Surveillance, and the boundaries of binary gender: flashpoints for queer ethics

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Abstract: Despite ubiquitous surveillance of identity and scrutiny of performances of binary gender, an increasingly large number of people are choosing to stake out public and private spaces that are in-between, including 'non-binary' and 'gender-queer'. In this article I outline some of the ways in which gender is *literally* and *metonymically* monitored at boundary-crossings at national borders and bathroom thresholds, and in the certification of birth and citizenship. I think through why shifting perceptions of gender, and the ways that we categorise gender in different spaces, for different audiences, is an issue for *queer ethics in practice*. What is a 'safe space' for sharing stories of stigma and state-imposed identity categorisation? How can affirmed gender-diverse categories and spaces remain open to accommodate change, fluidity and multiplicity? I draw on auto-ethnographic experiences of self-surveillance and attempts to propagate and celebrate my own multiplicity as a non-binary person. I speculate on the ways that (un)gendered Selfies might constitute creative and imaginative practice that challenges hegemonic injunctions to perform gender in finite and rigid binary ways. Can this sharing of complex and multiple selves have implications for the ethics and politics of categorising gender in educational, health and social service contexts? What might 'queer ethics in practice' look like in workshops, at reception desks, at airports?

Keywords: non-binary genders, categorisation, surveillance, queer ethics, boundary patrol

Background

'We love to put things in a box, don't we?'

This is the kind of reflection that participants in 'Code-switching Identities' offer during workshops. In these three-hour sessions a small group of ten to fifteen gender-diverse people interrogate and re-categorise our multiple fluid selves – by creating queer and sometimes 'un' gendered selfies. We share stories around mis-recognition and affirmation; times when we've felt safe/unsafe in public bathrooms; how we feel when people get our pronouns right. We think about all the #hashtags that have been imposed upon us during our lives and try to integrate them into a single visual representation of multiple 'transitions' with uncertain beginnings and ends. As babies the state imposes 'male' or 'female' upon us, according to the dimensions of our genitalia. As children, our parents label us with nominalisations like 'smarty-pants', 'the naughty one', 'just shy' or 'the black sheep'. At school we might get dubbed 'square', 'trouble', 'dobber', and later, 'freak', 'slut', 'stud', or 'frigid'. These labels are all imperfect stories without certain definitions, and we carry these narratives with us as baggage; a suitcase of former (and imagined future) selves. In our life journeys, many of us take the opportunity to reinvent ourselves; for example,

by moving from the country to the city; by partnering with somebody deemed 'in-appropriate'; by changing our names or our gender. Did you know in Australia you are currently only permitted by law to change your name three times? After that you need to make a special case, in an appeal to a Judge.

Frequent or dramatic changes to legal and social identity categories are highly regulated and patrolled, and in many cases stigmatised (Kaveney, 1999). Trans peo-ple are often characterised as duplicitous, or unstable, although there are also the familiar narratives of heroes' journeys towards discoveries of the 'true inner self' (Siebler, 2012). Either way, these are impositions, and often there is friction between the identity descriptors and categorisations that we are forced into, and the complex narratives that we might choose for ourselves. In how many of these digital traces, discourses, and everyday conversations, can we control how we are represented and/or perceived?

Universal categorisation of gendered personhood has never been so scrutinised, and there are interesting implications for ethical service provision and nation/state policy and law. In mainstream media and popular culture, we routinely witness in-tersections between multiple/fluid self-representations online and changing social understandings of binary gender. Non-binary model and gender activist Rain Dove offers their everyday activism (Vivienne, 2016) on Instagram in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Rain Dove doing everyday activism via bathroom selfies for Instagram

This public and embodied everyday activism led to Dove being maced by a parent in a 'female' bathroom. In an exemplar of digitally mediated advocacy their ensuing text discussions with the attacker made mainstream news worldwide (Braidwood, 2018). In policy and practice surveillance takes place in a variety of embodied and mediated contexts. Surveillance by the State (from above) determines how we are recognised as citizens, on birth certificates, passports and measurement in National Census. Sousveillance (from below) takes place when we blog about the scanning of our bodies at national borders, sharing circumnavigation strategies with others. Self-surveillance takes place every time we, in our waste-expelling bodies, make a quick decision about which of two publicly designated bathroom doors, might signify a safe-ish environment within.

Meanwhile, our embodiment is imbricated, interwoven, and inseparable from our digital traces. Experiences of networked daily life often highlight the ways that finite categories of personhood are contextual and arbitrarily enforced. While we may still attempt to separate online and IRL (in real life) aspects of self, digital traces of previous selves routinely offer evidence of change, fluidity and multiple ways of being (Jurgenson, 2011). At any one moment of time we are simultaneously manifest in contrasting spaces. For example, the professional self of *Linked In* versus the filtered holiday self of *Instagram*, may sometimes appear contradictory. We nevertheless acknowledge that we sculpt how we perform our identities according to who we are with, when and where (see an established body of Internet Research, including boyd, 2014). This is not, however, a wholly digital phenomena, for we have always been multiple selves. It seems obvious that we sound and act quite differently when we're drunk with friends compared with when we're chastising children about housework. This has long been a sociological insight, grounded in Goffman's analogy of performance management, in which we curate self-presentation according to our context on stage or backstage (Goffman, 1959). Giddens later scrutinised self-understanding in the context of modernity and intimacy with others (with very brief reference to gender-performance) while Blumer developed overarching theories of ways of being as 'symbolic interactionism' (Blumer, 1986; Giddens, 1992).

Despite these scholarly acknowledgements, in popular discourses and legal-medical practice, personhood that blurs the lines between male/female (or that celebrates ongoing fluidity), risks rejection as unstable, unreliable or incoherent. When categorisations are imposed, and at odds with lived experience, there are significant consequences. We stand accused of the universally unforgivable - 'you've changed!' – a judgement that is indicative of personal and systemic violence. Stigmatisation of gender transgression results in trans* and gender non-conforming people being over-represented in statistics on depression, self-harm, suicidality, drug-abuse, unemployment and homelessness (Grant et al., 2011; Hillier et al., 2010; Leonard et al., 2012). Notably these risk factors are the result of discrimination, not gender-diversity itself. Possibilities of playful exploration are curtailed through mediated moral panic in the vein of 'political correctness gone mad' (for example, see recent backlash to use of 'They' pronouns in Vivienne, 2018). When Princeton University guidelines attempted to un-gender identity categories – like 'Freshman, actress, cameraman, cleaning lady, anchorman, mankind, salesman, headmistress' by 'removing male-leaning terminology from official textbooks and introducing guidelines for

how to address someone of the opposite gender', a media commentator for news. com.au scoffed 'Give me a break' (Willis, 2016).

Despite the ubiquity of conservative discourses, some principals, parents and employers demonstrate goodwill as they struggle to come to terms with pronouns and creating safe(r) spaces for increasingly gender-diverse employees, students, clients and family members. These efforts are often thwarted by 'computer says no' technologies, or architectural conventions (e.g. gendered bathrooms) that reflect binary systems of categorisation. Importantly these systems of categorisation are simultaneously material/embodied and digital and take both *metonymic* and *literal* forms. Understanding these complexities and tensions between borders and boundaries, is core to queer creative practice. Often moments in which boundaries are transgressed provide *flashpoints* where we may learn more about differences and similarities.

Monitoring categoric boundaries

Opening up or blurring rigidly drawn boundaries is made difficult by rapidly changing social values and technologies/platforms/tools. How do we arrive at consensus over who is included and excluded from a category? Nicholas (Nicholas, 2019) explores the ways that queer ethics can underpin debates over complex social issues that evade binary categorisation, including gender ambiguity and 'unconventional' family structures. In Australia in 2018 we saw the issue of same-sex marriage equality broken open for national debate in a non-binding, non-compulsory 'postal survey' that asked a yes/no question while invoking complex discussions about childhood, gender, religious values and social change (Vivienne, 2018b). Does the categorisation of a space – in this case marriage – offer affirmation or safety if the boundaries that contain it, are constantly being disputed? And what emotional labour is required to renegotiate the boundaries (for example, polyamory) in order to accommodate fluidity in practice and encoded in law?

Information scientist Jeffrey Pomerantz (2015) usefully distinguishes between different types of data and their uses – intended for description, administration, structural integrity, and/or preservation. Fundamentally he defines data as a 'category' which in itself is a unit of meaning that *summarises*. It must therefore be smaller and contain less information than the complexity that remains outside it, beyond the boundaries of the category. In this way whatever is contained within a category becomes *metonymic*, a stand in, for something larger. Metonyms are historically and socially situated signs that are often inscribed with the stature of normalcy, appearing to be essential elements of biology. Hence, we have everything from moustaches to cigars as metonyms for male-sexed bodies and skirts, jewels and powder-compacts standing in for female-sexed bodies (see Figure 2).
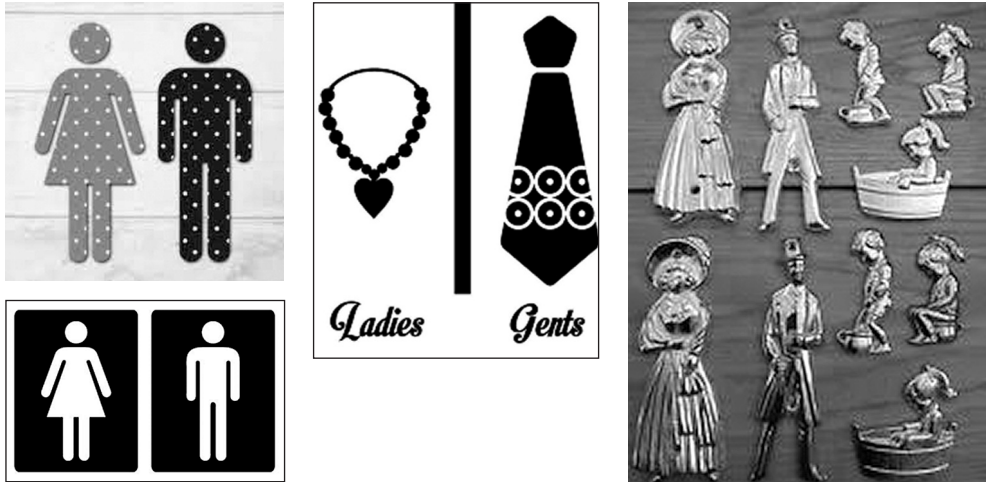
Figure 2. Metonyms for sexed bathroom spaces

These signs and symbols have an abstract correlation with bodies or sex organs, not a *literal* relationship. Consequently, analysis of these apparently timeless metonyms reveals categoric meanings that change in historical and socio-cultural contexts. Taking the example of pink and blue, we know that in the 'global west' and Anglo Christian colonies, prior to the turn of the century, many babies wore easy-to-bleach white, with Ladies Home Journal in 1918 proclaiming:

> The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl. (Hartmann, 2011)

Colour correlated with gender continued to change, influenced by market forces and biotech like pre-natal testing of gender. However, a more intersectional analysis points to the socio-cultural specificity of the apparently universal Ladies Home Journal, which is actually distinctively North American. Colour choices made by parents and carers beyond the categoric boundaries of 'global west' (which is in itself a contested unit of meaning) are notably absent.

Physical infrastructures, like gendered bathrooms and emergency accommodation for homeless people, remain overwhelmingly binary and inflexible at both architectural and systemic levels. Physical boundaries, like bathroom thresholds and airport immigration are *literally* monitored to enforce who is allowed in and who should be kept out. Consequently work-places, educational institutions and social service provision struggle to accommodate gender-diverse people. Here the boundary is literal, explicitly, visibly enacted and encoded in law, policy and social convention. Fundamentally these gender-boundaries are socially constructed, with metonyms of pink and blue standing in for the 'truth' of genitalia. The presence of a vulva or a penis does not, however, reveal anything fixed about gender identity; they are empty signifiers. Leakage between meanings – *metonymic* representations of gender and *literal* surveillance and enforcement – reveal the permeability of the boundary.

Proliferating gender categories

Despite forbidding cultural conditions, young people in particular are demanding a variety of new names that summarise their gender status. Our 'Scrolling Beyond Binaries' research included a 2016 national survey of more than 1,200 young people aged 16–35. We found a proliferation of gender-diverse identities on online platforms like Tumblr, where discussion of gender non-conformity is the norm, and the possibility of curating multiple identities is routine. Overall, 20% of our participants identified as non-binary or chose to define their own gender identities as "other" than male or female (Robards et al., 2019; "Scrolling Beyond Binaries," n.d.). In the US, a report by GLAAD (Harris Poll, 2017) indicated that 12% of Millennials (aged 18–35) identify as transgender or gender non-conforming – double the percentage of people in Generation X (people aged 35–51). In 2016, research by the trend-forecasting Innovation group (Shepherd, 2016) also found that 56% of American Gen Zers (aged 13–20) know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns.

Nevertheless, the proliferation of letters in the LGBTQI+ acronym is cause of generational hand-wringing and editorial comment. Neo-conservative opinion pieces take issue with the addition of new categories arguing that they all refer back to a 'natural' gender-binary and thereby contradict the premise of gender-theory which holds that gender is socially constructed (Stanton, 2018). Meanwhile, the truth of 'real' gender, as argued by (Dembroff, forthcoming) depends largely on what 'social kind' is held as evidence of group classification (e.g genitalia, hormones, genetics, socialisation, identity etc.). While the categories themselves can be contradictory or ambiguous (for example there are at least forty scientifically acknowledged underlying traits that may be called 'intersex') this empirical multiplicity does not prevent 'binary' facts of gender being hotly debated in the field of analytical philosophy.

Leaving behind these somewhat arbitrary and unhelpful debates, we can ponder more pragmatic concerns. Can social change be nurtured by simply making new categories available – whether that be via architectural design (gender-neutral bathrooms) or digital infrastructures (non-binary options in surveys) or opportunity to change a birth certificate without onerous medical interventions (more on this later).

Social changes like these promise greater agency for non-binary people and acceptance of diversity and difference, with no great loss to those who are firmly wedded to static identity nominalisations. While it is important to note that *all discussions* about finite categories can end in conundrums about inclusion and exclusion that provoke parody and eye-rolling, minimisation of the significance of gender boundary-wars is a political strategy in and of itself. Meanwhile surveillance at state, community and personal levels highlights a binary and obscures discussion of blurry or fluid possibilities. How can we make opportunity to celebrate complexity and change? In the following I think through moments of literal and metonymic boundary crossing in gender diverse daily life as opportunities or *flashpoints* for queer ethics in practice.

Boundary-crossing

Citizenship status is generally encoded in our passports with a 'M' or 'F'. This binary is also a mechanism for surveillance both metonymically and literally. As a non-binary person, I am acutely aware of the social and personal costs of navigating the boundaries of categories, both linguistic and legal. As an academic travelling to international conferences with an 'X' marked in my passport, approaching U.S customs whom only have 'pink' and 'blue' body-categories, fills me with anxiety. If a border-guard decides my 'gender-expression' (that is, their snap interpretation of my clothing, haircut, body language, voice) does not match my body-scan, they are within their rights to take me aside and search for 'anomalies' in the same way they would search for weapons. As described by Sasha Costanza-Chock:

> I know that this is almost certainly about to happen because of the particular sociotechnical configuration of gender normativity (cis-normativity) that has been built into the scanner, through the combination of user interface design, scanning technology, binary gendered body-shape data constructs, and risk detection algorithms, as well as the socialization, training, and experience of the TSA agents. (Costanza-Chock, 2018)

Trans people globally share stories of border-patrol and their embodied negotiations of gendered citizenship. Experiments with circumnavigation or transgression of these borders range from packers as phallus, to asking for a pat down as alternative to body scan. These stories are sometimes wry, sometimes painful: after all, how does a legally affirmed non-binary person get assigned a same-gender TSA agent? As a result of these kinds of regulatory practices, many gender-diverse people choose not to travel at all because they *expect* to be harassed and discriminated against.

X: a placeholder for 'other' or 'more'

Incompatible or incomplete forms of identification routinely place gender-diverse people at risk of harassment and discrimination. Where third (or more) alternate gender categories are made available, they invariably reveal inconsistencies in law and policy at state, national and international borders (Chiam et al., 2017).

In Australia we have a mix of approaches to gender-registration across states and territories with passports and marriage law dealt with at Commonwealth level, and birth certificates managed by States and Territories. Consequently, while we've been able to choose an 'X' category in passports since 2013 (with support of documentary evidence from a doctor or psychologist), changing the sex marker on birth certificates is still only possible in Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and South Australia (since 2016) and at the time of writing was recently or currently being debated in Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria.

Sex at birth is generally, in the absence of genetic testing, inferred by visible anatomy (Hird, 2004). In many cases this inference is scientifically inaccurate and there are many variations of sex chromosomes that may or may not be visible. The Intersex Association of Australia, while acknowledging inherent difficulties in gath-

ering accurate data, estimate that approximately 1.7%, or 1 in 1500, of the population are born with genetic variations (IHRA, 2013). Recently in Tasmania, State Parliament passed legislation that allows parents to opt out of recording their baby's gender on their birth certificate (Howarth, 2018), while their sex assignation would still be collected, anonymised and archived as population data. Proposed legislation in Victoria simplifies the process of changing gender on birth certificate by removing requirements for sexual reassignment surgery and medical intervention (for adults, while under eighteens still need parental and medical approval) and allow self-identification with a range of gender identities provided that they are in common use and not offensive. Recently the Health Department in the State of Washington in the U.S allowed adult citizens to elect to change their birth certificate to an 'X' (Gander, 2019). In terms of social change, moves like these are typically accompanied by opposition and public outcry. Christian news blogs feature headlines like 'Breaking News: It's a Girl, Boy or 'X' on birth certificates' and cite Genesis 1:27: "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Jones, 2017). 'The Australian' newspaper recently established a special section for gender issues and has so far published overwhelmingly anti-trans commentary including headlines like 'They're castrating children' (Langford, 2019).

Recognition

In 2017, when it became possible in South Australia to amend birth certificates to 'non-binary', I leapt at the opportunity. While I had never identified with 'intersex/indeterminate/unspecified', a (second) name change allowed me to acknowledge multiplicity with a new chosen middle name 'Asterisk'. For me this connotes all the foot notes to a longer story and, in code and search terms the * stands in for multiple alternate endings. I had my identity engraved on my arm.
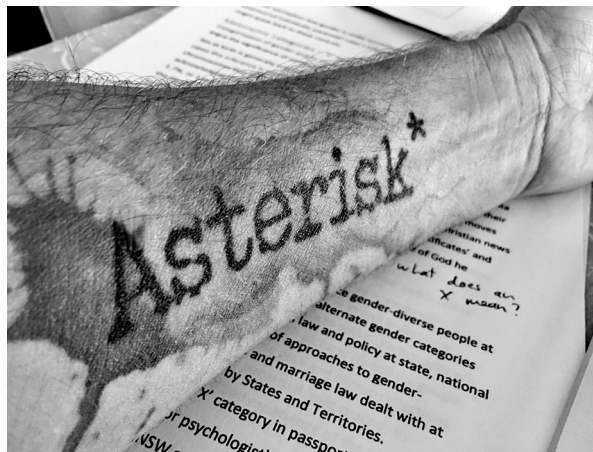

Figure 3. Name and gender change

However, what does an 'x' mean in terms of social recognition by other people, and their systems and machines? The Australian Passport office warns:

> Sex and gender diverse passport holders should be aware that while Australian travel documents are issued in accordance with international standards, those travelling on a passport showing 'X' in the sex field may encounter difficulties when crossing international borders due to their infrequent use. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade cannot guarantee that a passport showing 'X' in the sex field will be accepted for entry or transit by another country. (Office, 2018)

With my body marked in accordance with my self-understanding, I ponder what part of this body might be deemed incompatible with the pink or the blue; what part of me is 'anomaly' to my gender expression? What/how will border-patrol people recognise me?

Digital technologies offer binary options as '0' or '1' – code that is built on assumptions of what is more likely (given a set of conditions) to be true than false. In the face of proliferating categories, we are challenged by facial/body recognition technologies that amplify the socially-constructed bias of first impressions and highly patrolled boundaries between binary categories of black/white, male/female, citizen/alien and of course pink/blue.

To return to the example of crossing borders and gender boundaries, Costanza-Chock reflects upon both literal and metonymic border patrolling through 'millimetre wave scanning' that contributes to 'a sociotechnical reproduction of the gender binary'. They make an important connection between 'embodied knowledge' and the ethical design of Artificial Intelligence, contributing to a burgeoning field of Design Justice scholarship (Costanza-Chock, 2018). Without the experience of a gender-diverse body encountering a boundary between nations; the surveillance of a border-patrol officer and a scanning device; the binary gender encoded in a passport, it is difficult to gain insight into the nuanced complexity of designing 'open' systems and practices. This is a flashpoint for queer ethics.

Scholar of psychology and neuroscience, Todorov (Todorov, 2017) elaborates on the ways that 'first impressions' allow us to 'make up our minds about others after seeing their faces for a fraction of a second' and alludes to the ways that technology facilitates 'these snap judgments [that] predict all kinds of important decisions.'

> Physiognomists saw the face as a map that revealed the hidden dispositions of its owner. The value of the face is in its capacity to expose these dispositions. But the map we are reading is not the map physiognomists envisioned. The map is in our minds, shaped by our own culture, individual histories, and biases… Although the meaning of the map is elusive, we cannot resist reading it. We are the ones creating face value – making too much out of too little information. (Todorov, 2017, p. 15)

Quick readings of gender, with incumbent assumptions of power and authority, are not a focus of Todorov's work, however he draws connections with surveillance technologies that are trained on normative data sets and skin colour, with inevitable racist implications. Further 'the face' that Todorov refers to may in some ways be regarded as a metonym for our 'inner dispositions'. Snap judgement and facial recognition technologies call to mind an urgent need for queer ethics. In the face of uneven policy, law and administration, it is important to remember that M/F/X are merely metonymic signifiers that stand in for complex ways of doing gender and or being gendered.

Celebrating multiplicity with selfies

Most people inhabit multiple identities during a life journey (e.g. daughter, student, professional, mother) and these incongruencies are made highly visible and searchable by networked digital technologies. Consider how many online profiles we routinely manage. Do we share 'safer' versions of self with work colleagues, family or friends? When transition between divergent identities are measured in exclusively binary terms – e. g young/old, rich/poor, female/male – we witness increased stigmatisation and a reduction of complexity of all the perfectly valid in-betweens. In the following I briefly describe a creative project as a process and practice of speaking back to surveillance of rigid gender binaries.

Figure 4. Intimate multiplicity

'Code Switching Identities' took place as a series of three hour long creative workshops in Melbourne in 2018. This was a pilot project that aimed to explore how trans and gender-diverse people create digital, fluid and multiple selves. Culminating in an art exhibition and coinciding with a public forum to be held in 2019, participants will exchange insights between how government agencies and private institutions measure gender, and what trans and gender diverse people, at different times and in different contexts, might need of service providers. What meaning is being made of our gendered data? How might it serve our needs rather than those of advertisers and multinational corporations? The initiative engages with creative methods to produce 'un-gendered selfies'. In Figure 4, I offer an example of my own multiplicity, explicitly combining contrasting images of self, layered with personal memories not evident to the general public. I include 'transition' moments – my sister's wedding, being awarded a PHD, getting glasses for the first time, the significance of my self-reflective work, and experiments with testosterone and body hair in my private and 'safe' bathroom.

Another creative strand in 'Code-switching Identities' invites non-binary people to share a public bathroom in which they feel 'safe to selfie'. Participants will narrate the whys and wherefores of 'safety' including its fragile temporality. These audio-stories are geo-located via google maps and Instagram – podcasts with pictures. They explore notions of the gaze and mirror-reflections, interrogating and destabilising the very idea of finite and perpetual safe spaces. In 'Queering Bathrooms' an interviewee offers their embodied experience of the triangulation of self-other-sign (Cavanagh, 2010).

> I am washing my hands and a woman opens the door and sees me and stops. She doesn't look at me, but steps back and looks at sign on the door… 'Am I in the right place?'. (quoted in Cavanagh, 2010, p. 65)

Vasseleu describes this as a process whereby the 'body of perceiving subject is given form and content through its experience of surrounding objects' (Vasseleu, 2002, p. 51).

Public discourse (society as 'the surrounding objects') about who is entitled to feel safe in a bathroom runs the gamut, from statistics on how many cisgender people have been attacked by transgender people in bathrooms (apparently none, see Bianco, 2015), to 'Psychology Today' articles that measure the cost of 'unequal access' (McClintock, 2016) to Twitter/Instagram campaigns (Spears, 2015) like that of Rain Dove described previously. Thanks to the broad and specific search terms of google algorithms (categories in themselves) it is not difficult to locate very raw stories from regional young people who would rather not 'leave the house because it's too hard to find a toilet that I feel safe in using.' (Treloar, 2018)

Hyper-astute gender-diverse people might relate to descriptions and analysis of the 'quick exchange-of-looks'. More explicitly they may find corollary in how they experience social surveillance in their bodies, with racing heart and incessant self-surveillance. This research participant (ibid) describes the complex process that may need to be navigated invoked by previous public bathroom experiences.

> I don't feel entitled to stand in front of the mirror and check my look and fix my hair [as I do at home]. I want to get out of there [the public bathroom] as fast as I possibly fucking can… [This]… hyper… visible… space… in the bathroom, it's all about gender-presentation. (quoted in Cavanagh, 2010, p. 100)

'Safe to Selfie' podcasts invite the re-narration of momentous public bathroom moments. The process of stepping up to gender-surveillance, just as we square up to our own reflection via mirror and smart phone camera, is a process of self-identification; claiming a category. In creating 'face value' we determine which information or impressions we offer to our social networks. Ironically, the possibility of designating a 'safe' bathroom on a google map may also make it a target. The contingent nature of safety is exemplified here.

Self-surveillance: online and embodied

Self-surveillance of both our bodies and our digital traces is onerous work. When eliciting these stories from vulnerable communities it is important to help carrying the burden, even if it is momentary. We've written elsewhere on queer methods as 'holding a space' (Vivienne et al., 2016). Framing workshop activities and explorations around uncertainty is important. Regular checking in with participant/storyteller needs, before during and after workshops is foundational. While we cannot guarantee that the space that we create for storytelling will always stay that way, creative practice and public digital self-representation also offers a process in which gender-diverse people can experience holding themselves.

I have used my own experiences as data for this article, in deliberate 'queering' of the scientific method. Rather than expose research participants to scrutiny I offer up my body, and its digital traces. This, alongside carefully facilitated creative group practice, is a framework for queer ethics in practice. Were it not for my skin-in-the-game (including a close up of my tattooed and hairy arm), I would not be able to draw upon embodied experience of transitioning across boundaries.

> When I 'came out' as non-binary and gender-queer online, I had no way of knowing who had read my confessions… or not. Initially I wrote a blog piece and assumed that pretty much no-one saw it (I don't have a big readership). Then I shared the link on Facebook, and I consciously prepared myself for public comment at work. My body was on edge, when I chose a bathroom – who might I see there? I was conscious of the sound of my cowboy boots clipping in the corridor – did they sound like high-heels?
>
> As time went by, a few people commented on Facebook… but I became increasingly aware of the ways that timeline algorithms work. They effectively guaranteed that even the most vigilant follower may miss an occasional update.
>
> Because I no longer knew *who knew what* I became hyperaware of my vocal pitch and facial hair. High alert. ALL. THE. TIME. When previously I'd assumed that no-one would notice subtle changes, now I felt like everyone was scrutinizing me, looking for signs. I felt like my skin was a bundle of nerve endings exposed to violent changes in temperature… and mood.

This excerpt highlights the networked and personal nature of conversations about and across gender. Here I argue for recognition and understanding of non-binary 'in-betweens' and 'in-progress'. Whether via gender experimentation or more conventional self-development, *growth* requires *change* that calls for, and sometimes requires, transgression of social averages. As a sensibility and theoretical framework queer ethics in practice acknowledges the slipperiness between categories and the importance of gently holding a space for self-identification.

Conclusion: accommodating the 'in-betweens' and 'in-progress'

In current debates over the universality and/or intersections of identities, as rendered by facial recognition, algorithmic prediction and targeted advertising, reflection on the literal and metonymic categories of binary gender are urgent and overdue. Re-framing these debates around the agency of people who are most affected is also imperative. Producing 'un-gendered' selfies in 'safe' (momentarily, contextually) public bathroom spaces is just one form of hyper-astute critique of gender categories.

Projects like 'Code-Switching Identities' acknowledge that our different selves can make us greater as individuals. Collectively, accommodating 'they' as a framework for the multiple, fluid in-betweens, is a small shift in a continuing evolution of how we understand, categorise and name gender. Literally and metonymically the non-binary X allows some of us to move between the binaries of masculinity and femininity with less monitoring and more joy. The production and curation of our online trace and 'un-gendered selfies' constitutes creative activism that somewhat relieves the burden of discrimination, and battle fatigue. As a process and practice of sharing selves it is embodied, *as well as* literally designated, *as well as* replicated across networks. Negotiating personal movement (or transition) between categories calls on hyper-astute readings of nuance – a kind of gender-diverse superpower for broaching categories. These encounters, in turn, offer flashpoints for queer ethics in practices. In making up our own meanings and selfie-montages, we claim our boundary transgressions as opportunity to share our 'extra-sensory' perception.

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