

Emerging genders: semiotic agency and the performance of gender among genderqueer individuals

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Abstract

This article examines how individuals who identify with genders outside a male/female binary make use of the semiotic material available to them in the environment to interactively construct non-binary gender(s). Through micro-interactional analysis of the speech produced by individuals who identify as genderqueer, the article demonstrates how individuals draw on an array of signs to create and perform non-normative genders. The article argues that the implementation of embodied signs can be understood using a model of semiotic agency, which reveals how the signs themselves vary in their durability and manipulability in time and space. The article further exemplifies how these semiotic displays are used to perform gender as non-binary, mutable, and changing in time. The article uncovers how genderqueer individuals both challenge and maintain a binary gender system in their daily interactions. Moreover, the article demonstrates how individuals draw on available semiotic material available in the environment in ways that allow gender to emerge dynamically in interaction and transform over time.

KEYWORDS: SEMIOTICS; AGENCY; NON-NORMATIVE GENDERS; GENDERQUEER;
PERFORMATIVITY; EMBODIMENT

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When children meet Taylor,¹ they usually have questions. ‘Are you a girl?’ ‘Yes’, Taylor says. Next, a child will inevitably squeal, ‘No! She can’t² be a girl, she has a beard!’ Taylor just smiles, faintly amused. ‘Are you a boy?’ They ask, incredulous. ‘Yes’, Taylor says. Debate ensues. The children are quizzical, enticed by the puzzle. Some are defiant. ‘You can’t be a boy AND a girl’, they say. ‘Why not?’ Taylor asks. Taylor is in their³ mid-twenties and is quick to burst into a playful smile. Zhe has a small muscular build, wears loose colourful clothing and has facial hair, a golden gathering around their chin and upper lip.

When asked, Taylor says that zhe is genderqueer, specifically describing their gender as neither male nor female. The term genderqueer is a self-ascribed gender employed to describe gender identities that fall outside the male/female binary. Genderqueer individuals may identify as both male and female, as neither male nor female or as fluctuating between two binary gender expressions. Some genderqueer individuals see themselves as one of many possible combinations of masculine and feminine, while many others see their gender as existing outside of strictly binary categories. The term genderqueer is used throughout the USA to refer to a wide range of gender categories, expressions and performances (Ashton 2013; Levy and Lo 2013; Mayo 2007; Saltzburg and Davis 2010). Importantly, genderqueer individuals do not describe their genders as a single ‘third gender’ or as necessarily defined by or in relationship with a fixed gender system. In the present ethnographic study with fifteen genderqueer individuals, most described their experience of gender as ‘fluid’.

Given that genderqueer individuals experience and perform non-normative genders and yet inhabit a world dominated by a gender binary system, replete with signs associated with a binary system, the present article seeks to understand how individuals communicatively perform non-normative genders. Specifically, the article examines how individuals use the semiotic resources available to them to interactively perform ambiguous and non-binary genders. The article finds that individuals both rely on and resist binary forms in the construction of non-normative genders.

For a number of decades now, scholars have argued that gender is socially constructed (Brownell and Besnier 2013; Butler 1990; Morris 1995; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Parker and Sedgwick 1995; Weston 1993). As Butler outlined in *Bodies that Matter*, bodies receive meaning through a complex web of social contexts (Butler 1993). According to Butler and many others, it is through social interaction that the body is inscribed with meaning. There has been significant work focusing especially on transgender and intersex bodies that demonstrates the social construction of sex and gender (Besnier 2002; Boellstorff 2007; Reddy 2005; Young 2000).

Through attention to bodies that do not conform to binary sex categories at birth or who engage in embodied gender transformations, scholars have provided evidence of the dynamic social construction of both gender and sex (Davis et al. 2014; Hall and Bucholtz 2012; Sedgwick 1993).

There has also been significant work examining the discursive processes through which gender is constructed (Butler 1990; Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987). This work demonstrates that instead of being naturally linked to physical characteristics, gender is constructed through social interaction. For example, Zimman (2014) has shown how trans men disrupt the semantic link between characteristics of the body and gender by reworking genital terminology, for example using the term 'bonus hole' in the place of 'vagina'. Zimman shows how linguistic practices can function to de-couple the gendered semiotics of certain terms from their 'physiological entailments' (Zimman 2014:17). Gesture and embodied performance are significant practices through which individuals construct novel identities and genders. Embodied expressions and linguistic performance can provide a physical disruption to binary constructions of gender.

The interactive construction of gender has been advanced through ethnographic explorations of individuals who express non-binary genders cross-culturally (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999; Cameron and Kulick 2003; Campbell-Kibler et al. 2002; Kulick 2000; Leap 1996; Livia and Hall 1997; Speer and Stokoe 2011; Valentine 2003). This work has demonstrated that gender is in no way a fixed entity, but rather emergent in interaction. However, there is still more work to be done on the examination of how gender is social constructed on a moment-by-moment basis through social interaction. As Stokoe and Smithson (2001:218) have argued, much of the work on gender and language has treated gender as a fixed trait that resides in individuals thereby reifying the gender binary. They argue that even performative approaches to gender often reify a model of gender dualism (Stokoe and Smithson 2001:219). Stokoe and Smithson suggest that the path to overcome this bias is to explore gender as it appears in individuals' everyday interactions. The present article seeks to further this pursuit by providing a micro-interactional analysis of the moment-by-moment interactive construction of gender between two individuals who identify as 'genderqueer'. Through this analysis, the article explores how individuals craft complex and fluctuating gender performances by manipulating resources within the semiotic environment. By attending to genderqueer speech in interaction, the article illuminates how the individuals construct non-normative genders and how the gender binary both constrains and affords their situated semiotic action.

The article will address this in two ways. First, the article examines how one individual (Henry) uses an array of gendered signs to both challenge and creatively perform his gender. This section attends to how the gender binary both constrains and affords the production of non-normative genders. Second, the article examines how Henry uses semiotic displays to perform his gender as mutable or changing in time.

Background

The article draws on over twenty-five hours of video recordings including both open-ended, person-centred interviews and recordings of naturalistically occurring social events among 15 individuals who identified as genderqueer. Participants were solicited through friend networks in a local community of practice.⁴ The data were collected over a period of three months during which time I conducted participant observation, accompanying individuals to social events or activities. In addition, I conducted targeted life history interviews focused on gender experience. Finally, I collected video recordings of both the interviews and naturalistic interaction including meals and social events.

At the time of the ethnography, of the fifteen genderqueer participants, two were taking testosterone and had also undergone partial sexual reassignment surgery (SRS) including top surgery (mastectomy) but not bottom surgery (genital reconstruction). None had undergone facial reconstructive surgery, voice training, or other therapy. The focal individual in this article is one of the two individuals who chose to take testosterone and undergo partial sexual reassignment surgery. None of the other remaining individuals had plans to have surgery.

Among the individuals interviewed in the research, there was great diversity in individuals' gender displays. On one end of the spectrum, two individuals who identified as genderqueer performed gendered signs that consistently aligned with normative male or female gender performances. For example, Lily, who was born female, exhibited linguistic and embodied signs that consistently aligned with culturally normative feminine displays. In an interview, Lily reported that zhe didn't mind being assumed to be female, but said that zhe did not experience a particular gender and said that zhe felt neither male nor female. Lily was one of only two individuals in the study who performed semiotic displays that consistently indexed signs commonly associated with one pole of binary gender (femininity) and performed their genderqueer identity exclusively through a claimed gender identity and reported subjective experience. The majority of those involved in the ethnography were individuals whose gendered performances were

either consistently ambiguous (did not fall along a strict binary) or whose gendered performances changed over time. Examples of these more typical genderqueer presentations included individuals like Taylor who was ascribed female at birth, had long blond facial hair or beard on their chin, had breasts, and dressed androgynously.

Other individuals, like Julia, exhibited gendered presentations that changed distinctly over time. Julia was born female but reported that beginning in early high school; strangers often thought zhe was a 'guy'. At the time of the study, Julia was 22 years old, and often shaped their gendered performance with a great deal of self-reflection. For example, when selecting clothes to go out one night, Julia wondered aloud whether zhe should dress more like a guy or a girl. Julia often commented on their success at passing as both male and female, and switching between the two. These two gender categories were in no way mutually exclusive for Julia or for most others in the community. For example, when socialising with a group of men and women, Julia used the pronoun 'we' to index the group of men, and later in the night used the pronoun 'we' to index the group of women. Julia consistently used 'we' to refer to genderqueer people as well.

This use of first person plural across multiple categories seems to indicate that Julia saw themselves as moving between gendered social categories (man/woman/genderqueer). However, it is also important to note that participation in each of these categories was not necessarily inclusive in that Julia did not seem to feel that zhe could inhabit multiple categories at once. Instead, it seemed that Julia inhabited a single category at a time, and often took cues from their environment to make choices in this such that if Julia was inhabiting a female gender category, using the inclusive 'we' pronoun for women, and perhaps dressed in feminine clothing, Julia would more often use the women's restroom. On the other hand, when out with a group of gay men, and 'passing' as a man, Julia often waiting to go to the restroom until zhe was home or had access to a unisex restroom. In this way, while Julia inhabited multiple gender categories and seemed to move between them, Julia also seemed to experience social consequences that constrained their ability to inhabit these categories simultaneously. Through changing semiotic displays and through the negotiation of gendered social groups Julia and many others regularly moved between gender categories.

There seemed to be a tension between how genderqueer individuals described their gender and their everyday interactions around gender. The genderqueer people I spoke with described gender consistently asserted that gender did not existing in fixed categories. They described gender as 'fluid' and much more dynamic than a categorical or binary view of gender

would permit. However, as they navigated the social world, individuals like Julia often described themselves as navigating between categories. For most of the individuals I spoke with, there seemed to exist a tension between their ideological view of gender and their social experience. Despite their assertions that gender was fluid, playful, and dynamic, many individuals, like Julia, often described themselves navigating in and out of discrete categories they didn't necessarily believe in or endorse.

In the United States, where the cultural system of gender binaries dominates, individuals often found themselves making daily and nearly moment-to-moment efforts to navigate the categories that were socially present to them. In an environment a gender binary dominates, the act of being socially recognised as genderqueer can take nearly constant communicative effort.

In the following section, I explore how genderqueer individuals accomplish this semiotic work. I draw on data from recorded interactions with one genderqueer individual to explore the construction of gender through a set of multimodal semiotic displays. The following examples are by no means meant to represent all genderqueer individuals. Instead, the goal of the following section is to explore the semiotic resources people have available to them to perform their genders through a close look at one individual's semiotic displays. In other words, although this article does not attempt to demonstrate a process representative of one group, it aims to exemplify more generally how gender is performed using semiotic material through an iterative process that shifts over time.

Semiotic agency

Gender is expressed through a series of signs ranging from embodied signs as well as clothing, gesture, and linguistic features including prosody among others. Individuals have varying degrees of control and awareness of these semiotic displays. Transgender, intersex, and gender variant individuals who identify outside of a gender binary are often highly reflective regarding their gender performance. In their study of travestis in Brazil, for example, Borba and Osterman write 'travestis' bodies transcend the status of passive supports for their social modifications; they become active participants in building sociolinguistic meanings' (Borba and Osterman 2007:133).

Borba and Osterman refer this active participation in the construction of one's own gender as 'embodiment.' They define embodiment as 'the appropriation of signs that index gender and sexuality made by transgendered people.' They describe the process of embodiment as 'the stamping of socio-politically loaded cultural signs of gender and sexuality on indi-

viduals' bodies' (Borba and Osterman 2007:132). They assert that 'travestis' feminizing processes demonstrate that the body is taken not as a passive means on which social meanings are nailed but as an active participant in the constructions of those meanings' (Borba and Osterman 2007:134).

The term embodiment is employed differently by many scholars to refer to the involvement of the body in interaction. The term has been used with increasing frequency and attention by conversation analysts, and in a recent review article of over 400 articles Nevile (2015:122) documented the term embodiment used to reference a range of communicative acts including gesture, pointing, gaze, posture, facial expression as well as touch, and larger activities in the world such as driving or flying. In addition, following a phenomenological influence, anthropologists have been increasingly using the term embodiment to describe body's perceptual experience and its 'mode of presence and engagement in the world' (Csordas 1993:135).

These more common uses of embodiment do not capture the sense of agency present in Borba and Osterman's highly specific use of the term embodiment ('the appropriation of signs that index gender and sexuality made by transgendered people'; Borba and Osterman 2007:132). The question of agency is a critical component to understanding how individuals negotiate and perform gender. However, given that the term 'embodiment' is used far more frequently in the literature to refer to the use of the body in interaction and to the subjective components of experiencing the body, I am reluctant to adopt their definition of the term. Instead, I propose examining the embodied performance of gender through the exploration of agency. An exploration of agency affords attention to how signs are employed to perform gender.

Agency has been defined in various ways. Some definitions of agency connect agency and intentionality: for example the Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences defines agency as social action that is 'purposely shaped by individuals' (Drislane and Parkinson 2004). This definition implies that agency involves a form of intentionality and freedom to create, change and influence events. In this article, however I follow the definitions offered by linguistic anthropologists Laura Ahearn and Alessandro Duranti who argue that agency and intentionality, while connected, are distinct. Both Ahearn and Duranti hold that agency involves that one can or does perform an act, whether or not one is self-reflexive about the act.

Laura Ahearn defines agency as: 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn 2001:112). Alessandro Duranti's definition of agency incorporates a similar framework. He writes:

Agency is here understood as the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities' (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome). (Duranti 2004:453)

Agency involves minimally acting in the world. As acting in the world is almost always social, agency frequently affects others or is evaluated by others. Significantly, Ahearn's definition highlights the fact that all action is mediated by local social and cultural structures or systems. Gender performance is, of course, a more specific set of actions involving a suite of engagements tied to the use or manipulations of signs in the world.

In his work on semiotic agency, Paul Kockleman defines agency as 'the relatively flexible wielding of means toward ends' (Kockleman 2007:375). This concept of flexibility is very useful when thinking about semiotic agency. Within his definition of what he calls 'residential agency,' Kockleman includes the ability to 'control the expression of a sign' (Kockleman 2007:376). Similarly, Charles Goodwin has discussed semiotic agency as 'the ability to deploy a set of signs that allow people to act in certain ways' and as involving the production of signs by a situated actor (Goodwin, personal communication, 5 February 2008). Goodwin argues that the agency involved in 'visibly pursuing a course of action through sign use' can be recognised by others, and can lead to cooperative semiosis in which actors produce signs in concert with each other (Goodwin, personal communication, 4 June 2008). In Goodwin's definition, these semiotic actions not only have to be deployed, but also must be taken up in some way by other persons.

Similar to Goodwin's concept of cooperative semiosis, which refers to the exchange of signs between interlocutors as they emerge through interaction (Goodwin 2013), the concept of semiotic agency allows us to explore the role of agency in the culturally mediated deployment of signs in the world. Critically, attention to semiotic agency affords the inclusion of signs without requiring intention to engage in interaction. This would then include, for example, signs inscribed on a body from birth that may remain hidden from interactive engagement yet nevertheless hold powerful meaning for individuals themselves.

Semiotic agency, or, simply put, the attention to how agency is deployed in the semiotic environment allows us to explore how individuals create and communicate new genders. In an environment replete with the signs associated with a binary gendered system, attention to semiotic agency affords insight into how individuals who identify with non-binary genders challenge, maintain, or move beyond the gender binary.

The exploration of semiotic agency can be complemented with attention to how various signs endure in time. Some semiotic modes of gender expression are more temporally and physically enduring than others. The physical body and gendered aspects of the physical body endure in space and time. One's height and build, along with physiological characteristics (curviness, muscular biceps, breasts and genitalia, for example) are all highly durable communicative signs that can index gender. This durability of breasts, for example, can provide an enduring sign of femininity that carries over time and can be a structural constraint on the expression of masculinity; since breasts are so highly indexical of femininity and so highly durable, one's agency in this gender display is structurally constrained. However, even with this physical constraint, an individual can exert control over the way that this physical index of femininity is interactively activated. For example, an individual can wear clothing to reveal or highlight her breasts or the individual can choose to tightly bind their breasts, and wear more 'masculine' clothing. In each of these situations, gesture, posture, and other semiotic modalities also affect the semiotic role of this physical feature in interaction. Individuals can also alter the semantic meaning of physiological characteristics through the process of renaming (Zimman 2014). One individual in this study, for example, reported that she uses the term 'puffy nipples' to ascribe more masculine or ambiguous meaning to what otherwise would be called their breasts. Each of these signs only becomes meaningful when it is taken up and interpreted by interlocutors. As a result, signs vary cross culturally and vary depending on unfolding interaction. Therefore there is great cross cultural variability in the interpretation of gendered signs (Cameron 2005; Davies 2010; Nanda 2014).

Although some indexes associated with gender such as height are tremendously durable in time and extremely difficult to change, there is the possibility of surgical transformation of the body for individuals with particular cultural and economic resources. Much work has been done on the ways in which physiological characteristics of the body have been altered to signify gender in various ways (Blackwood 2005; Hall 2012; Feinberg 1996; Kulick 1998; Teh 2002). Thus many signs of even the highest durability can be modified. Modifications to gendered signs are made possible or impossible within different cultural contexts, and they are always interconnected with other culturally relevant categories such as class, ethnicity, and communities of practice.

Other semiotic displays of gender are highly flexible, and therefore hold very little durability. An example of this would be pitch contours such as high rise terminals, which have been found to be associated femininity

in most American cultural contexts (Smyth et al. 2003; Speer and Green 2007). Pitch contours do not endure in space and time after their production and are not constrained by physical constraints as any competent and physically sound speaker can produce them. Semiotic agency therefore is less constrained for the production of these more flexible signs including prosody or lexical items.⁵

Semiotic displays that index gender emerge through linguistic modalities including lexicon, morphosyntax, prosody, and through embodied modalities including clothing, tattoos, physical traits, gesture, and bodily orientation. All of these signs can emerge and change over time, and while some are more durable than others, almost all of these semiotic displays can be manipulated with varying levels of semiotic agency and varying levels of awareness. In the following section, I examine how these semiotic displays emerge and can be manipulated to construct gender in interaction over time.

Henry's semiotic displays

In this section, I examine an interaction with one focal individual, Henry, and a second genderqueer individual, Taylor. Henry and Taylor are Euro-American young adults living in northern California who were both assigned female at birth. At the time of the interaction, I had known Taylor for a number of weeks. On the day of this recording, I shadowed Taylor as she met up with Henry.⁶ After coffee I followed Taylor and Henry to a public park where I recorded the ensuing conversation.

Henry is a professional in his late twenties. Henry had undergone top surgery (a mastectomy) and hormone therapy (including taking testosterone). Although he passed as male, Henry identified as genderqueer. In the transcript below Henry discusses his gender. During this segment, Henry coupled his speech with a number of embodied displays. The figures in the text following the transcript include frame grabs to illustrate some of the embodied displays that accompanied Henry's talk.

The following passage begins as Henry is talking about his gender. Before this passage begins, Henry had introduced the topic of his genderqueer identity.

- 1 H: I do identify as genderqueer still,
 2 A: oh okay,
 3 H: I mean it's not like my primary thing,
 4 but I like the idea that physically I'm male now,
 5 I'm not your standard male,
 6 but I'm on T::, like
 7 you know I'm fucking hairy, like whatever
 8 like I'm a dude now.

Table 1: Table of durability concerning Henry’s semiotic displays.

MOST DURABLE (LEAST FLEXIBLE)		(LEAST DURABLE) MOST FLEXIBLE
Male pattern baldness	Clothing	Pitch contours/variability
Hairy chest	Haircut	Prosody
Flat chest	Beard	Embodied displays
Tattoo ('boy')	Shirt off	Posture
Low pitch ⁷	Pronoun (he/she/zhe) ⁸	Gesture
	Legal name	Lexicon

Of course, Henry’s agency in displaying these signs is mediated by social structure. The more durable signs are mediated by larger sociopolitical factors including access to medical institutions and the financial means to access these resources. Thus one’s agency to display these signs (for example the flat hairy chest, for individuals who were born female) is highly mediated by the physical structures of male and female bodies. Other signs, like clothing or pitch contours, are more flexible; these signs are more available for manipulation.

The display of certain signs is also mediated by environmental factors and participant frameworks. As in any face-to-face interaction, Henry’s semiotic displays are mediated by the participant framework and the environmental setting of the interaction. The sunny day, the local park, the casual social setting all afforded Henry the possibility of removing his shirt. Our face-to-face arrangement and Henry’s bare chest, for example, afforded the use of his body as a field of relevant signs that Henry drew upon to display his gender in the interaction.

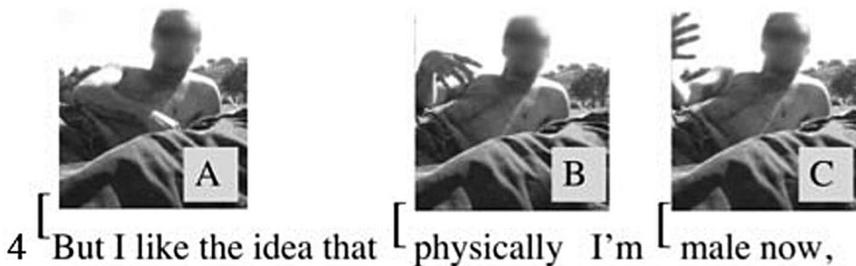


Figure 1.

In the utterance depicted in Figure 1, Henry invokes a large culturally salient category ‘male’ (in ‘I’m male now’). The identity category is modi-

fied by the words 'physically' and 'now'. We know from ethnographic data that Henry had a female body until a couple years before the recording. Even without the ethnographic evidence, however, looking just within the boundary of the utterance, Henry constructs himself as a certain kind of male. Here, the adjective 'physically' modifies 'male'. This qualifies which aspect of Henry is in fact 'male', implying a possible contrast between those traits that Henry has constructed as male and others which may be more ambiguous or feminine, that may not fit this category. It also provides epistemic validation of his claim. By arguing that he is 'physically male' Henry is able to both validate the truth of the claim that he's male (he has physical evidence) while simultaneously rejecting the notion that maleness is a fixed, binary category. The statement that Henry is male 'now' modifies the claim to maleness on a temporal dimension. The 'now' provides a temporal frame that limits the time frame in which this statement is true. The 'now' implies not only that Henry's gender may have (and did) change over time, but also that gender is a category that is in fact negotiable and emergent.

Henry invokes the category male not only verbally but also through embodied performance. The images in the transcript (above) capture some of this embodied performance. As Henry produces the adjective 'physically', he simultaneously produced the gesture captured in image B of Figure 1. Here, Henry's hand is turned with the palm facing inwards and acts as a deictic marker, pointing towards his body, specifically to his chest, which he is using to index his 'physical' masculinity. This environmentally coupled gesture (Goodwin 2007), coproduced with the verbal sign 'physically male', transforms his body into a relevant semiotic field, here, a flat hairy chest which is used here to symbolically evidence Henry's physical male-ness.

At the end of the utterance, as Henry articulates that he is male 'now', the deictic posture is released; Henry's arms move out to each side and both palms open (Figure 1, image C). This gesture ends with a beat (by both arms) on the word 'male' producing gestural emphasis on this term (McNeill 1992). This chest open/arms spread gesture indexes confidence and power and is often associated with American masculinity. Through the coupling of this gesture and the verbal claim that he is 'male', Henry is providing a multimodal semiotic performance of his male-ness.

In this utterance, Henry constructs his gender through a range of embodied semiotic displays. Lexically he draws on a culturally recognisable category (male). This category is performed through embodied actions including performances of masculinity (Figure 1, image C) as well as deictic markers in which more durable semiotic signs are invoked, including his (naked) hairy (flat, masculine) chest. The whole utterance is also spoken using a very small pitch range, associated with masculinity in the

USA (Smyth et al. 2003), and with relatively low pitch, another sign associated with masculinity that Henry has modified by taking testosterone.

As we can see from the above utterance various semiotic displays act in concert to construct Henry as not just 'male' but as a certain type of male; his gender is both physically and temporally situated. Thus far, we have seen Henry's gender or 'maleness':

- afforded through the semiotic displays associated with his physical body;
- performed through the linguistic and embodied production of indexical signs and environmentally coupled gestures drawing on physical signs on his body; and
- temporally situated in contrast to previous moments in time when Henry was not physically, linguistically, or socially male.

In this way, his gender not only emerges in interactive time and space but also in contrast to previous instantiations of his past gender(s). Furthermore, the semiotic assertion of a gender that changes over time upends the notion of a fixed binary system while simultaneously relying on that system to construct the new, non-binary gender.

As the interaction unfolds, Henry displays a range of semiotic agency. On the most enduring level, Henry has expressed semiotic agency in choosing to undergo sexual reassignment surgery and take testosterone. In the moments that unfold as Henry speaks this utterance, Henry expresses agency in invoking these durable sign of masculinity not only by removing his shirt (at the beginning of the interview), but also by producing an indexical gesture with his palm facing inward towards his chest, which was coupled with the verbal production of 'physically male'. This semantic meaning of 'physical maleness' was substantiated by the symbol of his flat, hairy chest.

In the utterances that follow, Henry continues to both construct and modify his gender. In line 5, he modifies his gender category, saying that he's not 'your standard male'. This term is coupled with an embodied quotative gesture (Figure 2, image D).

This quotative gesture marks the term 'standard male' as reported speech, or a separate voice. Here, Henry's quotative gesture provides an epistemic stance on the category. He's framing this category as recognised by others and therefore holding a generally salient 'truth'. But by using reported speech to invoke this category, Henry questions the epistemic validity of this claim through stance. However, it is important to note that he is not claiming to be a non-standard male. The use of reported speech allows Henry to perform the category that others see him as embodying while simultaneously critiquing the category. He distances himself from

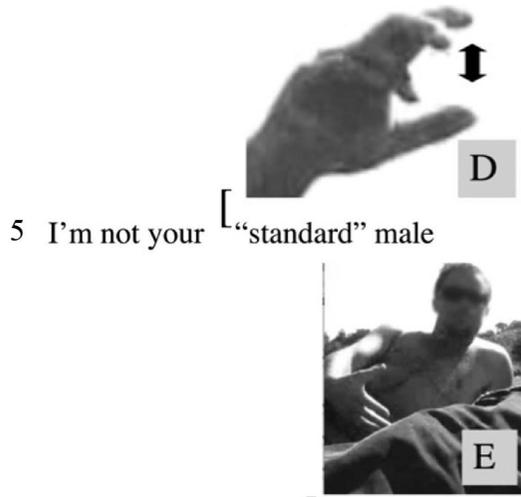


Figure 2.

the claim and then responds to the reported speech in his own voice. In response to this epistemically marked claim that he is not a ‘standard’ male, Henry provides instantiations of his maleness. Henry is claiming a male gender while simultaneously critiquing the gender binary.

In this way, the utterance is constructed dialogically as interactive, with Henry performing both voices (for further discussion of the dialogic emergence of gender in genderqueer narratives, see Corwin 2009). Henry’s response (the many instantiations of his maleness) occur over the next three lines. Again, here he uses a number of semiotic displays (Figure 3).

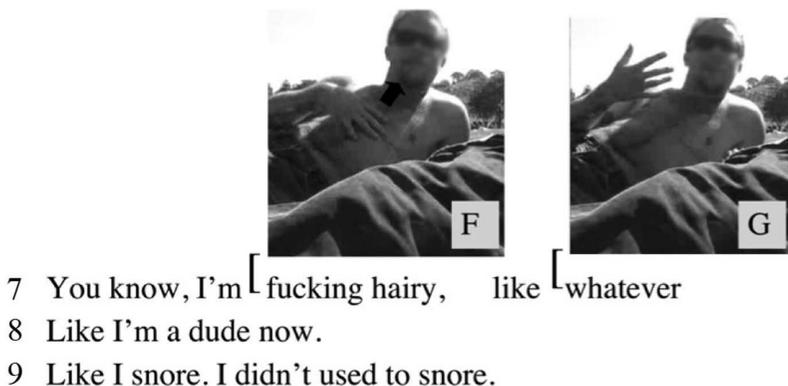


Figure 3.

In these utterances (lines 6–9), Henry provides instantiations of his maleness. In line 6, he says ‘I’m on T’ (testosterone). Like the statement (above) that he’s ‘physically male’, this is both an epistemic validation of his current masculinity and a comment on the temporal dimension of this masculinity, indexing a past where he was not on ‘T’, and possibly not male or differently male. Of particular interest is the second half of line 6. Here, the second half of the utterance is completed non-verbally. Henry says ‘like’ and then pauses for 1.5 seconds, during which time he completes the utterance through embodied performance. The gesture (partially captured in Figure 2, image E), consists of a defiant frown, with pursed lips, as he spreads his arms to reveal his chest. This gesture completes the utterance by providing embodied gestural display of strength and a defiant stance as epistemic validation of his masculinity.

In line 7, Henry provides further evidence of his masculinity, arguing that he is ‘fucking hairy’. Here, Henry instantiates his male-ness through a register shift (Agha 2007:81) ‘fucking’ and ‘dude’ (line 8) are lexical indexes of a gruff youth register again often associated with masculinity. This hairiness is indexed not only through the verbal claim, but also through a gestural inward movement of his hand over his hairy chest (Figure 3, image F). The end of line 7, ‘like whatever’, is accompanied by a gesture similar to that in line 6 (Figure 2, image E). Here, image G of Figure 3 represents another arms-open, chest-forward masculine embodied display.

In line 8, Henry says ‘Like, I’m a dude now’. This claim is distinct than the original claim that he is ‘male’. Here Henry is claiming to be a certain kind of male, a ‘dude’, a younger, perhaps more hip subset of men. In this moment, Henry has transformed the topic of concern; through these semi-otic displays, Henry is not conveying one of a possible two genders within a binary landscape. Now Henry embodies a new category, a specific type of young male. He is a dude.

Finally, in line 9, Henry claims that he snores, but that he ‘didn’t used to’. Again here, a temporal frame is invoked. This somewhat unusual sign of masculinity, which is provided as an instantiation of being male, is confined within this temporal frame. It’s also interesting that this seemingly uncontrollable behaviour (snoring occurs while one is asleep!) is cited as naturalistic evidence that Henry is male. In this example, Henry points to the fact that he’s modified these public embodied signs of gender over time (he snores now, while he didn’t before), while simultaneously arguing that his male-ness is naturalised, since these signs are produced even while he is sleeping. Again, here, Henry relies on the structure of a gender binary to evidence his gender while simultaneously undoing the binary by forging a new non-normative gender.

Changing gender expressions

So far, this article has aimed to demonstrate how gender is dynamically performed through a collection of semiotic displays that change over time. The utterances above contain a number of clearly masculine signs and a gender categories, including 'male' and 'dude' along with more subtle instantiations of these categories. In the subsequent sequence of utterances, Henry's gendered performance changes considerably. He moves from expressing his gender category as 'male' to a more feminine/genderqueer gender expression in the following utterances (Figure 4).

13 And the fact that I'm more comfortable in my skin now↑



14 allows me to be more fluid and more fe-mmy than I ever was



15 which is a lot of [trans - guys - [stories.
16 aww

Figure 4.

In this passage, Henry categorises himself as a 'trans guy' (line 16). This category is more or less consistent with the displays we saw earlier, in which the category 'male' was modified by references to Henry's transgender history. Here, the Henry identifies as a categorically distinct kind of male, a 'trans guy'. More interesting than this identity category are the semiotic displays that accompany the claim. In line 3, Henry produces a high rise terminal on 'now' (marked by the arrow). This high rise terminal which is associated with a question is an indexical marker of a passive or questioning stance and indirectly indexes femininity. In just this line, Henry's gender performance deviates from the earlier passages. This change in

pitch contour is a semiotic display associated with femininity, one of the first to appear in this set of utterances.

In line 14, Henry says that he feels more ‘fluid and femmy than [he] ever was’. These lexical claims to femininity are coupled with an embodied display of distinct from the embodied performances of strength and bravado a moment earlier. As he says ‘than I ever was’, Henry wiggles his head back and forth and then tilts his chin to his chest. This movement, a difficult one to capture in a transcript, is the most typically feminine gesture Henry has produced thus far. In line 16, as Henry produces ‘trans guys’, he tucks his head down and smiles bashfully in a demure display (image ‘I’). The posture is similar to the feminine head tilts described by Goffman in *Gender Advertisements* (Goffman 1979). Towards the end of line 14 and throughout line 15, Henry produces another semiotic display associated with femininity: his voice quality changes, becoming quieter and softer. This combination of semiotic displays act together to transform Henry’s gender identity from highly masculine (lines 1–9) to a more muted, seemingly feminine gender display.

Finally, in line 17, overlapping Henry’s production of ‘stories’, I say ‘aww’, a highly affective, response cry. This utterance can be contrasted with my staccato series of laughs (line 10), a far less emotive performance. In this moment, Henry’s gender displays are interactive. As his semiotic displays became more affective, my response softened to correlate with his emerging gender expression.

While, like Henry, all individuals draw on culturally relevant signs to perform gender, what is unique about Henry’s sequence of utterances is his combination of masculine and feminine semiotic displays. Henry’s combination of signs was typical of gendered displays across the majority of the genderqueer individuals who participated in the research. He consistently drew on the resources of a binary system of gender to creatively construct a non-binary gender.

Detailed analysis of Henry’s performance has hopefully made visible the constructed nature of gender performance. Gender becomes visible here as a set of performative moves that draw on a range of semiotic material that emerge over time. The emergent nature of gender performance allows it to transform over time in ways that can be both subtle and profound.

Conclusion

This article has shown that gender emerges in interaction through a range of multimodal semiotic displays. Through these semiotic displays genderqueer individuals are both constrained by and creatively resist the gender

binary system. Micro-interactional attention to Henry's semiotic displays shows how genderqueer individuals draw on the gender binary, are restricted by it, and creatively resist it, creating new gender expressions. This process of forging new space outside the gender binary is afforded through variable expressions of semiotic agency.

Henry's gender is expressed on more durable levels, which are often invoked or highlighted through a combination of signs. These semiotic displays include more durable signs like low pitch, hairy chest, receding hairline, somewhat less durable signs like clothing and body orientation, and finally highly flexible signs, like gesture and pitch contours, that changed throughout the performance. These signs were used to index gender in various ways including environmentally coupled displays (indexes of these durable signs, pointing towards chest) and through less temporally durable (and more quickly changing) displays like pitch range, gesture, and syntax. In sum, this article has shown that genderqueer identity emerges through an interactive multimodal semiotic process and is communicated through continuously emerging semiotic displays that both rely on and challenge a binary system of gender.

About the author

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Appendix: transcription conventions

- ::: colons indicate lengthening of the sound preceding the colons
- () parentheses indicate the author's description of affect/gesture
- (0.5) parentheses containing a number indicate a pause and the number of seconds
- [] square brackets indicate overlapping speech
- ↑ arrow in text indicates high rise terminal
- word underlining indicates emphatic speech
- ⇔ arrows on an image indicate embodied movement

Notes

- 1 All names are pseudonyms.
- 2 Transcription conventions appear in appendix.
- 3 The individuals in the study used a variety of pronouns. Taylor prefers the third-person singular pronouns 'zhe/their/them'
- 4 I asked individuals to recommend friends, and asked those individuals to recommend their friends. While not all of the individuals knew each other, most engaged with one or more of the other participants in ongoing social interaction.
- 5 As always, there are sociocultural constraints that must not be forgotten. In certain situations, for example, a man might not feel comfortable, or may endure negative consequences, if he produces a great number of high-rise terminals throughout his speech in environments where perceived expressions of femininity produced by males are not socially sanctioned.
- 6 All of the data discussed in this article were collected in accordance with IRB protocol.
- 7 While the size of one's pitch range is flexible, one's average pitch is less flexible.
- 8 Although the pronouns an individual uses are highly flexible, not enduring long in time, the pronouns others use to refer to an individual are somewhat less flexible as they involve historical patterns or additional requests (as in: 'please use the pronoun zhe when referring to me').

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