TRANS-SITUATED GENDER LABOR: Trans/Nonbinary Individuals Negotiating Gender & Race in Intimate Relationships

Alithia Zamantakis

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TRANS-SITUATED GENDER LABOR: TRANS/NONBINARY PEOPLE NEGOTIATING GENDER AND RACE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

by

ALITHIA ZAMANTAKIS

Under the Direction of Katie Acosta, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Gender operates as a currency of exchange between bodies through sexuality. Ward (2010) notes that “all genders demand work” to be produced and maintained through performances of gender, sexuality, and solidarity. This labor is illustrated in previous research, though, from a non-intersectional perspective of cis femmes in relationships with trans men and/or transmasculine partners. I expand Ward’s concept of “gender labor” to include trans-situated gender labor, or the work trans/nonbinary individuals perform to “give” (cis)gender. In addition, I conceptualize “pre-emptive labor,” or the labor performed prior to intimate encounters and relationships, which functions to protect trans/nonbinary individuals in addition to the structure of cissexism/whiteness. I examine the ways accountability to gender regimes functions for trans/nonbinary people within intimate relationships and encounters. Utilizing photo elicitation and in-depth interviews, I ask how trans/nonbinary people negotiate their gender/race within intimate relationships and how gender negotiations are inherently racialized processes.

INDEX WORDS: Trans Studies, Gender Labor, Dating/Hook-up Culture, Racial Labor, Doing Gender, Trans Intimacies
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GENDER AND RACE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, both of whom paved the way for my existence. I could not be here (in the academy or this world) without you, and I will fight daily to honor you.

The research for this paper was conducted on land stolen from the Mvskoke and Tsalagi peoples. My life, my existence, my education, and my career occur on the backs of Black and Indigenous peoples whose labor and bodies form the foundation of the United States Empire. In particular, my research occurred primarily on the land of the Mvskoke (Creek) and Tsalogi (Cherokee) Nations in so-called Atlanta, GA.
I want to acknowledge my thesis chair and academic advisor, Dr. Katie L. Acosta and my committee members, Dr. Wendy Simonds and Dr. Maura Ryan, for their theoretical and methodological feedback, perpetual editing and reading of my thesis drafts, and encouragement throughout this process. Thank you to Sage Saturn Nenyue, Samantha Martin, Jordan Forrest Miller, Sarah Hanson, the LGBTQ Scholars of Color Network, Nick Hemenway, Leanna Greenwood, Hannah McShane, Sage Sargent, Mason Frost, Ailey Ellsworth, and the nearly hundred other individuals and organizations that shared my recruitment flyer.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFAB—assigned female at birth
AMAB—assigned male at birth
BIPOC—black, indigenous, and/or people of color
CIS—cisgender
GCS—gender confirmation surgery (formerly known as sex reassignment surgery)
HRT—hormone replacement therapy
LGBTQIA—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual/agender
QPOC—queer people of color
QTPOC—queer and/or trans people of color
SOFHU—significant others, intimate friends, and hook-ups
TRANS—transgender
1 INTRODUCTION

Sitting across from Fey, a white trans woman mostly attracted to other women, in my apartment, we begin the interview by discussing cisgender peoples’ perceptions and understandings of trans-ness. I ask her, “Do you…feel like cis people in general have shitty perceptions of trans people?” She responds, “I don’t feel like a lot of cis people like understand it. I feel like if they did like understand like gender on like a personal level, they wouldn’t identify as cis.” Jane Ward, in their research on cisgender femmes dating trans men (2010), discusses how gender operates as a currency of exchange between bodies through sexuality. Ward notes that “all genders demand work” to be produced and maintained. Within intimate relationships, individuals engage in strategic performances of gender identity and/or expression to give gender to SOFHUs. In speaking with fifteen different trans/nonbinary individuals from areas across the U.S., I find that trans/nonbinary people engage in a form of trans-situated labor that functions to protect themselves from transphobic/racist violence and simultaneously functions to protect cis people from realizing the socially constructed reality of their own genders. While Fey’s comment on cis peoples’ understandings of gender erases the intimate experiences and knowledge cis women of color have with gender, her remark also points out that the work cis people should do to express love, desire, and solidarity for trans/nonbinary people in their lives would begin to tear away at interpersonal and structural cissexism.

I define trans as individuals who engage or have engaged in “the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place...[without] any particular destination or mode of transition” (Stryker 2008:1; emphasis is original). Stryker specifically uses the term “across” in the movement trans bodies make; however, my usage of trans instead utilizes the term “beyond.” The word “beyond” emphasizes the capacity for “trans” to
encapsulate nonbinary individuals and experiences. Nonbinary adds to this definition the explicit move away from not only a socially imposed boundary but also a socially imposed binary. I originally sought to understand the negotiation of gender and race in dating/hooking up. However, subsequent interviews prompted a shift toward intimate relationships. Such relationships include romantic/sexual partners, dates, hook-ups, friends with benefits, and intimate/close friendships. I shift to using SOFHU, an abbreviation for significant others, intimate friends, and hook-ups, throughout the remainder of this paper.

Ward’s (and also Pfeffer’s 2012) work on gender labor remains limited in their focus on the work that cisgender femmes do for trans men partners. Although it is critical to understand the work cis femmes perform in these relationships, it is equally critical that the experiences of trans/nonbinary individuals within intimate relationships are also analyzed to understand how cissexism functions within relationships and to better understand gender labor as multidirectional. Further, Ward’s and Pfeffer’s research does not explicitly engage with gender labor and gender negotiation as inherently racialized processes. Building off their work, I ask how trans/nonbinary people negotiate gender within intimate relationships? Second, how do trans/nonbinary people negotiate race and gender in regard to self-pressures, self-identities, and desires of how they wish to see themselves as raced and gendered beings. Finally, how does race interpersonally and structurally undergird what I term “trans-situated gender labor”?

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

West and Zimmerman (1987) moved gender scholarship within Sociology from sex/gender role theory to an ethnomethodological and interactional analysis of gender. To do gender “is to engage in behavior at the risk of gender assessment” (136). West and Zimmerman argue that all individuals do gender in their interactions with others through dress, gestures,
embodiment, and engagement with power structures. In doing gender, they are held accountable for their performance. Trans/nonbinary individuals, as gender deviants, are differentially held accountable for their transgressions of the gender binary.

My explicit recognition of individuals who move beyond not only a socially imposed boundary but also a socially imposed binary underlines the limitations of “doing gender.” West and Zimmerman argue that all individuals are interpreted as men or women. Discussing “preoperative transsexuals,” Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman (2002) argue such individuals “can ‘pass’ as members of one sex category (Garfinkel 1967), and persons on the street can ‘recognize’ a population of two and only two sexes from the dress and the demeanor of those who inhabit the streets” (29). Persons on the street then hold the “preoperative transsexual” accountable for their gender according to the sex assignment. This argument, however, ignores, that trans/nonbinary people are “recognized” and “held accountable” for their gender variously depending on context. West and Zimmerman’s work highlights the processes through which bodies are screened for sex/gender categorization. A customer at a computer store “could not categorize [the sales clerk] as a woman or a man” and left the store “disturbed by that unanswered question” (1987: 133). The encounter elucidates the thought process behind the social control of gender but does not assert that individuals can only be read as male or female, man or woman. The ideas of the “proper” doing of gender in regard to manhood and/or womanhood requires that there are improper ways of doing gender. Improper performances remain accountable to and regulated vis-à-vis their transgressions. The significance of these transgressions becomes meaningful through trans/nonbinary embodiment.

Cisgender\(^1\) individuals’ gender identities are constituted by the trans/nonbinary Other. To do cisgender is to remain at the unchosen place of one’s sex assignment. Sex, itself, however, “is
part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs”; it is not an innate identity of individuals demarcating difference between two supposed poles of male/female (Butler 1993). The division of sex into two “discrete” categories serves only the interests of regulatory heterosexuality, and intrinsically, cisnormativity (Butler 1990). Perceived through the lens of “doing gender,” trans/nonbinary identities are “ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable,” yet cisgender identities simultaneously require their existence to assert the fictive nature of a gender binary (Kristeva 1982). Thus, I do not seek to understand the ways in which trans/nonbinary individuals are held accountable as solely men or women but rather the nuanced ways in which they navigate the consequences of pushing beyond the social boundaries of a gender binary. I wish to allow the ruling relations (Smith 1987) of gender to emerge from data rather than presupposing them.

2.1 Re-doing gender

I use the work of Connell (2008) and Dozier (2005) to extend doing gender theory. Connell and Dozier build on doing gender to encompass the differential positioning of trans/nonbinary people. Connell reexamines the “case” of Agnes, a transsexual woman appearing in the work of West and Zimmerman (1987) and Garfinkel (1967). West and Zimmerman and Garfinkel use Agnes’s story to underscore how individuals produce gender through a symbolic interactionist frame (Connell 2009:106). Agnes’s story is used to articulate the ways in which she worked to do gender according to the normative regimes of womanhood in order to be “recognized” as a woman consistently. Connell emphasizes that solely focusing on the ways Agnes attempts to blend into the world of cisgender womanhood “occlude[s] important issues of contradictory embodiment” and interpretation. Friends, family, and coworkers of Agnes knew her as a trans woman, although strangers may have “recognized” her as a cisgender woman.
Additionally, if Agnes and other trans/nonbinary individuals maintain pre-transition relationships, the ability to “pass consistently” ceases. This emphasizes that one’s identity, the interpretation of it by others, and the ways in which others hold one accountable for their doing of gender are much more complicated than can be analyzed through the sole articulation of doing cisgender manhood or womanhood (Connell 2009). Connell, thus, argues that the doing of gender should not be articulated through the mere achievement of identity but rather as a dynamic, historically contextualized social relation and embodiment.

Dozier argues that both sex and gender are interpreted in the doing of gender, elaborating on Connell’s notion of “contradictory embodiment.” Bodies are culturally constructed and attached with meanings that are inherently gendered. When individuals interpret another’s gender, they make assumptions about an individual’s primary and secondary sex characteristics. An individual with a beard, coarse skin, loose fitting jeans and t-shirt, and short hair is assumed by others to have a penis. Dozier finds that these assumptions affect the ways in which an individual can then do gender and whether or not they are held accountable for their performance. “When sex…[becomes] more congruent with gender, behavior becomes…less important in asserting gender” (297). Dozier finds that, when a trans man is read as a cisgender man, he gains flexibility in gender expression. When he is interpreted as a woman or as an androgynous individual, the boundaries constructed around “proper” gender performance become constricted, increasing accountability, and decreasing the capacity to guide effortlessly through his doing of gender.

### 2.2 Doing gender beyond a binary

Connell and Dozier’s extensions of doing gender theory illustrate the ways trans/nonbinary individuals are unintelligible within a binary. I, thus, pull together the work of
multiple gender, race, and sexuality theorists to demonstrate the ways trans/nonbinary identities push outside the bounds of cis identity and require different analyses. Trans/nonbinary identities, even those that are binary (i.e., trans men and trans women), contest a cissexist gender binary that argues that one is born with a male or female body and develops into a man or woman, respectively, through gender socialization processes. Trans/nonbinary bodies contest such binary logic through chromosomes, hormones, genitalia, and secondary sex characteristics that do not “align” as XX, estrogen, vulva, and breasts or XY, testosterone, penis, and facial hair.

Trans/nonbinary embodiments range from those that do “align” to those that carry “contradictory” signs of chromosomes, hormones, and genitalia, such as XY chromosomes, higher levels of estrogen, penis, and breasts. These embodiments reshape the ways trans/nonbinary individuals interact with cisgender individuals in romantic and sexual contexts.

Trans/nonbinary bodies require different erotic imaginations than do cisgender ones. Additionally, the ways they dress, tuck, bind, and fashion their bodies complicate their navigation of eliciting desire while dating and/or hooking up.

Cromwell’s (2006) participants elucidate the navigation of discursive boundaries in dating by trans men. One participant states,

With a heterosexual man I can be their best nightmare fantasy in the shape of a boy hustler. With a heterosexual woman I can be a pretty hetero male; or if I perceive her as a fag hag, I can be a faggot with bi tendencies. With a lesbian top femme I can be a high heel worshipping boy bottom or a third sex butch, a lesbian man. With a gay man I can be a cock worshipping catamite or a fisting top. With gender ambiguous bi men and women and sexually ambiguous transgendered [sic] people maybe I can just be myself. (517)

Indeed, another asks,

What is it when a transfag and a transdyke get together and make magic together with their bodies and hearts? It’s beauty and delight and peacefulness and excitement and…Whatever else it is, it isn’t lesbian or gay or bisexual or heterosexual, because all of those miss the crucial fact that his transsexuality and queerness, her transsexuality and
queerness, are a major part of what gets them together in the first place and keeps it fun and exciting and hot and lets it pass into beauty. (517)

Both respondents point out that there is something different in dating another trans/nonbinary person—something freeing, sexually enticing, and hot. There are also complex ways individuals, such as the first quoted respondent, navigate the gendered mechanisms of desire. Performances, or activities by an individual to give off a certain impression (Goffman 1956), are not static. Rather, the participant performs various “fronts” according to gender/sexual/racial context. They, thus, forge new ways of loving and having sex.

Trans/nonbinary identities push against the idea of what it means to be a gendered being in the world. By deconstructing the boundaries of manhood and womanhood, they make possible new ways to embody, express, perform, and evoke these particular identities. Additionally, trans/nonbinary identities mark “the limits and excess of” heterosexuality and homosexuality, “simultaneously deconstructing and reconstructing or reimagining new possible ways” of sexual and romantic interaction and affiliation (Green 2016). Trans/nonbinary identities are “not a linear space of mediation between two monolithic, autonomous poles” of man and woman (Chen 2012:136). Rather, they shift, hover about, and challenge boundaries that demarcate where one begins and another ends, asserting the complexity of gender/sex. The lack of linearity inherent to trans/nonbinary identity prevents its capacity to be fixed within hetero-, homo-, or bisexuality.

Juana María Rodríguez (2014) argues that queer people, Latinx people, and queer Latinx people’s bodies are excessive. They “swish too much and speak too loudly…[they] produce gendered performances of overt desire that rouse discomfort” (2014:2). This “too much” of a body and an identity make clear the constructed nature of the categories they contest and construct new possibilities of doing gender and sexuality. At the same time, the discomfort they arouse complicates intimate relationships. Binary modes of analysis are unable to fully capture
the experiences of trans/nonbinary people. West and Zimmerman (1987) provide a framework for understanding the differential accountability placed upon trans/nonbinary bodies, but my analysis requires the co-utilization of Butler’s “performativity” to better understand the elicitation of desire as connected to (trans)gender.

2.3 Eliciting (trans)gender

Butler, in a similar vein as West and Zimmerman (1987) pushes beyond the idea of gender as performance. Butler argues that calling gender a performance means “we’ve taken on a role,” but “for something to be performative means that it” elicits an effect (2011). Individuals come to learn gender through repetitious and oppressive regimes, interactions, and structures (Butler 1992). That one is not born a gender does not mean it does not carry significance. Rather gender is an illusion that society has come to believe is real, and the belief that it is real circumscribes the ruling relations with gendered meaning. I, however, combine Butler’s performativity and Goffman’s “presentation of self” to understand the performativity of performance. Goffman uses the term performance to note the various ways individuals express themselves in order to evoke the proper impression in particular contexts (1956). Performance, for Goffman, can be fixed or fluid. Further, Goffman notes, the cynic may experience “a kind of gleeful spiritual aggression from the fact that he can toy at will with something his audience must take seriously” (12). Goffman’s use of performance serves as useful language to discuss gender through the theoretical lens of Butler’s performativity. The energy utilized to perform a particular front (or gender expression) for a given audience functions as labor one puts in to suppressing their self in order to elicit (gendered) communal belonging; doing gender constitutes a form of “gender labor” (Ward 2010).
Trans/nonbinary individuals must utilize gender while navigating intimate relationships/interactions to mitigate violence and to elicit desire as bodies considered deceptive, undesirable, and/or confusing within a heterosexual/homosexual system. How individuals carry themselves, speak, dress, and stylize their body (vis-à-vis hair, bone structure, musculature, genitalia, etc.) evokes particular responses of desire or disgust they may receive. Simultaneously, their performance is mediated by gendered/racialized norms of beauty and desire. For example, at a singles’ bar, one may be hesitant to show up in sweat pants, flip flops, and the same t-shirt they wore yesterday. Instead, they may wear heels, slightly revealing clothing, and cologne/perfume and carry their body in a confident and open manner to elicit the attention of potential onlookers. Or they may choose to appear in relaxed attire hoping to challenge the norms of the bar while simultaneously acknowledging that they may be “held accountable” for doing so.

2.4 Agency and its constraints

“The situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs,” (Butler 1988:522) requires the strategic performance of gender. As trans/nonbinary people date, hook-up, and/or engage in other intimate encounters, they navigate safety concerns, potential undesirability or fetishization, and the potential of being desired in ways that do not match their gender identity. I seek to understand whether this required navigation pushes trans/nonbinary individuals to perform different gender/racial “fronts” with (potentially) SOFHUs. The performance of multiple “fronts” does not demarcate an inauthentic performativity. Rather, it reiterates the power of performance and performativity in eliciting desire and/or romantic attraction. The disgust an individual can have for a body and the obsession a cisgender individual may have with essentialized ideas of trans/nonbinary identity/embodiment may equally
contribute to the less than ideal intimate experiences. A trans/nonbinary person “passing” as cisgender, either purposefully or accidentally, gains safety but also hides a potentially significant part of their life from others’ view. “Passing,” additionally, may “further support the enunciative power of those who are telling the differences” (Ahmed 2000:125). The body serves as the socially constructed locus of difference—a difference that all individuals are attempting to interpret in encountering others. These interpretations, whether correct or incorrect, attempt to determine what a person is. As trans/nonbinary people become more visible, the destabilization of gender may “become a mechanism for the reorganizing of social life through an expansion of the terms of surveillance” (id:125). The expansion of surveillance to better recognize others/“the Other” may then increase issues of safety and desirability for trans/nonbinary people, tautologically highlighting the need to “pass.”

Strategic performances of gender include clothing, makeup, body modifications like tattoos and piercings, nail polish, hair growth or removal, GCS, HRT, body language, and other permanent or temporary body “alterations”. These “alterations” are gestures, or “action[s]…that reach, suggest, and motions” through “the kinetic effort of communication” (Rodriguez 2014:2). Gender performances attempt to reach across gender boundaries, pulling another body into this body’s purview. Trans/nonbinary identity is relational, adding to and engaging with what it is attached (Chen 2012:137). Gender and all “gestures are always relational; they form connections between different parts of our bodies; they cite other gestures; they extend the reach of the self into the space between us; they bring into being the possibility of a ‘we’” (Rodriguez 2014:2). Trans/nonbinary elicitations of desire attempt to cross rigid boundaries of gender and sexuality by suppressing, exaggerating, or merely living their gender. These elicitations are attempts to bring into being the possibility of feeling and knowing desire. The relational, expansive, and
transformational aspects of trans/nonbinary identity resist fixedness. In doing so, they refute the possibility of doing gender as either a cis man or a cis woman. They call for others to interpret them accurately; thus, elicit potential desire, disgust, loneliness, or fetishization, among other reactions. The mechanisms for these are complicated and nuanced, facilitated by individual desire, interactional accountability, and gender structures. Constructing various gender performances to elicit desire challenges a notion of authentic gender expression as static and immutable. It also challenges the notion of agency. Agency may mean choosing from socially structured pathways of expression.

This constrained agency does not make trans-ness any less authentic. Pfeffer argues, “Enacting agency may involve strategies virtually requiring participation within oppressive social structures and institutions” (2012:593). The complications of agency delineate the self as contextually, historically, and structurally situated and multiplicitous within oppressive regimes that do not cease to exist even if individuals wish them to (Namaste 1996:195). Butler (2004) notes the complications of agency in a social world, writing, “If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world that I never chose” (3). The fact that one’s agency is constituted by forces outside their will does not in any way undermine the potential for them to make choices about how they live and express themselves. Rather, it merely emphasizes that the choices one can make are circumscribed by social interactions and structures. One may never even need to make a particular decision if there were not other forces at play predisposing them to do so. As trans/nonbinary individuals navigate intimate relationships/encounters, hierarchical systems of oppression require them to make decisions regarding their gender. Do they risk safety as a transfeminine individual by not passing or do they risk others not knowing they are trans/nonbinary by passing? Indeed, the choice is not always available in such
circumstances, as access to resources to fund GCS, HRT, a new closet of clothes, facial
“feminization” surgery, and other methods of “passing” are not available to many transfeminine
individuals who are poor, of color, homeless, sex workers, and/or multiply situated by these
identities and circumstances. The fact that one’s “agency is riven with paradox does not mean it
is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility” (Butler 2004:3).
Interactional and institutional oppression and agency are intricately tied in a knotted web that
trans/nonbinary individuals must make sense of as they date and hook up with others.

2.5 The Racialization of Gender

Much gender scholarship ignores the racialized construction and interactions of gender.
The lack of a racial analysis of gendered interactions ignores the whiteness of hegemonic
masculinities and femininities. Gender serves as “the modality in which race is lived” (Gilroy
1993:12). Thus, the race of the individual performing gender and the racialized context in which
the performance occurs determine the “appropriate” way to do gender. Individual interactions
occur within a matrix of domination (Collins 1990) that produces differential consequences for
differentially positioned bodies. White people hold Black women differentially accountable, for
example, in doing gender, and the “proper” performance of gender for a Black woman varies
depending on whether they are around other Black women or white women.

Anzaldúa’s concept of “interfacing” (1990) is useful here in understanding how
individuals perform various racialized gender “fronts” both to survive and to elicit particular
“racial interpellations” (Omi and Winant). Kang (2010) details how women choose various
styles of nails in regard to racialized and classed contexts. Nails are embedded with racial
meanings. “Clean,” pastel, French manicures are associated with white, middle-class femininity,
professionalism, and maturity; whereas, expressive art, acrylics, bright colors, and long nails are
associated with Blackness, working-class identity, a lack of professionalism or job ambition, youthfulness, and excess. Banks (2000) additionally studies the ways in which hair serves as a racialized gender performance. “What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long straight hair (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy” (2). “Good hair” becomes constructed as white hair, and the women in Banks’ study note that heterosexual men expect long, flowing hair as opposed to “natural” Black hair. The racialization of hair, nails, clothing, body posture, speech, body hair, and so forth detail the necessary racialized-gender “fronts” individuals must perform. Further, while white people may have greater latitude in performing gender outside racial expectations, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) remain differentially held accountable and policed according to white standards (Fahs and Delgado 2011).

Gender performances become contingent upon contradictory racialized contexts. Although women of color remain held accountable to white standards of femininities and masculinities, they are also held accountable to the femininities and masculinities of their particular races/ethnicities. Noting the psychic ambivalence of double consciousness (DuBois 1903), Fanon (1967) writes, “A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro” (17). The racialized negotiations of doing gender entail different gender “fronts” according to race and class context. Pascoe (2007) notes the different masculinities performed by Black boys in high school through attention to clothing and interest in dance that differs from white iterations of hegemonic masculinities. Puerto Rican migrants to the U.S. distance themselves from images of la loca (the feminine queer person assigned male at birth) in determining proper appearance and mannerisms in order to associate themselves with particular class, racial, and national iterations of gender (Asencio 2011).
The race of trans/nonbinary people and the race of the individual(s) with whom they interact determine which gender expressions they will be held accountable to perform. The greater latitude in expression for white trans/nonbinary people enables greater safety in pushing outside the bounds of accountable gender performance and a larger array of gender “fronts” to pick from for intimate encounters/relationships. Trans/nonbinary BIPOC must negotiate racial performance, gender performance, and racialized gender performance in attempting to elicit desire. Trans/nonbinary Black women, for example, must contend with “a historically complex distillation of images, derived from two sources:” white hegemonic masculinities and femininities, as well as “Black culture’s attempt to define womanhood for itself” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003: 111). Gender and racial structures form a “matrix of domination” (Connell 1991) in which trans/nonbinary BIPOC are made differentially vulnerable in dating/hook-up contexts. This differential vulnerability shapes the choices they make in doing gender in order to elicit desire.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

In attending to the relational qualities of race and gender for trans/nonbinary people, I add to the growing literature on hook-up and dating culture. Hook-up scholarship lacks empirical studies discussing any LGBTQIA individuals. Rather, the majority of hook-up culture literature is focused on “18 to 22 year old heterosexual college students” with an emphasis on the emergence of such a culture (Heldman and Wade 2010). The hook-up and dating practices of teenagers as they emerge into young adulthood, individuals older than twenty-two, and non-college students remain absent. Studies that do focus on emerging adulthood lack in discussions of sexuality and occur within a vacuum of heteronormativity (Turkelson 2012). LGBTQIA young adults face particular difficulties transitioning into adulthood, lacking support and role
models and experiencing heightened discrimination and violence compared to cisgender and/or heterosexual peers. While I broaden my scope to intimate relationships within this piece, the majority of these relationships/encounters are hook-ups, dates, and/or long-term partners. The expansion to intimate relationships as a whole merely provides a theoretical vehicle in which to tie together dating/hooking-up and other forms of romantic/sexual relationships.

3.1 Hook-up culture and new media

What literature exists regarding LGBTQIA hook-up culture largely surrounds cisgender, white, gay men with a focus on new media, such as dating apps like Grindr, Tinder, Scruff, and Jack’d (Hamer 2004; Wysocki and Childers 2011; Pascoe 2011; Hamer 2014; Jaspal 2017). This focus on new media may be one reason, among others, that cisgender, white, gay men remain central. While scholars, such as Michael Shernoff find “a kind of liberation from the often unbearable anxiety of cruising in raided bars or clubs” (2005) through the use of dating apps, others, such as Jamal T. Lewis, document the anxiety and often unbearable of having to navigate racism, fatphobia, and misogyny on these apps that remain constituted within larger structures of oppression (Ziyad 2015). Others, such as Diane Hamer (2014), document an obvious change and actualization of the goals of the Sexual Revolution since the dawn of internet dating, however rampant slut shaming persists and gender norms remain rigid within these spaces.

Apps like Tinder and OkCupid exist as two of the few that allow individuals to identify outside of a man/woman binary but still categorize individuals according to man/woman in the matching process. In addition to this structural barrier, messages populate apps like Grinder asserting desire mainly for white, masculine, thin, cisgender gay men. Such users argue, “It’s just my preference…I like what I like and won’t apologize for it” (Ziyad 2015) An argument like this
reduces systemically and socially informed “tastes” for other bodies to individual agency. While my study does not focus on new media and its relationship to dating, I will analyze the ways bodies are culturally demarcated as desirable or not and how trans/nonbinary people then navigate such a world.

3.2 Trans Intimacies

The growing literature on trans sexualities and intimacies analyzes the social consequences and constraints of desire for trans/nonbinary people. This literature largely remains focused on gender labor performed by cisgender femmes for their trans men partners and does not consider the racialization of gender labor and doing gender (Pfeffer 2012; Ward 2010; Tumpkins 2014). Tumpkins, for instance, highlights how cis femme partners engage in validating or erasing their partner’s trans identity. If they focus on the partner being trans, then they are a “chaser,” or someone who fetishizes their trans partner. If the trans piece of their partner’s identity remains unaccounted for, though, they potentially erase a critical part of whom they are. Tumpkins’ elucidates the foreclosure of opportunities of dating through the social constraints of desiring trans/nonbinary people. Tumpkins’ analysis is particularly relevant to the ways bodies in the United States are demarcated by gender, and the desire for certain bodies demarcates one’s (assumed) sexuality (Almaguer 1993). “The body is…directly involved in a political field,” but “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (Foucault 1991:25-26). Transphobia operating through dating and hook-up culture is both constrained by power and produces the very power relations that constrain it.

Differently from the aforementioned studies, Williams, Weinberg, and Rosenberger (2016) analyze trans women doing sex work. The trans women participants negotiate gender largely around their engagement with words. Words shape and are shaped by power. The
capacity for words to eroticize, comfort, and/or harm others is invested in the political (Tumpkins 2014; Williams et al. 2016; Ward 2010; Pfeffer 2012). Participants in Williams et al.’s study utilize the flexibility of words to de-gender, rename, and rethink bodily erotics. The participants use words to give gender to themselves and their clients. Giving gender to themselves sexualizes them as women for their own safety, comfort, and desire and serves to simultaneously give gender to heterosexual clients. Additionally, for trans/nonbinary individuals outside of sex work, the de-gendering of particular parts and gendering of other parts requires negotiation with their partner to use particular words and to prevent usage of others.

Gender labor and gender embodiment are often connected for trans/nonbinary people (Williams et al. 2016; Doorduin and Van Berlo 2014). Some feel in past experiences that their “body…was ‘in the way’” of their sexual pleasure, leaving them feeling “raped by the situation itself.” Rather than being able to merely have sex with their partner(s), they remain focused on negotiating their sexuality in relation to or in spite of being trans/nonbinary. Bodily presentations, GCS, sex position, orgasm, and sex acts serve as vectors of giving gender. Williams et al. utilize Green’s “erotic habitus”—“embodied tendencies or dispositions acquired through cultural reaming”—to understand how trans women “do” sex work (1666). Trans/nonbinary individuals must do the labor of both giving themselves gender in order to feel comfortable having sex and to teach their partners how to have sex with them. The labor of these negotiations includes performing various gender “fronts” through appearance and manner according to cisgender ideals of femininity and masculinity.
3.3 Performance as strategy

The negotiation of gender in relation to sexuality and dating by trans/nonbinary people is absent in most gender scholarship beyond Williams et al. and Doorduin and Van Berlo’s studies. In this section, I utilize the work of scholars examining the negotiation of sexuality by queer people of color (QPOC) to elucidate the utilization of performance and performativity as strategy. The racialization of sexuality and sexualization of race position QPOC in precarious situations regarding interpersonal relationships and connections. This precarity is not identical to the precarity experienced by white or BIPOC trans/nonbinary individuals in dating; however, it exemplifies similar enough processes from which to build this analysis upon. Decena (2011) and Almaguer (1993) argue that “coming out” is not a universal phenomenon but rather, a particularly white one. Almaguer highlights that the relationships sexually nonconforming Chicano men have with their families forecloses the opportunity of familial distance that the Industrial Revolution enabled for white participants. Reliance upon the family for solidarity in resistance to white supremacy and mutual economic support requires sexually nonconforming Chicano men, as well as Dominican men in Decena’s study, to navigate a liminal space between “coming out” and “hiding” their sexuality. This liminal space constructs sexually as a tacit subject. Participants’ families know they are not straight, but it is not always perceived as something that needs to be discussed and understood. BIPOC trans/nonbinary individuals similarly must navigate their gender identity as something that may be “recognized” but possibly cannot be spoken due to constraints of safety and/or desire. Navigating the world as such requires individuals to perform their gender differently in different spaces so as to elicit favorable responses.
These mappings and performances of various gender “fronts” extend into the realm of dating. Sexually nonconforming Black and/or Latina women perform gender in relation to whom they are dating and whom they want to date (Moore 2006; Acosta 2013). Women who want to elicit desire from a feminine woman may alter their gender to a more masculine or “gender-bending” appearance, and those who want to elicit attraction from, who Moore terms transgressives or gender-benders, may alter their performances to ones that are more feminine.

Eguchi Shinsoke explains his own navigation of eliciting attraction as a gay Asian-American man in the United States, stating, “I negotiate and renegotiate my performative presentations of gay Asian cultural identity constructions in social locations” (2011) in order to elicit the desired response, depending on whether he is around primarily white people, other Asian people, or other people of color, as well as whether these individuals are gay or straight. Shinsoke asserts that there are “multiple realities” of his performative acts as he tries to communicate his intersecting experiences and identities and obtain the desired responses. Similarly, Manalansan (2003) discusses the concept of biyuti, “a process where selves are made and remade” (ix) in relation to the bakla identity of Filipino gay men in the United States. The bakla, unlike the construction of the fixed and immutable Western, white gay man, is “not a static monolithic category but [is] a basis of multiple performances” (ix). Filipino gay men in diaspora find themselves in a state of “departure” and “arrival” that remakes their sexuality and gender, as well as sexualities and genders of the United States and the Philippines. The self is not immutable. Rather, it is flexible to the space it inhabits. Navigating social constraints and possible social consequences for “improper” representations of the self requires QPOC and BIPOC trans/nonbinary people to negotiate who they are based on where and with whom they are.
Academic scholarship remains lacking in literature focusing on constrained agency and the negotiation of gender by trans/nonbinary people. In poetry, though, trans/nonbinary BIPOC elaborate on the ways in which they navigate and negotiate desirability standards in the myriad ways that the cisgender QPOC above do, but in ways that are particular to their gender identities. Kay Ulanday Barret, trans, queer, disabled, Pilipinx-Amerikan writer, writes about a Thursday night gathering of young queers in Chicago. He remembers the ways in which the group of queer people found ways to celebrate themselves and each other in these spaces: the “boys with eyeshadow glitz to match their/ graf on avenue walls,/ the pants or shirt you were forbidden/ to wear at home/ (due to whatever that check box/ said on your birth certificate)./ Our mamas probably would have/ slit their wallets/ if they only knew where/ their work hours went./ We kissed hard./ We held hands” (2016:12). At home and at school, they had to alter their gender performativities so as not to damage their relationships with their families or to elicit responses of disgust. Together, though, they could reshape a queer performativity to elicit celebration, community, and love. Alok Vaid-Menon, a nonbinary transfeminine writer of Southeast Asian descent, discusses the pain they have experienced for not performing their gender in ways that have elicited love and desire:

Promise me that I will matter if I don’t shave. Promise me that I will matter if I don’t wear a dress. Promise me that I will matter if I don’t wear makeup…Promise me that I will matter if I am ugly…Promise that I don’t have to modify my body to matter…Promise me that you won’t love me like a man, kiss me like a man, fuck me like a man…Promise that I will matter when I am too tired to prove my gender to you. (2014)

Alok notes in order to be deemed desirable, loveable, and worthy as a trans/nonbinary person constantly requires “proving” your gender. If one does not perform their gender in ways that can be “recognized” as feminine or masculine within a cisnormative context, their body is quickly abjected or ignored. To be legitimized as a feminine person as an AMAB or masculine
person as an AFAB, one must constantly “prove” they are truly who they are. They must perform gender labor for themselves and others.

3.4 Agency in a social world

The work QPOC and BIPOC trans/nonbinary people perform to give gender to themselves and those around them highlight the complications of performance and agency. Marginalized individuals must do the work of push-and-pull against the home of their identity and the safety and resources needed to engage in a social world. Additionally, the push-and-pull of agentic resistance and engagement in oppressive structures often blurs together the two, as for instance, “A Filipino drag queen is not the unwitting dupe in a play of racist images but an active participant in the reformulation and deployment of such images in everyday life” (Manalansan 2003:121). Simultaneously, though, many Filipino gay men in the United States attempt to not be “seen” like other Filipino gay men, arguing, “I’m not like them” to situate themselves as better than those who are effeminate and/or poor.

Pfeffer (2012) highlights two paths trans families take in regard to agency. One path these families take is that of “normative resistance,” involving “conscious and active strategies and actions for making life choices distinct from those considered most socially expected, celebrated, and sanctioned, “such as resisting marriage, parenthood, monogamy, and queer invisibility.” Another path, “inventive pragmatism,” involves “active strategies and actions that might be considered clever manipulation of an existing social structure in order to access social and material resources,” such as accessing legal marriage, parenthood, and reproductive technologies through “passing” as a heterosexual, cisgender couple (578). Esterberg (1996) exemplifies these negotiations within the performance of lesbian identity through “ongoing attention to dress, to demeanor, and to the small details that may signal to others that one
experiences desire for other women,” (275) displaying the ways in which agency is complicated at an interactional level in addition to Pfeffer’s articulation of a structural level. Performances and identities are situated by and within the social. The participants in these studies constantly maneuver between false binaries of invisibility and visibility, safety and harm, resistance and acquiescence. These actions can be seen to be “kinda hegemonic, kinda subversive” (Sedgwick 1993:15). I will attend to the nuances and paradoxes of these relations in my analysis.

### 3.5 Political Landscape

When I began this project, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. While President-elect Trump stated he would protect LGBTQIA rights, many trans/nonbinary individuals, particularly BIPOC, undocumented, and working-class trans/nonbinary individuals, justifiably continue to fear what will occur under Trump’s administration. Since Trump’s election, twelve state legislatures, including states from Alabama and Texas to New York and Washington, have considered “bathroom bill” legislation that would effectively “limit transgender people to facilities consistent with their” sex assigned at birth (Richardson 2017). In February, 2017, only weeks after the inauguration, Trump “rescinded protections for transgender students that had allowed them to use bathrooms corresponding with their gender identity” (Peters, Becker, and Davis 2017). The Texas state legislature attempted to pass a “bathroom bill” during their general session that would force trans/nonbinary students to use the bathroom of their assigned sex, but the bill failed (Balingit 2017). However, Governor Abbott later called legislators back for a special session in which they then passed legislation restricting “municipalities from passing anti-discrimination ordinances designed to protect transgender people” (Fernandez and Montgomery, 2017; Balingit 2017). Some trans/nonbinary individuals
are now considering detransitioning (transitioning back to passing and living as the gender/sex they were assigned at birth) due to safety concerns after the election (Riedel 2016).

The rhetoric of “bathroom bills” relies on a transmisogynist discourse that positions trans/nonbinary people assigned male at birth as potential rapists and predators. Cisgender women, thus, need “protection” from such bathroom lurkers. The violence and deception associated with trans/nonbinary bodies, though, frames the social environment in which trans/nonbinary people seek out partners for dating and/or hooking-up. The dehumanization of trans/nonbinary people within the political landscape shapes the social and interpersonal. In July 2017, Trump tweeted a decision to ban trans/nonbinary people from serving in the military (Davis and Cooper 2017). These tweets have been responded to with images of Corporal Klinger from M*A*S*H. Corporal Klinger’s character, written into the show for “humor,” dressed as a woman to prevent being drafted into the military. The circulation of the image is embedded in a discourse of trans women and/or femmes as jokes to laugh at rather than people to whom one could be attracted. Within this precarious political climate, (BIPOC) trans/nonbinary individuals find themselves with heightened social sanctions and consequences regarding their actions, behavior, and opportunities. Issues of safety increase in such a climate, and the need to express oneself differently around cisgender people versus other trans/nonbinary people potentially becomes more necessary and/or desirable. I ask how the current political climate influences trans/nonbinary people’s negotiation of gender while dating. Further, I seek to attest to the differential positioning BIPOC trans/nonbinary people experience in comparison to white trans/nonbinary people.
4 METHODS

Utilizing photo elicitation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews (see Appendix A for interview guide) with fifteen participants over the course of three months (November, 2017 through January, 2018), I ask how trans/nonbinary people negotiate their race and gender within intimate relationships. Using a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2006) and NVivo software, I performed a line-by-line, initial coding on five interviews. I then theoretically fleshed out emergent patterns and arrived at a total of four axial codes. I then performed axial coding on all fifteen interviews. Participants were asked to capture a picture of themselves using a digital camera or camera phone as they would dress and stylize their body on an “ideal” date—one in which their only concern would be feeling a romantic/sexual connection with another human being. Submitted photos were used to elicit conversation and were included in data analysis. I analyze participant-submitted photos by comparing their denotative and performative functioning, paying particular attention to how the body functions for the viewer. Interviews ranged from 37 minutes to two hours, with an average of one hour in length. Altogether, twenty-three photos were submitted with some participants submitting more than one photo, and one participant requesting their photo remain private.

My study received IRB approval in October 2017. An additional amendment was submitted in January 2018 to allow participants who did not want to use a pseudonym to use their own name. Two participants chose not to use pseudonyms, explaining, “I’m very particular when it comes to naming and I don’t take it lightly…I’ve gone a long time with me like reaching the point of being myself, which is to say that I’ve never wanted to have a pseudonym.” This amendment was approved in February 2018. Interviews were conducted only with individuals who identify as a gender different than what they were assigned at birth. This eliminated gender-
nonconforming participants who are not trans/nonbinary. The broad range of experiences of
gender-nonconforming people encompasses cisgender and transgender experiences and
experiences of those who are neither. To limit the analysis to a cohesive group, gender-
nonconforming individuals, unless also trans/nonbinary, were not be asked to participate. One
participant did not claim the terminology of trans and/or nonbinary. They distanced themself
from these words but still spoke of the ramifications of transphobia as experienced within
intimate relationships, so I did not remove their interview from data analysis. Two of the
participants are Black, one Black and Southeast Asian, one Asian/Indian, one Latino
(Guatemalan and Mexican), and ten white (see Appendix A for participant information). My
participants are overwhelmingly white; however, I still engage in an intersectional and racial
analysis of the data. Eight were assigned female at birth, seven assigned male. My use of
male/man and female/woman reflects the words participants use. Thus, participant genders
included trans male, trans man, trans female, trans woman, neutroisiv/femme, trigenderv
(caelgenxervi, juxeralii, and transmasculine), nonbinary/genderqueervii/transmasculine/femme
boi, and nonbinary trans femme. In regard to sexual orientation, only two participants were
straight/heterosexual, one bi, one gay, two lesbian, three homoflexible/mostly gay/mostly
attracted to men, three pansexual, one queer/gay, one asexual/panromanticix, and one
Afrosensual. Nine participants had incomes of $30,000/year or less. Three had incomes $50,000-
65,000 per year, and the other three fell between $30,000 and $40,000 per year.

Participants were recruited from the United States through social media groups targeting
trans/nonbinary communities regionally and nationally, flyers in LGBTQIA community centers
in Salt Lake City, Utah (as I have community connections there) and Atlanta, Georgia (as I live
there), and through word of mouth recruitment at LGBTQIA, trans/nonbinary, and
trans/nonbinary BIPOC events, gay bars, and lesbian bars (see Appendices B and C for recruitment flyers). Those in Atlanta were invited to an in-person interview at a location that was most comfortable for the participant. Ten of the interviews occurred over some form of web cam (Facetime, Skype, Google Hangout, and/or Facebook Video Chat). Video difficulties prompted two of those interviews to turn into phone interviews. Of the five face-to-face interviews, one occurred at my apartment in Atlanta, GA, one occurred at an AirBNB in Salt Lake City, UT at which I was staying over the Christmas holiday, one occurred at a coffee shop in downtown Decatur, GA, and the other occurred at a coffee shop in downtown Atlanta, GA. Three participants lived in Utah, one in Washington, one in Mississippi, one in Ohio, one in Louisiana, three in California, one in Colorado, and four in Georgia.

All participants were asked ahead of time to take the photo of themselves as they would stylize their body on an “ideal” date and to either email me the photo or to print it and bring it in person to the interview. They were also asked if this photo could be printed in the thesis and subsequent publications. Only one did not consent to this. Participants were asked to come up with a name for themselves to be used in the thesis that is not their own or a nick name of their own. Those outside of Atlanta were asked to upload their photo to a private dropbox that did not record their email address. I chose no geographic restrictions due to the limited access to trans/nonbinary communities for research purposes.

I engage in this work as a college educated, white, able-bodied, mentally ill, queer, trans, and nonbinary femme from working-class, rural Utah. As such, my particular standpoint differs from those of other identities and other processes of learning and unlearning. I structure my work from a trans feminist ideology, working to insert the experiences of oppression, inequity, and community of trans/nonbinary individuals into academia and to analyze them through a critical
feminist lens that aims to reduce harm to research participants and to build upon prior knowledges.

4.1 Methodologies of photo elicitation

Dona Schwartz (1998) explains that photos are able to elicit response and interpretation from the respondent and are able to be analyzed by the researcher in understanding the geography of a particular area. Photos, Schwartz explains, embody the photographer’s subjectivity, record a moment, and are a “receptacle from which individual viewers withdraw meaning” (120).

Femme methodologies, further, expound on the ways in which images capture the recipients’ histories, subjectivities, and agency (Dahl 2010). Images work to potentially disrupt the unequal ways in which the researcher comes to listen and then translate words from the participant. Images, instead, offer up the possibility for the participant to capture and translate their self from the corporeal into image through their own agentic interpretation. Further, photography can queer methods by adding another “dimension in which the reader is another…collaborator” in the research project (Dahl:159). Femme and queer methodologies elucidate the “situated and partial knowledges” (Haraway 1991) that research captures. Photography adds to the text an additional situated and partial knowledge that can more fully capture the experiences of trans/nonbinary people who remain relatively absent within most academic literature.

Some scholars have used photo elicitation within gender and sexualities scholarship. Joanne Hill (2015) utilized photo elicitation to understand how “girls…navigate discourses of valued athletic and gendered bodies that marginalise or ‘other’ non-normative performances.” Hill asked participants to keep a photo diary of the physical activities they engaged in using a
digital camera that allowed them “control over flash, colour, zoom, focus,” and more. Hill then used the photos to initiate small group discussions among participants and placed them alongside interview data within the text to capture the girls’ active social world influencing and influenced by them as they navigated these discourses. Hill asked participants to decide how they would want their intimate partnerships represented, as trans/nonbinary people have often been represented poorly in social and media discourse (Davidmann 2014).

Similarly, Louisa Allen (2013) in two separate studies, one on “girls’ portraits of desire” and another on “boys as sexy bodies,” used photo diaries and photo elicitation to “see” female desire as already existing and not missing but undiscussed and to analyze boys’ bodies as sexualized. Allen then used the photos to elicit discussion in one-on-one interviews with the participants, capturing both what they understand, think, and feel, and what they “see.” Sara Davidmann (2014) used photography alongside case studies to imag(in)e trans partnerships. Words often disembbody, and Davidmann highlights the ability for pictures to bring the flesh and materiality of participants back into discursive analyses.

### 4.2 Coding

My study draws on trans/nonbinary individuals’ discursive interpretation of how they navigate dating, hooking-up, and other intimate relationships in relation to their gender(s) and race(s). Using grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) methodology, I first performed a line-by-line coding on six of the fifteen interviews. Four of the six interviews were chosen, because they were the first four interviews I performed. The other two were chosen, because they were the first two interviews I performed with people of color in order to ensure that I did not perform line-by-line coding on white participants’ interview transcripts only.
After line-by-line coding, I collapsed codes, sought out patterns, and incorporated theory—including Ward’s (2010) “gender labor,” Muñoz (2006) theorization of racialized affect, and West and Zimmerman’s (1987) “doing gender. In this process, I arrived at four axial codes that I then used to re-code the first six interviews and to code the remaining nine. These codes/themes were pre-emptive (gender and racial) labor, trans-situated gender labor, and balancing the labor load (which I later re-termed “queering labor”). Pre-emptive and trans-situated gender labor were arrived at through the incorporation of theory into two distinct patterns between how participants engaged in gender labor and differential gender accountability prior to and in the process of forming relationships and once relationships had already been formed, respectively.

While I disproportionately interview white participants due to my own limitation in seeking out BIPOC participants, I find it important to racially analyze the interviews of white participants for theoretical, political, and empirical reasons. In coding interviews, a pattern emerged in which white participants sought to position (white) trans-ness against racialized oppression while discursively absenting themselves from racialized mechanisms that they were perpetuating within the interviews. Finally, I renamed “balancing the labor load” to “queering labor,” as participants spoke not so much of a purely equal sharing of labor but of the importance of acknowledging unequal labor loads while often unable to be changed due to reasons beyond their control and/or a more equitable sharing of labor in which individuals engage in labor according to needs and abilities. In what follows, I explain and analyze these themes, beginning with trans-situated gender labor before shifting to pre-emptive labor, affective racial labor, and finally queering the labor load.
4.3 Methodological Reflexivity

Collins (2004) writing on Black feminist epistemology, notes, “It is impossible to separate the structure and thematic content of thought from the historical and material conditions shaping the lives of its producers (105). My analyses within this paper are not objective observations on the gender/race negotiations of trans/nonbinary individuals nor are they intended to be. My interviews were semi-structured and often occurred as a dialogue between my participants and me, and the particular conversations I had with each individual shaped the information they then shared with me afterward. My analyses are meant to contribute to other work within the realm of “gender labor,” such as the work performed by Pfeffer (2012) and Ward (2010). I highlight that both focus on the work cis femmes do to give gender to trans men and that my work, in contrast, focuses on the work trans/nonbinary individuals perform. Rather than viewing my work as arguing against Ward and Pfeffer, I and my participants have co-produced a “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1991) that joins in conversation with Ward and Pfeffer. In addition, my whiteness, my biological family’s and my ascendancy to the middle-class in my adolescence, and my position within the academy fundamentally shaped the knowledge produced herein.

As a nonbinary, trans femme studying and analyzing the experiences of other trans/nonbinary individuals, I found myself in a precarious insider/outsider status throughout my requests for participants and the interviews themselves. I posted my call for participants throughout the city of Atlanta, as well as in social media groups for trans/nonbinary people. After I posted my call in one particular group, I was asked whether or not I was a trans person studying trans people or a cis person “using us [trans people] as a stepping stone to a career”. The question was a valid question, seeking to know whether I intended to exploit trans/nonbinary communities. The reality is that, despite my best intentions, my research will still serve as a
stepping-stone to my own career as an academic professor and researcher. I have worked to mitigate this harm by continuing relationships with my participants past the end of the interview—supporting one in their journey to becoming a doula, getting drinks with another and continuing to text about shared mental health problems, and continuing relationships through social media conversations. In addition, I work to uplift the stories and work of trans/nonbinary people of color in conversations with friends and family, in social media protests, and in continued solidarity at protests against xenophobia, racism, and other forms of oppression. Beyond the relationships formed with participants, these were things I already did in my own life, and thus, are not necessarily ways of balancing out the potential harm caused by my interviews; nor do the continued relationships negate the emotional labor, vulnerability, and voyeurism to which I have subjected my participants.

Another individual’s question on the same feed just mentioned asked, “What positive outcomes for this population do you anticipate might be a result of this study? And how do you intend to demonstrate the value of your participants?” I responded that my hope was to utilize the experiences of trans/nonbinary folks negotiating gender while dating to elucidate what little analyses we have on anti-trans violence born out of intimate encounters. My hope with this project is to provide a systematic account of the work some trans/nonbinary individuals perform in order to elicit safety and desirability. Ultimately, my work does not prevent harm from occurring, nor does it elicit the end of cisnormative notions of desirability. However, I aim to broaden the scope of how trans-ness and nonbinary-ness are thought of within the academy. Trans/nonbinary individuals are neither unique sites of gender transgression nor gender perpetuation. Rather, my fifteen participants negotiate a push/pull relationship with seeking new
ways of being and existing while also aiding in the maintenance of cissexism/whiteness. I hope my analyses continue to contribute to further research in this vein.

In doing this research, I was positioned, both structurally and interpersonally, as an insider/outsider. At times, my trans-ness served to connect me to my participants, opening up space for further vulnerability on both of our parts than may otherwise have occurred. At other times, my education, my position within the academy, my elevating class status, and my whiteness clogged the connections my trans-ness opened. In the same comment feed evolving out of the question of whether I were cis or trans, another person commented, “I also wonder how many people put out these requests for labour without the offer of an honorarium…In any context that transgender people are asked for their emotional labour for the benefit of others, including themselves, there really ought to [be] a small sum offered as a means to at least try to compensate for the economic imbalances many transgender women experience.” I felt it important to address these very valid concerns with what little I could offer in response:

I wholeheartedly agree with the comments on this post regarding the value of people’s time in being research participants. As a trans femme who has worked multiple minimum wage jobs and done sex work to get by, I completely understand the economic oppression we experience, which is part of the reason I’m going to grad school…I wish I could offer money to my participants but unfortunately my program does not offer research funds for students and gender/sexuality research is rarely funded unless quantitative and focusing on health, and I don’t do quantitative research. I do want to acknowledge the exploitative nature of research though, and I constantly find myself in a battle between not wanting to do it
because of the exploitative nature of it and also not wanting more cis people being the only ones talking about our lives as they perceive them.

As I felt (and feel) conflicted about the exploitative nature of research and the need for trans research by and for trans people, I also feel conflicted about my response here in this quoted section of the feed and here in this section on reflexivity. I do not want to try to say, “I caused harm, but I did x to mitigate it.” I do want to highlight the ways I have worked to do so, but I am much more interested in acknowledging the violence and the sad truth that research (especially Master’s level research) often does little in changing the world around us.

Conceptualizing a queer ethics for research, Mathias Detamore (2016) highlights that knowledge is a co-production “traced horizontally between and through the researcher and researched. Liberal fantasies of ‘emancipating’ or ‘redeeming’ ‘subjugated voices’ evaporate and are replaced with a more nuanced assemblage of voices working from their own authority” (178). As I sent out my call for participants, interviewed my fifteen participants, and analyzed the data from these interviews, I have worked to elucidate the various voices and stories of particular individuals as they negotiated their gender/race in intimate relationships. Talking to people about heartaches, pain, loneliness, fetishization, and the like are not easy, but there was something healing in this research for both myself, and I hope for my participants.

As a trans femme in the academy, I feel isolated from people like myself every time I step through the doors heading to class or my department. I occasionally spot another trans femme, but this occasion is a fleeting moment before my return to a space filled primarily with cis bodies and cis ideologies. Speaking with my participants was an intimate experience. We spoke about sex and dating; we laughed and spoke with broken voices. I tried to answer their questions about
me and my life as best I could—questions regarding my own gender, race, dating experiences, and mental health. Breaking this barrier between researcher and researched, and creating a queerer (although not unproblematic) relationship between myself and my participants, allowed me to hear stories I otherwise would not have thought to answer. As I spoke to Davis, my first participant, I relayed my experience with an eating disorder born out primarily through an internalization of cissexism, femmephobia, and fatphobia, and in turn, he began to share his own experience with an eating disorder and the ways this experience has affected his relationship to his body today and the negotiations he is and is not willing to make for others. I did not include this data in my work as it was a singular experience not discussed by other participants, but it stuck in my mind throughout the remainder of my interviews reminding me of all that vulnerability enables within research and within activist work towards social justice.

In building a transfeminist methodology, Johnson (2015) highlights a need for methodology “that operates against transgender marginalization.” In some ways, I have worked to do this. Two participants sought to keep their name as is rather than choosing a pseudonym, stating, “I’m very particular when it comes to naming and I don’t take it lightly…I’ve gone a long time with me like reaching the point of being myself, which is to say that I’ve never wanted to have a pseudonym.” The IRB accepted my amendment in order to do so; however, I think it is important that researchers continue to push back against IRB protocol that stipulates the necessity of pseudonyms for participant confidentiality and safety in order to also recognize that, for people who have spent a large chunk of their lives with a name other than their own, forcing a pseudonym may cause more harm than good. In addition, Johnson also calls on researchers to interrogate our own trans-ness. Isa highlighted that the words trans and nonbinary are not reflective of Isa’s experience and identity. Undoubtedly, my own trans-ness and nonbinary-ness
have influenced my use of these terms in calls for participants, in my analyses, and in the very naming of this paper. I spent a long time thinking of other words to use, but I did not want to reify cis-ness but using the word “non-cisgender.” In addition, trans and transgender remain words used in academic theories, research, and key words, meaning that the lack of these words may also mean an academic loss in contributing to Trans Studies.

In noting the limitations of my work, I find it crucial to note the role of my whiteness in regard to my interviews. When I began my interviews, I found it difficult to probe into people’s responses to my questions about race and to ask more questions about other responses that touched on race/racism. I was unsure of what to ask without sounding so critical that I would keep them from saying more. I was also unsure of what to ask because of my own complicity in whiteness and the lack of conversations we as white people have around race. My capacities in this regard grew throughout the process, yet my data remains affected by this. While I aim in my dissertation to do better, and in my life to be better, I cannot undo what is done. I believe my interrogations of self throughout this process, though, aid in my having been able to highlight the underlying racial mechanisms of gender labor, and I hope that my work prompts further engagement with the ways in which white supremacy and cissexism are co-imbricated, co-constructed, and inseparable.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Pre-emptive Labor

Ten out of fifteen participants currently or previously used dating apps as a way to pre-screen people, whether by looking at the questions on OkCupid that ask whether someone would date a trans person, by openly explaining their trans/nonbinary identity in their profile, or by intentionally marking themselves as trans/nonbinary in identity markers on Grindr, HER,
FetLife, Tinder or other apps, to make sure that transphobic people do not message them in the first place. These individuals engaged in a large amount of back-stage management of their presentation of self in order to cultivate desired matches, messages, and SOFHUs (Goffman 1956). Further, this back-stage management often occurred out of fears of safety.

In addition to the pre-emptive labor participants engaged in on dating apps, participants engaged in bodily pre-emptive labor, changing how they dress, speak, and/or gesture through body language for the first few dates. Several participants used the language of not wanting to “push it too far” in reference to their gender presentation. An arbitrary line between being just one of the girls/guys and “too trans” regulates the ways many of the participants dressed and behaved in intimate encounters. This management of their presentation of self is not just about being seen as desirable, though. As I explain further below in this section, this management of the self also occurred because of the ways participants believed cisgender people to view transness as complicating sexuality and gender. Each of my participants discussed some form of pre-emptive labor, occurring through prior self “disclosure” of one’s trans/nonbinary identity, change of dress, bodily presentation, and/or voice, and/or intentional use of dating apps. I first conceptualize pre-emptive labor before discussing the racialized mechanisms undergirding pre-emptive labor.

The individuals I interviewed discussed engaging in strategic actions, including changing how they dress and sound, altering their body posture and language, and restricting their gender expressions in order to gain access to intimacy with others. I interviewed Lewis, a queer/gay, Black, trans man in Georgia who is primarily attracted to other men over Skype. I had come across YouTube videos of Lewis speaking about his experiences as a Black, queer/gay, trans
man, including videos about dating as a Black, trans man, and I reached out to him due to the relevancy of the topics he discussed and the topic of my project.

In the interview, Lewis spoke about cisgender people’s expectations regarding intimacy with trans people. Lewis explained that cis people often react to trans people coming out later in a relationship as a form of betrayal. Lewis sighed, “Cisgender people think someone’s trans status is something that should be made clear, explicit, and explained up front, yet for them, their cisgender status is not assumed to operate the same way.” This cisnormative expectation even became discursively embedded within trans participants’ discourse, as many used the phrasing of “disclosing my trans identity” or even “disclosing my trans status”. Trans participants’ internal sense of self shifted around the interactions and experiences they had with cisgender people. Despite several of them, Lewis included, critiquing the demand placed upon them to continually out themselves and the conflation of being trans with having a sexually transmitted infection, their language continued to center trans-ness as a negative status that ultimately became “disclosed” at some point.

Lewis was presently dating a cisgender, Black man, but I asked Lewis about his own previous “disclosure” of his gender to others prior to and/or when meeting them. He explained how this has shifted over time, primarily vis-à-vis dating apps:

So I would put something in my profile that I was transgender and then noticing that would confuse people, because they thought I was a man who liked to wear dresses or something, and that’s not what I meant. They would conflate, you know, being a cross-dresser or whatever. So then I would explicitly say, “I used to be a woman,” because I find that was the clearest language of explaining what it meant. After awhile, I got tired
of explaining to people, and so I would take it off my profile for awhile, just because I wanted to get to know people before I had that conversation, and I later put it back on again, but I think after awhile, I just got tired of explaining and would just limit my dating pool to those people who either were trans or were cisgender people who understood already….It was very angering for me that I constantly had to do this. Um [pause] also [pause] people would just say inappropriate things online that I know they wouldn’t say to me in person, so I think that’s a um [pause] what’s the word, I think that’s a drawback to the online means of meeting people as opposed to face-to-face, because people would just say nasty things to me, so it was mostly angering.

Lewis spoke of the seemingly perpetual questioning that he, and other trans/nonbinary participants, experienced when trying to date online. While I did not set out to primarily discuss intimacy through dating apps, the majority of my participants, including Lewis, spoke of pre-emptive gender labor and meeting people through apps or online dating sites. The barrage of questions and constant requirement to explain one’s self may occur more often through online dating, as Lewis mentioned that people seem more likely to say “nasty things” online compared to face-to-face.

Additionally, Lewis elaborated how, despite pre-emptively outing himself online, he still received gendered and racialized messages that he felt he had to respond to:

It was really interesting, because there were times when I put I was trans on my profile, and yet I still got white guys looking for Big Black Cock. And so they were just looking at my pictures and not really reading my profile, which I know happens all the time. But I
would spend time creating, carefully crafting what I was gonna say in my profile and people weren’t reading it, you know? I would just be annoyed; that was another thing that made me angry.

Lewis, here, spoke of the way in which pre-emptive gender labor and racial labor are not isolated mechanisms of intimate labor. Rather, they are interconnected. Lewis, pre-emptively outed himself on dating apps like OkCupid to preserve his energy and prevent the need of explaining his trans-ness to others. However, people focused more selectively on his racial and gender markers and pictures and ignored the explanations in his profile. Lewis’ body became a site of racialized gender fetishization, with individuals not only wanting to have sex with a man or have sex with a Black person but particularly with a Black man, based on white framed stereotypes of Black men with large penises available for white sexual consumption (Collins 1990). Later in the interview, Lewis spoke of racist fetishization of his dark skin, and I asked him, “Do those ways of being fetishized and exoticized in terms of the trans-ness and the Black-ness feel similarly exhausting to you, or do they feel different in terms of the ways they affect you?” He explained that the racial fetishization is less frequent:

Given that I’m primarily interested in men of color, so it’s primarily who I’m engaging, and the apps that I use, particularly Jack’d, there’s more men of color on that app [pause] um, so I would say overall, my engagement with white men on those apps is less frequent [pause] I will say that I think the trans piece is more exhausting, because it’s just more prevalent. Because it happens, it’s happened, regardless of the race of the person I’m
U.S. racial segregation in housing, segregation in terms of who uses which apps (with primarily Black men and other men of color using Jack’d over other apps), and filters that allow individuals to segregate by race and other markers (such as body type) for “premium” members of apps like Grindr already facilitate a lesser likelihood of Black and white bodies coming into contact. While trans/nonbinary individuals could choose to limit their dating/hook-up pool to other trans/nonbinary people, there are no apps explicitly allowing this option. While this labor is exhausting for trans/nonbinary people (of color) to have to perform, it also brings cis bodies and trans bodies into contact. Bodies coming into contact with other bodies within a sexual field can potentially transform individual desire and collective notions of desirability (Green 2014). However, it remains important to note the role of safety in trans/nonbinary participants deciding to pre-emptively out themselves or silo their dating pools. Coke, a pansexual, Indian, trans woman, for example, discussed how she avoids dating cis men because of safety reasons:

Coke: “I tend to avoid dating cis men, but I date everyone else.”

alithia: “Why do you avoid dating cis men?”

Coke: “Because I’m afraid of the violence when they find out you’re trans.”

alithia: “Have you had any experiences with cis men where they’ve done those things or is it more fear of it happening in the first place?”
Coke: “Um I’ve had where someone I was talking with online freaked out when they just learned I was trans [pause] and I was like, well if that’s what they act like online, then what if I meet someone in person?”

alithia: “What did they say online?”

Coke: “They were just freaking out. They started cussing me out, saying I was a man [pause]; they just went on a rant and a lot of trans slurs, and it just made me really uncomfortable, so I just blocked them.”

Coke’s experience with cis men online led her so far as to rule them out as intimate options. However, this is not always an option for people, nor is it necessarily an option they want to take. Other participants, like Lewis for example, spoke of how “there’s less trans men available, especially given I’m friends with a lot of trans friends, so the people I wanna date, either I’m already friends with or they’re just really hard to find.” Thus, despite one’s intentions to prevent intimate encounters with cis people, the reality of having SOFHUs who are never cis is much more difficult to create. OkCupid now allows queer users to only see other queer people; however, a similar option is not available for trans people. Tinder allows users to filter by gender and sexual orientation; however, bisexual women, for example, will see queer women and heterosexual men as potential SOFHUs. Additionally, apps like OkCupid and Tinder, despite allowing individuals to identify by genders outside the binary, still require that individuals choose to be seen with “men” or with “women.”

5.1.1.1 Dress, body, and voice

While the majority of participants spoke of a felt need to pre-emptively out themselves through dating apps, participants’ responses to changing their voice, body, dress, and so forth for
others were more contested. For example, Davis, a 28-year-old, white, gay, trans man spoke of feeling like he had to change how he dressed before a date but not needing to change his voice. I asked Davis if, in the process of physically transitioning, he would “try to change [his] voice before it started to just naturally change from the hormones, in order to deepen it around other people?” He responded, “Not really. It just wouldn’t help. It just sounded like I was intentionally lowering my voice (mimics what he is speaking about), right? So it didn’t really help.” His decision to not alter his voice was also reflected amongst other AFAB participants who stated a similar sentiment of not changing their voice, because it did not assist in “passing” as cis.

However, when asked about changing how he looked to feel attractive or to be seen as attractive, Davis responded:

I think it’s really hard to feel confident if, for example, none of my pants fit right now because I’ve lost so much weight. I’ve gone down two pant sizes, so I feel like on a basic level, I want to be wearing something that fits so I don’t feel like I’m wearing my dad’s clothes, so that um [pause] that I feel more confident around all these people that would have nice things. Like, I only have one pair of 34’s right now—that’s where I’m at, a 34. So if I really wanna feel fancy, I’ll wear my nice 34’s and my button-up, you know? At least it makes me feel a little more confident in my appearance. Like I’m wearing clothes that I feel good in. I’m wearing clothes that fit.

Whereas, AMAB participants (8 out of 9) spoke more of a felt need to change how they dress for safety and/or desirability, AFAB participants, such as Davis, spoke more of a felt need to dress in a way that evoked confidence. Three of the six trans men participants spoke of needing to
evoke confidence specifically in regard to their dress. Additionally, five of the six trans men’s submitted photos shared a similar aesthetic of masculine confidence (comfortable and casual but dressed up), upright posture, either staring into the camera with a bright smile or staring off to the side with a look of self-assuredness and swagger. Sora, a white, mostly gay, trans man, explained his photo choice:

Well that one I had just gotten taken because I needed an updated professional headshot, and I had a friend who was doing headshots, and she came over and did several pictures. I really liked this one. And I guess like, the same things I’m looking for in portraying confidence at work ended up being how I want to be seen by a partner.

alithia: Yeah, how do you want to be seen by a partner?

Sora: Um [pause] like whole and complete, confident, self-sufficient.

Professional codes of dress and body language, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, were mapped onto trans men’s photos in regard to portraying a masculine ethos of confidence. I coded these photos as “just one of the guys” (see Figure 1). Just one of the guys exemplifies a performative of dominant masculinities as a way of eliciting recognition as a “cisgender” man, safety through the privileges of cisgender manhood, and a reification of gender ideologies. Only white/Latino men exhibited this performative aesthetic (see Appendix A, Tables 4-5).

In contrast, trans women’s pictures were more likely to fall within the categories I termed “transdrogynous” (see Figure 2) or “just one of the girls,” (see Figure 3) performative aesthetics used to elicit safety by trans women. What contrasts just one of the guys and girls codes were participants’ explanations of what they hoped to performatively elicit on a date.
Figure 1 "Just one of the Guys"

Figure 2 "Transdrogynous"
For example, Victoria, a 39-year-old, white, bi, trans woman described herself as just presenting as female on first dates, further elaborating, “I would say that I’m a little more self-conscious on dates, because especially if I feel like the other person’s on the fence, I don’t wanna slip up or do something that I think might freak them out, you know?” Just one of the girls photos portrayed trans women in stereotypically feminine dress, smiling yet demure. These photos included
women posing with various objects around them or in their hands, appearing reticent in body language. Transdrogynous photos were submitted by trans women who explicitly attempted not to evoke gendered assumptions of cisgender men or women. These individuals were more likely to feel like they did not pass or could not pass presently without surgeries or hormones and used androgyny as a way of eliciting safety. While they were more likely to receive side-glances and confused stares, they also felt physically protected in their androgynous style. For example, Fey, a 23 year old, white, homoflexible, trans woman, explained:

I have the mode when I’m gonna be in an area that I know is safe, how I like to dress, and in an area where it’s in public, I’m just kind of cautious. In the cautious area, I usually will wear a band t-shirt, which is just like a unisex band t-shirt and then women’s jeans and no make-up and it usually gets me misgendered, and then otherwise I will wear skirts because they’re uh… I don’t know like more feminine clothing and stuff like that.

Fey intentionally wore “unisex” t-shirts and jeans with no-make-up to prevent individuals from being able to ascertain her gender. She had longer hair and her attire included a mix of stereotypically feminine and masculine clothing that complicated people’s ability to read her as a woman or a man. While dressing this way caused people to misgender her as a man or to stare longer trying to figure out whether she was a man or a woman, this style of dress also prevented any physical harm in areas that she felt are less trans-friendly. In addition to changing how they dressed, trans women participants also spoke of changing their voice on first dates, as compared to trans men participants who said they never did. Changing of voice was mentioned by all but one trans woman participant. Fey mentioned:
When I go on a first date or something like that, I usually change my voice. Um or like I’m in even a new area, or I’m presenting really feminine, I will definitely change my voice without even thinking about it. I just make it higher pitch and try to emphasize higher pitches.

A change of dress alone did not elicit the safety and comfort trans women participants wanted in potentially dangerous spaces or interactions. Instead, a change of dress accompanied by a higher pitch in voice felt necessary to not make their SOFHUs uncomfortable and to prevent misgendering that made them feel further wary of the situation.

(2017) uses to highlight the significance of moments when individuals are perceived as a
gender/sex other than that with which they identify—trans women experienced fears of violence in addition to similar social misrecognition. For trans women, being misrecognized as a “man in a dress” carries implications of violence, death, and other threats regarding physical safety.

I included an additional code for those who did not desire to reproduce cis-ness in how they dressed and behaved. I coded these individuals and their photo submissions as a “queer style” of dress, embodiment, and voice (see Figure 4). Black and/or nonbinary participants were more likely to fit this category as an aesthetic of distancing oneself from hegemonic modes of being and eliciting new forms of intimacy and intimate interaction. This aesthetic included an exaggerated stylization of dress, including wearing a “masculine” suit and jacket with a space themed bow-tie and long hair, a tank-top that reads “Trans* Is Beautiful” with jewelry specifically chosen to add a touch of femininity for a trans man, or a dress and colorful lipstick on an individual with facial hair.

While these stylizations might be said to fit within the transdrogynous category, these individuals sought less to seek gender-anonymity within androgyny and more to highlight their refusal to fit. Their body language was less reticent, more vulnerable (including fragmented shots of the body), and more open (with deep stares into the camera or joyful, candid shots). Kade, a 26 year old, white, trigender individual, described his picture as “very ostentatious,” elaborating, “There’s a quirky femininity/asterisk about the way that I present with my hair that’s supposed to invite that kind of fun question, like, ‘Okay, why do you like this? This seems unusual.’” Rather than seeking to appear like a cisgender man or a cisgender woman, those that dressed in a queer style sought to appear specifically as trans, queer, and different. They wanted individuals not to ask them what gender they were but to ask themselves, “Why am I staring at this individual, what is drawing them to me, and what is this saying about me?”
While West and Zimmerman (1987) posit that all individuals do gender as a man or a woman, these participants highlighted that they were read differently in different contexts and that they refused to simplify their gender expression for others. Isa, a 25 year old, Black, Afrosensual, neutrois/femme who did not claim the terminology trans and/or nonbinary but also did not identify with the sex šé (pronounced shay) was assigned at birth, for example, refused to allow social norms to control how šé dressed:

I DO NOT look good, and then I would say, I strive not to look good, and then I would say I REFUSE to look good for other people, because when I look my best, it’s because I’m appealing to the integrity within myself.

Isa attempted to dress in ways that elicited new ways of intimately interacting with others. Isa explained that šé’s way of interacting through dress was a gesture, “It’s the implied question of will you help me build this better world? Will you help me shift this paradigm? Will you help me? I’m asking you for help.” Gender and dress became something done not according to accountable norms of manhood and womanhood but something to performatively evoke community. In addition to evoking community, this queer style of dress and embodiment was used by participants as a way of evoking love of self. Lewis, introduced earlier, spoke of femmephobia within the gay community and how he held himself to a rigid expression of masculinity when first dating and hooking-up. However, as he found love in and for his trans-ness, this shifted:
For the longest time after coming out as trans, I bought into being a trans man means X. I have to look a certain way. I have to be masculine. I had to, you know, I ended up, sadly, like giving away all of my clothing I was wearing pre-transition….So it wasn’t ‘til the summer of 2015 where I was having conversation with a trans man friend of mine and he was wearing necklaces, and I was like, “You know what? I miss wearing necklaces.” He’s like, “Then wear necklaces” [both laugh].

Lewis desired different ways of dressing and expressing as a man, and through community with another Black, trans man, sought to challenge rigid norms of manhood, purposefully picking out jewelry, earrings, and booty shorts that challenged others’ notions of “doing gender.”

Participants whose photos fell within the queer style category and who described dressing and embodying their (a)gender in ways that refuted hegemonic gender norms sought not only to counter how they were told to be but also forms of dress and embodiment that asked others to concurrently refute these hegemonic gender norms. It is important to note, still, even those in the queer style category pre-emptively outed themselves or sought out ways of narrowing their pool of potential SOFHUs for protection from a transphobic world.

5.1.1.2 Pre-emptive laboring for what?

While all participants spoke of pre-emptive gender labor of some sort, through pre-emptive outing in person or on dating apps or through dress, body, and voice, their reasons for engaging in this labor were different, and the pressures they felt to engage in this labor changed according to positionality. The reasons participants gave for engaging in pre-emptive labor fell into three main categories: to be desirable, to be safe, and to protect potential SOFHUs from having their own gender/sexuality complicated. Nonbinary AFABs did not reference engaging in
pre-emptive labor out of safety concerns. Collectively, AMABs were more likely to reference this reasoning. Non-binary AMABs, however, were the only group that did not reference engaging in pre-emptive labor because of transness complicating sexuality/gender. While there are only 2 Black/1 Black multiracial people in the sample, they make 22 collective references to gendered/racialized labor. As mentioned in the previous section, Black and/or nonbinary participants were more likely to fall within the queer style category of dress and embodiment; thus, their engagement in pre-emptive gender labor occurred more through pre-emptive outing in person or on dating apps. In what follows, I illustrate the three reasons for engagement in pre-emptive gender labor (desirability, safety, and because trans-ness complicates gender/sexuality).

5.1.1.2.1 Desirability

I interviewed Bruce, a white, straight, trans man, while visiting Utah. Bruce fit within the just one of the guys categories of dress—wearing a zip-up hoodie with loose fitting jeans, large sneakers, and a ball cap. I asked him about his choice in clothes in general and on dates, and he could not provide an answer. Bruce had trouble finding women to date and maintaining relationships. He only dated cis women and told me he would date a trans woman “if I came across one.” He felt undesirable because of his trans-ness and wanted to be desired by cis women in particular. Prior to moving to Utah, he had tried to hide his trans identity until developing a relationship with a SOFHU. When he moved to Utah, he decided that this was chance to begin being open about his trans-ness and that he needed to find a way to love his trans-ness, as well:

When I moved here, I said I’d be open about it. So [pause] on my profiles, it says right on there: transgender. So I don’t really have to be a ball buster [laughs]. I had one girl bawl
her eyes out one time when I told her. Like we went on, ’cause I used to go on one date,
and if I liked ’em, then I’d tell ’em before we kissed or anything, so they didn’t feel like
[pause] I don’t know. So I liked her after the first date, so I told her in hopes for a second
date, and she bawled her eyes out. “How did this—how could this happen to me?!” And
dah dah dah dah.

Bruce’s experience of having a cis woman cry when he told her he was trans was unique among
my participants. He was the only one to mention such an experience, but he was also one of only
two heterosexual participants. After several experiences like these, as well as several
relationships that ultimately ended, he felt like his trans-ness got in the way of intimacy with cis
women. He was excited to be interviewed but was also reticent and nervous—worried that his
answers did not fit what I “wanted” him to say. At the end of the interview, he began asking me
questions about my own gender and experiences. I turned off the recorder and answered his
questions. It was at this point that he began to open up to my own questions. Earlier in the day
before I interviewed him, he and his current partner, a cis, pansexual woman had broken up, as
she was not looking for anything long term and he was. He mentioned the hardest part was that
he had asked her if she would like him more if he had a “real dick.” She told him no, but in
previous relationships, cis women, such as the one that cried when he came out to her, had told
him, “Yes, it would be better, but I’ll deal with what is.” Constant reminders by cis women that
he was not enough led him to be wary of intimacy. He said, “I get told that I’m hot a lot, and
then, if they find out anything, it’s like, ‘Ew, what? No. No. No.’” In response to these constant
experiences, Bruce now engaged in pre-emptive gender labor by coming out to cis women ahead
of time so as not to “waste his or their time.”
5.1.1.2.2 Safety

In addition to feelings of undesirability, trans/nonbinary individuals also engaged in pre-emptive gender labor out of a fear of transphobic interactions. Coke, already introduced earlier, mentioned that, with co-occurring safety issues because of racism-transphobia and the current political landscape surrounding trans-ness, “I’ve kind of [pause] been really like paranoid about going out on dates lately.” I asked her to elaborate, “Just like some, not so much the dating itself, but the people around us. It’s like I’m worried about how people react if they see a trans woman with another trans woman out in public trying to get coffee. It makes me feel icky and unsure of what will happen.” Coke did not change how she dressed for others, but she only went on dates in public areas where others would be around and able to help if a date became violent. She also gave her address and the start and end time of the date to a friend as a precaution. In addition, she had cut out cis men as potential SOFHUs due to safety (as already mentioned earlier), and she pre-emptively outed herself to further prevent any contact with potentially transphobic individuals. Every participant highlighted the demanding nature of this labor, feeling constantly bombarded with transphobia and instilled with a paranoid need to always plan for unplannable scenarios.

Davis, introduced earlier, spoke of context in regard to safety. While he felt relatively safe in the trans-aware area of Washington state where he lived, he felt more unsafe previously when he lived in Tennessee:

Most of my transition was in Tennessee, and a lot of it was safety issues and blending in. I knew that I wanted to be perceived as male, and being perceived as male in Tennessee, it’s easy and it’s hard, right? Because people don’t know trans people exist in Tennessee,
so it’s easy for them not to know that you’re trans. But it’s very difficult to be perceived as male, because you have to fit a very rigid gender conception and gender binary notion. So it wasn’t until I came out to my dad in therapy that I got rid of my last female clothing.

Davis felt that he had greater safety advantages than a trans woman, as trans men are less visible in the public eye, making it easier to blend in as “just one of the guys.” However, in order to be perceived as one of the guys, he had to fit their definitions, not his own. Davis, in addition to several other participants, highlighted that he had never experienced violence himself, but the knowledge of previous violence made him afraid to take any chances:

I’ve heard stories from guys, they go into the men’s bathroom, and because he wasn’t really fully passing, he got beat up in a bathroom. They questioned him. They got, pretty much they, you know, they were harassing him. So [pause] yeah. I do believe that it’s a safety issue there.

Participants like Davis talked to others about their experiences being trans. These experiences formed an understanding of the differences between them based on race, gender, and class. Others experiences also served as a caution sign.

5.1.1.2.3 Complicating gender and sexuality

The final reason highlighted by participants for engaging in pre-emptive labor came out of a sense that trans-ness complicates gender and sexuality. Ahmed (2000) notes that, when an individual come into contact with another individual, both become mutually reconstituted by the
other. When individuals “fail” to hold others they are in relation to accountable for their gender and sexuality transgressions, they begin to question (and possibly alter) their own gender/sexuality. Sociological and feminist theories of gender and sexuality tend to separate the two as connected yet discrete axes of oppression and identity. However, some of my participants discussed how sexual and/or romantic interactions with trans/nonbinary individuals foster space for cis individuals to question their own gender/sexuality.

For instance, Kade, introduced earlier, spoke with me about a previous relationship he had with a cis, heterosexual man prior to transitioning. During their relationship, he met a trans woman, and through conversation with her, began to realize and actualize his own trans-ness. He decided to pursue a relationship with the trans woman during this process:

I ended up breaking up with the person I was with, this guy that I’d been with for a long time, that I thought we were gonna get married. We ended up breaking up so I could potentially pursue a relationship with this transgender woman.

Two or three years later, he and his former partner decided to meet up to “see if we still were friends, see if there was like closure that could be obtained.” While the former partner knew he was trans, meeting with Kade also complicated his own understanding of his sexuality:

We met at a restaurant that we used to go to together, and I was pretty obviously presenting masculine at that time, and he was a little like weirded out by it, because in high school, he used to get teased as being gay a lot, and he really wasn’t sure if this [Kade’s transmasculine identity] meant that it was all true [laughs]. And he was nervous,
so I had to reassure him, ‘No this doesn’t mean you’re retroactively gay.’ That’s not how any of this works

The shift in Kade’s gender identity caused his former cis, heterosexual, male partner to panic that maybe people were correct in assuming he was gay. Kade had to engage in the emotional labor of comforting the partner in order to assure him that Kade’s transition was solely about his gender and not about the partner’s sexuality.

Kurt, a 21 year old, white, pansexual nonbinary participant in Georgia repeatedly told me, “I try not to push it too far” with partners. When they were first dating and getting to know their current partner, a cisgender, heterosexual man, they were afraid to dress how they wanted to. Kurt often wore shorts and a button-up, short-sleeved shirt tucked in, with their hair in a ponytail on dates to appear less overtly masculine, but with partners, Kurt desired to wear “men’s” suits, a chest binder, and a packer on dates. Earlier in the day before one of their first dates with their current partner, they had been out in public and wore a binder as they normally did. However, on their way to their partner’s place, they realized that they still had the binder on. They anxiously hurried to slip out of the binder before arriving at their partner’s place, because they were unsure how he would respond. Kurt enjoyed wearing a binder and a packer, but once again, they tried not to “push the line” too much. As they and their partner’s relationship progressed, Kurt began wearing a packer to bed with the partner, which “freaked him out.” Over time, though, the partner became more accepting. They worked together on a name to call Kurt that feels both masculine and feminine, and the partner began to compliment Kurt when they wore masculine clothing. What is particularly interesting, though, is that Kurt described their partner as becoming more “gender fluid” as he started to accept their masculinity. Kurt’s own
genderqueer transmasculinity necessitated their partner work to better desire them for their transness. In the process, the partner’s manhood and how he conceived of it had also begun to change.

While Kurt’s partner did not become hostile or angry about what Kurt’s own identity and his acceptance of it said about him, this was not always the case. Sara, a trans woman writing online, noted that interactions with cis, heterosexual men “can quickly lead to defensiveness as they backpedal to explain how they aren’t gay…. These men are interested in my femininity, even though they may be worried about being seen as gay just for hitting on a woman with a penis, or having sex with a girl who used to have one” (2017). Sara wrote regarding a recent Breakfast Club show in which comedian Lil Duval explained how he would react to finding out someone he was sexually/romantically with was a trans woman:

“This might sound messed up and I don’t care,” Duval says. “She dying. I can’t deal with that.”

“That’s a hate crime,” Charlamagne [the show’s host] says. “You can’t do that.”

“You manipulated me to believe in this thing,” Duval says, before continuing, “If one did that to me, and they didn’t tell me, Ima be so mad I’d probably going to want to kill them.”

The naturalization of cis-heteronormativity requires stability and a lack of ruptures within a binary way of being, loving, and fucking. Trans/nonbinary individuals transgress social norms of “proper” gender, and when they transgress these norms while in relationships with cis people (particularly heterosexual men), the potential for harm arises. Pre-emptive gender labor is the work trans/nonbinary individuals do to, at least temporarily, constrain themselves within the
confines of cis-heteronormative, white notions of desirability in order to be loved and desired at all and to be safe. It is a labor of temporarily giving cis-ness to themselves by asking others to read them as cis, and thus as desirable, or to immediately know that they are not cis, allowing the cisgender person the option to choose whether or not they want to be intimately touched by trans-ness. The labor of having to explain oneself to others and contort one’s body and voice so as to prevent harm and to foster intimacy weighed down on trans/nonbinary individuals I interviewed. The differential accountability to which they were held for not doing gender “properly” placed the onus on them to make sure that cis people were comfortable with their difference, could handle their difference, and would not harm them for their difference.

By pre-emptively outing themselves on dating apps and websites and altering how they dressed, sounded, and acted, my participants worked to contort themselves to fit within cisnormative ideologies of desirability. However, as noted in this section, desirability was not the sole reason for engaging in this labor. Participants of all genders and races also sought protection from the violence inflicted upon trans people across the country (and indeed, the world). The Trans Murder Monitoring Project came into existence because of the dearth of violence trans people of color, and trans people as a whole, experience. They note “2,609 reported murders of trans and gender-diverse people between 1 January 2008 and 30 September 2017” with 181 of these cases in the US, 1071 in Brazil, and 337 in Mexico, ranking the US as the third most dangerous place for trans/nonbinary people to exist in the world (2017). In addition, trans/nonbinary participants engaged in pre-emptive gender labor in order to prevent (potential) cis SOFHUs from fearing that their own gender/sexuality was complicated through desiring a trans/nonbinary person. These fears of no longer being cisgender and/or heterosexual were primarily discussed through experiences with cis-het men. Cis-het men also perpetuate the vast
majority of anti-trans murders, highlighting a need to explore the connections between cis-het fears of gender/sexual confusion and cis-het perpetuated anti-trans violence.

### 5.1.2 Pre-emptive gender labor as racial labor

While white participants were quick to speak on the exhaustion of this pre-emptive labor, some were equally quick to demand similar forms of labor from potential BIPOC SOFHUs or to erase and minimize the labor done by potential BIPOC SOFHUs. Pre-emptive gender labor is inherently racialized in terms of the differential levels of safety and desirability white individuals are afforded, as well as in terms of the ways in which cisnormative desires are imbued with whiteness. My focus in this section is not on separating and teasing out pre-emptive gender labor from pre-emptive racial labor. Rather, my focus in this section is on how whiteness is reproduced through discursive absence in discussions of forming and building intimate relationships. White trans/nonbinary participants had much to say regarding pre-emptive gender labor, the forms it takes, why it occurs, and the expiation of this labor. However, the majority of white participants did not see an inherent connection of race and trans-ness.

Kurt, a white nonbinary individual introduced earlier in this section, mentioned that educating people is “exhausting,” but they did it in relationships, because they wanted to build the relationships. However, as highlighted earlier, this process of education instilled anxiety as they negotiated names, pronouns, binders, and packers. When I asked about the role race plays prior to and in the process of building relationships or hooking-up in regard to trans-ness, they stated that “Hispanic” people share a culture of “machismo,” which “makes the gender stuff harder,” ignoring a white frame of a monolithic Latinx-ness within that statement (Feagin 2006). At another point, they stated that Black communities absent discussion of trans-ness and that this absence contributed to higher murder rates of Black trans women. Kurt reductively
boiled down problems of racism to problems of culture rather than a system of gender constructed in tandem with race that gave birth to respectability politics within Black power communities and pathologized Black men and women for supposedly “inferior” gender expressions (Mumford 2016).

After the interview had ended, I drove Kurt home and we continued talking. They told me in regard to people of color, “You know, I expect with any marginalized group that people will educate me just like I educate them so that I can better actually advocate, and it’s not that they owe it to me, but I can’t advocate for them without knowing.” Kurt here exemplified what Ahmed (2012) notes as whiteness as an “occupying through or as care (what we might call simply a caring whiteness or even a sorry whiteness)” (37). Whiteness manifested in Kurt’s statement through an expectation of a racialized labor of constructing “good whites” that somehow could not occur otherwise—despite myriad sources of information online. Educating cis people about trans-ness became implicitly coded as educating cis people about white trans people. Whiteness manifested itself in such conversations as a discursive absence implicitly present within reductions of racism to differences of culture. In addition, whiteness manifested through reflections on trans-ness that absented explicit naming of racialization even when questioned about it.

Monroe, an eighteen year old, nonbinary trans femme, also elucidated the point I make with Kurt’s interview but from a Black/Southeast Asian positionality. Monroe felt desirable (physically, socially, and emotionally) among chosen family and QTPOC but consumable and undesirable by others for their work, scholarship, and body. Monroe told me that, although they dated people of any race, they preferred QTPOC. I asked:
alithia: In terms of wanting to date other QTPOC, is that formed out of your own desire just to date other people of color or out of past experiences with white people?

Monroe: Geez, uh both! I think that I appreciate the closeness of shared experience deeply. I think that intracomunally there’s a lot of trans anti-Blackness, so I try to avoid ending up, I guess, in spaces or with people who I feel like might not recognize the validity of Black trans issues.

Kurt and other white participants spoke of racism and the role of race/racialization vis-à-vis pre-emptive gender labor as an issue of culture and/or not an issue at all. I asked Mia, a 37 year old, white, trans woman, for example if she felt like her race at all shaped the ways in which she dated/dressed/acted several times in different ways to which she merely replied one-word responses of “Nope” or “No” and would not elaborate.

However, Monroe, as well as Lewis’ comment earlier about white fetishizations of an assumed “big Black cock,” highlighted that race does indeed shape gendered concerns of safety and desire. Monroe, for example mentioned that they were wary to make it seem “like I only talk about race” when on a date with white people. When going on dates with QTPOC, Monroe was able to talk about social justice, politics, and their experiences of being a Black/Southeast Asian nonbinary trans femme, but when they were on dates with white people, whole chunks of who they were became invisible.

Even when race was discursively absent on these dates, it remained ostensibly present, as it is whiteness that necessitates the “implicit injunction not to speak about racism….to protect whiteness from being hurt” (Ahmed 2012: 147). Pre-emptive labor ultimately functions as a way of reconsolidating cis-ness and whiteness by institutionalizing—or making “normal”—white trans-ness. As I interviewed participants, I began to see a recurring pattern of individuals saying
that trans people are “just normal people.” While only five participants directly said this and only one implied this through referring to trans people as no different from cis people, an interesting, pattern emerged in who said/implied this statement. Non-Black, binary participants were the only ones to say or imply that trans individuals are just normal people that want to be seen and recognized like anyone else (see Tables 3-5). Black and/or non-binary participants never said or implied this but rather sought greater relational and affective change. This pattern is not surprising given the historical ties and co-construction of anti-Blackness and cissexism, as well as the greater difficulty to institutionalize Blackness and nonbinary identities, as both fundamentally challenge the foundation of U.S. society. Sexual politics cannot institutionalize the very bodies made absent so as to forge others’ existence. In this chapter, I have shown how pre-emptive gender labor functions through pre-emptive outing, alterations of dress and body, and discursive regulation prior to and in the process of forming intimate relationships/encounters. In the next chapter, I begin to discuss the ways in which this labor functions in relationships that have already formed.

5.2 Negotiating Gender/Race with Long-Term SOFHUs

In addition to the strategic acts participants engaged in to alter their body, dress, voice, and posture and to pre-emptively out themselves online prior to forming relationships, those (currently or previously) in relationships spoke of the work they do with long-term SOFHUs. Seven of the fifteen participants were in some form of intimate relationship(s), one was currently dating someone but not in a relationship with that individual, and one was not in a romantic relationship but had multiple play partners (or individuals with whom she engaged in kink). Of those currently in intimate relationships, four were in some form of open and/or non-monogamous relationship. In this section, I focus on these eight individuals and the racial-gender
negotiations in which they engaged with their SOFHUs. I also attend to the various forms of intimacy participants built with others and the importance of terminology to these relationships.

5.2.1 **Language and intimacy**

The participants in my study elucidated the importance of language to their intimate relationships. Isa expounded on şé’s struggle to find the language to describe who Isa is in relation to intimate others and who intimate others are in relation to Isa:

Last night, something that came up was talking about our language. I was kind of saying to him [Isa’s intimate friend], ‘You’re lucky, because your bae is cute.’ Like I’m sexy, so you’re fortunate. [Both laugh] but I don’t know, like bae is not really my language. I don’t really do bae or boo or any of these things or boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever it is. I’m searching for language that speaks to the truth of these things that is beyond all these things while also knowing that even though I say like I like the word partner energetically, I’ve had to grapple with what does it mean to be femme in relationship to someone who is solidly identified as a man and knows himself to be a man and is like a strong, proud man? And then being like, “Hmmm [pause] is that my boyfriend? Is that my, like am I his girlfriend?”

Isa settled on using the language of situationship and intimate friend to describe the relationship between Isa and Isa’s partner. However, even this language felt failing in some ways to describe whom each individual was to the other and apart from the other. Isa did not want to merely reproduce heteronormative, binary modes of dating in which one partner has to be the masculine
“energy” and the other has to be the feminine “energy,” but Isa also did not want to deny what is. Isa explained:

It becomes this thing about gender. Like if that person, who at one point told me that he’s pansexual, but at a bar, someone asked him, “Are you gay or straight?” And he said straight, then what does that say about me and what does that say about our relationship? Like, am I just his kinda woman? Or in the way that we relate, it’s very like the duality, like he’s the masculine and I’m like the feminine person, and so it’s like okay yeah, in some ways, this is a straight couple. I’m just not female assigned at birth, and then in other ways it’s not. It’s a very queer related—it’s a very transcendent connection.

Isa struggled to figure out whether sé reproduced cis-/heteronormativity or whether the relationship Isa built with sé’s partner pushed back against those boundaries. Does being a feminine-identified person in relationship with a man equate to a heterosexual relationship? Does it still equate to a heterosexual relationship if they both have a penis? It is not homosexual, as they are not both men; nor is it same-gender-loving, as they were not the same gender. Beyond that, Isa’s and the partner’s relationship was in a blurry zone of queer/heterosexual/other. Trans-ness does not neatly fit into concepts of heterosexuality and homosexuality upon which contemporary notions of sexual orientation are built. Nonbinary identities even further complicate these sexual conceptions as they defy notions of same- and opposite-genders/sexes.

Participants like Isa highlighted the difficulty in negotiating these gender/sexual boundaries without a clear path to answers. Through these intimate negotiations, Isa sought to not be misrecognized as a cisgender, heterosexual or as a trans individual but also did not have
the language as to how šé wanted to be recognized. Pfeffer notes that “people’s misrecognition of…identities often carries significant implications for our everyday lives” (2017: 41). For Isa, misrecognition meant that individuals misinterpreted or were unable to understand the world Isa had cultivated and was continuing to cultivate.

In addition to participants, such as Isa, struggling to find words to define their relationship, participants currently in relationships also named and defined the boundaries of their relationships in a variety of ways. Isa described šé’s relationship as an “intimate friendship” and a “situationship”, seeking something that represents the “language [that] is authentic to our experience” and that also acknowledges that labels are “public or communal [ways] of relating to people.” Fey stated that she had multiple girlfriends but that they do not date per se. Fey explained, “I think the whole entire thing of going on a date and dinner and stuff just seems like I’m gonna wine-n-dine you or something…it’s just very cisnormative.” While Fey called her partners her girlfriends, she sought to challenge the idea that she had sole ownership of her girlfriends and the notion that they were prizes to win in a sexual competition. Additionally, Kate, a fifty-seven year old, white, trans lesbian sought my assurance several times that she could participate in the study, as she did not “really date.” Kate told me, “I have a lot of kinky dates where I play with people and go out with girlfriends and friends that I know, but I don’t know if it’s in the sense of like meeting somebody and dating.” Kate’s relationships were primarily sexual rather than romantic, challenging societal ideas that relationships must be romantic and that solely sexual encounters are accurately conceptualized as hook-ups.

Another participant, Kade, was in a “polyfidelitous” relationship meaning that he and his two partners “love more than one person but…are committed to this group of three.” Kade had been in a long-term relationship with a cisgender, nonbinary AFAB individual and a shorter
relationship with a binary, trans woman. Additionally, the cisgender, nonbinary partner and the binary, trans woman partner were committed to one another. The three of them lived together, cared for one another, engaged in sexual and romantic intimacy, and supported each other’s wellbeing. Monroe, another non-monogamous participant, was currently in a monogamous relationship. They told me, “When I say that I’m a polyamorous person, what I mean is that I experience attraction of varying types or in varying degrees for more than one person at a time.” I asked them how they negotiated multiple attractions in varying degrees while being in a monogamous relationship. Monroe explained:

I met my current partner a couple months ago and I was given a very untraditional and very defensive ultimatum as a boundary from this partner. Basically that, if we were to stay together, I would need to be monogamous, which was very difficult, because of also being with two other people. I had just gone through a break up, and I sat on it for not a particularly long time and because we were sharing a life together in a lot of aspects, I felt that it was a compromise that definitely, at least for right now, needed that in my life—one person I was dating was very understanding and supportive just of our relationship dynamic being more platonic, and the other actually broke up with me out of their own personal thing, so it was very convenient and timely.

In addition to Monroe and Kate, Isa also identified as polyamorous:

I do know and believe in polyamory; I also believe in not forcing yourself to be with one person. However, if you’re with someone and by being with them you just kind of
organically are not as open to other people, then that works, like that’s fine. That’s whatever it is; however, that’s not forcing, like I’m dating this person, so I can’t talk to anybody. It’s more like I’m feeling this person and because of that feeling or because of those vibes I am differently open to other lovers.

Isa’s comment elucidated the negotiations non-monogamous participants like Monroe engaged in with other partners. Rather than seeing Monroe’s choice to be presently monogamous as a decision manipulated by the other partner, it is possible to view their choice to be monogamous and identify as polyamorous as an organic growth out of the negotiations SOFHUs must make in order to build relationships. I present these descriptions of some of the types of relationships my participants engaged in to briefly detail the variety of intimacies engaged in by trans/nonbinary participants and the complex ways that sexuality, gender, and monogamy infiltrate relationships between individuals.

5.2.2 What to call and do with the body?

In the previous section, I highlighted the ways participants negotiated terminology with themselves and relationship terminology/boundaries with partners. In this section, I begin to discuss how participants negotiated race and gender through the body, sexual position, genitalia and terminology, dress, and voice. Every participant presently in a relationship discussed engaging in these negotiations with their long-term SOFHUs. However, some participants noted a self-/internal pressure to engage in this labor, and others noted an external pressure from their partner(s) to do so.

Fey spoke of the ways in which her previous partner, a white, bisexual, cis woman, always wanted Fey to top her\textsuperscript{xiv}. Fey explained:
I only had one relationship with a cis woman after I’d come out. It was just really bad. It was right before I started hormones and a little bit into it [the hormones]. It was like no effects or anything. I just felt like a dude the whole entire time.

alithia: Was it just the fact of having sex with her or things she did that made you feel that way?

Fey: Yeah, it’s primarily the sex, but like they [cis women] don’t really relate or anything like that to my experiences and stuff, so I guess when I came out, I came out as bi a year before I came out as trans, and so I was just like, “I’m a switch XV, right?” But really, the more experience I have, the more I kinda realize that I’m just a really big bottom.

alithia: So was the cis woman you had a relationship with a lesbian?

Fey: No, she was bi.

alithia: Okay. Do you feel like being a trans woman and being with her as a bi, cis woman in any way was hard in regard to her sexuality? Did she know how to relate to you as a woman dating another woman who’s also trans?

Fey: I think she had trouble with that. I think she had trouble seeing me as a woman.

alithia: Can you explain more about why you think she had trouble seeing you as a woman?

Fey: Well yeah, it’s just the sex. It was just always like, you know, I have to be on top. It just made me feel really weird.

Fey felt that the cis woman she was in a relationship with expected her to be the penetrating/dominant partner because she was assigned male at birth. However, she also felt an
internal pressure to act in such a way. Fey elaborated, “I feel like it’s my own internal feeling. I mean I have so much bias towards it.” She said, if she were to date a cis woman again, “It would just kind of feel like I was in a cis-het relationship again.” Fey’s gender is internally validated by the genders of her SOFHUs. Being with cis women as a trans woman carries with it too much personal baggage. Fey’s former cis woman partner expected Fey to engage in a particular sexual position/persona because of the partner’s internalized binarism. This expectation then caused Fey to not feel like the woman she knows herself to be. In discussing the ways cis femmes give gender to their trans men partners (or help them to achieve their manhood through relational intimacy), Jane Ward writes, “Although butches and FTMs are often theorized as stand-alone figures who are not reliant upon femmes (or the feminine other) for public recognition, such accounts construct trans and butch masculinity by citing the existence of a satisfied feminine other, or a female subject who may be queer, but is different from butches and FTMs in that she is happy to occupy the role of the girl” (2010: 243; italicization is mine). Fey’s account highlights that, while masculine subjects rely upon a “feminine other,” so too do feminine queer subjects rely upon a non-feminized other.

Kate also spoke of expectations of her own and her SOFHUs for her to act in a “male” role in intimate acts. She said:

I think sometimes when I go out, I don’t know if I take on the role of like being like the male or people still kinda expect that, where I’m the male, I pay for the date. And part of me feels that I should, um you know, that’s tricky. I still feel like I’m the dominant person in the—or the male type person in the dating thing, you know? It’d be nice where somebody would actually take me on a date and treat me as the woman.
Kate never spoke to her play partners about the roles they put her in and the discomfort she felt at being placed in “male” situations on dates. Additionally, she felt a desire to pay for her play partners when they went out to dinner. I asked a clarifying question about why she paid on dates, and she told me:

Usually when it comes down to paying the tab, I feel like I should be the one to pay the tab, ‘cause, maybe, you know sometimes what I, because I transitioned real late in life. I’m 57, and so it’s only—this February will be 3 years that I’ve actually been transitioning. So does 53 years of being a guy ever go away? You know? It’s wired into me in a sense if that makes any sense. Um so I think it’s just wired into me still and I still do that. But obviously if someone says, “Hey let me take you out, and blah blah blah,” I sure wouldn’t have a problem with it, you know? I wouldn’t be offended.

Kate felt like having spent the majority of her life misrecognized as a man meant that she should continue to allow this habitual gendering on dates. Of course 53 years of life do not just go away. However, Kate’s felt need of having to continue performing roles imbued with masculine meaning simply because of her past highlights an internalization of cissexism. As Sociologists and trans activists have long argued, gender roles are not inherent; they are constructed through interpersonal interactions, logics of colonialism, slavery, white supremacy, and institutional power. The idea that one is born a man and, thus, must act a certain way originates out of systemic cissexism and the erasure and forced alteration of bodies that do not fit male/female, man/woman binaries. Kate did not challenge her partners or refuse to continue seeing them
Despite the ways they misrecognized her. But she also did not challenge herself to live in ways that would not maintain the status quo.

These negotiations of language surrounding the body/sex, however, were not always negative, nor were they always complicit in the reification of cissexism. For example, Paul, a 26 year old, white, mostly gay, trans man told me about his experiences with a long-term girlfriend whom he was with when physically and socially transitioning. Paul’s girlfriend was genderqueer, which made these negotiations easier. In fact, she even prompted some of the negotiations, inspiring different names and encouraging the use of different terminology during sex. Paul explained to me:

I specifically remember the first time she called me by the name that she had chosen during sex, and that was actually when I—we had been, I think earlier that day, we were sitting in the cafeteria, and it was me and her and like maybe one or two other friends, and we were kinda talking about it, and I was like, you know, ‘Well what name would I go by if I was gonna go by a name?’ And it was like, that process was really awkward for me, for other reasons, but she suggested Jace and then we, you know, the conversation continued, and we hadn’t really made a decision, and then later that day, we were in our room, like, you know, having sex, and people will like moan your name during sex or whatever. She said Jace, and that was when I was like, ‘Yep, that’s gonna, that’s it!’ And that just felt really good.

Paul’s girlfriend referring to him with a name typically associated with men during sex not only made the sex more enjoyable but also made him feel desirable and attractive as a man. Her attraction to him as a man changed how he saw himself. Paul told me, “I felt she was attracted to
me. I felt comfortable and attracted, attractive myself.” Paul’s experience with this partner detailed that figuring out how to refer to bodily parts/acts did not have to be detrimental to relationships or steeped in cissexism. These negotiations of terminology and names during sex, the ways in which individuals had sex, and the ways individuals dressed could serve to affirm the trans/nonbinary individual’s gender and to foster sexual excitement, mutual support, and dialogue for their relationship.

5.2.3 Laboring by Teaching

In addition to corpo-linguistic negotiations, my participants discussed the labor of having to teach cisgender and/or white partners about trans-ness and/or Blackness. While all of the participants currently in a relationship discussed educating their partners, the way the labor played out between intimates differed according to their SOFHUs’ own gender, race, and/or class identities. All participants discussed educating SOFHUs about their gender/race as requiring emotional energy, they differed in whether or not they found this labor tiresome and whether or not they sought out ways to not perform this labor. Some, such as Dev, stated that they were “okay with half questions,” such as questions about their genitalia or how they have sex as a trans man; whereas, others, such as Isa, refused to have this labor demanded of them. In this section, I parse out the different ways in which participants engaged in a labor of educating current intimates and the raced/gendered ways in which they agreed and/or refused to partake in this labor.

In the pre-emptive labor section, I introduced the reader to Lewis, who described the various demands placed on him by cisgender intimates and his resentment and discomfort around those demands. As we continued the interview, I asked him whether it felt different dating trans men compared to cis men. He responded, “Yeah, it feels much more comfortable, um although,
that’s really contextual, because my last boyfriend was also white, so there was different stuff there.” While white participants often only had to educate their partners about their gender, and with trans/nonbinary partners this occurred even less frequently, participants of color still dealt with stark differences between how they viewed and experienced the world and how their white partners did. Lewis was open to dating people of any race, but he preferred to date other QTPOC. I asked him if he would share some of the experiences he had with white SOFHUs that shaped his preference for relationships with QTPOC. He explained:

I think the white people I’ve most recently been in relationship with were pretty good. I just think there are certain things they couldn’t understand, because they weren’t a person of color—they weren’t Black in particular. I remember with my last boyfriend, [he] was super socially conscious, did a lot of work around prisons and people of color and trans people and all the intersections there, and uh I think for me, there were certain things that [pause] affected me that I would talk about and sometimes his responses weren’t as empathetic as they could’ve been. I remember when the Trayvon Martin thing happened—when he was shot and killed—um [pause] feeling just a lot of anger around that, and there was a time shortly after that where I was walking, and [pause] there was a white person who deliberately avoided passing me on the street was how I perceived it, and that just made me very angry, ‘cause it was all around the same time, and so much just made me angry. And confiding that to him and him just sort of making light of it, um which wasn’t what I needed in that moment. I just needed somebody to be angry with me.
While Lewis’ partner ideologically attached himself to ideas of social justice and even worked in the community for gender/racial justice, he remained unable to fully grasp Lewis’ experiences as a Black man in a white supremacist society. Knowing how the social world functions and intimately understanding and feeling how it functions are different things. Understanding that racism happens does not equate with living under racism’s impact. Lewis attempted to confide in his white partner about his anger and hurt. He did not necessarily want to debate what happened or analyze the situation. He wanted “somebody to be angry with” him, but this would have required greater educating of his white partner than he necessarily had the emotional energy for at that moment. Steinbugler (2012) conceptualizes negotiations such as these as “racework” noting that “conceptualizing these social practices as ‘work’ makes interracial intimacy visible as an ongoing process, rather than as a singular accomplishment” (xiv). Existing in a white social world in which whiteness is the default means that white partners, even when trying to do better, often do not know how to exist outside of a white racial frame. People in interracial relationships “must negotiate each other’s differential access to status and power” (xiv) in ways that are similar to negotiations occurring between people within larger groups but unique to their particular relationship.

Dating QTPOC, and in particular, dating other Black people, does not necessarily solve the issue, though. Lewis’ current, long-term boyfriend was a cisgender, Black man. Being with this partner was healing in many ways for Lewis. He told me, “It wasn’t until being in relationship with him that I realized there was so much I was missing in my past relationships because of that [shared Blackness].” Lewis and his partner were able to experience shared kinship around their racial identity. In addition, the partner “sought out to educate himself around trans issues” before their first date, mitigating the potential labor Lewis would have to engage in.
However, later in the interview, Lewis and I discussed issues with internalized transphobia and racism, and I asked him whether he and his partner discussed these issues, as well as potentially the partner’s. Lewis sighed:

Yeah, I, I’ve spoken to him about this, and it’s a difficult conversation, because he feels [pause] I know sometimes he internalizes things that shouldn’t be internalized, because I think I was very intentional in saying this is something I’m struggling with, but he feels that cisgender men have a bad rep, and ‘I’m thinking about all cisgender men the same way,’ and he’s not like that. He feels like he constantly has to prove he’s not like other cisgender men.

In addition to teaching long-term intimates about their gender/race, participants like Lewis spoke about the ways they had to comfort cisgender partners. Lewis had to assure his cisgender partner that he saw him as different from other cis men that may not as deeply interrogate their positionality within a cissexist, heteropatriarchy. Lewis had to find ways to negotiate difficult conversations like these to ensure that his partner understood his experiences as a trans man while also working not to lump his partner with other cis men.

While Lewis worked to comfort his partner, other participants, such as Isa, refused to have any of şé’s labor demanded. I asked Isa how şé felt and what şé said if Isa’s partner needed education around Isa’s neutrois/femme identity. In response, Isa told me:

I feel like I am not inclined to, like if someone has the expectation for me to like do it, I will not. There’s a person in my life that, generally speaking right now, I’d say is an
intimate friend, and with that person, I told him very early on about where I stood. Um [pause] like here is where I stand. I put things on the table. Sometimes I build the table and then I put things on the table. And then I say here you go, that’s where I stand, so you can do whatever you want with that, because I know who I am, and so doing as much as possible upfront so you know what it is.

Isa provided potential SOFHUs with a layout of who Isa was upfront in order to mitigate any potential demands on Isa’s labor and to prevent the exhaustion of having to educate intimates who do not understand Isa’s gender. By placing pronouns, identities, and politics on the table at the start of the relationship, Isa’s potential SOFHUs can then decide whether to continue the relationship, knowing what information they may have to educate themselves on in their own time. Isa explained throughout the interview that Isa worked in all relationships to build an authentic self-representation. However, Isa did not necessarily refuse conversation with (potential) intimates. Isa explained:

I don’t explain gender to people. I’m like, “This is what I look like.” Pronouns, name, here you go. Got a question, ask me, I’ve probably got an answer, and if I don’t have an answer, let’s have a conversation and go find an answer that’s more than just I don’t know what to say to you.

Isa would not provide explanations of what gender is and how it operates beyond a binary. However, Isa was also not closed off to all conversations with SOFHUs. Relationships require conversation and negotiation. Kurt, for example, talked with me about how educating people is
“exhausting;” however, they would do it in relationships, because the relationship “cannot function if you are unwilling to have discussion.” Isa proactively told potential SOFHUs what şé was willing to discuss and negotiate and who Isa was ahead of time. Isa, then, was willing to join the other person(s) at the table Isa sat regarding pronouns, name, identities, dress, and so forth for conversations surrounding these various pieces without allowing the conversations to become emotionally taxing.

In contrast to Isa and Lewis, Kate actively opened herself up to educating SOFHUs. Kate did not have any intimates in the terms of girlfriend/boyfriend/partner. Rather, Kate had play partners with whom she engaged in bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism (BDSM) play. The individuals with whom she played formed long-term sexual relationships with Kate, and they occasionally went on dates. However, Kate did not view herself as dating in terms of actively fostering, long-term romantic relationships. In addition, Kate formed long-lasting relationships with members of her local BDSM community. These individuals would get together for play parties, group outings, and community advocacy. Kate explained:

I’m the education coordinator for our community up here, which means I give a lot of classes and stuff on different topics so, I’m all about educating people, you know? You can’t, you can’t knock people down for stuff they don’t know. It [the community] is called Bond-ed\textsuperscript{vi}. It’s a fet[ish] community. We give all different kinds of classes for people up here, so people can play safe, learn important things, you know. There’s a lot of things to learn within the kink community?....Consent’s big and for a long time the vanilla community violated, there was a lot of violations of consent that were, that was considered acceptable, when it wasn’t; whereas, in the kink community, it’s discussed.
Somebody comes into the community, it’s one of the first things you talk about is consent. Just because someone’s walking around this venue naked doesn’t mean you can touch them. You know? So there’s a lot of educational things that I do.

In response to this active role Kate played in educating her community, I asked her what sorts of questions people had in those classes regarding trans-ness and whether any of the classes involved discussions of gender. She replied:

I think probably one of the things that’s asked that I know that I’ve told quite a few people is, if you’re not sure how somebody identifies, just ask them, ‘What pronouns [do you prefer,’ or ‘How do you prefer to be addressed?’ That’s probably the most common thing. And I know that I’m not 100% passable. There’s not a day that goes by that I’m misgendered. Do I like it? No, but I can’t live my life off [pause] unrealistic expectations of others. So in other words, I’m the one that decided to be trans and that’s my decisions. I can’t expect everybody to jump through hoops and treat me any different as anybody else. You know a good example for me, there’s uh gender-neutral restrooms now right? And a lot of the trans people have problems with those because guys are pigs and a lot of times, it’s not about guys or girls being pigs, it’s about people having respect for one another and leaving it in the condition that the next person can use it. It really doesn’t have to do with male or female. People are pigs! (Laughs).

Kate felt that she could not expect anything other than cisnormative understandings of gender from others since they were not actively choosing to surround themselves with other ways of
existing and being. However, Kate also did not want to be misgendered or to have to deal with issues regarding bathrooms. In response, Kate actively opened herself up to questions and educating others in order to ensure that people could learn to be better without expecting them to be better without adequate information. Kate engaged intentionally in a labor of teaching with her specific community, whom she often referred to as more open about trans-ness than “vanilla people”—or non-kinky people. Still, though, despite their openness surrounding trans/nonbinary identities and expressions, they needed to be educated as cisgender people.

One may think that trans/nonbinary people educating others about gender would only occur in relationships with cis people. However, differences in understanding and experience also existed between nonbinary trans participants and their binary, trans partners. Kade was currently in a relationship with a cisgender, nonbinary AFAB and a binary, trans woman. Kade felt that his binary partner did not understand who he was as a trigender person and saw problems arise out of this lack of understanding. Kade experienced shifts between his three genders (caelgenxer, juxera, and transmasculine). During these shifts from, for example, being in a transmasculine identity to a juxera identity that is more feminine, Kade’s nonbinary partner was “fine with her playing the masculine role and me playing more of the feminine role.” However, Kade’s binary partner was not comfortable expressing “in a masculine sense” as a trans woman, but even more importantly, she did not know how to interact with Kade at all during these shifts, unsure of what pronouns, gendered terminology, and gendered behavior to rely on. Kade told me:

I don’t think she understands nonbinary-ism at an intrinsic level like my other partner does. She at least to some degree identifies, so she’ll notice but she kind of doesn’t know how to
interact with it, so she’ll just kind of let whatever’s happening, happen, or just give me a hug and tell me I look good.

alithia: Do y’all talk about that, like her difficulty with knowing how to interact with the nonbinary-ness?

Kade: I haven’t really, um I haven’t really talked to her about it. It’s on my list of things to talk about, but I haven’t done that.

alithia: Mmm, is it, just ‘cause it hasn’t come up yet or does it feel too difficult to have at this point?

Kade: Um…I’m trying to figure out the best way to explain it to her. She thinks very differently than my other partner, so I’m trying to think of the best way to talk to her about it in a way that she can hear, and I believe once I do, that she’ll be supportive of it, but we’re, you know, we’re very different people on lots of other aspects other than our genders, so [I’m] trying to figure out a way to navigate that conversation.

Kade not only had to teach his partner how to interact with him, but he had to find palliative ways to teach her. Much like Lewis’ cisgender partner required education and comfort, Kade’s trans partner also did. Kade did not explain more in that moment the different pieces he had to navigate in order to figure out a comforting way to educate her. However, later in the interview, I asked him whether his binary partner ever placed male expectations on him in regard to his gender. He replied:

Yeah, she does, that’s actually one of the reasons I’m more reticent to talk to her about being more than just a binary trans man. I know she knows, and it’s just one of those
conversations I haven’t explicitly stated yet, and to an extent, I appreciate how she treats me like a man, air-quotes on that, with basically calling on me to do things that she was expected to do before she came out as a trans woman, and in a way these experiences are kind of healing or therapeutic for us, because they reinforce the most dominant aspect of my gender, and they reinforce her gender, and in another way um [pause] sometimes her expectations of me are too high like….Um I suspect that I’m autistic, I have a hard time making eye-contact, and difficult social interactions can often unduly make me anxious, and I have a lot of like sensory process issues….but she asks me to do these things for her, and they’re sort of things that she’s expecting of me as her man to do, and I sure wish I could, but there’s a lot of other factors that have to do with disability and social disability that are keeping me from being able to do that.

Kade wanted to be able to engage with his partner in ways comforting and healing to both of them. He wanted his transmasculinity to be validated in moments where he was transmasculine, and he wanted her womanhood to be validated as well. Kade potentially being autistic, however, meant that he experienced a gendered social world differently than his partner. While men are expected to make eye contact, make demands and requests for their women partners, and engage in the world through hegemonic and/or dominant masculinities, such interactions made Kade too anxious to actually engage on an interpersonal level with anybody. In addition, Kade was not always transmasculine. At times, his gender shifted to juxera or caelgenxer, and he desired differently gendered interactions in those moments than he did when he was transmasculine. His partner’s expectations of particular masculine gender behaviors and her lack of knowledge surrounding his nonbinary-ness, how to interact with it, and his being disabled created barriers in
their relationship. Additionally, as she placed expectations on him without opening up conversation first surrounding those expectations made him uncomfortable to actually negotiate what they both wanted and felt comfortable doing.

While all partners in a relationship must negotiate what they want and desire out of the relationship and how they want to be loved/treated, trans/nonbinary and/or Black participants in my study had an additional burden of having to engage in intimacy negotiations as people whose identities others are often ignorant about. Trans-ness, nonbinary-ness, and Black-ness are not viewed as the default in society, and thus, interactions with trans-ness, nonbinary-ness, and Black-ness often require conversations with partners not sharing these identities about how to understand and interact with these specific pieces of a person’s identity. In addition, although trans binary people and trans nonbinary people share kinship with one another in terms of positionality within a cisnormative society, binary and nonbinary trans people do not experience gender in the same way. Nonbinary-ness, potentially confusing to cis people, remains also confusing to some binary partners. This labor of educating SOFHUs requires emotional energy and emotion work on the part of the trans/nonbinary participants I interviewed. Due to the potential for emotional exhaustion/burnout through this labor, some participants, such as Isa, refused to have their labor demanded of them and proactively worked to paint an authentic and complete image of self ahead of time. Others, such as Kate, actively sought to educate others. Dev, for example, stated, “I want to paint a pretty picture for them.” Individuals who actively sought to educate others wanted cis people to have an “accurate” and “positive” image of trans-ness, despite the vast and diverse ways of being and existing as trans/nonbinary. Finally, some, like Lewis, educated their long-term partners while also wishing they did not have to. Educating others could be mitigated by having shared identities, but the intersections of gender, race, class,
sexuality, disability, and other pieces of identity meant that education around other identities would then be required.

5.3 Queering Labor

In her work on the queer partnerships of cis femmes and trans men, Pfeffer (2017) explains that the word queer can signify not only that the individuals are not heterosexual, but also a potential desire to adopt “a more radical or outsider identity as a form of cultural resistance” (xxxv). I have primarily focused on the additional burdens of labor placed upon my participants by cis and/or white SOFHUs. In this final chapter, I focus on how participants worked to challenge these demands and foster relationships that felt less like work and more like home. Individuals sought out other trans/nonbinary SOFHUs and/or other QTPOC SOFHUs. Additionally, a few of the white participants actively sought to engage in white anti-racist accompliceship. While these intentional acts of resistance did not entirely negate the infiltration of cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and whiteness into their relationships, they did work to queer the labor that individuals did in intimate relationships. Rather than labor occurring as a one-way demand by the relationally privileged partner, queering labor functioned to create relationships in which emotional, physical, and linguistic labor occurred multi-directionally, with both/all individuals in the relationship working to prevent placing additional burdens on their SOFHU. I asked Kate, for example, whether gender ever came up with kinky dates. In response, she told me:

Nope, everybody knows, identifies me as Kate, and Kate’s a female, and it’s not even ever brought up, you know? It’s not even hardly, not even just talked about with people that I’m friends with and stuff. Occasionally, you meet a girl, and they can obviously tell I’m trans,
and I think out of a courtesy, they don’t ever like say, “Are you trans?” Or blah, blah, blah. It’s really not talked about.”

Kate did not want her gender to be a master status. She wanted her womanhood to be an unacknowledged fact of her reality. In positioning herself within her local BDSM community, she found spaces where “it’s not about your gender. I’m a kinkster, I like kink.” Her BDSM community fostered spaces of education where they learned from one another and where she actively worked as the education coordinator. However, the role of educating was not placed solely on her. She worked to educate others in the community about gender, consent, and other issues. Other groups within the community worked to educate people regarding race and racism within kink. The labor flowed in multiple directions rather than solely from one individual to the other. In this chapter, I flesh out the different ways participants sought out relationships with other trans/nonbinary people and/or QTPOC and the ways some white participants worked to be anti-racist. I focus on how they worked to create queer, multidirectional flows of labor.

5.3.1 #Trans4Trans

Introduced in the pre-emptive labor section, Coke, a trans woman, dated people of any (a)gender except for cis men because of her fears surrounding physical and verbal violence from cis men. Coke was not currently in an intimate relationship with anyone, but she had primarily dated cis women, trans women, and nonbinary individuals. I asked her if dating cis women felt different at all from dating trans women. She responded, “It does. I feel like, with trans women, I’m able to connect with them better. We share similar experiences.” For Coke, differences in experience could not necessarily be bridged. This did not mean that she would not date cis women, but it did mean that dating other trans women felt intrinsically different and better to her.
In response to a question about anything cis women could do to bridge the gap in gendered differences, she said, “I’m not even sure when it comes to that. Um…for me, it’s icky. I guess just the more we talk, the more…if we spend hours on end talking about the most random thing, you definitely have my attention.” Coke still felt she could develop intimate feelings for potential cis women SOFHUs. She did not know what cis women could do to love and interact with her trans-ness; however, she noted that the connection with trans women came easier and felt better because cis-ness was not immediately creating a difference that had to be considered prior to forming a relationship.

Ten out of fifteen participants noted the differences in dating other trans/nonbinary people compared to cis people. Of the four who did not note the ease in dating other trans/nonbinary people, all were white. Additionally, one other participant, Dev, mentioned the differences in dating queer women as opposed to lesbian, gay, or heterosexual women. Dev told me:

Lately, I’ve been talking to queer women, and that’s also another new, I guess a new…I don’t know. I was gonna say a new era, but a new uh [pause] woman. You know? They chose to identify themselves as queer. It makes it a little bit easier for trans men, because queer women are open to everybody. They’re also open to dating trans guys. They’re also open to dating trans women. They’re open to everything, ‘cause there’s no labels, you know?

Much like Pfeffer describes queer, cis femmes in her study (2017) as having genders not encapsulated by a cisnormative gender binary, Dev saw queer women as fundamentally different
from other cis women. While not trans and not necessarily nonbinary, queer women’s resistance to sexual binaries was seen as a concomitant resistance to gender binaries placed on their SOFHUs and on themselves. Dev told me that dating trans women and cis women was not necessarily different in how they interact or in making the relationship easier/better. However, he intentionally labeled queer women as a new type of women that “make it a little bit easier for trans men.”

Prior to my interview with Dev, he had also been interviewed by a CNN reporter regarding dating as a trans man. In the interview, the reporter states,

While [Dev] has gotten top surgery and had his breasts removed, he has yet to get bottom surgery. That meant straight women were ‘looking for something I don’t have.’ And if he dated lesbians, he realized those women would have to confront their own sexuality as well, because they’d be dating a man.

Queer women, though, in challenging the idea that attraction is undergirded by a man/woman binary, also stopped fitting within that binary and, in some ways, bridged the gender gap for Dev.
His trans-ness and manhood were not seen as something to get over or an issue preventing a relationship; rather, his trans-ness and his manhood were able to fit fully and completely within a queer relationship. In figure 5, a participant wears a tank stating, “Trans is Beautiful.” The shirt functions as what Sedgwick (2003) terms a periperformative, or an utterance that maps itself around the performative enunciation to make trans-ness beautiful and thus alludes to the making desirable of trans-ness. In relationships with queer women, though, Dev did not have to declare
that trans is beautiful or make his trans-ness desirable to the women. It was already worthy of desire.

As already mentioned earlier, for Kade, being in a relationship with two trans/nonbinary people did not necessarily mean that his partners necessarily understood his trans-ness and nonbinary-ness intrinsically. While Dev assumed that being with queer women would make it easier to date as a trans man, and Coke discussed being with trans women as easier than being with cis women. Kade noted that not all trans people are the same, and thus relationships with trans people will be different according to the individual trans SOFHU. However, Kade did note the ease of being with another nonbinary partner. Kade and his nonbinary partner had been together for five years at the time of our interview. He explained that “she started identifying as a version of cisgender, nonbinary about two and a half years ago, so we were already together at that point, and I think she started investigating her gender as a natural consequence of being around so many trans people.” With cis people, Kade experienced high demands of his emotional labor to explain himself and his gender. He and his two partners were polyfidelitous and were not necessarily seeking out additional partners to add into their relationship. However, he told me that, if he were to date another individual and/or bring them into the relationship, he would want them to be trans/nonbinary. He explained:

In my experience, I feel like there’s a real demand on my emotional labor and time to explain myself, because I’m unusual, like air-quotes around that, and because I’m unusual compared to their experience of people, the onus falls on me to explain my difference, which was an experience I had outside of being trans, you know, as a young kid explaining why I’m different. Having to do labor around, yeah, you know, it’s weird
that I like such and such, so let me explain to you why, and that experience continued but in a, I don’t know, more high-stakes game as I understood my trans-ness.

Cis people not only required education around his trans-ness and additional education around his trigender identity, they often demanded it of him in order to interact with him and/or be in a relationship with him. Additionally, he interacted differently with the world and saw himself differently as his gender shifted from transmasculine to one of his other genders (caelgenxer or juxera). In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways his binary partner did not understand his nonbinary-ness at an “intrinsic level,” and thus did not know how to interact with him. However, his nonbinary partner relieved him of the anxiety and exhaustion surrounding these barriers with cis people and binary trans individuals:

When I am experiencing a shift to a gender other than transmasculine, it’s a little bit uncomfortable for me. It’s something I’m coming to terms with, and I think this has to do with internalized uh [pause] what would the term be for it? Internalized cissexism, where I’m expecting myself to behave on a binary and then I can’t, because my gender is just wildly doing something else that day. There’s sort of a shame that goes with, that I feel like I should cover it, and I think in response to that, my partner that I’ve been with for the longest, she’ll usually notice that I’m doing something, and she’ll say that I look cute that day, or she’ll use some sort of term that lets me know she’s noticing that I’m perhaps a little bit more feminized for me. She might use, “Oh you’re handsome,” normally, but she’ll use something that’s a little more feminized, and just let me know that she’s noticing. But she’ll generally leave it alone, because she doesn’t want to increase the
discomfort of the dysphoria that I’m feeling. And my, my other partner, I’m sure that she notices, but I don’t think she knows how to interact with it yet, because um she’s a little bit more of a uh traditionalist. She’s fairly binary, um [pause] I don’t think she understands nonbinary-ism at an intrinsic level like my other partner does.

While his nonbinary partner understood that he felt discomfort around his gender shifts because of an internalized cissexism that made him feel shame for not existing within a gender binary, his binary partner did not. The nonbinary partner, thus, was able to use different language to decrease his anxiety and to give him the space that he needed to relax and feel comfortable in his gender shifts.

Being with trans, nonbinary, and/or queer individuals did not necessitate that the demands of emotional labor ceased for my participants. Rather, intentional and active work on their SOFHUs part was needed. However, trans/nonbinary participants were able to find some relief from this work and some space to exist as themselves when partnering with people of specific genders and/or sexualities. They were able to queer the labor load within these relationships and find (fleeting) ways to exist that did not reproduce cis-/heterosexism and that shifted the onus to explain off of the trans/nonbinary individual.

5.3.2 #QTPOCOnly

The majority of participants preferred and/or saw differently relationships with trans people over relationships with cis people. However, not all participants of color preferred relationships with other people of color. Only participants who were Black preferred other people of color and/or other Black people in particular. Other participants of color, like Dev, saw connections with white SOFHUs and SOFHUs of color as depending on the individual and not
necessarily necessitating a preference for other people of color. Isa not only preferred Black people over whites and other people of color as SOFHUs but also claimed an Afrosensuality. Isa stated:

I am someone who does claim sensuality, and specifically Afrosensuality, so I am an Afrosensualist, and that combines a lot of different nuances, so acknowledging, you know, Blackness, acknowledging quareness or queerness, acknowledging the intersectionality of all of these things, but also for me, like sensuality is to have a really full sensual experience, even though you can have sensuality without this being equitably distributed, but it is an equitable distribution of the erotic energy, which is mental, the intimate energy, which is emotional, in most cases, and then the sexual energy, which is like the physical/sexual body.

Isa’s attachment to Afrosensuality specifically grew out of the desire for “an equitable distribution of the erotic energy.” Rather than having an imbalance of sexual, mental, intimate, and emotional labor, Isa sought to queer Isa’s relationship to other people’s bodies by claiming sensuality as a political and sexual goal. Additionally, Isa used the word quare in addition to queer, highlighting that Isa’s sexuality and race are not separate entities; rather, they are imbricated in one another. Isa’s Blackness and queerness informed one another. For example, Isa told me:

Politically, for different things, I am a person that has said previously that I am a pro-Brown person with a Black emphasis, so that I am—I like people of color, my history
with people is that I have been mostly with um Black men, and I can’t necessarily say that that’s because I was like raised with that. I mean I don’t know….I’ve had moments where I’ve found white people to be differently attractive, and then I’ve also had moments where I haven’t….If there was a racial preference, it’s based on an assumption—I am with this person who shares kinship with me in this way of this identity, therefore, there’s less work that I have to do. I don’t have to explain things. Like, you just get it. So I don’t have to exert the energy to do that understanding making, and/or I don’t have to like do as much. So it’s like easier in a different way.

Being with a Black person did not negate that other differences may exist between Isa and Isa’s SOFHU. However, it did mean that there was a “shared kinship” around race, and potentially queerness, that mitigated the demands often placed on Isa’s labor. In the previous chapter, I discussed how Isa refused having šé’s labor demanded. By claiming an Afrosensuality and a pro-Brown politic with a Black emphasis and forming relationships with other Black people, Isa worked to prioritize this refutation.

In the pre-emptive labor section, I highlighted Monroe’s discussion with me regarding intracommunal anti-Blackness within the trans/nonbinary community. I also touched on the ways in which Lewis experienced racial fetishization and a lack of understanding by white partners. Both Lewis and Monroe, as well, preferred relationships with QTPOC over relationships with white people. By working to foster relationships with other QTPOC, they potentially queered the intimate labor load by “sharing kinship” with their SOFHU(s) and thus minimizing the affects whiteness may have had on their relationship(s).
5.3.3 White anti-racist accompliceship

While I have focused in the previous two sections of this chapter on how trans/nonbinary participants worked to foster relationships with other trans/nonbinary people and/or queer people and Black participants worked to foster relationships with other QTPOC and/or Black people in order to queer the labor load for themselves, in this section, I focus on the ways a few white participants worked to reduce the labor load for their partners. Three out of ten white participants specifically spoke with me about engaging in anti-racist accompliceship. Four of the other ten felt that their whiteness did not impact their experiences as trans/nonbinary people. The remaining three highlighted that their whiteness did position them differently than trans/nonbinary BIPOC; however, they felt unable to discuss it beyond stating that. The use of the word accompliceship is intentional rather than the word allyship. While allies may claim solidarity without actively engaging in acts of solidarity, accomplices “listen with respect….aren’t motivated by personal guilt or shame…. [and] don’t just have [marginalized peoples’] backs, they are at our side, or in their own spaces confronting and unsettling colonialism” and other manifestations of white supremacy (Indigenous Action Media 2014). The three participants whose interviews I discuss in this section not only touched on racism and racial differences; they also spoke of the work they do to queer the labor load with BIPOC SOFHUs.

I asked all participants questions regarding whether they believe their race shaped their gendered experiences, whether trans/nonbinary BIPOC have different experiences than white trans/nonbinary people in regard to safety and desire, and whether they discussed race/racism with (potential) SOFHUs. When I asked Kade if his race shaped his gendered experiences, he stated, “Undoubtedly it has, but like water is invisible to a fish, it’s difficult for me as a white person to know for sure what the experience would be if I were a person of color and trans.”
Whereas, some participants stated a similar concept but were then unable to elaborate further, Kade went on to highlight the work he felt he needed to do as a white person to fight against racism. He explained:

I’m actually a Black Lives Matter activist, and I align myself to communities of color….As much as I possibly can, back them up, help them out, uh try and counter issues of racism wherever I see them having to do emotional labor around it. I try to step in if that’s something that they would likely want or need and they’ve talked to me about effective ways to help them in situations. I’m sure plenty of people are neutral towards me, but uh I joke a tad-serious, that uh I’m invited to the trans day of empowerment by whoever’s not mad at me this year.

Beyond merely acknowledging his privilege and whiteness, Kade actively worked to queer the labor load of (trans/nonbinary) BIPOC by working in tandem with Black Lives Matter in his community. In addition, Kade sought to challenge whiteness as it manifested within his own trans/nonbinary community, working to not only challenge racism among strangers but also among those who would then choose whether or not to remain in community with him. He was willing to lose access to community, only being invited to events, such as the trans day of empowerment, by people who did not become angered at him when challenging white privilege.

Additionally, Kade worked to challenge whiteness within his close, intimate relationships with his two partners. I asked Kade if, as three white partners, they talked about race and whiteness, to which he responded:
Yeah a lot actually. The partner I’ve been with the longest, we’ve had a long time to kind of interact with each other and to smooth out the rough places, if you will, and I am very adamant in my activism….The partner I’ve known less, as the more traditionalist, she, she’s ex-military, she’s from Texas, she has a lot of contributing social factors that she hasn’t really gone in-depth with….When I first met her, she was still using the, “Well, I have Black friends, so I can’t be racist” excuse. And I pretty quickly explained to her why that’s not a good plan….Over the course of the two years we’ve been together, I’ve presented her with a lot of reading material. I talk to her extensively about this stuff.

Kade sought ways of challenging racism as it manifested in interactions with his partners. Whiteness is racial domination normalized (Bonilla-Silva 2014). By working to counter his partners’ beliefs that she could not be racist and by ensuring that these conversations continue within his house, his community, and other spaces in which he interacted, he worked to challenge the normalization of whiteness. He centered his political affiliations over the comfort of his partner. In addition, rather than merely writing her off for her racism, he sought to educate her in order to prevent BIPOC from having to. Davis, too, worked to challenge his white privilege, stating, “You’re always trying to be a better ally. You’re trying to listen more than anything, speak when you’re supposed to, advocate and listen otherwise.” Davis noted his role in challenging this labor was not simply about taking up more space in conversations about race but rather, learning to listen and “accept people’s experience as true.” Davis, thus, spent time on his own working to educate himself rather than expecting BIPOC to educate him. Davis and Kade saw whites as needing to bear the onus for these conversations, thus, queering the racialized
labor load that often places the burden of challenging racism onto people of color who did not and do not choose to exist within white supremacy.

Queering the labor load did not mean that the burden of having to contort one’s body to fit into cis-ness/whiteness, having to educate others about gender/race, and/or having to negotiate gendered/raced expectations in intimate relationships ceased. Trans/nonbinary individuals in relationships with other trans/nonbinary individuals, such as Kade, still engaged in gender labor. QTPOC, such as Lewis, still engaged in gender labor with his Black partner. BIPOC participants still bore the brunt of white supremacy and engage in racial/gender labor whether some whites engaged in anti-racist accompliceship or not. However, by seeking out relationships with other trans/nonbinary people and/or QTPOC and by engaging in white anti-racist accompliceship, these participants worked to create multidirectional flows of labor rather than labor born out primarily by one of the SOFHUs. For example, Isa told me, “In my experience, I like people who are bisexual or pansexual or queer, because it means that I can be all of myself [pause] because I’m like all the worlds colliding into one.” Isa’s partner was pansexual and being with him reduced some of the burden of feeling like Isa needed to be one thing or explain various parts of Isa’s self to the partner. However, at another point, Isa relayed, “At a bar, someone asked him like, ‘Are you gay or straight?’ And he said straight. Then what does that say about me, and what does that say about our relationship? Like, am I just his kinda woman?” Trans/nonbinary participants still had to negotiate gender/race even when forming relationships that queered the labor load, but they were able to foster space in their relationships with SOFHUs in which to begin challenging often forced negotiations and labor.
The participants in my study highlighted how gender labor functions through discursive maneuvers by trans/nonbinary individuals that result in a “giving” of (cis)gender to potential partners and hook-ups. In an effort to prevent violence and/or stigma, participants described highlighting their gender on dating apps or altering their clothing, posture, and voice, among other bodily cues. In doing so, participants performed a preemptive gender labor through which the cis-ness of cisgender views (vis-à-vis dating apps) and dates could be stabilized. As Ahmed (2000) writes, “the unmarked body is the body that appears contained, enclosed, and separate” (46). The marked body, in contrast, remains vulnerable to potential penetrations of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, unwanted questions, and stigma and embarrassment. The touch of some bodies by Other bodies reconstitutes both bodies, as the boundary between cis-ness and trans-ness remain permeable (Ibid.). Pre-emptive gender labor performed by trans/nonbinary individuals served as both protective for the particular individual and reifying for the containment and separation of trans-ness and cis-ness. Participants often described suppressing particular acts and/or modes of dress in order to not “push” their partner(s) “too far.” This “too far” can be understood, through participants’ elaboration, as the partner questioning their own gender and sexual identities and, thus, becoming uncomfortable with the relationship itself.

Trans studies scholars in Sociology and Feminist Studies have discussed the ways in which trans-ness is a relational project and/or interactional achievement between and through various bodies (Butler 1988; Vidal-Ortiz 2002; Halberstam 2005; Connell 2009; Schilt 2010; Chen 2012; Enke 2012; Nordmarken 2014; Allen 2016; Green 2016; Darwin 2017; Janssen 2017); however, fewer scholars have taken up the relationality of cis-ness beyond the recognition that for cis-ness to exist, so too must trans-ness. My argument here is not a perfunctory reiteration of this latter
point. Rather, the fifteen individuals I interviewed discussed the myriad ways they contort themselves to prevent even touching cis-ness while still being touched by it. Whether individuals formed relationships with cis SOFHUs or not, they internalized and wrestled with cisnormative notions of desirability, feeling as though as trans men they could not express femininity, as trans women, they had to take extra precautions to not scare away dates, and as nonbinary people, that they pushed gender “too far,” causing feelings of self-shame and stigma. In addition, whom they found attractive and desirable became shaped by cisnormativity. Mia, for example, stated,

Well, a lot of times, what it boils down to is the fact that I like women. Like I literally prefer women. Now if she is trans, and she’s gon’ over and had the surgery and stuff, then we’ll take and see what we do. But as far as, I prefer dating cis women, for the simple fact that…a woman doesn’t stop very easily and you can never get enough [sex/orgasms].

Mia had not had bottom surgery and was a trans woman herself, yet she viewed cis women as more desirable than trans women. In seeking to make herself desirable to cis women, she internalized cissexist conflations of vaginas and womanhood and separated out cis women as more desirable than trans women for that reason.

A recent YouGov survey found that 27% of sampled individuals (n=2,191; proportions weighted) are not open to being friends with a transgender person (Bame 2017; “Transgender Issues” 2017). Further, only 17% of respondents would be open to dating a transgender man, 16% a transgender woman, and 18% a nonbinary, transgender person. It is not surprising, then, given these findings, that trans/nonbinary individuals put a lot of energy into managing their presentation of self prior to engaging in intimacy with others who may or may not harbor similar sentiments. However, in this process of pre-screening and explicit profile tailoring to prevent
contact with potentially violent people, they also prevented many cis people from coming into contact with trans-ness and the potential gender transformations such contact could catalyze.

In long-term relationships, trans/nonbinary participants continued to negotiate gender/race as they struggled with gendered/raced expectations placed upon them by cis partners. Kate, mentioned and discussed in the results, struggled with having male expectations placed on her by play partners when on dates and felt as though she could not challenge their expectations since she had “lived as a man” for fifty years of her life. Connell (2009) highlights that trans/nonbinary individuals often do gender through “contradictory” embodiments, (mis)recognized as having a differently gendered/sexed past in comparison to present. Kate’s struggle highlights that how individuals do gender and how they are held accountable can contradict one another. Kate did gender as a woman but was held accountable as a man despite being recognized as a woman by her play partners. In addition, participants like Isa sought to be desired as individuals containing all of the worlds of gender colliding into one rather than solely as one gendered embodiment or another. Isa and Kate highlight that there are various factors that doing gender theory must expand to include.

Participants often bore the burden of having to teach their partners how to interact with their transness, nonbinary-ness, and/or Blackness. Rather than seeking out their own education, the SOFHUs of trans/nonbinary participants sometimes demanded this labor from them. At other times, SOFHUs who did the work of educating themselves were still unable to relate to the trans/nonbinary participants I interviewed and came up short in offering what the participants needed at a given moment. In response, some participants refused to do this labor and proactively fostered representations of self at the start of relationships that allowed potential SOFHUs to choose whether or not to continue into a relationship that would require self-
education. Others tired of this labor but continued to perform it, while others enjoyed educating others and took up roles as community educators, such as Kate. Participants highlighted that the onus for gender labor and gender/race negotiations fell unevenly on trans/nonbinary individuals with cis SOFHUs and for BIPOC individuals with white SOFHUs.

Many participants worked to foster relationships with the potential to queer the labor load in order to create space for multidirectional flows of labor. Gender labor is inherently relational. Individuals perform labor to give gender to others. However, working to queer the labor load functioned to create greater degrees of balance so that one partner was not always bearing the burden of having to negotiate gendered/raced negotiations of self and other. For example, by seeking out other QTPOC, Black trans/nonbinary participants worked to foster relationships in which they did not have to deal with the racial fetishization that Lewis experienced online or the inability to discuss race and cultural references as Monroe experienced with whites on dates and in friendships. By seeking out other trans/nonbinary individuals, participants worked to create relationships in which their partners, such as Kade’s cisgender, nonbinary partner, understood their genders on a more “intrinsic level.” Finally, a few of the white participants worked to engage in anti-racist accompliceship in order to challenge manifestations of whiteness and white supremacy, understanding that the onus should not fall on people of color to do so. In comparison to the majority of white participants who perpetuated whiteness as discursive absence or who discussed race through colorblind frames, these participants sought to align themselves with communities of color and engage in education and conversation with their white SOFHUs to challenge whiteness within intimate relationships as well.

While I worked to provide a racialized analysis of whiteness within this project, I am also limited in being able to provide greater analyses of these discussions among participants of color,
having only five participants of color in all. Additionally, my project remains limited in scope, only analyzing the interviews of fifteen participants altogether. Future research would do well to take up analyses of gender labor as performed by trans/nonbinary people with predominantly or solely samples of color, as the majority of trans research remains focused on white participants. These analyses would also do well to include a more diverse sample of trans/nonbinary individuals and their respective communities. The majority of my participants were younger than thirty and had a college education, potentially having vastly different experiences than those without a college education or those who are older may have. Having a college education also shaped the directions of the conversations I had with participants, as many used the language of hegemonic masculinity or intersectionality or other words shaped and informed by the social sciences and humanities and not as vastly dispersed throughout non-academic communities.

Despite these limitations, I have worked to extend the ways in which gender labor functions to include the ways trans/nonbinary participants not only give gender in intimate relationships but also sustain cisgender through pre-emptively outing themselves and contorting their bodies to fit arbitrary notions of desirability. Additionally, through analyzing the racial discourse of my white participants, I have worked to highlight the ways in which gender labor is always a racial project, informed by and informing the ways in which cis-ness is maintained and manifested within intimate relationships with SOFHUs. While individuals highlighted the limiting ways in which they were held accountable to binary forms of gender expression, they also highlighted that they do gender differently in different contexts. Doing gender was not about solely doing gender as a man or a woman. Rather, individuals worked to construct presentations of self that differed according to whether they were with other trans/nonbinary people, cis people, and/or BIPOC. In different contexts, they were given more latitude to do gender beyond the binary, and
indeed, even when held accountable to a binary, trans women did gender as women differently at different times in order to elicit safety and desirability and trans men did gender differently as men at different times in order to elicit desirability. There was no one way of doing manhood or womanhood. However, those participants that did do gender beyond the binary remained worried about pushing their expression “too far” beyond manhood and womanhood in ways that would create situations of un-safety and/or confusion for others. Doing gender theory, thus, must expand to include individuals whose gender identities and expressions extend beyond the constraints of womanhood and manhood.

7 CONCLUSION

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States has resulted in heightened awareness of the xenophobia, racism, cissexism, and ableism embedded within the U.S. nation-state. Trump’s tweets declaring a ban on trans service members in the imperialist U.S. military, executive orders declaring the ability to detain immigrant families indefinitely, policies exacerbating the consequences of white supremacy and colonization have heightened the precarious position in which marginalized individuals live. At the end of each interview, I asked participants a final question: “Thinking of the current political landscape, do you think that the political climate has changed with the Trump administration in regard to trans/nonbinary people?” Non-Black and/or binary individuals were more likely to say that Trump has made things worse; whereas, Black and/or nonbinary individual stated that Trump has heightened the visibility of already occurring problems (see Tables 6-7). The only Black person that wasn’t sure of whether Trump had made things worse or not was unsure because they were still parsing it out; whereas, the two white people who said they were not sure were apolitical and unaware of media, news, and politics. This difference in response highlights the ability whites have to exist
without attentiveness to the violence and vitriol of white supremacy and the protections whiteness affords to even marginalized trans/nonbinary individuals.

In my interview with Sora, he told me, “I have this constant feeling like I need to be aware of potential threats to my physical safety and that’s a new feeling as a white person.” While Sora was previously able to feel safe and secure as a white, trans man, the election of Trump and the heightened social and media awareness to social problems of inequality has brought additional fears of how trans politics will shift in the coming years. In comparison, Isa responded, “I feel like there’s something to be said about the top-down and trickle effect, while also knowing that, in different ways, like the justifiability of violence based on culture, based on society or whatever, these things were already there, and I’m not sure to what degree they’ve been enhanced.” Issues of cissexism and white supremacy have existed within the U.S. nation-state since the early colonization of Indigenous peoples and enslavement of African peoples. However, the gendered negotiations white trans/nonbinary participants engaged in due to safety and/or desirability differed from those of trans/nonbinary BIPOC participants due to the lack of physical protections for their racialized-gendered bodies.

In analyzing gender labor performed by trans/nonbinary participants, I highlight the racialized mechanisms through which gender labor functions. Participants discussed how dating another trans/nonbinary person lessened the particular exhaustion they felt in dating cis people. Rather than feeling a need to engage in preemptive labor to combat any violence and/or stigma, participants could relax, even if the relaxation remained fleeting. Participants of color shared similar statements as white participants; however, the participants of color also discussed the ways in which dating a white trans/nonbinary person did not necessarily work to balance the race-gender labor performed between the two. Instead, for some participants, dating a cisgender
person of color balanced the race-gender labor more than dating a white trans/nonbinary person. Jamal Lewis, director of the documentary No Fats, No Femmes, stated in an interview, “Whom we decide to (and, not to) lay with (and, love) is political…It informs whom we save, whom we fight for, whom we deem worthy, whom we deem disposable, and vice versa” (Ziyad 2015). The gender/race negotiations that trans/nonbinary participants discussed in my interviews highlighted the additional burdens that marginalized individuals experience in having to navigate a dating world shaped by issues of cissexism, femmephobia, and white supremacy. In attending to these negotiations, I highlight the labor trans/nonbinary participants engaged in and the spaces and relationships they attempted to foster to challenge and resist these forces within their intimate lives.
REFERENCES


### Table 1 Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Assigned Sex</th>
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<th>Race</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Type of Interview</th>
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<td>30-40</td>
<td>Face-to-Face</td>
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<td>20-25</td>
<td>Web Cam</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Latino</td>
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<td>Neutrois/Femme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kurt</td>
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*aNames reflect participant pseudonyms except for the two individuals who chose to use their real name.

*bFor individuals using more than one set of pronouns, their pronouns are listed in order of preference. For example, Isa generally only uses Isa’s name rather than any pronouns. However, if an individual needs pronouns to refer to Isa, then Isa is okay with they or şé (pronounced shea).
As some of the participants chose to use their actual name in place of a pseudonym, I shaded states within the U.S. in which participants resided to protect anonymity.

Figure 6 Participants’ States-of-Residence

¹As some of the participants chose to use their actual name in place of a pseudonym, I shaded states within the U.S. in which participants resided to protect anonymity.
### Table 3 Photo Codes by Black and Non-Black

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<tr>
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### Table 2 Photo Codes by Gender

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<th>Nonbinary trans femme</th>
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### Table 3 "We’re Just Normal People" By Gender

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### Table 4 "We’re Just Normal People" By Black/Non-Black

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### Table 5 "We’re Just Normal People" By Gender and Black/Non-Black

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### Table 6 Feelings on Trump by Gender

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### Table 7 Feelings on Trump by Race

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Figure 7 "Just one of the Guys"
Figure 8 "Just one of the Guys"
Figure 9 "Just one of the Guys"
Figure 10 "Just one of the Guys"

Figure 11 "Just one of the Guys"
Figure 12 "Just one of the Girls"
Figure 14 "Transdrogynous"
Figure 15 "Transdrogynous"
Figure 16 "Transdrogynous"

Figure 17 "Queer Style"
Figure 18 "Queer Style"

Figure 19 "Queer Style"
Figure 20 "Queer Style"
Figure 21 "Queer Style"
Figure 22 "Queer Style"
Figure 23 "Queer Style"
Figure 24 "Queer Style"
Figure 25 "Queer Style"
Figure 26 "Queer Style"
Appendix B—Interview Guide

Thank you for participating in this interview today. The purpose of this study is to understand the ways in which trans/nonbinary people live their gender while dating. This interview is meant to be a conversation. I have questions in mind that I want to touch on, but largely, I want this process to be one in which we can chat with one another about your dating and/or hook-up practices. I’ll ask questions about race, gender, dating, hooking-up, bodies, the media, and more. I ask that you do not use your real name or the real name/identifying information of anyone you discuss during this interview. I want to reiterate that at any point during this interview, if you feel uncomfortable or triggered, we can stop and take a break. We can also take a break if you need water or to use the restroom or for any other reason. Additionally, you can end the interview at any time for any reason. You don’t even need to give me a reason, and there will be no consequences for doing so. I’ll start by telling you a little bit about myself and what brought me to do these interviews and we can then move from there.

1. How do you identify your gender?
2. How did you come to know yourself as (gender)?
3. How do you define your gender? How do you explain it to others?
4. Do you tell others you are trans/nonbinary?
   a. How do you decide whom to tell?
   b. How does it differ in telling family from friends from coworkers? How do these differ from telling a date? A hook-up?
5. When do you tell someone you are dating, if at all?
   a. What prompts you to tell them?
6. In what ways have you changed your clothing since defining yourself as (gender), if at all?
   a. Other ways of dressing yourself such as makeup/hair/tattoos/piercings/etc.?
   b. What about your body, such as gender confirmation surgery/hormone replacement
therapy?
c. What prompted you to do these things?

7. Before “coming out” what were your perceptions of trans/nonbinary people?
   a. How have those perceptions changed since “coming out”?

8. How do cis people perceive trans/nonbinary people? How do you know? How do their perceptions affect you, if at all?
   a. Do you tend to agree with these perceptions?
   b. Do you ever attempt to challenge these perceptions? How so?

9. What about in relationships? What did/do you hear about trans/nonbinary people dating?
   a. Sexually-hooking-up?
   b. From where did/do you hear these things?
   c. How do you relate to these perceptions?
   d. How do they affect your dating life?
   e. Sex life?

10. Can you tell me about your picture of yourself on an “ideal date”?
    a. Why did you choose these particular clothes/manners of dressing your body?
    b. The pose and angle?
    c. Do you tend to dress similarly on dates? If not, please elaborate.
    d. Does whether the date is in an LGBT-friendly area or not affect this? How so?

11. What genders do you date? Have sex with?
    a. Races?

12. How do the ways in which you dress/adorn your body/wear or remove hair/paint nails/etc. depend on which gender the date is?
    a. What about with hook-ups?
    b. How do the ways in which you do these things depend on the race of the date?
    c. The race of the hook-up?

13. How about body language?
    a. Tone of voice?
    b. Movement?
    c. Space you take up or don’t?
    d. Whether you order for yourself or they order for you?
    e. Whether you pay, they pay, or you go “Dutch”?

14. Do these things affect the way they see you as (gender)?

15. How does your gender affect your dating life? Sex life?
    a. How does it affect the way you prepare for and act on dates? Hook-ups?
    b. How does your race affect your dating life? Sex life?
       i. How does it affect the way you prepare for and act on dates? Hook-ups?

16. How does the gender of the person affect whether you “out” yourself?
    a. How about their race?

17. Do you feel desirable as (gender)? As (race/gender)?
    a. Why or why not?
    b. Have you always/ever?
    c. What changed, if anything?
18. How do you elicit desire as (gender)? As (race/gender)?
   a. What things do you do, if anything, to attract others? Do you think those things are different from others genders?
   b. Other races?
19. How does your safety as (race/gender) play into how you dress/act on/prepare for dates? Hook-ups?
20. Do you suppress or exaggerate your gender at all during dates?
   a. Hook-ups?
   b. What about your race?
   c. Why and how so? Or why not?
   d. How does this differ from being with friends from family from coworkers?
21. Which of your identities, if any at all, affect the way you navigate dating the most? Please elaborate.
   a. Navigating hook-ups?
   b. Navigating friend relationships? Family relationships? Coworker relationships?
22. How do you feel in general in life as (gender)?
23. Do you feel like you have to navigate dating differently than others? Why and how so? Why not?
   a. Hooking-up?
   b. What about your race?
   c. Why and how so? Or why not?
   d. How does this differ from being with friends from family from coworkers?
24. Does it require energy to figure out how to navigate dating?
25. How did/do you learn to navigate dating as (gender)?
   a. Hooking-up?
26. If you are currently in a relationship, do you live together?
   a. If so, how do you determine who does what in terms of housework?
   b. What about in terms of emotional work? How do you and your partner(s) share in processing with each other, sharing feelings, etc.? Do you feel like you both do an equal amount of emotional work with each other? Why/why not?
27. Let’s turn back to your photo. What would an ideal date look like for you as (race/gender) looking and gesturing as you are in this photo?
   a. What about an ideal hook-up?
   b. How would the date/hook-up relate to your trans/nonbinary identity? Would it be important? Irrelevant? What about your race? How would the ideal relation be for these identities? What kinds of things would they do to show you this?
28. Thinking of the current political landscape, do you think that the political climate has changed with the Trump administration in regard to trans/nonbinary people?
   a. Why/why not? How so?
   b. If yes, do you feel that the shift in political climate has any effect upon your dating/hook-up life? On the ways in which you dress/behave/etc. when seeking partners? How so? Why/why not?
   c. Do you feel that the current political climate has affected your level of safety in public? What about in private, specifically regarding dating/hooking-up?
     i. Why/why not? How so?
29. Are there any further comments you have that I haven’t asked about that you feel are pertinent to our conversation?

30. Demographics:
   a. Gender Identity:
   b. Sex Assigned at Birth:
   c. Race/Ethnicity:
   d. Sexual Orientation:
   e. Estimated Annual Income:
   f. City You Live In:
Appendix C—Recruitment Flyer

Seeking Trans/Nonbinary Participants for A Study on Dating Practices

Participation involves submitting a photo of yourself as you would dress on an ideal date and a 45-90 minute interview on dating and gender.

Eligibility:
* You must be 18 years or older
* Must identify with a gender other than what you were assigned at birth
* Must have been on dates since identifying as trans/nonbinary
  * Must live in the Atlanta Metro area or have access to Skype or Google Hangout

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Figure 28 Recruitment Flyer
Appendix D—Online Recruitment Flyer
Seeking Trans/Nonbinary Participants for A Study on Dating Practices

Participation involves submitting a photo of yourself as you would dress on an ideal date and a 45-90 minute interview on dating and gender.

Eligibility:
* You must be 18 years or older
* Must identify with a gender other than what you were assigned at birth
* Must have been on dates since identifying as trans/nonbinary
* Must live in the Atlanta or Salt Lake Metro areas or have access to Skype or Google Hangout

To participate, email azamantakis1@student.gsu.edu

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*Figure 29 Online Recruitment Flyer*
NOTES

i Cisgender refers to those who identify with the sex/gender they were assigned at birth. For example, if an individual is assigned male at birth and identifies as a man, they are a cisgender man.

ii Transfeminine is a term used for someone who was assigned male at birth but identifies as a woman and/or with a feminine, nonbinary gender identity.
See the following link for an image of Corporal Klinger:

Neutrois is used by the participant to refer to “an open space...a conversation; it means so many things, or it’s like the ambiguous...I refuse to be defined.”

Trigender refers to having more than one gender. It is not the equivalent of gender fluidity. Rather, the participant experiences each gender concretely at different times.

Caelgenxer (pronounced kyle-gender) refers to the aesthetic association with space.

Juxera is a feminine gender similar to girl but on a separate plane. It is associated with a very ostentatious gender presentation.

Genderqueer refers to nonbinary identities that, similar to neutrois, refuse to be defined along or within a binary.

Asexual refers to an orientation of attraction that does not center or involve sexual orientation. The participant identified as panromantic, meaning that they experienced romantic attraction people that was not centered around gendered orientations of desire.

Grindr allows users to filter by “tribe,” one of which includes a trans “tribe.” However, the trans “tribe” includes both trans individuals and cis people that are trans attracted and/or fetishists of trans-ness.

Immediately after my interview with Kurt, I noticed that the audio recording had not saved. However, my interview with Kurt remained important in regard to complications of gender/sexuality. I immediately re-recorded my interview with him in my own words in order to preserve the data, but the data remain limited because of this.

A binder is an additional piece of clothing or a wrap that is stretched over the breasts to flatten them and make them less (or not at all) noticeable. A packers is a human-made phallus, much like a strap-on dildo but not necessarily sexual. It is often used to give the appearance of having a penis, and some packers can also be co-utilized as devices through which to pee while standing at a urinal. Packers can be used during sex, but this is not their sole purpose, and some are not hard enough to offer much capacity for sexual play.

Immediately after my interview with Kurt, I noticed that the audio recording had not saved. However, my interview with Kurt remained important in regard to complications of gender/sexuality. I immediately re-recorded my interview with him in my own words in order to preserve the data, but the data remain limited because of this.

Topping can refer to penetrating a partner (whether with a penis or sex toy), being the more “dominant” partner rather than a submissive partner, and other similar usages among primarily LGBTQIA communities.

Switch refers to individuals who are open to topping and bottoming. Switch is primarily a term used by lesbian, bi, and queer women; whereas, vers—short for versatile—is more often used among gay, bi, and queer men. Bottoming can refer to being penetrated (by a penis, sex toy, fist, etc.), being the more “submissive” partner, and other similar usages.

The name of Kate’s community has been changed throughout.