Something Off My Chest

Queer Sensibilities of Clothing, Gender, and the Body

Maaike Weitering (496093)

Supervisor: Willem Schinkel

Engaging Public Issues Master's Thesis

Erasmus University Rotterdam

June 23rd, 2023

Abstract

This thesis explores how people who live outside, between, or beyond the gender binary navigate the embodied and material experience of gender through clothes or the way they dress. To do so, it uses a queer adaptation of the wardrobe interview, understood as a material-semiotic approach to methods. In total, ten wardrobe interviews were conducted. Theoretically, the project is situated within queer studies, primarily indebted to the works of Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and José Esteban Muñoz. The combination of the materiality of the wardrobe, personal narratives, and theoretical concepts such as performativity, disidentification, and queerness, yields an understanding of gender that is closely tied to the materiality of clothing and the body. In the discussion, the writings of Andrea Long Chu are used to critically consider gender as a category of inquiry as well as the wardrobe as a political space.

Keywords: clothing, gender, queer, wardrobe interview.

I wanna be pretty like boys are pretty
But when I try I just look like a girl

I style my hair
Brushing left, brushing right
I remain in the middle - parted

I put on my shirt and questions begin to form
Sleeves cuffed up or rolled to the wrist?
Button up or open collar?

The jeans don't fit quite right
Too baggy here, too tight there

I look like a boy, but it's not pretty

I swap the shirt for a tightly fitted tee
Tucking it in to high waisted trousers
They're tight in "all the right places"

Now I'm pretty - but like a girl

I'm constricted by the t-shirt
It's gotta go
Bring back the shirt with a boyish charm

Add sneakers and tousle my hair
The earrings I've been wanting
Check myself in the mirror one more time

I'm pretty

This poem was written by one of the informants that took part in this thesis project. With their permission, I put it right at the beginning, as it strikingly illustrates the struggle that this thesis grapples with: navigating the embodied and material experience of gender, specifically for people who live outside, between, or beyond the gender binary.

The past few years have seen an expansion of queer and trans discourse to include genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, and other gender-nonconforming people. Yet, there remains a lack of literature, research, language, or other tools that venture to understand the embodied and material experience of genderqueer people (to stick with this term for now). Theoretically, this topic is underexplored, as it concerns identity categories that exist

somewhere in the liminal space between queer theory and transgender studies. Other available knowledge is highly medicalized, discussing gender dysphoria as a medical condition to be treated (Corwin, 2017; Darwin, 2017). What is needed, then, is a way of knowing and understanding the experience of inhabiting a body that goes beyond the medicalized and the purely theoretical: gender is not something conceptual, but something that happens to bodies (Robinson, 2022; Salamon, 2010; Taylor, 2018). Thus, drawing from queer theory and material semiotics, this thesis is an inquiry into ways of knowing that are rooted in the body and its engagement with the material world, raising the problem in a way that concerns what we do, what happens, how we use things, what we say, how we express ourselves, what we fight against, how we intervene, and how we struggle (Butler, 2021; Gunn, 2015; Ilupeju, 2022; Laing, 2021).

This leads to the following research question: *how do genderqueer people navigate the embodied and material experience of gender through clothing and the way they dress?* Navigating, in this context, refers to finding non-normative ways of being in normative spaces and systems.

Theoretical framework

In order to explore the research question, this project dives into wardrobe studies, conceptualized as a material-semiotic approach to methods. First and foremost, however, its theoretical roots lie in queer theory, using theories and concepts from Butler, Sedgwick, and Muñoz as analytical sensibilities and tools that can be used to analyze and dissect the inventory of notes, photos, and narratives gathered from the wardrobe interviews.

Gender performativity

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, first articulated in *Gender Trouble,* questions subjects' agency in assigning identity categories to themselves, arguing that identities are not chosen but stabilized through the disciplined repetition of performative acts,

governed by hegemonic heteronormative discourses (Butler, 1990). Taking from Foucault, discourses are systems of power relations comprised of ideas, concepts, and practices that systematically produce and assign meaning to that of which they speak. In her later work *Bodies that Matter*, Butler writes that gender performativity was misread by some to mean that "one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night" (Butler, 1993b, p.10). Thus, they emphasize that gender identity is not a choice, a role, or something you pick out of your wardrobe. Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act' or performance, but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. There is no subject prior to its gendering. This means that gender performativity is never voluntary; never singular. Instead, it is an ongoing, repetitive nexus of power and discourse that constitutes the practice of materialization and becoming (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993a).

Ergo, performativity can never be equated with performance. The former is distinguished from the latter, insofar as performativity entails a citation of norms that precede and constrain the performer, and which, importantly, cannot be understood as the performer's choice or will. Whereas performance might imply a moment of agency, this agency is always already constituted and determined by the discursive power that precedes and surrounds it. Performance is necessarily subsumed by performativity. Agency and the potential for subversion are limited within Butler's framework of gender performativity, as the latter cannot be detached from past iterations of gender performance (Butler, 1993a, p.232).

The term 'queer' emerges as an interpellation that contests the status of power versus opposition, and stability versus variability, within performativity. The (gender)queer subject, who is queered into discourse through homophobic or transphobic interpellations of various kinds, cites those very terms as the discursive basis for an opposition. For Butler, the failure

to approximate the norm is not the same as the subversion of the norm. Crucial, however, is the fact that repetitions are never simple replicas of the same: reiteration also always means difference. This means that the question of subversion of the norm becomes a matter of inhabiting the practices of its re-articulation. Butler points towards the ability of drag to allegorize the seeming naturalness of heterosexual performativity. It is not that drag opposes heterosexuality, but, through parody and the hyperbolic, it exposes the failure of heterosexual regimes to ever fully control or contain their own ideals. Thus, while the subversive potential of gender performance is significantly constrained, as it is relative to the norm, the potential for subversiveness lies in the ability to expose this norm as imitative, hence undermining the illusion of a stable self (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993a). Important to note here, is that this notion of subversion remains stuck in the dichotomy of norm and subversion.

Epistemology of the closet

Like Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick concerns herself with the consideration of how discourse operates to produce identities that are performed and contested. *Epistemology of the Closet* discusses ‘the closet’ as a misleading spatial metaphor. Sedgwick argues that, while experienced as a private problem, the closet is produced by the heteronormative assumptions of everyday talk: assumptions about what goes without saying; what can be known about a person just by looking at them; what can be said without a breach of decorum; and who will bear the consequences of speech and silence. Consequently, the closet is not a private issue – an individual's lie about themselves – but it is publicly constructed, and therefore better understood as the culture’s problem. In a regime of heteronormative discourse, publicness will feel like exposure, and privacy will feel like the closet. The closet may seem to be a kind of protection, as being publicly known as homosexual is never the same as being publicly known as heterosexual: the latter always goes without saying and troubles nothing, whereas the former carries echoes of pathologized visibility. It is perfectly meaningless to ‘come out’

as heterosexual. Thus, in the normative sense of the terms, a queer person has neither privacy nor publicness. Rather than creating a closet for themselves, people find themselves in its oppressive conditions before they know it (Berlant, 2019; Edwards, 2009; Hall & Jagose, 2013; Sedgwick, 1990).

Whilst Sedgwick's rendition of the closet mostly concerns sexuality, perhaps a version of the same problem faces genderqueer people (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). This could especially be the case for informants who pass as female or male but identify otherwise. The task of managing public and social perceptions and stigmatizations of gender may present itself as being like the closet, and it might display a similar inequality in knowledge claims. The leverage of medical discourse, for example, is that it appears as a public and authoritative kind of knowledge, supposedly objective and neutral, whereas the gender-nonconforming person's claims about their own identity are understood as subjective, private, and pathological, creating a transaction of knowledge that makes the latter dependent on the former. As such, the closet serves to uphold and reinforce hierarchical sexual and gendered dichotomies, making them appear natural or descriptive (Berlant, 2019; Parker & Sedgwick, 1995; Sedgwick, 1990).

Queer and now

In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick further expands her argument against monolithic understandings of sexuality and gender that presume binary categories and dichotomies such as gay and straight; woman and man. As argued in the context of the closet, these dichotomies create and reinforce a hierarchical perception of the world that masquerades as natural. Moving beyond issues of gender and sexuality, the term 'queer' can work to explore intersectional issues that acknowledge the relations of ethnicity, race, and postcolonial nationalisms to gender and sexuality. As such, queer theory not only deconstructs dichotomies of gender and sex, but also the part and the whole; safety and danger; fear and

hope; past and future; thought and act; natural and technological (Hall & Jagose, 2013; Sedgwick, 1993). Hence, for Sedgwick, the idea of queer opens up a world of different possibilities for defining and understanding oneself:

"A word so fraught as "queer" is—fraught with so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement—never can only denote; nor even can it only connote; a part of its experimental force as a speech act is the way in which it dramatizes locutionary position itself. Anyone's use of "queer" about themselves means differently from their use of it about someone else. […] A hypothesis worth making explicit: that there are important senses in which "queer" can signify only when attached to the first person. One possible corollary: that what it takes—all it takes—to make the description "queer" a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person" (Sedgwick, 1993, p.8).

Sedgwick's discussion on performativity relates primarily to speech acts, a tradition of philosophical thought concerning utterances and phrases that do not merely describe, but actually perform the actions they name. Discussions of linguistic performativity have become a place from which it becomes possible to reflect on ways in which language can be said to produce effects of identity or enforcement. This is illustrated in the quote above: does it change the way we understand meaning, if the semantic force of a word like 'queer' is different in a first-person from what it is in a second- or third-person sentence? While this seems mostly linguistic, Sedgwick is able to illustrate the instability of the supposed oppositions that structure an experience of the self. Exposing these power relations means challenging normative identity categories, and destabilizing or deconstructing the oppressions they propagate (Berlant, 2019; Edwards, 2009). Crucially, this understanding of queer moves away from categorization, not only by deconstructing binaries, but by finding normativity's "secret reserves of elasticity": making space for the flexible, the unpredictable, the ambiguous, and the contradictory (Sedgwick, 1990, p.135). While for Butler, subversiveness

retains fidelity to the norm, Sedgwick sees the potential of queer theory precisely as the ability to deconstruct this binary of norm versus subversion (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1993).

Disidentification and queer worldmaking

José Esteban Muñoz's writing is concerned with how queer people of color, as a result of the effects of colonialism, have been placed outside hegemonic racial and sexual ideology, i.e. white normativity and heteronormativity. He theorizes another strategy to resist the power relations inherent in these normativities, by developing the concept of disidentification as a tool to analyze the ways in which minority subjects manage or negotiate a public sphere that continuously suppresses and exerts violence upon those who do not conform. The disidentificatory subject does not assimilate (identify) nor reject (counter-identify) dominant ideology. Rather, they employ a third strategy, and "tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against, a cultural form" (Muñoz, 1999, p.19). Disidentification is a process of reworking the cultural codes of the mainstream to be able to read yourself into the mainstream. As such, it is a survival strategy that consists of a simultaneous insertion and subversion. Muñoz makes it possible to redefine queer culture by simultaneously undermining and acknowledging normativities, rendering it permeable and profuse (Muñoz, 1999). The notion of disidentification might prove very useful in analyzing people's lives and practices. However, seen through the eyes of Butler, disidentification remains bound to identification, and hence, to the norm.

Arguably contra Butler, Muñoz's conceptualization of queer worldmaking delineates how performances – both theatrical and everyday rituals – have the ability to establish alternative worldviews. More than simply views or perspectives, they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of 'truth'. For Muñoz, queer worldmaking does not need to locate a tear in the social fabric to thrive. If anything, it is

rectified in its unique ability to undermine the normative while simultaneously functioning as a bottom-up engagement with the everyday (Muñoz, 1999; Muñoz, 2009).

Queer worldmaking and utopianism question the existence of the future and the present as a rigid binary. Heterosexual culture depends on a notion of the future as a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction, but this is not the case for cultures of dissidence: a queer version of utopianism cannot necessarily be conceptualized linearly. Queering the concept of futurity abolishes the necessity of realizing a fixed utopia, instead creating the potential for queer futurity. In the words of Moten: "José's queerness is a utopian project whose temporal dimensionality is manifest not only as projection into the future but also as a projection of a certain futurity into and onto the present and the past" (Moten, 2014, §1). Muñoz's queer utopianism creates spaces that can be created in reality, "a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present" (Muñoz, 2009, p.49). They may be something as fleeting as a queer performance or the act of having queer sex in public. Either way, they are places where individuals can challenge the heteronormative regime and are free to perform their gender and sexuality without fear of being categorized, marginalized, or punished. In this way, Muñoz's utopia can offer a type of actualization to queer theories (Moten, 2014; Muñoz, 2009).

Wardrobe studies

Wardrobe interviews are a material method in which researchers are invited (or invite themselves) into informants' wardrobes, and conduct their research based on and with the items of clothing present in the wardrobe. This type of research has taken different shapes, forms, and aims, ranging from inquiries into sustainability, fashion trends, family dynamics, and so on (Klepp & Bjerck, 2012; Woodward & Woodward, 2009; Woodward, 2020). Wardrobe interviews approach the wardrobe as a set of relations between things, as well as things that are relations – it is a method of researching things in themselves, as well as

researching *with* things. The interviews revolve around the embodied experience of clothes as a notion of the past and a passage through the memories, narratives, and emotions that are associated with them. Besides this, the state, size, shape, brand, and color of the garment, as well as where it is placed within or outside the wardrobe, are important sources of information. Wardrobe interviews can be posited as a provocative method: they provoke researchers and informants to think differently about a particular phenomenon, reveal patterns that the informants themselves were not aware of, and provoke different responses and results than might be obtained using methods that neglect material culture (Law, 2019; Woodward, 2007; Woodward, 2020).

The queer, the chest, and the wardrobe

In Sophie Woodward's work, wardrobe interviews are part of a study of clothes themselves. Following in the footsteps of researchers like her, this project could be conceived of as an adapted, queer version of wardrobe studies, relocating the focus from clothes alone toward gender and the body (Küchler & Miller, 2005; Woodward, 2020). While remaining interested in the materiality of clothing, it is interested too in what is underneath: to explore, in material detail, the embodied experience of gender. Thus, it seeks to use clothing and the way informants dress as an entry into larger material totalities and conceptualizations of gender. This poses the following question: compared to Woodward's use of wardrobe studies, how does that make a difference? Or: if it is not merely linguistic or analytical, but embodied knowledge we are after, how might this method be of use?

Wardrobe interviews produce material on how clothes are discussed in the specific context of the interview – other contexts may produce different discussions about the same clothes. Rather than regarding this as a limitation, this project uses this to its advantage. The potential of the wardrobe interview and its inherent focus on materiality is its ability to structure the conversation around something concrete and related to practice. The bodily

experience of clothes becomes a source of enactments, perceptions, and interactions, both within and among bodies, that make it possible to investigate clothes' performative and ideological functions within cultural and social heteronormative power structures. Some of the most interesting issues emerge in the discussions around and through objects. By positioning the wardrobe interviews in the context of the embodied experience of gender, it aims to make this topic, which would otherwise remain abstract, complex, and overbearing – tangible. It explores the possibility that informants' use of and relationship to clothing carries within it distilled ideology, knowledge, and affect about the experience of their own gender. Thus, the wardrobe interview is used to tap into the physical and sensorial capacities of objects to elicit knowledges that would otherwise perhaps not have been verbalized. As such, they are an object of study as much as they figure as an anchor or provocation. If methods are a part of how the phenomenon that is being researched is configured, one might as well make use of that fact (Barad, 2003; Law & Urry, 2004; Woodward, 2020).

Additionally, the potential of wardrobe studies lies in the fact that neither researcher nor informant knows what the answer to certain questions will be, which direction the conversation will go, what responses will be provoked, and ultimately, what the results of the research will be. These unexpected, playful, and uncertain possibilities of things have the potential to break away from medicalizing or already existing theory, by allowing different ways of knowing – the embodied, sensory, imaginary, and material – to take central stage (Haraway, 1989; Woodward, 2020).

Material semiotics

As mentioned, wardrobe interviews can be conceptualized as a material-semiotic inquiry into methods. Material semiotics is committed to exploring how practices in the social world are simultaneously semiotic, because they are relational and they carry meanings, and material, because they are about the physical objects shaped in those relations

(Law, 2004). This challenges the idea that culture, the social, or identity are separate from the material world. Instead, material semiotics works from the premise that things and materials – as they come into being and are transformed through relations with other things and people – are inextricable mediators of who we are and our social relations. This allows us to ascribe agency to the material, which in turn enables a way of thinking about things in terms of what they *do* rather than merely what they mean – what effects things have, and how these effects emerge from how people and things are connected. The aim, then, is to cultivate a set of methodological tools and sensibilities that are sensitive "to the weaves of materiality and narrative, to the irredeemably situated character of those weaves (its own included), to difference, and to the idea that there is no single machinery at work behind the complexities of the social" (Law, 2019, p.15). Taking a material-semiotic approach means being committed to exploring how the social is materialized in different contexts, and recognizing that we are always part of what we explore. What makes material methods suitable for this project, then, is that they offer the possibility to tap into material, sensory, and embodied ways of knowing or experiencing (Küchler & Miller, 2005; Law, 2004; Woodward, 2020).

If the world is understood to be fluctuating and at times disordered, many conventional social science methods are unable to deal with this mess, as through data generation and analysis, they produce seemingly ordered and coherent depictions of reality. A material-semiotic approach to methods, however, emphasizes the multiplicity and the situatedness of knowledges, understanding knowers as situated in particular relations to what is known and to other knowers. These are politics and epistemologies in which partiality rather than universality is the condition for knowledge production (Haraway, 1989; Law, 2004). We are caught up, as Haraway puts it, in a dense material-semiotic network. That is, we are caught up in sets of relations that simultaneously have to do with meanings and materials (Haraway, 1989). Detachment from this network is both delusional and a denial of

responsibility. Doing research requires that we, as researchers, acknowledge and take responsibility for our situatedness, and recognize that we are produced by sets of partial connections. For me, this project stems not merely from a theoretical interest, but from the desire to understand my own identity and the world surrounding me. It is a means by which I try to articulate a place in the world. I think of my own body and the ways in which it approaches reflexivity in the intersections. I am sensitive to the discourse pitting women against men, heterosexuals against homosexuals. I am neither one nor the other fully, but somewhere in between, where my body is constantly erased by others that do not see, understand, or choose to blind themselves to my presence. I also think of the vast intragroup differences within these categories, due to the intragroup differences within race, class, gender, religion, spirituality, beauty, geography, and other modes of experience. I think of gender and how gender is placed on my body via gazes, clothing, questions, and assumptions. As I approach others, I have to understand my body and my sense of identity as a complicated performance of all those things (Haraway, 1988).

Besides the researcher, methodological apparatuses are active components in the production of knowledge and the enactment of worlds. However rule-governed and technical a certain method of gathering data may be, the field's discourse is characterized by social and political values that both direct observations and serve to interpret them (Haraway, 1988). Consequently, methods do not just access what you are trying to understand or uncover existing information, but enact the world, creating particular realities and connections. The informants, the position of the researcher, and the research tools are all part of the questions we ask, how we answer those questions, and how the object of those questions is configured through all of this (Barad, 2003; Law, 2004). This requires a different account of objectivity (if we were to stick to that ideal at all), which emphasizes the complex, mediated, possibly paradoxical, situated, and partial character of knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

Research design

For this project, a total of ten wardrobe interviews were conducted. The informants were found through various methods: starting from personal circles, social media, and the Queer Gym in Rotterdam, then using the snowballing method to reach more informants. Appendix C shows the flyer I used to find participants on social media and at the Queer Gym. As much as possible, a group was gathered that was diverse in terms of gender identity, body type, transition phase, ethnicity, socio-economic background, educational level, ability, and age. All interviews took between one and two hours and were conducted in the informants' homes.

On the one hand, researching *with* clothes might entail diving into questions like why informants choose to dress a certain way, what their favorite or most-worn items are, what importance their clothing items have in their everyday life, and what that can mean in a larger perspective of how they experience their body and gender identity. On the other hand, the wardrobe interview will focus on the materiality of clothing: what kind of clothes informants wear in terms of size; material; cut; color; and how that affects their posture, emotions, or how they carry themselves. Throughout the project, the document in Appendix B has functioned as a guideline for conducting the wardrobe interviews, containing a variety of topics and questions to explore.

At the start of each interview, informants were asked about their favorite garments, as a way of inciting them to make categories and mini assemblages from the contents of their wardrobe. This encouraged them to be enthusiastic and reflexive about themselves, as well as getting them to engage with their wardrobes dynamically. Starting the interviews like this proved to be an inspiring and energetic start to the interviews, both for the researcher and the informants.

Observation is an important part of wardrobe interviews, as they allow insight into how informants interact with an object. There are limitations of language in understanding the full complexity of the material aspects of the world. This goes especially for this research project, as it is a discussion that is relatively new and unexplored, and, importantly, more lived and embodied than theoretical. As it includes different parameters, such as context, movement, interaction, gaze, perception, play, and communication with others, this method seeks to develop an understanding of bodily experiences and the problems of inhabiting a body that does not prioritize a linguistic model of culture and does not reduce an understanding of things to what people say about them. Rather, it is attendant to what informants *do.* This requires the researcher to focus on the senses, by watching, listening, talking, touching, and taking notes before, during, and after the interviews on all of this. This is an important resource for analysis (Gunn, 2015; Woodward & Woodward, 2009; Woodward, 2020).

Gathering, archiving, photographing

Informants' narratives, recording, taking notes, photographing, and even handling some of the clothing itself can contribute to the researcher's recollection and empathy, and provide opportunity for new knowledge (Woodward, 2020). Thus, alongside the notes and audio recordings taken during the wardrobe interviews, an inventory was created consisting of photographs of clothing items that informants were willing to show during the interviews. At their own initiative – I left it open to informants as to which items they deemed worth being captured – primarily their favorite or most-worn items were photographed. In consideration of their privacy and protection, the informants themselves were not photographed. Instead, the subject of the photographs consists of the materiality of the clothing in terms of its shape, physical condition, color, and so on. Throughout the research, the creation of this archive of photographs has functioned to see items of clothing in

relationship to other items in the wardrobe, to other wardrobes, and to look at the relationship between an item of clothing and larger material totalities.

Some notes on accountability

An important part of conducting the wardrobe interviews was to continuously be attentive to the emotions and reactions of the informants. Recognizing that clothes have agency and can be provocative, they can elicit distressed responses or affect informants in ways that they or I had not anticipated. This might ring especially true when positioning this project in light of embodied and material knowledge. Certain items of clothing might have distressing meanings, memories, or narratives attached to them, possibly that informants had not thought about until they were asked to reflect upon it. After all, gender and queerness are far more lived, experienced, enjoyed, and suffered than they are theoretical. Therefore, at the start of each wardrobe interview, it was communicated to the informants that the interview could be paused anytime, and they were given the option to withdraw (all or some of) their participation at any point. Moreover, an effort was made to create a comfortable and safe environment, for example by expressing my gratitude, ensuring informants that there are no wrong or right responses or actions, and discussing my aim to do research *with* them, not *on* them. Fortunately, none of the informants withdrew their participation, and the breaks taken were limited to water breaks.

Another aspect of accountability is being attentive to race, class, and axes other than gender along which society and identity are organized. Throughout the process of finding informants, I have striven to make the sample as diverse as possible, so as to not create or contribute to an understanding of gender that is predominantly white and middle-class. I managed to speak to a diverse group of people in terms of gender identity and assigned sex at birth, the former ranging from people who identified as non-binary, genderfluid, fluid, transfemme, trans, questioning, as well as people who refused a gender category. In terms of

age, informants were between the ages of 20 and 35. However, the majority of people I interviewed were white, with a Dutch, British, or Romanian background, with the exception of one Thai person. Moreover, with one exception, all informants were either currently attending, or had attended a university.

In light of the above discussion on material semiotics and situated knowledges, the aim of this project is by no means to create some universal or generalizable account of the embodied experience of gender. This means it is imperative to take heed of the limited ethnic and educational diversity among the informants in the current project, and to recognize that a more variegated sample would, in all likelihood, have resulted in a different inventory of experiences, narratives, and photographs. Moreover, it means recognizing my position as a researcher, as briefly discussed before (Haraway, 1988; Law, 2004).

Finally, a vital dimension of accountability is to present and write this research without idealizing it and hiding mistakes, but instead being transparent about what this project was and was not able to do. Creating an archive of photos and associated narratives, and acknowledging the limited size and diversity of the informants, are two contributions toward this end.

Analysis

Throughout this project, I have encountered a wide range of wardrobes. Some wardrobes were shared with a partner, or multiple partners; some wardrobes had just undergone an extensive overhaul, with old stuff being thrown out and new stuff being brought in; some wardrobes were temporary, still in boxes, or otherwise in motion; some wardrobes were massive and chockfull, some wardrobes were small, with empty drawers; some wardrobes were not even really a wardrobe, but a scattering of clothes throughout a whole apartment. As diverse as these wardrobes were, so were the people to whom these wardrobes belonged: non-binary, genderfluid, simply fluid, transfemme, trans, questioning,

without a need for a gender label, or principally opposed all labels. Some of their experiences and opinions resonated widely, others were personal and intimate.

The closet/wardrobe

It is beyond the bounds of possibility that this project could capture all intricacies and complexities of each individual's wardrobe, which leads me to start this analysis with the opposite, something that all informants have in common: they were born in times and places defined by an absolute despot duality that says that in terms of gender identity, they can only be one or the other. One of the first things I spoke about with Darra was that they "used to always really think that you had to choose between being a girly girl or not, and that there was no in-between." Growing up, they preferred wearing their brothers' clothes, but felt hesitant to do so. "I felt that if I do this, I have to do it the rest of my life". Like Darra, Jamie was more compelled towards boys' clothes as a child. However, they were never allowed to wear them, as their mother made it mandatory that all shopping be done in the girls' section. They tried to make do with this, picking out things that "coincidentally, did not have puffed sleeves and sequins."

From an early age, Darra and Jamie experienced the gender binary as a rigid system that is hard to break free from. They also learned that clothing is an important part of constituting and preserving this binary. Clothing, it becomes evident, is a language of publicity. In this sense, the wardrobe can be aligned with Sedgwick's closet. Navigating femininity, masculinity, and the in-between through the wardrobe is a way of making public what might otherwise be felt as private. Having a particular wardrobe is a way of coming out of the closet, if that wardrobe in any way diverts from what is socially and culturally accepted attire for the gender category one has been assigned. The embodied experience of gender, sexuality, and clothing style no longer needs to be understood as private, as the wardrobe has become a type of publicness that itself has a visceral resonance. In other words, the wardrobe,

like the closet, blurs the distinction between public and private (Berlant, 2019; Sedgwick, 1990). In one way or another, all informants have struggled with their closet/wardrobe – i.e., the interaction between their identity, the way they dress, and perceptions and expectations of gender. Sedgwick helps us to realize that this struggle can be at once private and public, but also simultaneously joyous and frustrating, pertaining to the body and banally material. This analysis attempts to carefully navigate all of these tensions, dichotomies, and contradictions, indebted to the promise of queer theory as a persistent refusal to consolidate, reduce, or essentialize its object of study, but to instead be a site for collective contestation, and a point of departure for future imaginings (Muñoz, 2009).

Heteronormativity in a tiny pink dress

In the wardrobe interview with Ellis, a non-binary person assigned female at birth, the conversation kept circling back to the overwhelming expectations and pressures they felt. Sometimes, these expectations could be recognized in assumptions or remarks made by friends, family, their partner, or their somewhat conservative in-laws. Other times, they had trouble pinpointing where exactly the pressure was coming from: they described it as a bunch of "invisible, potentially non-existent strangers". The pressure, of course, was the pressure to be female; a woman; feminine – and to dress accordingly. More so than trying to be perceived as non-binary, Ellis felt the strong urge to disprove their perceived womanhood. They found an important way to mitigate this perception to be the careful consideration of wearing – or not wearing – specific items of clothing. For Ellis, this item of clothing is the dress. While they had four dresses hanging in the wardrobe they shared with their partner, none of them had been worn much. "Once, for a job interview", another time for an anniversary dinner. A particular occasion that stood out to Ellis was a wedding they attended half a year ago. The invitation did not state a dress code, yet they "spent multiple months

mulling over what to wear, because that somehow felt very important". No one explicitly told them to wear a dress, yet they strongly felt it was expected.

We talked about their views on gender as "emergent in interaction." Emitting a certain gender expression to the outside world determines how people behave towards you. Admittedly, Ellis was not under the impression that wearing pants to a wedding would make the other wedding guests reconsider their femininity. Nonetheless, not wearing a dress would be an outward expression of their desire to be perceived as something other than a woman; an expression of "how I see myself". On the day of the wedding, Ellis "succumbed to the pressure" and wore a dress anyway, feeling uncomfortable all day. The problem was not the dress in itself. In a hypothetical society without restrictive gender roles, Ellis mentioned they might "reconsider" wearing dresses, preferably together with their cisgender male partner.

Like Ellis, Jesse had a bone to pick with dresses. For them, wearing dresses is linked to "passing as a woman" – or "trying to". This is less so with clothes that are typically regarded as masculine. They gave the example of the three-piece suit: people who identify as women can wear them, bowtie included, and not immediately be perceived as trying to pass as a man. The other way around, that is not so true. Finding a style that attempts to mend the "massive disconnect" between how they want to be perceived and interacted with, versus what they feel comfortable wearing, is a complex process.

Jesse, Ellis, and most other informants associate dresses with "passing", or being recognized as a woman. Max is no exception to this. However, being assigned male at birth, wearing a dress is the opposite of passing for them. We had an extensive conversation about their hesitance to wear dresses in their day-to-day life, afraid of the responses from colleagues and passers-by. Then they showed me one of the first dresses they ever owned, gifted to them by a friend. It was a tiny pink dress, with a band of feathers around the shoulders. It was much too small for them, barely able to fit around their body. They wore it

anyway, for a performance. “It is my unique way of wearing it. I am not going to shrink myself for anyone.” Contrary to Ellis and Jesse, wearing that dress was a refusal of the expectations of heteronormative discourse.

To avoid getting overly repetitive, I shall summarize by saying that dresses were a much-discussed topic throughout this project. Dresses, more than any other item of clothing, played a large role for nearly all informants in navigating the balance between wearing clothes that feel good and “fit your sense of identity”, versus wearing something because it either complies with or countermands certain gender roles. Max described this process as “mental acrobatics.” Muñoz’s notion of disidentification could prove useful here, understood as a reworking of the cultural codes of the mainstream by at the same time acknowledging and rejecting them (Muñoz, 1999). Jesse strikingly describes what could be seen as a process of disidentification, when they say that “sometimes I do want to wear a dress, but I have this voice in my head that says: if you wear a dress, you are invalidating your gender queerness. Which isn’t true, because sometimes I just want to wear a dress.” They neither identify nor counter-identify with heteronormative ideology, but are instead looking for a way to read themselves into it (Muñoz, 1999). For Ellis, disidentification could be wearing a dress together with their partner. For Max, it could be just the act of wearing a dress. Riley found yet another way, showing me a dress they feel “masculine” in, due to its wide shape, unsinged waist, and shoulder pads.

Between performance and performativity

Whereas Jesse or Ellis associated dresses with passing, Micah had a somewhat different take. While considering themselves a more masculine presenting non-binary person, dresses did not necessarily make them feel feminine. One of their favorite items of clothing was a long, silky, slightly see-through dress. Wearing that dress makes them “feel like a little dude wearing a dress.” They describe feeling like a character, or like they are putting on a

costume. This resonated with Ellis, perhaps surprisingly, for whom buying or trying on dresses, lingerie, and other feminine clothing reminds them of playing dress-up as a child, even though wearing them in public makes them feel extremely uncomfortable. For Quin, dressing more masculine is a form of play or performance too. On days that they wear low-cut jeans and a hoodie, they "feel almost like a little boy." Fully "feeling the fantasy", they start doing chores around the house, fixing the tire of their bike, and installing a new bookshelf. They conceive of it as a type of hyperbolic parody, a way of counteracting the stereotypical feminine behavior they feel is expected of them.

Max too echoes the idea that getting dressed can feel like putting on a costume, or even like giving a performance. They showed me the lingerie-type, flowery corset they wore to a party the night before our interview. "The other instance I would wear something like that would be performing. Which is probably just the same thing, really. In one, people pay to see you on stage, in the other, you go out to be seen." In fact, it was through performing that Max first started to "play" with their gender expression. While on the topic of performance, they whip out an old shoebox from a cupboard, with a pair of voluptuous fake bosoms in it. "For ages, I had these bosoms. I'd wear these on stage. When I eventually got more serious about understanding what my gender expression was, I stopped wearing them." Previously, they would have worn the flowery corset with the fake bosoms, trying to blend them into their flat chest with make-up. "But now, wearing it without them makes me feel like I have ownership of my gender, in a way." This, it seems, is almost like a meta-performance: a performance beyond performance.

Using Butler, it is possible to look at all this through the lens of performativity and subversion. For the informants, dressing up, playing, and performing are means to create a sense of agency in the navigation of their gender identity. However, for Butler, performance is subsumed by performativity. As argued, performativity is a compulsory reiteration of the

norms by which one is constituted. These norms cannot be thrown off at will, but instead precede and constrain the gendered subject, leaving them with limited agency. Thus, whereas performance might imply a moment of agency, this agency is always already constituted and determined by the discursive power which precedes and surrounds it. No subject is free to stand outside a matrix of power or to negotiate them at a distance. Consequently, it is not possible to equate feeling "like a little dude", or wearing lingerie without a set of fake boobs (even if it seems one step beyond performance), with gender performativity. However, as Butler stresses: repetition is always also difference. The parody and performance that these informants engage in expose the instability and imitative character of heteronormative discourse, hence forming a resource from which resistance, subversion, and displacement can be forged (Butler, 1993; Butler, 2021).

Confusion – as consequence or creative effort

Throughout the wardrobe interviews, another topic that consistently appeared and reappeared was confusion. Confusion is a somewhat multi-dimensional entity in this instance: it is a consequence of how informants dress and express themselves, as well as a creative effort. Especially prevalent in non-binary informants were the moments of pride and bemusement they found in encounters with strangers, who had trouble making sense of their gender identity, even if only for a split second. These moments can take place in restrooms, when strangers visibly "question whether they walked through the right door." Likewise in clubs and bars, during a work or volunteering shift, in the metro or train, or simply walking down the street. "To see people have that question mark… I think that's how I experience my own gender as well," Ellis told me. Instances of confusion are experienced as "very gender-affirming" and oftentimes funny. The same sentiment is shared for situations when people are misgendered as the opposite sex they were assigned at birth. Micah and Zene, who are partners, tell me they sometimes actively seek to elicit confusion when they go out together.

When Micah wears their favorite dress, Zene enjoys dressing a little extra masculine. In the eye of the beholder, they might almost appear as a straight couple – but not quite.

What confusion brings can be more significant than moments of amusement or pride. When asking Jamie whether they were searching for recognition of their non-binary identity, they answered that they are "more so looking for confusion." In a similar vein as Jamie, Zene mentioned that: "It's just my name that tells people I was born a girl. For the rest, people don't know what the fuck I am. I absolutely love it. The confusion is good, because that way, I give a definition that somebody could be none." With Butler in mind, confusion can be read as a form of subversion which, akin to parody, undermines the heteronormative illusion of the self as a stable subject (Butler, 1993). Moreover, confusion can be a commitment to your own ambivalence. Thinking with Sedgwick, we can see how ambivalence opposes a monolithic understanding of gender. Following your ambivalence to the end is a recognition of your queerness. It deconstructs binary categories and dichotomies, opening up space to a rhetoric of possibility that avoids definitional boundaries that entrap you and narrow your possibilities for action (Hall & Jagose, 2013; Sedgwick, 1990).

Dungarees, jumpsuits, and other uniforms

The dress was not the only frequently mentioned category of clothing. On multiple occasions, the uniform came up. Interestingly, the definitions and functions of a uniform differed among informants. Max, while wearing a pair of denim dungarees, pulled out multiple more dungarees and jumpsuits, and held them in front of their body one by one. As much as they love expressing themselves through their clothing, dungarees feel "gender neutral" to them, or like "a safe bet." "People can perceive me however they want in it. I'm thinking about prison jumpsuits, or sci-fi movies where everyone wears the same thing. Everyone looks the same – I would be very up for that." For Max, having a uniform that anyone could wear feels gender-affirming, precisely because the element of gender is

removed. When Quin showed me their thrifted dungarees, they similarly mentioned that their main appeal was the fact that “anyone can wear these.” While a big part of exploring gender identity, for her, was finding the courage and freedom to experiment with “doing both”, we discovered throughout the interview that the items of clothing they pulled out as their favorites, were the ones “made for everyone.”

Yae assigns a somewhat different meaning to uniforms. They show me a pair of jeans: “These pants are kind of a uniform. These are my cool person pants. I wear them on days I want to tell people that I am cool, without having to prove it in a conversation.” A uniform, for Yae, is a way “to prove that I am someone from a particular category.” On the opposite side of the cool pants spectrum are another pair of pants. They are a pair of simple, comfortable, stretchy, dark blue pants. “I feel like wearing this is closer to my Asian side. Particularly when I see Asian women, we just put an outfit on, and it’s not trendy. It’s just clothes that we buy because it’s clothes.” In these pants, they feel they are perceived as an “average Asian person”, who is not trying to fit in, “be anyone”, or make an effort. For Yae, in a sense, the jeans become like an “armor”, a presentation of a certain aspect of their identity, or the adherence to a certain role. Some days, however, they do not want to be perceived as “the queer person of color that the queer community would label me as.” They would rather let things come “from the inside.” This attitude is shared by various other informants. Zene, for example, tells me about the days in which they retreat to their standard outfit of cargo pants and a baseball jacket, an outfit they deliberately picked to “not be too visible.”

Jesse provides yet another perspective. Throughout our conversation, the uniform functioned as a common thread. From their perspective, the way someone dresses is closely tied to the group of people they belong to or hang out with, or the “counterculture” someone is part of. “I call it a uniform because I see that a lot of the alternative crowd pretty much

wears the same outfit. Their wardrobes are interchangeable. The ravers have their clothes, the squatters have their clothes, and the lipstick lesbians have their clothes. You can be identified by your clothes." They had owned some "uniforms" themself too, which were now put away in boxes underneath the bed, waiting to be brought to the charity shop. In the boxes were an array of different outfits: some brightly colored pants and tops (or "multicolor everything, to be perceived as queer"); a pair of dungarees with paint stains all over them (the artist); crop tops and baggy trousers (the hippie); and a very old dress their mother bought them when they were sixteen (the girl). They feel limited by these uniforms: "It expresses just one thing about you. That can be quite reductionist."

Visibility, recognition, and the art of camouflage

The way in which Yae and Jesse think about uniforms is different from Quin and Max. For Max and Quin, wearing a uniform is a way of avoiding categories or groups. In a sense, this could be conceptualized as a type of camouflage. Camouflage is commonly associated with a textile pattern of interlocking greens and browns, used primarily in warfare. However, in her book *Hide and Seek*, Hanna Rose Shell reveals camouflage to go far beyond that. She defines camouflage as an adaptive logic of escape from representation. Way more than a pattern, then, camouflage is a set of institutional structures, mixed-media art practices, and permutations of subjectivity that seek not to make someone or something invisible, but unrecognizable. It is a way of hiding in plain sight. Shell describes modern practices of camouflage as an "enduring chameleonic impulse", that aims to create surfaces onto which one's visual environment might be projected (Shell, 2012).

The dungaree might be one of those surfaces, upon which the perceiver can project any and all gender identities, regardless of the person wearing them. Uniforms are a way of hiding, of "not being perceived." In contrast, for Jesse and Yae, uniforms are a condition for social recognition. While these definitions might at first seem opposing, they are both

concerned with issues of visibility and hiding. Both can be thought of as “survival strategies” that informants practice to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of heteronormativity. Being publicly visible as a gender non-conforming person means managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence (Muñoz, 1999; Sedgwick, 1990). Not every day is a day in which informants “want to be perceived”, make a statement, elicit confusion, or “embrace the gender fuckery of it all.” Sometimes, they “simply want to exist.”

Binders, bralettes, and bras

Another much-discussed category of clothing found within the wardrobe were binders, bralettes, bras, and lingerie. Jamie wears their binder preferably every day, reluctantly switching it out for a sports bra when “the muscles in my shoulders and back start to cramp.” Having felt dysphoric about their breasts ever since they started developing, they long ago made it a habit to put on their bra or binder first thing when they get out of bed. It didn’t go unnoticed by their family and friends that when they started wearing a binder, they got a boost in confidence that made them stop “slouching,” leaning their shoulders forward to minimize the appearance of their chest. They started to “stand up taller”, take up more space, and feel more comfortable in their body.

Riley and Micah wear binders as well, though not as often as Jamie. For the two of them, feelings of dysphoria about their chest fluctuate from day to day. “Every once in a while, I would like to be able to choose not to have them, because that can make me feel euphoric,” Riley tells me. Binding, for them, is a way of exploring their non-binary or more masculine appearance. However, because of their large breasts, neither of them has “the option to bind properly” in their current physique. “The cup H titties are not going away. I can push them anywhere, but it’s not going to be flat.” Because “hiding” their chest is not an

option, they feel limited in their gender expression. The boobs in themselves are not the issue, as Micah and Riley both are aware of. Rather, it is the immediate sign of femininity they emit. “They are gorgeous and stunning, just not for me.”

For Zene and Darra, the opposite is true. They both have “a very flat chest”, giving them the option to play with the appearance of their chest, even without wearing a binder or a bra. While they have not always loved their body, either for being too feminine or not feminine enough, they have learned to love it. For Ellis, this consideration was ignited when their breasts got significantly smaller during a period of intensive fitness. They found the appearance of their strong and muscular body, with big arms but a small chest “a very cool combination.” Since this period, their breasts have gotten somewhat bigger again. While this bothers them, they refrain from wearing a binder. “Binders squish you, make you feel confined. I can’t wear them for an hour or longer.” Yea feels the same way about binders. “I like the way it makes my chest look, but I don’t like how it makes my chest feel.” Bras are too tight for them too. They tell me they always check the weather the day before, “just to prepare myself if I am going to have to wear a bra all day.” Instead of bras or binders, they hide their chest with large, loose-fitting jackets and shirts.

Quin enjoys doing both: some days, they wear a lacey push-up bra. On other days, they wear a bralette that works to flatten their chest. They do not experience feelings of dysphoria towards their chest, but would preferably regard it as ‘sometimes they are just… too present.” For Jesse, this is more or less similar. When they first came out as non-binary, they mostly wore sports bras, “to reduce my chest.” After a while, however, they realized that “I didn’t really feel like I was doing it for my own peace of mind. I felt more like I was doing it to validate my not being a woman.”

The trouble with androgyny

At some point during their lives, Jesse, Ellis, Riley, Jamie, Max, Yae, Micah, and Zene all decided to move away from a female or male gender identity. Doing this, however, meant being met with a next challenge: if not feminine, and not masculine either, then what? One of the expectations that seems to come with identifying as neither, is that of neutrality or androgyny. Ellis mentioned that, when coming out as non-binary, their idea of what that identity category might entail was quite limited: “It is always a white, very skinny and therefore somewhat shapeless person, assigned woman at birth, who now dresses as a man and calls themselves non-binary.” Quin and Riley expressed a similar sentiment, stating their frustration at the presumption that a male body somehow qualifies as more androgynous than a female one. “Am I non-binary enough if I think that my boobs are allowed to be there?” When it came to their wardrobes, it became clear that ‘androgynous’ or ‘neutral’, could be more or less equated with masculine. “In terms of androgyny, that was when I was getting more button-down shirts. More things that are regarded as a bit more masculine.” For Jamie, moving towards neutrality, at first, meant “overcompensating towards the masculine”. Categories and conceptions of femininity and masculinity intertwine to create an image of the androgynous non-binary person. For most informants, their body shape inhibits them from attaining this neutral, androgynous, or non-female ideal. For some, this has to do with their hips or waist. More often, it concerns the chest. Furthermore, to be legible as neutral or androgynous, or to aspire to be, means being bound by binary gender categories. “I couldn’t ever really work it out, which is why I had the realization that you don’t have to ‘have’ androgyny. It made me start to realize the ridiculousness of gender in clothing.”

Categories and labels

For Jesse, the notion of androgyny is closely tied to their trouble with identity categories – they are too restrictive. “People have an idea of what a label means, and then

they just try to push you into that box, rather than understanding you as a whole person." Coming to this conclusion was quite a journey for them. They first came out as bisexual, followed by pansexual. Then, at 21, they "stopped trying to be female", and came out as genderqueer, then genderfluid, until they came across the term non-binary: "That feels the most at home, but still…" They found that the non-binary "category" comes with its own array of assumptions and reductions. Jamie, Riley, and Micah feel more comfortable identifying as non-binary. For Jamie and Micah, using the term felt akin to "admitting" to themselves what they had known for a long time. Yet, they recognize that the term is still situated within a discourse of (trans)masculinity and -femininity. "We still talk about characteristics that are supposedly masc or fem. Why do we still have to think with and within those terms?" While aware of this, Darra and Quin provide another point of view, by emphasizing the appeal and "strength" that emanates from asserting yourself as female. "Being a woman is also a very powerful thing."

From the perspective of early feminist thought, failure has often been a better bet than success. The failure or refusal to live up to a feminine gender role provides the opportunity to be relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals. For Darra, this idea dawned upon them when they fell in love with a girl, and "noticed that I don't have to be sexy or feminine. I could do so much more than how I previously thought I had to look or behave. That made it possible to try out so many things." Not succeeding at womanhood, or any gender role you have been ascribed, can offer unexpected pleasures. Now, Darra feels more affinity with a general ethic of experimentation than with any label, category, or set of pronouns. They use their wardrobe as a way of exploring femininity, masculinity, and the in-between. "I think I mostly just find it funny, without wanting to attach a gender to it." On some days and occasions, they wear a low-cut dress, a three-piece suit, or find joy in an outfit that is a mix-and-match of stereotypically feminine and masculine clothing items. And

whereas previously, they felt their small breasts made them not feminine or "attractive" enough, they now enjoy the fact that they are visible to others only when they decide, as "t-shirts just fall straight down".

Arguing from Butler's point of view, as much as it might be necessary to assert one's validity and right to exist through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to identify oneself and determine the conditions under which one does so, it is simultaneously impossible to sustain control over the trajectory of those categories within heteronormative discourse. The subject never quite inhabits the ideal they are compelled to approximate. The expectation of self-determination or agency that self-naming – or the refusal to do so – arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the label itself. That is, by the history of the usages that one never controlled, but that constrain the usage that now emblematizes autonomy. This does not have to be an argument for or against using identity categories per se. Instead, it is a reminder to consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been constructed. In this sense, it is indeed politically necessary to keep claiming these categories, precisely because of the way these categories lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing. Furthermore, diving into linguistic performativity, the "act" by which a term authorizes or de-authorizes a set of social relations is, of necessity, a repetition. For Butler, it is in these repetitions that difference, and consequently, the potential for subversiveness, emerges (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990).

I am queer; I am fluid

If we follow Sedgwick, one of the most appealing aspects of queer identity is the refusal to name what that identity means. Instead, queer is a celebration of the difference and diversity of individuals, without fixing or essentializing their identities (Sedgwick, 1993). Some informants, like Jamie and Micah, find enough wiggle room within the non-binary

label. Others do not find solace in replacing one label with the next. Ellis jokingly told me that when someone asks them to explain what non-binary means for them, they reply with “I don’t know man, I just work here.”

Zene, Yae, and Max all feel drawn toward the idea of gender fluidity. What resonates with them about gender fluidity, is that “it gives the notation that it is really something that I am going through, that it is not this stuck thing.” This pertains to the mind as well as the body, for Zene: “I do have feminine features. I have very big hips, I have a big butt. But I have a flat chest. I always saw it as a feminine body, but now I see it as a genderfluid body.” Yae goes one step further, detaching gender from fluid. “Not gender fluid, but simply fluid.” Being fluid means sometimes feeling closer to nature, to an animal, to water: it means remembering that “the value I put on myself is simply by the value that other people put on me,” and being able to let go of that. Moreover, fluidity gives Yae the ability to adapt to different cultures, people, and situations. “There are so many situations where I cannot control people’s behavior, and I don’t feel safe to confront them. So, I become fluid. To make me feel safe and in control.” This notion of fluidity resembles Sedgwick’s conceptions of queerness and ambivalence, refusing to be pinned down or essentialized (Edwards, 2009; Sedgwick, 1990).

Something off my chest

Transition is an intricate and multivalent topic for a group of people that fall outside, between, or beyond the gender binary. For some, like Darra and Quin, it is something they never seriously considered for themselves. Most others have. Micah and Riley are on the waiting list to get a breast reduction. For both of them, getting a reduction would result in “the possibility to choose not to have boobs,” and being able to “explore the whole spectrum” through their wardrobe, without immediately being perceived as a woman. This option already exists for Darra, Quin, and Jesse. Zene emphasizes the importance of loving their

body as it is, mentioning that they have found a way to dress themselves to make their breasts "look like pecs." This resonated with Ellis, who said that even though they might want a breast reduction at some point in their life, they are more concerned with loving the body they already have. "You can be non-binary in any body."

Yae and Jamie are both in the process of getting a full mastectomy. In Jamie's case, this will be in addition to micro-dosing testosterone. Max is looking to gain a pair of breasts and hormone replacement therapy. They stress the importance of clothing in their transition process, while also saying that "once I start exploring medication and surgery, there will be so much more to find from that, I think." Contrary to heteronormative discourse on gender transition, they "don't subscribe to the idea that it's this heavy weight, that I feel like cis people ascribe to it. It's not like I don't ascribe value to my body, but I don't really care if it's one way or the other. For me, it's maybe a bit like I'm an action figurine or a barbie. You take off an arm and replace it with another arm. It's kind of this modular thing." Remarkably, while Yae, Jamie, and Max all have envisioned what their body could look and feel like after surgical or hormonal transition, none of them have a specific goal or endpoint in mind. Jamie: "I want to allow myself the freedom to explore." They reject the trans discourse they see around them, which implies that life only starts after transition. "No! Life is already happening!" For all genderqueer informants, transition breaks with heteronormative conceptions of the future, in favor of a nonlinear futurity that incorporates the importance of the present moment (Muñoz, 2009).

Micro-utopias and acts of resistance

Queer life is varied, ambitious, ambivalent, and already happening. It is less concerned with providing a solution to a theoretical problem and more focused on generating knowledge that is central to living. In Muñoz's conception of utopia, queerness becomes truly tenable not by trying to occupy a place in the heteronormative world, but through the

development of a world outside of this. Not every day allows for the creation of a little utopia, filled with (gender) euphoria, optimism, and free from oppression. However, little queer utopias can be found everywhere. They can be found scattered throughout this project too, in Max' modular "barbie" body or Zene's "pecs." Riley uses the term "very gender" to refer to people, moments, and items of clothing that break away from the heteronormative framework; that elicit a moment of confusion, wonder, or a glimpse of a world beyond female and male. For Max, their football team showed them this. Whereas performing allowed them to express a more feminine gender identity, the football team "gave me the confidence to explore more relaxed clothing", without having to worry about being too masculine presenting. Something that they were scared to do before, now made them feel "perceived in the way that I would like to." Quin discovered that by being expressive and "unique" in their clothing decisions, they are more likely to receive a question on who they are, or what her/their pronouns are. "People make fewer assumptions and ask you a question instead." For Darra, that purpose is served by dressing in something ridiculous: dressing in a thrifted, all-green outfit, they get called "frog" instead of ma'am. For Ellis, the queer gym is a small utopia, full of gender non-conforming people, unbothered by "gender roles, feminine clothes or leg hair" (Muñoz, 2009).

Conclusion

Equipped with queer theory and wardrobe studies, this thesis has aimed to create an understanding of gender that is sensitive to embodiment and materiality. Working together with informants and their wardrobes cultivated an extensive account of what it means to dress and inhabit a body that stands outside, between, or beyond the gender binary. On the one hand, thinking about gender requires that we understand what it means to be attached to a norm. This became evident when differentiating between performance and performativity, or in discussions about visibility and uniforms, dresses and bras, and queerness and categories.

Yet, despite heteronormative discourse, informants were perpetually committed to finding ways to refuse, subvert, or disidentify – through a commitment to their own ambivalence, creating micro-utopias, finding solace in fluidity, or queering futurity through their conceptions of transition.

Discussion: exploding gender, refusing politics

With this discussion, I seek to provide a final critical point of view. Using the works of Andrea Long Chu, this discussion speaks back to the rest of the thesis and the queer theory it employs, by troubling gender as a category of inquiry, and subsequently the wardrobe as a political space.

Historically, feminism has had to explode the private to be able to see the personal as the political. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* is a striking example of this: for the closeted person, there is no private, either normatively or empirically. The liminal spaces in which queer bodies find themselves, including their closet/wardrobes, are specific instances in which this public/private distinction is thrown into crisis. More than troubling the public/private binary, the epistemic and political prerogative of queer theory, as articulated by writers such as Sedgwick and Muñoz, is to deconstruct the foundational solidity of any identity category. The 'queer' in queer studies is a site of collective contestation, the refusal to consolidate or limit the object(s) of study. 'Queer' is never fully owned, but always redefined, twisted, and queered from a prior usage, in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes (Muñoz, 1999; Sedgwick, 1993).

What has happened, then, is that queer theory has conceived of itself as an academic discipline whose unity derives not from a shared object or a shared methodology, but from a shared political commitment. The reason that Butler remains stuck with the dichotomy of norm and subversion, is precisely because politics exists within this realm. In the same manner, when Muñoz tries to move past Butler's limited possibility for subversiveness

through the tropes of disidentification and queer worldmaking, he nevertheless remains bound to a conception of the norm. While one might argue that this commitment to politics is not inherently atrocious, it is worth considering what an understanding of the wardrobe – or gender, for that matter – as a political entity actually gets us, and, perhaps more provocatively, whether we want to perceive of the wardrobe as a political space at all (Butler, 1990; Chu, 2019b; Muñoz, 1999).

To answer these questions, it is worth visiting the work of Andrea Long Chu. In her appropriately titled book *Females*, Andrea Long Chu writes the following: "Everyone is female, and everyone hates it" (Chu, 2019a, p.18). Femaleness, to her, is not some biological entity or characteristic – but neither does it refer to gender. Instead, Chu proposes an ontological definition of femaleness as a universal existential condition, "the one and only structure of human consciousness. To be is to be female: the two are identical" (Chu, 2019a, p.19). The condition of femaleness is one defined by constant sacrifice and negation of the self, to make space for the desires of the other. It is letting someone else do your desiring for you, at your own expense. Thus, for Chu, being and desiring are inextricably connected. Gender is nothing more than how one copes with being female: it is a response (or defense mechanism) against one's femaleness, within the terms of what is historically and socioculturally available. "What makes gender gender—the substance of gender, as it were—is the fact that it expresses, in every case, the desires of another." By conceptualizing femaleness as a product of desire, Chu explodes the category of gender (Chu, 2019a, p.41).

This explosion is not just an explosion for its own sake, but a move away from trans studies as a political project. Chu argues that feminist politics of the past two centuries may be collected under the discovery that "being female is bad for you" (Chu, 2019a, p.20). The response to this discovery was to try to find ways not to be female anymore, at least under the existing terms, by either advocating for the abolition of gender altogether or by proposing

new identity categories unencumbered by femaleness. Politics, then, is understood as the many ways in which feminist, queer, and trans theory has attempted to suppress and mitigate femaleness. What this means for Chu, is that politics, informed by the desire to exist outside of the heteronormative power matrix, is always anti-female: “After decades of tedious feminist debates over agency, one thing is clear: women may be capable of political action, but females never are” (Chu, 2019a, p.87). Females and politics cannot exist together. In the words of Lauren Berlant, holding onto the possibility of politics emerges as a kind of cruel optimism. Berlant defines cruel optimism as a relation that emerges “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project" (Berlant, 2011, p.1). Cruel optimism indexes the moments when a body desires and needs an arrangement of the world that is also frustrating or corrosive to that same body. After all, politics requires a norm (heteronormativity), objects (gendered subjects), and institutions (the closet, or the workplace). Desire, on the other hand, does not conform to political principles and cannot be changed proceeding from the political demand. No political program effectively restructures what people desire, at least not with the result that they start feeling the way you want them to (Berg & Chu, 2018; Chu, 2019b).

Chu would argue that if we insist on seeing the wardrobe as a political space, we remain stuck in a discourse in which gender is a category of inquiry and contestation; a discourse in which we have to concern ourselves with representation, recognition, hierarchy, and authority (Chu, 2018a; Harney & Moten, 2013). What that leads to, is a reading of the wardrobe and of this project that wants to see non-normativity as anti-normativity, and disruption as resistance. This is a kind of cruel optimism that will only lead to disappointment (Berlant, 2011; Chu, 2018b). Chu reminds us that most non-normativity is not anti-normativity, and most disruptions are not productive. However, they do not have to be! Other

ways of being together are always already here – embodied in moments of being together, moments of conversation and collaboration that are taken as ends in themselves, not aimed at the production of anything. Rather than a political project, “transing should be a methodology that would start from the premise that everyone’s gender is a political disaster and refuse to fix it” (Chu & Drager, 2019, p.112). Instead, we might start along a path that is tuned into the ways in which ordinary life fails to measure up to the political analyses we thrust upon it. Perhaps, the wardrobe could be conceived of as such a time and space. After all, why would living together have to necessarily entail living under some political order? (Harney & Moten, 2013)

References

Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 28*(3), 801–31.

Berg, A. & Chu, A. L. (2018, July 18). Wanting bad things: Andrea Long Chu responds to Amia Srinivasan. *The Point Magazine.* https://thepointmag.com/dialogue/wanting-bad-things-andrea-long-chu-responds-amia-srinivasan/

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism.* Duke University Press.

Berlant, L. (Ed.). (2019). *Reading Sedgwick.* Duke University Press.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993a). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex.* Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993b). Critically queer. *GLQ: A Journal Of Lesbian & Gay Studies, 1,* 17-32.

Butler, J. (2021). Gender in translation: Beyond monolingualism. In Browne, J. (eds.), *Why gender?* (pp.15-38). Cambridge University Press.

Chu, A. L. (2017). The wrong wrong body: notes on trans phenomenology. *Transgender Studies Quarterly, 4*(1), 141-152.

Chu, A. L. (2018a, November 24). My new vagina won't make me happy (and it shouldn't have to). *The New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/opinion/sunday/vaginoplasty-transgender-medicine.html

Chu, A. L. (2018b). On liking women. *n + 1, 30,* 47-62.

Chu, A. L. & Drager, E. H. (2019). After trans studies. *Transgender Studies Quarterly, 6*(1), 103-116.

Chu, A. L. (2019a). *Females.* Verso Books.

Chu, A. L. (2019b). The impossibility of feminism. *Differences: A Journal Of Feminist Cultural Studies, 30*(1), 63-81.

Corwin, A. I. (2017). Emerging genders: Semiotic agency and the performance of gender among genderqueer individuals. *Gender and Language, 11*(2), 255-277.

Darwin, H. (2017). Doing gender beyond the binary: A virtual ethnography. *Symbolic Interaction, 40*(3), 317-334.

Edwards, J. (2009). *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.* Routledge.

Gunn, M. (2015). *Body acts queer.* University of Borås.

Hall, D. & Jagose, A. (Eds.). (2013). *The Routledge queer studies reader.* Routledge.

Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies, 14*(3), 575-599.

Haraway, D. (1989). *Primate vision: gender, race and nature in the world of modern science.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Harney, S. & Moten, F. (2011). Politics surrounded. *The South Atlantic Quarterly, 110*(4), 985-988.

Harney, S. & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Fugitive planning & black study.* Minor Compositions.

Ilupeju, M. O. (2022). *Earnestly.* Archive Books.

Klepp, I. G. & Bjerck, M. (2012). A methodological approach to the materiality of clothing: Wardrobe studies. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 17*(4), 373-386.

Küchler, S. & Miller, D. (2005). *Clothing as material culture.* Oxford: Berg.

Laing, O. (2021). *Everybody: A book about freedom.* Picador.

Law, J. (2004). *After method: Mess in social science research.* Routledge.

Law, J. & Urry, J. (2004). Enacting the social. *Economy and Society, 33*(3), 390-410.

Law, J. (2019, January 30). Material semiotics. *Heterogeneities.* http://w.heterogeneities.net/publications/Law2019MaterialSemiotics.pdf

Moten, F. (2014, March 10). The beauty of José Esteban Muñoz. *Boundary 2.* http://www.boundary2.org/2014/03/the-beauty-of-jose-esteban-munoz/#first

Moten, F. (2018). *Stolen life.* Duke University Press.

Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics.* University of Minnesota Press.

Muñoz, J. E. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity.* New York University Press.

Parker, A. & Sedgwick, E. K. (Eds.). (1995). *Performance and performativity.* Routledge.

Robinson, B. A. (2022). Non-binary embodiment, queer knowledge production, and disrupting the cisnormative field: Notes from a trans ethnographer. *Journal of Men's Studies, 30*(3), 425-445.

Salamon, G. (2010). *Assuming a body.* Columbia University Press.

Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology Of The Closet.* University of California Press.

Sedgwick, E. K. (1993). *Tendencies.* Duke University Press.

Shell, H. R. (2012). *Hide and seek: Camouflage, photography, and the media of reconnaissance.* Zone Books.

Shulman, G. (2021). Fred Moten's refusals and consents: The politics of fugitivity. *Political Theory, 49*(1), 272-313.

Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (Eds.). (2006). *The transgender studies reader.* Routledge.

Taylor, S. R. (2018). *The body is not an apology.* Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Woodward, S. (2007). *Why women wear what they wear.* Berg.

Woodward, K. & Woodward, S. (2009). *Why feminism matters: Feminism lost and found.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Woodward, S. (2020). *Material methods: Researching and thinking with things.* Sage Publications Ltd.

Appendix A

Checklist ethical and privacy aspects of research

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title:

Name, email of student: Maaike Weitering, 496093mw@student.eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Willem Schinkel, schinkel@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: March 26th, 2023 – June 25th, 2023

Is the research study conducted within DPAS YES

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1.	Does your research involve human participants.	YES
	If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research?	NO
2.	Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants.	NO
3.	Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else).	NO

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1.	Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them?	NO
2.	Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study?	NO
3.	Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants?	NO
4.	Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants?	NO

5.	Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants?	NO
6.	Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)?	YES
7.	Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent?	NO
8.	Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study?	NO
9.	Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured?	YES
10.	Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study?	NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

Regarding item 6: given that this study specifically concerns non-binary or genderqueer informants, this type of data will be known about the participants. If relevant to the informant and the wardrobe interview, data regarding any of the other mentioned categories might be discussed as well, as it is vital to not neglect narratives regarding race or class.

Regarding item 9: while it is not relevant to mention the names of the informants in the study, it is impossible to completely avoid identification based on the content of the wardrobe interview, and possible photos or items gathered. Discussions regarding identity and privacy will be held with each informant, and their preferences will be respected.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

All informants will receive a detailed explanation of what the study entails, its aims, the results, and the possible unexpected circumstances (see next question).

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

For this project, it is important to be very attendant to the emotions and reactions of the informants. Recognizing that objects have agency and can be provocative, they can elicit distressed responses or affect informants in ways that them or me had not anticipated. This might ring especially true when positioning this project in light of embodied and material knowledge, or the chest *as a problem.* Certain items of clothing might have distressing meanings, memories, or narratives attached to them, possibly that informants had not thought about until they were asked to reflect upon it. After all, queer is something far more lived, experienced, enjoyed and suffered than it is theoretical. Thus, throughout the project, it is important to keep being aware that this might happen, being prepared to pause an interview, and giving informants the opportunity to withdraw (all or some of) their participation.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

In the informants' wardrobes.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

The anticipated size of my sample is roughly 10 informants.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

There is no statistical data on this topic. In The Netherlands, roughly 3.9% of the population identifies as non-cisgender, including genderqueer, non-binary, and other gender non-conforming identities. However, there are no specific numbers with regards to how many people who identify outside the gender binary.

PART V: DATA STORAGE AND BACK-UP

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

Digital data files and photographs will be stored on my laptop, which is password protected. Possible notes on paper will be made in a dedicated notebook and kept safely at home.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

Me.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

All data will be stored on my laptop, in Microsoft Word and Atlas.ti.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

Anonymizing all data is not relevant for this particular study. In consultation with the informants, their names, ages, and possible other personal details will or will not be publicized.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student: Maaike Weitering	Name (EUR) supervisor: Willem Schinkel
Date: March 26th, 2023	Date:

Appendix B

Wardrobe interview guideline

How to conduct a wardrobe interview?
Some ideas & guidelines

Things to do / ask before the interview:

1. Ask how they are doing + pronouns
    a. Introduce myself (if applicable)
2. Express appreciation
3. Explain the overall research project, what I aim to learn from it
    a. Depending on the informant
    b. Theoretical background
        i. The chest as a problem
        ii. Wardrobe studies
        iii. Material culture and methods
        iv. Understandings of gender
4. Explain what the wardrobe interview entails, what it might look like
    a. Duration of the interview
    b. Use clothes as a probe or anchor
    c. Asking for memories, narratives, emotions
    d. About more than speech / words
    e. Not structured, no right or wrong
5. Ask to audio record
    a. For future analysis, will not be shared
6. Identification / anonymity, regarding:
    a. Name
    b. Age
    c. Photo
    d. Gender identity
    e. Physical health
    f. Sexual orientation or sex life
    g. Ethnic origin
    h. Place of residency
    i. Religion
    j. Political opinions
    k. Education
    l. Job / career
    m. Other personal details
        i. Note: it might not be possible to completely anonymize all data
7. Ask for consent
    a. Possibility to take a break at any point
    b. Possibility to discontinue at any point
8. Inform about taking notes
    Of my observations, surroundings, impressions, postures, interferences and disturbances, emotions, silences
9. Ask to take photos
    a. Of their clothing
        i. Texture close-ups
    b. Of the surroundings
    c. Of them
10. Ask for any questions

Possible question & conversation topics:

1. Individual items
    a. Favorite items
    b. Most worn items
    c. Binders, sports bras, underwear
2. Material
    a. Textures
    b. Sizes
    c. Cuts and shapes
    d. Colors and prints
    e. Quality
        i. New or worn-out
        ii. First or second-hand
3. Camouflage
    a. Passing
    b. Fitting in
    c. Standing out
4. Style
    a. Change in style (throughout life)
    b. Where do they get their clothes
5. Specific occasions and scenarios
    a. Work
    b. Partywear
    c. Family
    d. At home
6. Keeping old clothes
    a. Memories and associations
7. Social & society
    a. Who do you dress for?
    b. Freedom to dress as one pleases
8. Body language
    a. Posture
    b. Confidence
9. How does it relate to gender?
    a. Experience
    b. Embodiment
    c. Chest
    d. Gender transitioning
    e. Queer identity

How to start the interview / possible questions:

1. Ask something personal
    a. Gender identity / transition
2. Ask about current outfit
3. Ask about wardrobe
    a. Favorite item

Possible scenarios:

1. Informant gets emotional
    a. Ensure that emotions are okay, there are no rights or wrongs for this project
    b. Offer to take a break
2. Interview falls silent
    a. Prompt informant to do / show me something

Things to pay attention to

1. Silences and pauses
2. Pace of speaking
3. Emotions
    a. Informants'
    b. Mine
4. Tension
    a. Or comfort
5. Body language
    a. Posture
    b. Movement
6. The wardrobe
7. The room
8. Clothing
    a. Texture
    b. Size
    c. Cut
    d. Color
    e. Print
    f. Quality or brand
    g. New or old
    h. Amount
9. Interferences or disturbances
10. Language: translate transcription?

Things to do / ask after the interview:

1. Express appreciation
2. Ask for contact details
    a. Follow-up questions (from them or me)
    b. Send finished project, photos
3. Ask for other informants
4. Ask for any questions

What changes if informants are not queer?

Appendix C

Flyer