bodies, Kennedy and Davis (1993) suggested that the bodily manifestations of lesbian identity were fundamentally shaped by the gay and lesbian culture that resided in these communities. More specifically, they argue that while lesbians share the same sex category (female), the community they researched embodied two distinct gender identities: butch and femme. Their work was critical in understanding the role that butch-femme gender presentations play in the enactment and experience of desire. Kennedy and Davis found that lesbian women used embodied gender markers to find sexual partners and engage in rich and fulfilling sexual lives. Tertza's comments above suggest that part of her sexual desire for her partner is based on Sally's embodiment of traditional masculinity and when

she plays with lip gloss and feminine bathing suits on vacation, Tertza is less attracted to her. At the same time, she gets pleasure from the moments when her gender-desire performance with Sally forces others to rethink the intersections of gender and desire and the multiple possibilities created within. One way to think about this relationship between lesbians and desire is to recognize that gender and desire are always linked through the process of embodied cartography. If you have a play narrative of a gendered self, you can be explicit about the ways playing with gender is sexually appealing to you and the ways/moments it's not, which is what Tertza is doing here. Conversely, if you have an essentialist narrative, that becomes harder. If clothing is most often a reflection of an internal self, then to not like the way your partner is doing gender at that moment is to potentially not like something about their actual self. That becomes a much riskier proposition. Tertza isn't risking anything here. She recognizes that sexuality and gender are performance so she can enjoy the performance without desiring it.

Tertza also believes in the liberatory potential of makeup, particularly for lesbian women. Here she presents her theory of the differences between lesbian and straight women's use of makeup:

So, the difference for me between the way that most heterosexual women wear makeup and the way queers wear makeup is that heterosexual people are operating on the deficit model, which is that their face isn't good, and they have to fix it and put their face on, and they wear lots of foundation, because they are covering up things and trying to adjust things. Whereas to me, queer people put on eyeliner and lip stuff, and it's decoration. It's adding something. We don't necessarily know every technique for how to make your eyes do this or that, but instead, "It was fun! Look at that pretty color." And if I weren't a clinician I'd have more piercings, because that's also a way to say that pretty doesn't have to look gentle, that it can be kind of fun and funky.

For Tertza, makeup, like hyper feminine clothing for Joan, is decoration. She is not interested in makeup as a path to normative femininity. Instead, Tertza's comparison between lesbian and straight women suggests that she sees lesbian and queer women as uniquely positioned to challenge and re-imagine ideas of femininity, even if her grouping of "most heterosexual women" is a false one

Kathy Peiss (1999) argued that makeup in the U.S. has always occupied a contested and conflicted place for women. While makeup companies in the postindustrial age are clearly selling a limited version of beauty, women have historically always used makeup in transgressive ways. Peiss argued that women have taken up beauty culture as a way to exercise "their right to self-definition" (p. 269). Women were not mere dupes of the patriarchal makeup industry but instead cosmetics were also a source of pleasure for women. Not only did beauty regimens tie women to other women; they became a time when women could work on only themselves, moments of "relaxation and respite." While I think it is important to underscore the ways that these pleasures are *always* mediated by the cultural demands on women's bodies and the increasingly required nature of cosmetic use as a prerequisite for full social participation, I think that the kind of makeup use that Tertza describes is more than simply a passive acceptance of beauty culture. It suggests a reimaging of the role that this traditionally feminine bodily practice can take.

While Joan and Tertza challenge femininity through fun and playfulness, Dani, a 45-year-old white woman, is interested in highlighting the failure of traditional femininity by creating contrast between social expectations of masculinity and femininity. She tells a narrative about intentionally disrupting ideas of appropriate womanhood. Dani wears

women's clothing, specifically tighter fitting clothing, to mark her as female in spite of her muscular body, short hair, and her work with cars. Although she was one of the oldest women I interviewed, Dani looked young. At almost exactly 5 feet, she is short and physically fit. While she wore simple jeans and a t-shirt during our interview, both showed her thin, muscular frame. Her blond hair hides the grey well and is cut very short and styled into youthful tousled pieces on the top. Despite interviewing her in October, she appeared tan, contributing to her overall younger appearance.

I'm comfortable with who I am and how I look. When I dress I'm not wearing dresses, but a couple years ago I started buying "girl clothes" again, as I called them. I went through a phase where I wore baggy jeans and t-shirts, but now I want people to know that there's a female body in here and that's what I am. When I ride my Harley, I'll wear my, as I call them my "girl jeans" and my jacket's fitted, so it's very evident that I'm either a very small man or I'm a woman on the bike. And I just started kind of liking that, that people notice that "Wow, that's a woman riding that". Maybe that was part of it too, in the things that I do that are in a very masculine world, because of the car thing and because not a lot of women ride motorcycles, I really wanted to be noticed that this is a woman doing this. So that has become important to me in the last couple of years.

In fact, Dani's narrative suggests that her clothes are part of an intentional challenge to normative ideas about gender. For Dani, her body becomes a moment of social transgression; on her body, as well as through her work and leisure, she is able to reframe social expectations about what women should be doing.

The recognition that gendered clothing and accessories are costumes is central to the recognition that gender is performed, not a fixed or essential part of the self. Queer and feminist theorists argue that it is through this recognition that emancipation from the chains of gender can be imagined. Whether it's Joan and Tertza's playful relationship to the costume of clothing and makeup or Dani's purposeful disruption of gendered

expectations through clothing, these women are describing a visible and exaggerated femininity that is more than simply internalizing traditional feminine beauty mandates. Instead they use traditional femininity to challenge its cultural mandates that subordinate women and the feminine.

Exaggerated femininity is particularly significant for lesbian women because this population specifically has been associated with corporeal masculinity and held up by theorists as examples of gender transgressors (see Halberstam 2002; Moore 2006). But I found that exaggerated femininity, like that embodied by Joan, was used just as often by my respondents and this gets overlooked as an important site of resistance by researchers (for notable exceptions, see Nestle 1992, Rose and Camilleri 2002; Coyote and Sharman, 2011). The irony here is that women who embody femininity are often invisible as lesbians both within and outside lesbian communities. For example, Kelly described her feelings of exclusion from lesbian communities:

It's interesting for me because I look pretty conventionally heterosexual female, feminine. I have long hair and so that means people assume that I'm heterosexual and that I can pass pretty easily. But I'm disappointed in that because I'd like to be able to go out and be recognized as a part of this community more easily.

Kelly highlights the stronghold that heteronormative expectations have and the ways they can play out on the bodies of both lesbians and heterosexual women. It is for this reason that the work of exaggerated femininity done by Joan, Tertza, and Dani is so crucial. By queering femininity (Rose and Camilleri 2002) and making visible the ways that normative femininity is just as “unnatural” as any other gender performance, they expand the corporal possibilities available to all women.

Wearing cargo pants and a thermal shirt topped with a vintage print t-shirt, Sage

has a funky utilitarian appearance. Preferring to buy her clothes at the thrift store because it is organized by color instead of style, Sage embodies a relaxed androgyny. In contrast to the parodied exaggeration of femininity worn by Joan and Tertza, Sage's aesthetic seems to borrow from both masculinity and femininity. She describes androgyny not as something in between masculine and feminine, but instead as a corporeal presentation that specifically incorporates both masculine and feminine elements and challenges expectations:

I'm at my best when I make the person do the double-take. I had a buzz cut one time, and I was with a girl who had a buzz cut, too, and we were walking out of some restaurant randomly in the middle of - middle USA on a road trip. We were just walking out of the bathroom, and this old dude's coming up the sidewalk. He looks at us. He looks at the sign on the door, and he walks into the women's room. Clearly he trusted what he saw in us more than the sign on the door, and my friend and I, we're like - our immediate instant reaction was like, "Score!"

It should be noted that this narrative sits in sharp contrast to the discussion of mistaken gender identity in the bathroom from the previous chapter. The women in that chapter were horrified and embarrassed when their bodies were seen as misaligned with the gender of the bathroom. Sage revels in this ability to mark her body in ways that disrupt simple formulations of gender. Sage is less concerned with her ability to embody femininity and instead works to disrupt it.

Like Joan above, Sage is acutely aware of gender as a performance in which she is the primary participant. During our discussion of language, Sage discusses her preference for "queer" as it captures both her desire for play and the refusal to separate gender into two binary categories:

AR: Let's talk for a minute about language. If you had to self-identify, what language is most comfortable for you?

SAGE: I would use queer.

AR: And why is that?

SAGE: For me it's more playful. It's more honest about the willing deviance, as opposed to some sense of essential something. It seems more uniting of men and women and less separating of them, in terms of "There's these gay men, and there's these lesbians."

Forcing a discursive realignment of sexuality to include consideration of both lesbians and gay men, queer for Sage is about both gender and sexuality. Furthermore, Sage's androgyny is a corporeal performance that involves challenging masculinity as much as it involves challenging femininity. This becomes clear in her discussion of her hair.

Many women I interviewed spoke to the importance of hair for their gender and sexual identities. Sage tells the following story about the time she went from long, traditionally feminine hair to a short style modeled after the glam rock scene of the late 1970s:

I had gotten to this hairstyle place in this place in my little town. I had brought in the *In Touch* cover, and I was like, "This! Do this!" I had such a clear idea, and this woman was like, "Oh honey! I can't cut your hair like that. I'd lose my job." I said, "No, it's okay. I want it like that," and she's like, "No. Honey, I'll give you a trim. I can't cut your hair like that." I was so mad. Of course I was 13, you know, I couldn't really advocate for myself. I should have just walked out and gone to the barber. I don't know what I should have done. I went home and cried to my dad, and he pulled me out on the front porch and got the clippers out and cut my hair. He's like, "I'll cut your hair. I can do this."

Like Kris, Sage also experienced overt policing around her body and the choices she was making around how she would present her body to the world. Significantly, although the narratives both share the apparent disapproval from others to which Kris and Sage were forced to respond, Sage frames her experience very differently than Kris. Sage's story becomes one of empowerment and bonding with her father, the parent with whom she primarily resided during her childhood. And unlike Kris, Sage does not express the same

fear of overly embodying masculinity in particular social situations. For example, “I remember my job interview [for the assistant professor job she currently holds]. I went to a thrift store and found an old man green tweed suit that was perfect, and I put glasses on, fake glasses, because I was performing smart”. It appears that Sage left the fraught negotiations of embodied masculinity back with her 13-year-old self as she now describes an intentional play with gender that delights her.

Cathleen, a 33-year-old white woman, also envisions a flexible and fluid embodiment of gender, but she is not as explicitly politicizing gender as Dylan, Sage, Tertza, and Joan do. At 5 feet 8 inches, Cathleen is tall and of average weight. Although she described weighing more in the past, when I met her, she was not overweight and appeared fit but not necessarily muscular. The clothes she wore during our interview were casual but formfitting. Her jeans were clearly women’s and light-washed denim, fitted in the hips, and flared out over her brown low-heeled boots. Her top was a cotton knit long-sleeved shirt in a shade of blue slightly darker than her jeans. She wore her blonde hair in a layered bob that was longer than her chin but didn’t quite reach her shoulders. When asked to describe her body, she contrasts her current figure with her body of several years ago:

Yeah, I had really short hair. I also put on weight, I got a desk job and I was chubbier and shopped in the men’s department, wore men’s pants, wore men’s shirts. I really liked to wear short-sleeved collared shirts and boots.

The role of weight in shifting clothing choices was a common theme among my respondents. Several other respondents echoed this statement connecting weight gain with a shift to men’s clothing. Given the cultural significance of weight for women

(Bordo 1993), a relationship between weight and gender enactment is not surprising. Although there is some debate about the extent to which lesbian women internalize the socio-cultural mandates of thinness (Atkins 1998, Myers et al 1999), the narratives I heard suggest that many do, to varying degrees and ends. Cathleen makes clear that while she likes clothing from the men's department, now that she's thinner she also incorporates more traditionally feminine clothing into her wardrobe. This decision appears neither particularly fraught nor explicitly political. Instead, Cathleen seems to recognize the ways that her clothing constructs gendered presentations that may not correlate to an internal self.

Furthermore, Cathleen's embodiment of a masculine aesthetic connected her back to her childhood, a time when perhaps she felt greater freedom to move between masculinity and femininity.

There is something different about the way I felt [when I wore men's clothing] which was reflected in the way I dressed and the way I looked. I remember the energy of it; it is hard to put it into words. I really did feel connected to the same sort of phenomenon that I experienced when I was a kid.

While this gender fluidity might have begun in childhood, she still experiences it today. "There are days now that I feel butchier or less butchy. Now it is like day-to-day I will wear a dress if I want, or pants." A sense of negotiating gendered practice daily or situationally was a key feature of Cathleen's narrative. For Cathleen, the performance created the identity (Butler 1990) and she was aware of that performance.

As Sage, Tertza, and Joan illustrate, some lesbian women used their marginal social locations as a space from which they could call attention to the constructed nature of gender. Cathleen also recognizes gender as constructed and her narrative reflects that.

But not all women who tried to challenge and resist corporeal gender expectations were successful. In the next chapter, we will look at narratives of women who struggled to be legible as gender satirists.

CHAPTER 5

“NO! YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO LOOK LIKE A GIRL. I DON’T LIKE YOUR MOUSTACHE.”: PLAY IN CONFLICT

Sierra and I share her bed during our interview. The entire top floor of her three-story row home, her master suite is spacious and open and a quiet refuge from our children playing loudly downstairs. Recently remodeled, the centerpiece of the room is a large whirlpool tub elevated and surrounded by glass tiles. With a view of her neighborhood outside the picture windows behind the head of the bed, Sierra sits cross-legged surrounded by white pillows and a white down comforter and I perch on the side of the bed. A white woman in her early 40s, Sierra is thin and fit. Her tanned arms are muscular and fill out the short, capped sleeves of her fitted pink polo shirt. Like her shirt, her jeans are also fitted and crisp, and her bare feet reveal pink polished toes. Despite the location, Sierra is professional and confident. With her master’s degree in psychology, she works as a consultant at a private firm that provides behavioral health services and treatment.

Throughout our interview, Sierra describes the ways her clothing choices (she primarily wears skirts at work), and the bodywork she does in the gym (she prefers to stay fit but not overly muscular) serve to create a feminine gender presentation that she likes. Then about half way through our long interview, we begin to discuss her hair. “I was blessed with a good hair gene,” she tells me. “I have a ton of thick hair on my head that grows quickly. I like my hair. It’s wavy and straight. It’s both.” Reaching her shoulders, her hair is dark brown and thick. She frequently runs her fingers through her hair as she talks. Then her voice lowers, and almost as if she’s confession to me, she

leans in and asks if I want to know something interesting about her.

I shave my legs. I would never dream of letting the hair on my legs grow out. Never. But I think I have a little bit of a fetish with underarms... When my hair grows in under my armpits, it doesn't look like a mess. I think it's really sexy, when my armpit hair grows in. I just think it looks cool.

Sierra's confession explicitly challenges gendered expectations. While her body generally conforms to normative femininity, she not only doesn't engage in the practice of armpit hair removal, but she takes great pleasure in it. Furthermore, she admits to finding this corporeal practice sexy. Like the many play narratives we saw in the previous chapter, Sierra's embodied gender performance is disrupting gendered expectations in ways that are pleasurable and purposeful. However, she is quick to reframe this gender play:

Whenever people, like in my family, will say, "I cannot believe you don't shave under your arms," I will say, "Neither did Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy. She did not shave under her arms." It's a very European thing to do.

While Sierra's narrative echoes the explicit challenging of gender norms, at the same time she performs a strategic discursive maneuver that repositions herself firmly back within hegemonic femininity. By not shaving her underarm hair, Sierra is clearly working to redefine femininity and the outward markers of it. However, she follows up this admission pointing to a famous traditionally feminine woman who also left her underarms unshaven. She further re-codes it as a European, and therefore sophisticated, practice. Sierra has clearly worked to counteract this norm-breaking with more traditional femininity by pointing out these connections. While she is intentionally challenging gender ideals, this is not the same as the kind of gender play the other women

are describing. While not shaving her armpits could be a transgressive act of resistance against normative ideas of beauty and feminine attractiveness, Sierra reframes it for me to align with female bodies that fit squarely within social expectations.

Unlike Sierra, Dylan's narratives suggest she has no interest in conforming to social expectations, particularly those around gender and sexuality. In fact, Dylan was the only respondent in my project to immediately challenge the very idea of a coming out narrative:

I don't think that I necessarily have one specific story and I don't necessarily believe in a coming out story. I think there is a personal experience that I have but I think that more broadly I experience that daily. It's not like I had one specific light bulb moment. It wasn't "Oh, this is how I've been feeling my whole life," which I think is the narrative we often hear.

However, although she resisted the dominant coming out narrative whereby coming out is the moment a non-straight individual recognizes the internal self or feelings that have always existed, she still told me a story of her queer identity. For Dylan, she "came into a queer identity over a course of a number of years," and she connects it to her discovery of feminist spaces in college. "I was pretty content and then I took a Women's Studies class on a whim and it was unlike anything I had ever experienced. My voice mattered in the classroom. People were held accountable for fucked up shit they said." Dylan became increasingly involved in gender studies and the campus women's center, and she points to this involvement as the vehicle through which she came to be more critical of feminine beauty norms. "As a person who is bigger than many people, a person who has always had a bigger chest, and bigger thighs, and a bigger ass, I've always felt outside of beauty expectations and beauty norms." Dylan is probably slightly shorter than average

for an American woman at about 5 feet 2 inches tall. Her hair is cropped asymmetrically short and dyed platinum blonde. Her tight jeans, baggy shirt, and Converse sneakers all contribute to a young and alternative aesthetic, topped off by bright white plastic-framed oversized glasses.

It was through the discovery of women who did not shave their legs, specifically feminist women whose values she shared, that Dylan started to actively question feminine beauty discourses that have shaped women's bodies.

It was just a really transformative experience that I was like, "Alright, I'm not going to shave. I'm done. I'm not." And then it became this kind of thing that I was like, "Oh my God! That person doesn't shave either, and that professor doesn't shave either. Maybe I should wear a skirt to class tomorrow so that professor knows that I don't shave." And it became this thing that I was kind of like, "This is such a cool in-crowd. Look at all of these awesome people that don't shave." I feel like it was this almost secret feminist high-five that you were kind of like, "Oh hey!" and then you could be like, "That person's on board." And it was super cheesy, but it felt like something that was at the time really cool, and then I didn't think twice.

Dylan's narrative of gender play pointed to the way that bodies are used as a significant marker for locating community. She was able to identify others as feminists by noticing the hair on their legs and wanted others to similarly notice her. While she works to locate similarly minded individuals, Dylan is invested in her outsider identity. In her narrative, Dylan is explicit about her desire to "fuck everything" that mandates what an attractive body looks like or the kinds of bodies to which she should be attracted.

Dylan then goes on to link the relationship between this embodied political practice and sexual desire.

Now I've actually found that I prefer partners who don't shave either. It feels like when you connect with body hair in that way, it just seems like you're fucking everything that tells you how to be. These are two really

hot people, and they are having hot sex, and they are hairy, and that's really rad!

Dylan is invested in reimagining what bodies can and should look like. It is specifically through her gender play that Dylan is calling for a redefinition of what kinds of female bodies can be seen as sexually desirable. In addition, she makes visible the ways that meaning-making activities of sexuality and gender are tied together and mutually constitutive.

However, Dylan's narratives also challenged any fixed, monolithic connections between sexuality and gender.

The idea that I'm going to be a lesbian forever is like the idea that I'm going to be a woman forever. I'm fine in my cis-gendered body right now, but I feel like that's pretty temporary. I don't want to be tied into these really gendered expectations, and I feel like lesbian and gay identities still hold firm those gendered expectations.

She felt that a queer identity, rather than a lesbian or gay identity, gave the opportunity for her sexual desires and gender presentation to align in unexpected and non-normative ways. Women with essentialist narratives about their gendered presentations tended to talk about their corporeal practices as reflective of an internal self or simply as natural. Dylan also connected her appearance work with gender, but her narrative differed from the essentialist narratives in a key way. For Dylan, the body was a malleable canvas on which she was able to mark important identity categories.

I was like, "Maggie, I need to make a hair appointment. I'm getting my hair cut off. I need a change." I convinced myself that I needed a life change, but what I really needed was this really identifiable, in my mind, marker that I was a queer person. Short hair was going to do it, apparently, so I cut it all off.

Significantly, a gendered marker, in this case short hair, becomes a way to signify a

particular sexual identity, a queer identity. However, Dylan articulates a key problem with the use of corporeal signs to signify identity; signs can have multiple and varied meanings that are historically and culturally specific. They rely on the decoder to share the cultural knowledge in order to understand the intended meaning. Dylan finds that her short hair was not always read as a queer identity that resisted any fixed alignment between gender and sexuality. Instead she found that her hair was read as a marker of a specific kind of desire.

I think that people also read into my hair as “she wants a femme to date.” So some people see my short hair and were like, “Oh, have you seen that hot sexy femme?” I mean I did. Sure, she’s cool, they’re cool. I’m just not too into it. I’m not into this dynamic.

While a key feature of the gender play narrative is the pleasure individuals find in challenging normative gender expectations, Dylan experiences frustration that her embodied disruptions are not read as disruptive within lesbian spaces; they are just read as butch.

As I will argue more fully in the final chapter, the availability of play as a narrative option to describe corporeal gender experiences appeared to be limited to white women. The women of color I interviewed did not draw on ideas of gender flexibility or gender play in the same ways that white women did. One notable exception came from Nneka, a 29-year-old black woman. Here she describes intentionally using her body to challenge ideas of gender and femininity:

I have a lot of facial hair but I have long hair, so that kind of messes people’s gender ideologies up already, so I feel like that’s a queer part of me, like refusing to wax my moustache or there was a time when I let my beard grow out really, really long. So I would end up getting in a lot of conflicts with the women I would date because I was the more feminine and they were the more masculine quote-unquote. And they did not like

my facial hair and I was like ‘but we are supposed to be queer people!’
And they were like ‘no, you are supposed to look like a girl! I don’t like
your moustache.’

Nneka is neither drawing on traditional “butch” lesbian markers or attempting to re-appropriate feminine markers, instead she actively tries to “mess people’s gender ideologies up” by adopting some aspects of traditional femininity (“long hair”) while visibly rejecting others. Significantly, Nneka was not able to transgress these boundaries of appropriately gendered bodies without repercussions. Ultimately, her body became unaccountable, to use West and Zimmerman’s language. The way Nneka “did gender” did not align with expectations that made her body readable, or desired, by others. Her efforts to reimagine what a feminine body could look like were met with resistance by potential romantic and sexual partners.

Nneka was the only black woman I interviewed who shared a narrative describing explicit attempts to play with ideas of femininity. There is an undercurrent of queer ideology that seems to be framing the ways lesbian women, particularly white lesbians, talk about gender. Queer theory has been rising in academic and social popularity since the mid 1990s as a way to challenge the fixed identity politics of the 1960s and 70s. Posited as the ultimate liberation from the confines of fixed gender and sexual (and presumably other) identities, queer theory has made significant contributions to sex/gender studies and to lived experiences of the sex-gender system. That said, the narratives I heard, and failed to hear, suggest that not all people are equally able to benefit from this theory. Furthermore, the fracture seems to be along racial lines. If emancipatory projects are systematically unavailable to certain groups, we must call into

question their ability to truly liberate. The next chapter will tease out the possible reasons for and potential implications of this racial divide in available narratives.

The masculinized female body seems to have been the genesis of empirical inquiry into lesbian bodies. Kennedy and Davis argue that while “femme” gender identity was less concerned with visible difference from straight femininity, the “butch” as visibly different, marked as other, was responsible for the public work of defining lesbian identity within the context of dominant straight culture (p. 374). Not only does the masculine lesbian represent the public, visible lesbian subject, but it also does important gender work. Lesbian bodies complicate traditional ideas of gender in several key ways. Some theorists argue that “butch” and “femme” represent the two distinct genders adopted by lesbians (Case 1993; Munt 2001). As women, lesbians fall into a single sex category, but within that category there are at least two distinct gender possibilities—*butch* and *femme*. Lesbian feminists of the 1970s actively resisted *butch/femme* roles and appearance in favor of more androgynous bodies, arguing that *butch/femme* reproduced the inequalities inherent in heterosexual relationships (Stein 1996). More recent scholarship suggests that while *butch* and *femme* gender presentations are still meaningful for lesbians today, they have lost their monopoly on lesbian gender identity. With the influence of the lesbian feminist movement (Stein 1996), queer theory, and increased lesbian representation (Griggers 1992), an almost limitless range of possibilities exists for lesbian gender expression.

However, in one of the few empirical works on black lesbian bodies, Mignon Moore (2006) suggests that the black lesbian communities in New York City now rely on three distinct gender expressions: *femme*, *gender-blender*, and *transgressive*. Moore

identifies each of these gender expressions using a scale of one to ten, with one representing the most feminine appearance and ten the most masculine appearance. Key markers of appearance included clothing, jewelry, hairstyle and cut, and physical movements of the body. The gender-blender scored between four and six on the gender scale, indicating that she “blended” elements from both traditional masculinity and femininity. The transgressive gender presentation scored the highest on the gender scale and adopted many traditionally masculine markers, such as men’s clothing and cornrows or short hair.

Unfortunately, Moore repeats a common pattern in this literature. While the femme was explained away as simply expressing traditional femininity, the gender-blender and transgressive were of key importance for Moore. Because they displace hegemonic masculinity by re-grafting it onto the female body, they challenge the idea that men own masculinity. Moore’s discussion of the decoupling of masculinity from men suggests the second key way that lesbian gender expression has challenged traditional theories of gender. The butch body, or what Judith Halberstam calls “female masculinity,” has complicated the relationship between masculinity and male bodies. Masculinity is now no longer the sole domain of men. By decoupling masculinity from men, women performing masculinity suggest that masculinity (and femininity) is just that—a performance (Halberstam 2002; Moore 2006). While this is a key and important insight, these authors largely fail to recognize their own work in reproducing gender hierarchy. By suggesting that masculinity is the only avenue for social transgression of gender, the feminine lesbian body becomes simply a reproduction of traditional feminine oppression. The women discussed in this chapter offer a challenge to these theories that

only masculinity can do important socio-cultural work. Explicitly playing with gender and gendered corporeal expectations can be a powerful way to subvert normative mandates that constrain all bodies. However, as Sierra, Dylan, and Nneka make clear, those attempts at subversion are not always successful. Given the racial differences in gender narratives, it is imperative to interrogate both why those divisions between who adopts an essentialist narrative and who adopts a play narrative exist and the consequences of those differences.

CHAPTER 6
PRIVILEGE, CONSTRAINT, AND BODIES:
RACIALIZED NEGOTIATIONS IN GENDER

We tell the stories of who we are, who we have been, who we want to be, and who we are becoming, using narratives. We explain ourselves to others with narratives. It is in fact through these stories that we construct the self (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). While all identities are constructed through narrative, sexuality is particularly explicit in this process. We even have a name for it: the coming out story. I started each of my interviews by asking my respondents to tell me their coming out story. Some women focused on their self-realization that they did not identify as straight, and others focused on when they told family members, and still others told me about their first romantic or sexual experience with another woman. But they all had a narrative. Using the cultural trope of “the coming out story,” I am going to summarize the key findings of the *embodied cartography* approach. Then I will discuss the racial differences in the essentialist and play narratives and why those differences are significant. Finally, I will consider the future of this research, including identifying gaps in the present study and possible next steps.

Each coming out story was slightly different but was still immediately recognizable. Coming out is perhaps most commonly thought of as a linear developmental process through which individuals come to recognize and accept their sexual difference (Cass 1979). While many sociologists would take issue with this model, the mandate to create a cohesive coming out identity narrative appears pervasive but also heterogeneous (Stein 2006:27). All the women in my study were readily able to

access this narrative when I asked. Furthermore, these narratives illustrate the unique experience that each participant had with embodied cartography. The coming out story was a way to map out a sexual identity pathway that often invoked gendered bodies.

Several women pointed to gendered enactments in childhood to construct a current sexual self. Consider Cathleen's narrative:

So I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia and my family was Evangelical fundamentalist Christians. When I was eight, I had a crew cut and would only wear camouflage. You know, whether or not my strange idiosyncrasies foretold my future is sort of a matter of contention in my family. I feel like, hello, your eight-year-old daughter had a crew cut and wouldn't wear pink and wanted to be a boy. Like, I wanted to be a boy at that point. And my mom would just say, 'I thought you were so cute.'

Dani made a similar linguistic move to connect a tomboy identity as a child to an adult lesbian identity:

Um, I don't remember it being a big 'ah ha'. I just remember thinking, when I was younger, I grew up with my brother and my two next-door neighbors were boys. So the 4 of us did everything together. And all I knew was that I enjoyed doing all the stuff that they did, I didn't want to do the things that girls were supposed to, like sit and read Tiger Beat or something. I wasn't really interested in that. I wanted to be out riding my bike. And my mom was actually pretty good with that. She let me do that for a while and then said, 'well, you know girls shouldn't really do that rough and tumble stuff.' So then we just went and played in somebody else's yard so she couldn't see it.

Both Cathleen and Dani use narratives of gender to create a cohesive narrative about sexual identity as compelled by the coming out story trope. As with the narratives above, Jenna's story is also about not meeting others' gender expectations. However, with long blond hair, visible make up, and women's clothing, Jenna performs normative femininity in a way that explicitly marks her as a feminine woman. Jenna felt excluded from lesbian

communities during the coming out process, a phenomenon she connects to her feminine appearance and rejection of the activities that were used to indicate gay identity:

I started having crushes on girls when I was about 8...And when I went to college, I went to a super liberal college and I loved it, but I started dating men. I felt like I wasn't gay enough there. It was either you play rugby or softball and you're an uber-dyke or you're not. So I was really very contained, I didn't really like to do anything. I really I wanted to make out with women, I wanted to go do things, but I just didn't feel comfortable, like I just wasn't gay enough.

Like Jenna, Sage's narrative maps gender onto sexuality. She reflects back on her corporeal role models and points to the ways other bodies became the inspiration for how should could re-imagine her own:

I have a very clear memory of 7th grade, a bunch of kids in the cafeteria being like, 'Did you hear some disease is killing all of the fags? Isn't that awesome?' and me being like 'Yeah, it's awesome.' Then I was in this conflicted space of wanting both to wear my dad's ties with his blazers and then to be like Duran Duran. I didn't want to be like Siouxsie. I wanted to be like Duran Duran! Those gender-bendy boys were my role models. And Annie Lennox. I had a total obsession with Annie Lennox at that age.

Coming out stories are one way that lesbians, and all non-straight people, both construct their sexual identities and explain those identities to others. And as seen above, these narratives often used gender to explain sexuality. Gender and sexuality become mutually constructed through narrative. The discursive component of sexual identity was most notably outlined by Michel Foucault (1978) and later revised by Judith Butler (1990, 1993). In his foundational text *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) traces the shifting discourses on sex and sexuality over time, tying them to specific institutions. The meanings of sex and sexuality are not accidental but instead constructed through discourse that is created and wielded by various institutional powers. However, while it

may be tempting to theorize about discourse in terms of dominant and marginalized discourses, Foucault is concerned with the “multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (1978:100). As is to be expected, the relations between discourse and power are complex and ever changing. “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (1978:101). Within discourse are both the mechanisms of power *and* the seeds of resistance to that power. For example, Foucault discusses the discourses surrounding homosexuality. The power of control over homosexuality and other queer sexualities in the psychiatric, literary, and legal discourses of the nineteenth century is clear. However, the presence of these discourses also gave rise to alternative discourses of resistance. Using the very categories and languages of the discourses of oppression, homosexuality began to write a “counter-discourse” of legitimacy.

Focused more explicitly on gender and sex (i.e. male/female) than Foucault, Butler (1990, 1993) argues that neither are either biological nor even social givens, but instead the meanings assigned to male and female bodies are enacted by the subjects themselves in repetitive activities and performances of the self. However, these performances are not haphazard or at the complete discretion of the performer. Instead they are bound and limited by discourse. The “historicity of norms . . . constitute the power of discourse to enact what it names” (1993:187). Butler also theorizes that these very identity performances then re-construct the systems that shape them (1990). Performance and discursive social systems create a circular process by which performances of identity are inscribed by the sex-gender system and the system of heteronormativity, while at the same time, each performance serves to re-make and

reinforce those same systems. Furthermore, because these systems require constant iteration to be maintained, there is always the possibility of disrupting them by performing non-normatively (Butler 1990).

But the coming out stories above have more than just the narrative production of self in common. They are not just narratives about identity but also narratives about bodies—both their own bodies and those of others. Bodies are the canvas on which, and the tools with which, we “do” self. Any analysis of embodied identities such as sexuality, gender, race, and ability should also include an analysis of how bodies are implicated in those narratives. Dani and Jenna’s coming out stories describe the ways they did or didn’t use their bodies to perform activities that would suggest a lesbian sexuality. Cathleen and Sage describe embodied aesthetic practices that they marked as part of their sexual plot. The body is an important part of the identities stories we tell. Furthermore, the coming out stories of these five women make visible some of the ways that gender is used and constructed as they are narrating a sexual identity location. Each of these narratives is not just about how they came to think of themselves as lesbians but they are also about the role of gender in their sexual identity. Gender and sexuality are always co-constructed. Not stories of gender or sexuality alone, they each suggest ways that gender and sexuality are always mapped onto one another. Embodied cartography as a theoretical approach centers the body and works to understand the ways that multiple and fragmented identities are put together, taken apart, and reassembled in narrative attempts to create the self. However, this identity work is always performed within a matrix of overlapping systems of meaning and understanding that differently located individuals.

Even though essentialist narratives were more common than play narratives, there were clear racial differences in who used which narrative model as they worked to construct a cohesive sense of self. In general, black women told narratives of fixed, essential gender expression, while white women were more likely to have narratives of fluidity or play. In fact, Nneka was the only black women in my sample to use a narrative of gender play. While my small sample does not allow me to make definitive statements about why this is the case, the depth of my data and the amount of time spent talking to these women does allow me to make some descriptive observations that might help us to understand these racial differences.

Black lesbians were more likely to talk about themselves as more completely and essentially either masculine or feminine presenting. Explanations for gender presentations were often punctuated with phrases like “that’s just who I am,” or “it just feels more comfortable.” Furthermore, not only did their narratives of gender and sexuality indicate less conflict and struggle, but the moments when they did articulate shifts or moves away from men’s clothing or toward shorter or longer hair, these shifts were described as more situational. The shifting embodiments that black women described were more rooted in specific situations and not a sense of intentional playfulness or desire for fluidity. Instead it appeared to be more strategic and contextual. For example, Paige, who we met in chapter 2, described wearing women’s jeans instead of her usual men’s jeans out of respect for her family. This discussion not only pointed to the strategic ways that some women employed markers of traditional femininity but also the situational nature of her transition. For Paige, wearing women’s clothing was not about a fluid sense of sexuality or gender but instead a moment of silent negotiation with

her family. In contrast, white women seemed much more able to feel and enact a sense of playfulness around ideas of gender presentation. White women, like Joan, who we met in chapter 4, were not only playing with gender but also seemed to connect their gender presentations to specific the political goal of disrupting normative expectations of sexuality and gender. Only one of the twenty black women in my project actively invoked a narrative of gender play, and as discussed in chapter 5, Nneka struggled to navigate romantic partnerships when she refused to conform to normative ideals of femininity.

While I can't make any definitive statement about why this apparent difference between white and black lesbians exists, I can make some general observations. Given the systems of white privilege that exist, the ability to "play" with gender might be one such privilege. To play with gender as Joan and Dani describe involved sacrificing a certain degree of gender accountability (West and Zimmerman 1987) to communities that rely on fixed and essential ideas about gender. In other words, while gender playfulness and subversion has a long history within white lesbian communities, ideas that gender is a fluid social construction is not a framework adopted by mainstream Americans. To push boundaries of gender might be an experience that white women, who already experience the benefits of racial privilege, are more able to access and practice. Bodies that are "unmarked" by racial difference (i.e. white bodies) already embody some aspects of emphasized femininity, which is constructed not only in relation to white masculinity but also in relation to black femininity (Connell 1995:75). Because white women automatically access gender legitimacy through race, they might experience greater freedom to safely re-imagine and reconstruct their gendered bodies.

This explanation becomes particularly salient when considering the ways that embodied masculinity was occasionally presented as an insulator against the ever-present threat of violence against women. Consider Vaughn discussing being mistaken for a man:

It occurs to me that I am a little bit bigger than your average woman and I have this more masculine body language and I think it helps me feel a little bit safer in situations where more slight, feminine women don't. I feel like in the dark a lot of people wouldn't know whether I was a guy or a girl, and that helps me.

In this case, her masculine presentation has actually become male privilege. But privilege is always multiply located within a complex system of identity axes. Vaughn is able to access this male privilege because she is white. None of my black respondents reported feeling safer in the dark when they were mistaken for black men. Given the cultural images constructed of black men and the social space navigated by men who are excluded from hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), I would not expect for embodied black masculinity to be perceived as a source of safety.

Another possible explanation for the racial differences in the adoption of essentialist and play narratives might be the relationship between race and queer practice. Mainstream LGBT activism has been based on the civil rights model of single-axis politics that relies on subsuming other identities for the dominant strategies and goals (Cohen 1999). This single focus has become crystallized in the past two years as same-sex marriage has become virtually the only issue that gay activism has addressed. Queer politics in theory was a great alternative to the sexual identity politics. For folks experiencing marginality from multiple axes, this shift seemed promising. Unfortunately,

queer theory and activism has not been the liberating force it promised to be for many queers of color and non-middle class queers (Cohen 1999; Ferguson 2003). Cohen's (1999) critique of the failure of queer practice offers us two important insights to the racial differences in gender and sexual narratives. First, some queer theorists and activists have called for a decentering of sexual categories, pushing a move to a more fluid understanding of sexual identity. However, they leave unspoken the class privilege that allows for such fluidity (Cohen 1999). Queer gets discursively located in opposition to heterosexual whereby all heterosexuals have power and all queers lack it. Sexuality has become the primary frame through which many queer practitioners work, at the expense of a framework that would acknowledge multiple systems of power at work together. This leaves the ways that other relations of power intersect with sexuality to created qualitatively different embodied experiences (Crenshaw 1991).

Secondly, "queer theorizing that calls for the elimination of fixed categories of sexual identity seems to ignore the ways in which some traditional identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one's survival," (Cohen 1999:450). There can be safety and security in these communities that people of color (and other folks living in the margins) might not find within queer movements. This claim seems to suggest why the black women I interviewed did not seem to adopt a queer narrative of gender play and flexibility. Furthermore, when Nneka did experiment with femininity in ways intended to disrupt its dominance, she was overwhelmingly rebuked by her black romantic and sexual partners. As a result, the narrative of gender play had less use and appeal for her, particularly because she wanted to continue to date black women and foster a strong lesbian of color community.

Patricia Hill Collins (2005) argued that class is an important axis through which black women experience sexuality, particularly sexual regulation. Images of black femininity become reified justifications for public policy decision and are used to control and regulate the bodies of black women (and black men and white women). Working-class and middle-class black women experience these images of femininity in different ways. For working-class women, the bitch and the bad black mother are the images of femininity offered. The black bitch is “aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy.” She is the descendant of the mule image of slavery and it is an image evoked to “defeminize and dehumanize.” The bad black mother is the other image of working-class black female sexuality and she can take the form of the welfare mother, the crack mother, and I would also argue, the black teen mother. These images are particularly insidious because they are used repeatedly to enact public policy that lessens the governmental responsibility to provide assistance and that attempts to reduce the fertility of black women (Collins 2005).

In contrast, middle-class black women employ a “politics of respectability” in an attempt to avoid the bitch and the bad mother images. The black lady, as exemplified by Claire Huxtable of the *Cosby Show*, is a loyal black wife and mother who, while she may work, primarily exists within the sphere of the home. This image is a reworking of the loyal Mammy, created during slavery. Alternatively, the educated black bitch has money, power, and is seen as “so cutthroat and ruthless that [she] cannot be trusted” (Collins 2005:146). These class-based distinctions are important and unfortunately a limitation of the current study. Given that all of my respondents, both white women and women of color were college educated or in the process of earning college degrees, I am

unable to speculate about how class as an intersecting identity would inform the body narratives of lesbian women. This would be important to include in future work on the body and identity.

Embodied cartography as an approach to identity centers the body in an effort to understand the ways that multiple identities are mapped and remapped onto each other. Given the centrality of desire to questions of sexuality and sexual identity, it would be important to closely examine the ways that desire is implicated in narratives of identity. Desire made several appearances as women told the stories of their bodies. Both Toni and Tertza highlighted the ways that sexual and gender identities were connected to corporeal experiences of desire. Toni describes her masculinity as an essential and fixed part of herself. In addition, she pointed to the ways that for her, masculinity was also about occupying a particular place in a sexual relationship. Toni desired a feminine woman as a partner who would not only physically contrast with her masculinity but who would also allow her to enact chivalry, such as opening doors and spooning around her in bed.

Tertza most notably implicated desire not when talking about her own body, but when talking about the body of her partner, Sally. Tertza described a desire firmly rooted in specific gender presentations. She was more attracted to Sally when she was performing a butch masculinity than when she performed femininity during their beach vacation. This narrative serves to disconnect desire from the individual and remap it onto corporeal performances of particular identities. Given the possibilities attention to embodied cartography opens up for the examination of identity work, desire seems to be

an important axis to consider. Future research on embodied identity should center and interrogate desire and attraction.

As I have outlined in the preceding chapters, sexual identities are constructed in conjunction with gender identities. Embodied cartography is the process of mapping out the body at the intersections of gender and sexuality. It is based on three key ideas. First, narratives about the body are one way that we make sense of identities (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Second, while narratives of gender identity are always also narratives of sexual identity, the ways they map onto each other are varied and multiple. Finally, these identity narratives are mediated by race, and when we try to theorize gender, sexuality, or race separately, we miss important structural realities. However, embodied cartography also creates the theoretical space to consider the ways that identity narratives are always in flux, always have the potential to shift and change. Future uses of embodied cartography should be attentive to the fissures in the narratives. In what moments do the essentialist or play narratives breakdown, move, or overlap? It would be useful to apply the framework of embodied cartography to other identities. What other kinds of identity work would the framework illuminate and what would it obfuscate? In the future, embodied cartography should be applied to other samples.

While these findings suggest that contemporary narratives of gender and sexual fluidity may not be offering the kinds of emancipation for all initially imagined, the arguments within these pages should always be consider partial and in progress. This project is “not about truth but about representations, not about inscription but about interpretations,” (Rodriguez 2003). As this project attempts to take seriously the multiple and shifting natures of both theory and meaning, it necessarily becomes a constant

interpretative work in progress. There is as much to be learned from what I have written as from what I have left unwritten, what lies at the edge, in the white spaces (Rodriguez 2003), in the Borderlands (Anzaldua 1987). My practices and conclusions should be read as partial and tentative through the temporary lens of our own historical positionalities and lived realities (Rodriguez 2003).

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Lesbian Identity Research
Interview Outline**

[The lettered questions are to be used *only* as probes and asked if numbered questions do not reveal enough information. Ultimately, the goal is to elicit narratives with as little intervention from me as possible.]

The goal of this project is to understand how non-straight women think about their identity and appearance.

1. First, can you start by sharing your coming out story with me?
 - a. How old were you when you first started thinking you might not be straight? What are some of your earliest memories?
 - b. Who was the first person you came out to? How did they react?
 - c. Was anyone particularly influential when you came out?
 - d. Did you come out all at once or over a period of time?
2. Are you out to your family?
 - a. All your family?
 - b. How did they react?
3. Did you change your appearance when you came out? Why?
 - a. What specifically did you change?
 - b. What led you to make those changes?
4. How do you identify NOW (gay, lesbian, bi, queer, other?)
 - a. What does that mean to you?
 - b. How did you come to choose that word?
 - c. Have you always identified as <identity>?
5. Are there people in your life who don't know you identify as <identity>?
 - a. Family? Friends? Coworkers?
 - b. Do you act differently with these people?
 - c. Do you dress differently?
 - d. Do you speak differently?
6. Under what circumstances do you come out to new people?
 - a. Can you think of a recent example of when you did this?

- b. How did you come out to them?
- c. What was their reaction?

Now I would like to ask you some questions about your appearance.

7. Tell me about your personal style?
 - a. What kinds of clothes do you wear?
 - b. Is what you are wearing now a good example of how you typically dress?
8. Has your hair always been <long/short>? Why did you decide to cut it or grow it out? Do you think you will ever <cut it/grow it out>?
9. Do you tend to wear jewelry or not so much? If so, what kind?
10. Make up?
11. On a typical day, can you describe for me what you do to get ready?
(probe here for details)
12. What is your favorite outfit? Describe.
13. Can you describe your body type for me?
 - a. Do you do anything in particular to maintain this body type?
 1. Go to the gym/exercise?
 2. Diet/eat more?
 - b. What is your ideal body type? Can you give me an example of someone with that body type? What about their body do you like?
14. Do you think you look <identity>?
 - a. If so, what makes you look <identity> ?
 - b. How do you feel about that?
 - c. Do you think people ever assume you are straight?
15. Some women have described intentionally dressing or using their appearance to look like a lesbian in public, while others describe moments where they intentionally tried to hide it. Do either of those experiences ring true for you?
16. Do you ever feel pressure to look differently?

- a. From who?
 - b. What was your response?
17. Do you ever feel pressure to dress differently?
- a. From who?
 - b. What was your response?
18. *(for respondents of color)* Do you think race has shaped your identity as <identity>?
- a. How so?
 - b. Can you think of a moment when race was particularly important for you as a <identity>?
19. *(for respondents of color)* Do you think there are particular difficulties for women of color?
20. Have you ever had a particularly negative experience based on the way you look?
- a. From a stranger or someone you knew?
 - b. How did you respond?
 - c. Has this affected other parts of your life? In other words, did you make any changes to your behavior as a result?
21. Many women describe difficulty with medical professionals, have you ever had difficulty in this way?
22. *(for respondents of color)* Have you ever had a particularly negative experience based on your race?
- a. From a stranger or someone you knew?
 - b. How did you respond?
 - c. Has this affected other parts of your life? In other words, did you make any changes to your behavior as a result?
 - d. Do you think appearance issues are more difficult for (lesbians) of color?

Now consider a time when you have been in public with someone you were dating.

23. How affectionate were you in public places?
- a. Hold hands?
 - b. Kiss?
 - c. Other ways? Examples?

24. Have you every experienced people saying negative things or indicating their disapproval of you when out with someone you were dating?
 - a. Can you think of a specific example?
 - b. What was your response?
25. Can you tell me about the women you usually date or are attracted to?
 - a. Race?
 - b. Gender expression?
 - c. Like you? Different from you? How?

Now I want to switch gears a bit and talk about images of lesbians in our society.

26. Can you tell me what images of lesbians are out there?
 - a. Are there any lesbians in popular culture? Famous lesbians?
 - b. What do these images look like?
27. Do you see yourself in any of those images you just described?
28. The idea of lesbians as butch or femme has been around for a while. What do you think about butch/femme? Do you see yourself in those identities?
29. Some women identify as queer. Do you identify in that way? Why or why not?
30. If we think of masculinity and femininity on a scale, with 1 being the most masculine and 10 being the most feminine, where would you place yourself? Why?
 - a. What do you see as your most masculine qualities?
 - b. What do you see as your most feminine qualities?

Finally, I would like to ask you several demographic questions:

31. How do you racially identify (if not already answered)?
32. How old are you?
33. What kind of work do you do?
34. What was the last year of school you completed? When? Where?
35. Income range (show card)?
36. Where did you grow up?
37. How long have you lived in the area you live in?

38. Is there anything else you would like to tell me that I may not have thought to ask?

Thank you for your time today!

NOTES

ⁱ Minh-ha, Trinh T. 1989. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

ⁱⁱ Collins, Patricia Hill. 2005. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.

ⁱⁱⁱ I use “non-straight” to indicate my awareness of a range of sexual identities, including lesbian, woman-identified, bisexual, queer, and others. These words each have their own histories and political meanings. As part of my research I hope to interrogate the meanings of these words for my participants and the connection between these identity markers and identity itself.

^{iv} See for example The Human Rights Campaign’s resources for coming out at: <http://www.hrc.org/coming-out-center>.

^v See for example “Born this Way,” a pop song by Lady Gaga.

^{vi} Sociology owes feminist theorizing as much for this interest in the body as it does Foucault. Several recent feminist anthologies have been devoted to the subject, with writings dating back to the early 1980s. See for example, *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, edited by Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick; *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, edited by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury.

^{vii} Does the increased plasciticity/constructed nature to bodies also come with increased fear? If we can’t know the “truth” about a body (such as its “real” sex), do we become

more invested in re-entrenching the boundaries to make sure we know who's in and who's out?

Postmodern and trans body theories are interested in the plasticity of the body—its changability (i.e. Shilling 1993 as cited in Turner; Haraway 1985). These theories are very appealing in this moment where we embrace the social constructivist legacy and apply it to the body. However, we must keep at the fore the ways in which those constructions are always mediated and constrained. For example, literature on transsexual and transgendered bodies remarks on the ability to construct “passable” bodies, but the ability to construct such bodies are constrained by economic realities that allow or prevent various medical interventions ranging from hormone therapy to laser hair removal to genital surgery. These constructions are also constrained by socially acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity (as mediated by race) and the ability of an individual to appropriately embody them. For example, Asian trans women tend to “pass” better than white trans women. I believe this is due in no small part to the feminization of Asian men in American culture.

^{viii} I have very clear memories of the first time I brought a girlfriend home to meet my parents. I was in my late 20s and had been living away from home for some time. Still, I was desperate for their approval and knew that the masculine appearance of my girlfriend would be uncomfortable for my parents. Instead of the tie she has selected to wear in an effort to impress my parents, I asked her to just wear the sweater. We worked to “edit” her decidedly queer appearance to conform to more traditional femininity. In this case, it was not an attempt to pass as straight (my parents already knew we were dating) but

instead to be more gender normative. Of course, as a black woman, she already failed to live up to my conservative white parent's notion of ideal femininity.

^{ix} For example, in many ways lesbian motherhood may confer a certain degree of authentic femininity to women who otherwise sit outside of that convention. Angela Davis (1993) theorizes about the ways that motherhood may legitimate, to a limited degree, black teen girls who see limited other life opportunities. Because of the link between motherhood and womanhood, Davis argues that these young women “make consciousness decisions to bear children in order to convince themselves that they are alive and creative human beings” (p. 362). Similarly, lesbian women may also feel a similar draw to motherhood, given that they too are systematically denied access to other legitimate femininities. Emily Martin (1987) argues that working class women may be less invested in medical models of the body than middle class women, and thus more able to enact resistance against them, or simply ignore them all together. Does this “resistance” (if that's the appropriate term) work similarly for lesbian women?

^x I am working to differentiate between “constraint” and “oppression”. As bell hooks (1984) argues, oppression is marked by the inability of a group to have a voice. Oppression is the complete silencing of a class of people. White women, while constrained, generally do not experience the same social and cultural silencing as black women. I anticipate this being an important distinction in my research.

^{xi} Most notable are her essays in *Sister Outsider*.

^{xii} There is a growing literature that takes seriously queer theory while also critiquing it from a “queer of color” perspective. See for example Ferguson 2003 and Munoz 1999.

^{xiii} There is a prolific and fascinating set of literature that attempts to define and unpack the historical and contemporary relevance of butch-femme identities. Much of this work is not empirical but instead offers a rich literary picture of the relationship between these identities, desire, bodies, community, and visibility. See for example: Joan Nestle (ed), *The Persistent Desire: A Butch-Femme Reader*; Sally R. Munt (ed), *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*; Michelle Gibson, *Femme/Butch: New Considerations of the Way We Want to Go*.

^{xiv} Androgyny is an important type of body for lesbians, particularly given the political shifts of the 1970s. The lesbian feminist movement actively resisted butch-femme gender presentations, arguing that they reproduced the inequality and misogyny inherent in heterosexual relationships. Some form of androgyny became the only politically-correct lesbian body. For a popular culture representation of this issues, see *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (HBO Productions, 2000).

^{xv} Butler's performativity has become increasingly central to gender and sexuality studies, particularly in the humanities. Her work has been less embraced by social science researchers, perhaps due to the difficulty in translating it into empirically verifiable concepts. That said, her theory of performativity aligns well with the social constructivist philosophy popular in sociology. Several theorists (Hall 1996; Rottenberg 2003) have made important attempts to extend her theory of gender performativity to race. Catherine Rottenberg makes a particularly compelling argument that the concept performativity cannot simply be grafted onto race; the process of racial performativity has a key difference. While gender has two ideal categories, male and female (although

there are clear power differences between the two), race has only one, whiteness.

Gendered individuals are interpellated into being either male or female, and both are valid. Men are thereby encouraged and coerced into embodying masculinity, and women are encouraged and coerced into embodying femininity. Racialized subjects are similarly interpellated into being either black or white, but regardless of race, all should aspire to whiteness. Whiteness is the only ideal racial identity. I think Rottenberg's distinction is an interesting one and may be useful for the study of lesbian identity. Subjects can be interpellated into gay or straight beings, but all should aspire to embody heterosexuality. The legitimating effects of marriage and reproduction for gay couples could be understood through this lens.

^{xvi} For a critique of intersectionality and a consideration of the role queer theory can play as a corrective, see Jasbir Puar (2007).

^{xvii} Language is culturally and regionally specific. While "butch" tends to be the most common term to describe lesbian masculinity, it has historical roots in white lesbian communities (see Faderman 1991, Kennedy and Davis 1993). Women of color are more likely to use the terms "dom," "dominant," or "aggressive" to describe lesbian masculinity, although Cole (2010) uses "masculine of center" as an attempt to unify these different terms and find ways to talk across them.

^{xviii} While Monica raised the issue of her eating disorder several times during our interview, I failed to interrogate it as a site of meaning. This was my own methodological shortcoming. I felt unprepared to deal with any issues that might come up during the course of the interview if I probed for more information. The consequences

of my inaction are not only that I have little information about Monica's eating and how that related to her embodied cartography of identity construction, but I also refused Monica the opportunity to elaborate on an issue that she saw as important enough to raise during our interview.