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GENDERFAIL THE QUEER ETHICS OF DISSEMINATION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth
University.

By Brett Suemnicht

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MFA Virginia Commonwealth University 2018

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
Queer Occupations.....	1
GenderFail.....	5
GenderFail Programs.....	11
Social Engagement and the GenderFail Awards Project.....	16
The GenderFail Archive Project.....	19
On Protest Signs and Performative Type.....	33
This is Not Another Photo of a Gay cisgender White Man.....	46
On Whitewashing and Queer Resistance.....	53
Stonewall, Exclusion, and the Corporatization of Gay Pride Events.....	55
Whitewashing Queerness.....	63
Homonormativity and a Seat at the Table.....	69
On the Undercommons and Queer Resistance.....	73
My Pronoun (card) #1: On Passing, Whiteness and Mental Health..	78
Bibliography.....	92

ABSTRACT

GENDERFAIL THE QUEER ETHICS OF DISSEMINATION

By Brett Suemnicht, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

Major Director: Hilary Wilder, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking Department

My research is centered upon my ongoing project GenderFail, a publishing and programming initiative featuring the perspectives of queer and trans people and people of color.

GenderFail: The Queer Ethics of Dissemination is a collection of writings on queer collaboration, archiving as a collective act, and publishing as a site of queer community. The following text also illustrates the importance of creating and maintaining an intersectional platform as a non-binary white queer subject. I examine and define the role of "queer identity" in my own work while mapping the history of failure by white queers, including myself, in the of articulation of intersectionality. By understanding how intersectionality is important in a queer-focused collaborative practice, I seek to emphasize the messiness of citation, collaboration, and community in relation to my discursive uses of printed matter.

Queer Occupations

So, we came here to tear shit up, you know?

Including ourselves. We came to fail.

Fred Moten

My work is a practice in queer occupations. As queer occupier, I utilize various skill sets in my practice to play on a false notion of a presumed mastery in certain fields. I often utilize roles, skills, and traits in my practice without formal training. Through these occupations I position myself as a queer imposter to take on the messiness that comes with inexperience, and use that messiness to create work differently. I do not intend to master any of the temporary occupations that I employ in my practice - as designer, as archivist, as master printer, or even a mastery of queerness itself.

As a maker, facilitator and publisher who employs queer subjectivities, I am constantly taking on knowledge roles to fit the needs of the work I wish to create. The content I produce is not always practical, useful, or perfect. I look to occupy knowledge roles in hopes of failing, reclaiming and re-imagining the projects I investigate. My work invokes a queer amateurism, one that invites failure. You could call it a collection of queer doings, or doing things by whatever means necessary to accomplish my objectives. A queer occupation tries to look for

other forms of 'success' in what's otherwise called 'failure.' I am not trying to create a 'perfect' project, collaboration, or idea but rather trying to create meaning in any way that I know how.

This approach allows me to embrace my lack of knowledge as a way of framing my interactions with each project I embark on. Collaboration becomes an important part of any queer occupation, enabling me to work with people who have sets of knowledge that I do not have. I seek other artists to realize these projects in ways that I wouldn't be able to alone. I regard collaboration as one of the most important aspects in a queer occupation. I'm not pursuing a certain level of mastery in the performance of a given skill, occupation, trade, or identifiable organizational mode of working; I am pursuing productive forms of failure that are coded in queer subjectivity.

Each of these temporary occupations that I take on in my projects, artworks, or conceptual frame of mind allow for a freedom in looking to alternative value systems for success. My investigations into 'queer occupation' are an attempt to perform the messiness of inexperience that I invoke in my practice. I perform the role of outsider in each of my activities to allow myself the freedom of imperfection, which is important to the realization of a queer artistic gesture. I regard the idea of having complete control or mastery over anything one creates as

a type of delusion that limits one's own creative potential. My occupations allow for a messiness that wishes to highlight problems and become a catalyst for change. In the *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* exhibition catalog, Fred Moten speaks to the need to deal with the 'mess' in institutions, stating:

Revolution or anti-colonialism, as [Frantz] Fanon says, is a program of total disorder, and museum and academic institutions clean up messes. I mean, really, the history of the modern subject, as codified by Kant, is about cleaning up of mess. It's about the eradication of swarm, and of fuzz and business. But what if this got to be a mess that the Museum chose to present, rather than clean up? There a poetics of the mess, you know?¹

A queer occupation embraces this "poetics of the mess" to reflect a queer lived experience that always needs "cleaning up." There is a level of unpredictability that comes with inexperience, which is ripe for the creative rediscovery of how to occupy new forms of communication through my work. I am looking to be transparent regarding my lack of experience in the skill sets typically needed for the projects I create. Therefore, collaboration is a fundamental aspect to the type of content I produce. Through collaboration, I wish to foster a

¹ Burton, Johanna. *Trigger: Gender As a Tool and a Weapon*. New Museum of Contemporary Art, The, 2018.

type of community that feeds off of each unique perspective brought to the table. Together, we can begin to occupy knowledges that disrupt the purification that looks to clean up the messes we create.

In the pursuit of queer occupation, I wish to continue to fail miserably at the expectations put on me by the colonizer, the oppressor, the capitalist, the fascist, the neo-nazi, the abuser, the racist, and the sexist; to thrive and continue a practice of refusal as a necessary form of resistance.

GenderFail

In 2015, I started GenderFail, a publishing and programming initiative that seeks to encourage projects that foster an intersectional queer subjectivity. For GenderFail, a queer subjectivity is one that pushes against a capitalist, racist, ableist, xenophobic, transphobic, homophobic, misogynistic, and anti-environmental ideology. Our projects look at various forms of failure - from personal, public, and political perspectives - as a boundless form of creative potential. GenderFail is fueled by the messiness of collaboration, education, and community to continue to push our goals of failing forward. GenderFail embraces failure as a site of cultural production.

The GenderFail platform is framed as a socially-engaged project employing publishing, public programming, and socially-engaged art. Each publication, program, or project through GenderFail looks to respond to the interests of the people, communities, or groups that I collaborate with. The platform, which is nomadic in nature, is built upon the collaboration it fosters. Without the involvement of other authors in the various GenderFail publications, programs, and projects, the platform could not exist.

GenderFail started strictly as a platform for producing publications by artists. Self-publishing has been an important

part of my overall practice and has been the driving force for the content produced through GenderFail. The publications released through the platform look to an expanded queer subjectivity that extends conversations on “queerness” beyond just focusing on issues surrounding gender and sexuality, but also including issues such as environmentalism, anti-fascism, and other forms of oppression that affect marginalized people. Most of the publications released through this project have been produced as “zines” because of their cheap production cost and easy deployment as disseminated objects.

Zines, outside of their low production costs, offer a rich history of cultural codes which are embedded into the medium. Gregory G. Sholette argued that zines “do not offer just a message to be received, but a model of participatory cultural production and organization to be acted upon”². Zines make up a medium that is open to anyone, a medium that is oftentimes employed in activist and political aims. Sholette goes on to say that “The message you get from zines is that you should not just be getting messages, you should be producing them as well”³. This notion that anyone can be an author is mirrored through the various zine-making workshops that pop up at artist-run spaces, museums, and cultural centers around the world. Zine production, through self-publishing, has offered me the ability to create

² Morrell, Amish. Anti-Catalogue #01. The Model, 2010.

³ Ibid.

content without waiting for the approval of anybody other than myself.

At the time of this writing GenderFail has produced publications with Liz Barr, Jesse Harrod, Evil MTN, Maria Tínavt, Anthony Iacono, Paige Hanserd, Ethan Kastner, Pallavi Sen, Roxana Azar and TrueQué: Residency. Most of these publications happen through collaboration with people in the arts communities that I am active in. Each of these publications cover ways of addressing the type of queer subjectivity that I am looking to foster through the platform. These artists represent cities around the United States and the world including Milwaukee, Austin, Philadelphia, Richmond, New York City, and countries including India, Ecuador, and Spain. The nomadic nature of the project allows for each collaboration to happen at various intersections between the places crossed by myself and those crossed by each artist that I meet. GenderFail is not grounded in any particular place, allowing for each project to manifest when a person, place, and idea come together. No area in particular becomes a home for the project, allowing for these connections to exist outside of any given arts community. GenderFail creates its own community by adapting to various places to find temporary sites of production and collaboration.

One of my goals for attending the Painting & Printmaking MFA program at VCU was to collaborate with students on publications during my time at the university. GenderFail has allowed me the opportunity to expand upon my own community and build new connections with other students in the program. My first collaboration at VCU was with MFA Painting & Printmaking alumni María Tinaut. *Women's Hands in My Family Albums* is a publication that shows images decontextualized from María's personal family archives. These images were mostly taken in Valencia, Spain by María's grandfather Vicente Tinaut in the 1950's. María's concise cropping of these images allows for the viewer to be directed to a particular aspect of each photograph. María reanimated her own grandfather's photographs by regarding the images through a feminist lens, showing the importance of touch, intimacy, and the personal archive. Touch becomes a defining characteristic of the images, which focus on intimate moments among these women's hands.

The photographs included in the publication were taken during the Francisco Franco dictatorship in Spain, and the release of this publication coincided with the election of Donald Trump and the rise of fascism that came with his election. María talks about the political context of the imagery in her MFA thesis, stating that "This is the symptom of the desire to remove the power of a fascist regime from the domestic

setting"⁴. *Women's Hands in My Family Albums* focuses on moments of touch by women in her family, showing moments of beauty within a fascist political state. María's gesture of recontextualizing small but powerful moments of intimacy within an unstable political climate is an important enactment of a certain kind of resistance that helps to inspire a radical softness as a boundless form of resistance .

My second publication with a colleague at VCU was with sculpture alumnus Anthony Iacono. *Sax Solo* is a series of photographs from Anthony Iacono's personal archive. The eleven photographs shown in the publication are from his expansive archive, usually taken from his iPhone camera. These images are used as research material for his painting practice, and oftentimes come from people in Iacono's life. Before starting our collaboration, Anthony had taken a picture of me wearing a golden necklace that rested on my hairy chest. This photograph, and my inclusion in his research, sparked my interest in the rest of his archive.

Anthony's photographs depict intimate moments involving the body, showing just enough information to indicate the presence of a person. The gender of the subjects in these photographs is ambiguous, allowing for the viewer to focus on the fluidity of

⁴ Tinaut, Maria. "Construction of an Album for Oneself." Virginia Commonwealth University , 2017. VCU Scholars Compass, scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5940&context=etd.

the gestures depicted. Artists like Anthony are expanding upon the complexity of a queer art gesture. Anthony depicts the body in a way where one cannot be fully discoverable as either male or female. The images presented in *Sax Solo* show a nuanced depiction of queer bodies that are quiet, contemplative, and complex. *Sax Solo* fits perfectly into what I wish to accomplish with GenderFail by disseminating queer publications that don't just focus on hypersexualized queer male bodies.

In addition to making publications that focus on the body, in early 2018 I had the opportunity to work on a publication centered on issues of food justice, environmentalism, and sustainability. The resulting publication, *Dead Planet Cookbook*, by VCU alumnus Pallavi Sen, is a continuation of Sen's ongoing project LUNCHY. LUNCHY is an anti-packaging, anti-food waste, pro-clean plate, pro-small budget, climate-aware cooking project for first-time cooks living in the Anthropocene. The publication is part cookbook, part artist manifesto; it takes an intersectional approach to consumption and includes chapters like "It's Not (just) The Oil Companies, It's You." Since working on this publication with Pallavi, I have been considering issues of sustainability and environmentalism in context with the future of GenderFail.

The environmental issues brought up in *Dead Planet Cookbook* are queer issues, and should be considered in an intersectional

queer discourse. Working on this publication has made me realize the importance of activist-focused arts writing. As a publishing project located in the United States, GenderFail looks to stand against the devastating effects of the abuses of power by elected officials in our country. Executive orders from the Trump administration, which pulled the United States out of the Paris Climate Accord, opened drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and have supported the building of pipelines through Native American lands, among other decisions, largely affect people of color and the poor. These issues are queer issues. Any issue affecting a marginalized body is a queer issue. With GenderFail, I have the opportunity to use my platform to address these issues and help position them as queer issues that affect other marginalized people.

GenderFail Programs

In addition to publishing zines, art books, and artist books, GenderFail has expanded to include other programs based loosely around printed matter. One of the key aspects of my use of the term "printed matter" is its association with dissemination. The programming I wish to produce outside of publishing books or prints aims to foster the dissemination of content rather than the uniqueness of one object or idea. I

value the power of the printed multiple and its ability to reach certain audiences without having to spend large amounts of money or rely solely on digital technologies. The mobility of the medium is one of the most attractive aspects of the programming fostered through GenderFail.

Since the fall of 2017, I have been offering free use of my risograph machine to queer, trans, and non-binary people and people of color. The ability to help folks realize their projects has been one of the most rewarding aspects of being in arts publishing. GenderFail started as a response to my desire to foster a platform that takes an intersectional approach to queer arts publishing. Contemporary queer publishing is filled with projects that look to promote the white, cisgender, gay male body as the focus of their artistic inspiration. The queerness I look to foster connects to issues that don't solely focus on gender or sexuality, but includes forms of oppression that affect all marginalized people.

The nomadic nature of GenderFail has become an important aspect of the project in its current state. Not having any particular place for GenderFail to call home has encouraged me to reach out to various communities to host events, releases, and other projects central to its mission. One curatorial project, *GenderFail Presents: Queer Date*, was a exhibition and queer-focused reading space at After School Special located in

Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The exhibition was curated as an official GenderFail event and invited all of the artists who collaborated with GenderFail in its first year of operation. For the exhibition, each artist was asked to select another person who produces artist books or zines to show alongside their publication. The artists who showed in the exhibition were Paige Hanserd (Philly) inviting Michelle Macinsky (Philly), Liz Barr (Philly) inviting Amber Sollenberger (Chicago), Jesse Harrod (Philly) inviting Allyson Mitchell (Toronto), Brett Suemnicht (Richmond) inviting Nicole Killian (Richmond), and Ethan Kastner (Milwaukee) inviting Ethan Krause (Milwaukee).

The exhibition looked to expand upon the GenderFail mission by expanding the connections between queer and trans people and people of color creating zines, artist books, and other types of printed matter. The show displayed each publication as an art object in the gallery, along with prints and video work. The exhibition's installation was inspired by Printed Matter's *Queer Zine Exhibition* curated by AA Bronson for the LA Art Book Fair in 2014. The zines in *Queer Date* were hung on the wall with a piece of string that went through the binding, in order to engage the zines in similar ways as the display in the *Queer Zine Exhibition*. In a Hyperallergic feature about the *Queer Zine Exhibition*, Alicia Eler talked about queer zines as "self-published, serial publications with a 'queer spirit,' where the

hand of the artist/maker is clearly visible in the final product".⁵ The publications were oriented to highlight their materiality as art objects, rather than as printed matter being bought and sold at a zine or artist book fair.

One of the first GenderFail projects within our programming initiative was remembertheirname.info, a resource that displays information about all of the trans people who have been murdered since 2016. In 2016, twenty-eight trans people were killed in the United States,⁶ and that number was nearly matched in 2017.⁷ The stories began to awaken me to the reality of the horrible violence being enacted against trans people and people of color. With the introduction of the large number of bathroom bills and other anti-LGBTQIA legislation in 2016, it's important to reflect on those whom we have lost. The information about these deaths is mostly reported by news stations local to the areas in which each victim is murdered. These news organizations often misgender individuals and display the information of their deaths on websites that are plastered with advertisements. As a reaction to these seemingly unlimited accounts of misgendering,

⁵ Eler, Alicia. "Peeking into the LA Art Book Fair's Queer Zine Show." Hyperallergic, Hyperallergic, 6 Feb. 2014, hyperallergic.com/106609/peeking-into-the-la-art-book-fairs-queer-zine-show/.

⁶ The Advocate. "These Are the Trans People Killed in 2016." ADVOCATE, 14 Oct. 2016, www.advocate.com/transgender/2016/10/14/these-are-trans-people-killed-2016.

⁷ The Advocate. "These Are the Trans People Killed in 2017." www.advocate.com/transgender/2017/12/14/these-are-trans-people-killed-201701.

I created a website where people can go to remember trans people who have been murdered due to transphobia.

This resource creates a space to remember queer, trans, and gender non-conforming folks who have been taken from us, without having to deal with ads, mis-gendered news articles, and other distractions on news websites. Web-based projects are an easy way to widely share information, especially when most of these deaths are being filtered through online platforms and social media. Rememberthirname.info focuses on the importance of disseminating information in ways that look to honor these trans people who have been taken from the queer community.

This program was the starting point for conceptualizing what I want GenderFail to accomplish as an arts-based publishing practice. Providing information to queer folks plays an important role in my practice, as it helps to build up, support, and celebrate queer and trans people and people of color. One of the best ways to encourage change is to create content that gives people other reference points outside of dealing with the transphobic, homophobic, and white supremacist attitudes that have rapidly surfaced in conjunction with the election of Donald Trump. GenderFail is not a directly activist organization, but looks to build a platform to enable the creative projects of an expanded queer community.

Social Engagement and the GenderFail Awards Project

Starting in the summer of 2017, I began to conceptualize GenderFail as a Socially Engaged Art (SEA) Publishing Project. My first project that directly aims to embody the SEA categorization is the GenderFail Awards Project. The Genderfail Awards Project highlights the work of queer individuals by fostering a network of support that reacts to the instability of the current political climate. I initiated the program by mailing an awards letter and ribbon to LGBTQIA people from my personal network to acknowledge personal accomplishments in their daily lives. This first awards cycle was limited to 100 awards and includes an individualized statement addressing the personal accomplishments of everyone involved in the project. I started by acknowledging queer folks from my own life, but the project expanded to include friends of friends and my personal inspirations.

Each person who receives an award is invited to send a photo response of themselves interacting with the award ribbon sent with the letter, or to photograph something else that represents themselves. Through these photographs, I wished to create a visual record of individuals who embody the attitudes that were described in the letter, celebrating the diversity of the queer and trans body. The award was sent as an invitation

that aimed to create future dialogues, discussions, and prompts centered on acknowledging the labor that queer people do on a daily basis. Each person could interpret the photo prompt in any way they wanted. Below is the statement included with each awards letter that was sent to everyone involved in the project:

As a recipient of this award, you embody the characteristics that look to queer utopian futurities. To be able to thrive in our current administration, you provide a moment of hope that helps other LGBTQIA+ folks navigate the oppressive nature of heteropatriarchy. With this award, enter into the world knowing that you cannot be silenced and that your voice is powerful, unique, and undefinable. Together we can continue to foster voices that reinforce the power of our queer communities through conversations, support, and intersectionality.

Each ribbon award that accompanied the letter stated "Signaling a Refusal of Mastery and an Insistence on Processing and Becoming".⁸ The language used in the award is a quote by José Esteban Muñoz from his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. This phrase was then printed on the awards ribbon, a form that is most commonly used in primary school competitions or in rural United States county fairs. The use of this ribbon looked to disseminate such a form in communities outside of where it normally appears. The award was conceived as subverting the notion of the 'award' itself, identifying it as a symbol of inclusiveness rather than mastery to promote a system

⁸ Muñoz, Jose Esteban. *Cruising Utopia the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York University Press, 2009.

of support among the LGBTQIA community. I wanted to create a symbol that could be used to acknowledge queer and trans people in a way that isn't always permitted by heteronormative culture.

One of main goals of the GenderFail Awards Project was to build up queer folks and encourage them as they deal with transphobia and homophobia in Trump's America. Each person who sent a photo response was mailed a letter asking them what they think the queer voice is today. This prompt was inspired by the 2010 *Queer Voice* exhibition catalogue produced by Ingrid Schaffner at The Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. For the catalogue, Schaffner asked artists, curators, and writers from her personal network to respond to her question, "What is the queer voice?" Since 2010, queerness has shifted, changed, and become visible in ways that have benefited some queer folks, but have left others behind. In the redeployment of this prompt, I wanted to ask a variety of queer folks inside and outside of the contemporary art world to define the queer voice.

In framing this project as a socially engaged work, it was important to invite various authors. In his book *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, Pablo Helguera said that "socially engaged art almost by definition is dependent on the involvement of

others besides the instigator of the artwork".⁹ Without the involvement of other voices in the project, the work itself is meaningless. As the instigator of the work, I provided the framework to expand upon the perspectives of others while framing it within the mission of GenderFail. This project is not about myself, but rather is about providing a platform for the voices of others to be highlighted and celebrated. Although the project is inherently based upon my own connections and relationships with most everyone involved, I wish to do this project again in additional awards cycles. In many ways the GenderFail Awards Project is at the beginning stages of its articulation as an SEA project.

The GenderFail Archive Project

Since 2017, I have been running the GenderFail Archive Project (GAP), a socially engaged work that looks at archiving as a social activity. The project started out of my desire to share the publications in my personal library and give a platform to the publications that I cherish. Through this initiative I facilitated a socially engaged experiment on archiving, one that is fueled by outside interpretations on a

⁹ Helguera, Pablo. *Education for Socially Engaged Art: a Materials and Techniques Handbook*. Jorge Pinto Books, 2011.

personal collection of art-focused publications. I allowed myself the freedom to create my own systems of classification without being tied to any standardized system of archiving.

The GenderFail Archive Project invites artists, curators, librarians, activists, and other engaged publics to pick a selection of titles from our collection of art books, zines and other publications. Books are only included in the GenderFail Archive once they are selected by invited people, groups, or collectives. The project looks to create a socially-constructed archive and to conceive creative solutions to display mechanisms that hold artist-made publications. Because the GenderFail Archive brings outside perspectives to the collection, the collaborative method by which the publications are archived forms the main aspect of the project. Pulling in outside participants allows for collaborative decision-making that filters the content through many different perspectives. This project in particular has been heavily influenced by artist-run publishing, curatorial projects, and libraries, including: Paul Chan's Badlands Unlimited, Ulises Carrión's Other Books and So, Lauren Mackler's Public Fiction, Garden Library for Refugees and Migrant Workers in Tel Aviv, Salon für Kunstbuch in Austria, The Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, and Printed Matter in New York City.

The GenderFail Archive is incomprehensive, small, and by most standards does not warrant being called an archive. These collections of books are not rare and can be found in most places where artists' books are sold; at zine fests around the United States or on publishers' websites online. The GenderFail Archive might not actually be an archive at all, but something else that I haven't been able to name or fully explain yet. In this way, the typical connotations of the word 'archive' are important to the context of the project

When audiences are confronted with the GenderFail Archive, they are invited to regard these objects as being valuable; a value that comes from their content, rather than their monetary value. The conflation of my use of the word *archive* disrupts typical associations that one might have with other archives. My hope for using a word like *archive* is to inspire other people to be able to regard their own personal collections as being special, important, and unique enough to also be regarded as archivable. This project is the performance of a personal artist's library, to activate it as something more than it really is. I have no formal training as an archivist or librarian, yet I allow myself the agency to present myself as holding each of these occupations.

In the development of this project I looked to other artists who use archiving in their practices, including Paul

Soulellis's *Library of the Printed Web*. The project is "a collection of works by artists who use screen capture, image grab, site scrape and search query to create printed matter from content found on the web".¹⁰ Soulellis looks at experimental forms of publishing that bring together digital and analog processes of archiving web-sourced content. When MoMA bought the archive for their collection, they compiled the complete information and displayed it using Google Sheets to include all the archived information available online. In the GenderFail Archive Project, I decided to also use Google Sheets as a way to display the information on an open-source platform, presented on genderfailarchiveproject.com. *Library of the Printed Web* became my main reference point for how an experimental artist-based archiving practice can take form.

The GenderFail Archive Project employs an intersectional archiving process that allows multiple authors to decide what becomes archived, digitized, and presented. Invited collaborators generally spend anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour and a half selecting publications during a studio visit to the GenderFail library. They most often make selections without any prior knowledge of the collection, thus, curiosity becomes the driving force for the selection process. This process of selection is meant to mirror the experiences that people have at

¹⁰ Soulellis, Paul. "Library of the Printed Web." *Library of the Printed Web*, soulellis.com/projects/library/.

art book fairs, artist-run bookstores, and other places where the dissemination of artist-made publications happens.

Many of the selections for the library are made with the audience in mind, and aim to present inquiry into an expanded field of issues in order to reflect an intersectional approach to collecting. Until these publications are selected by collaborators with the GenderFail Archive Project, they remain in the personal library of GenderFail. Thus, the function of how publications are archived is the main aspect of the project. These outside collaborations create a structure in which content is filtered by two different authors. The collaborators with the GenderFail Archive Project are able to pick publications that are relevant to their personal experience, interests, or subject position. It also gives them the opportunity to pick publications that allow them to learn more about issues that don't directly affect themselves. In final sentence of *NO-ISBN - The An-Archive as Subject*, an essay by Gabrielle Crum in the book *NO-ISBN* by Salon für Kunstbuch she states:

In this sense, No-ISBN is not an archive to be completed, but a fragmented proposal of such resistive and frequently curbed voices and singularities, which offer strategies of decentralization and disobedience to which we should grant our attention: to their knowledges, to the kind of contract they are seeking.¹¹

¹¹ Cella, Bernhard, et al. *NO-ISBN: on Self-Publishing*. Salon Fur Kunstbuch, 2017

The type of knowledge that is being sought by the GenderFail Archive project is that of what intersectional formulations come from inviting external curators and from the selected content itself. A few of the GenderFail library's titles that reflect this intersectional approach include *Men Unlearning Rape* by Twinky Pandam, *Black Anarchism* by Ashanti Alston, *Culture Color Theory* edited by Alanna Reeves, *Survivance Indigenous Poesis Vol.1-3* by Radical Indigenous Survivance & Empowerment, *An Immigrant Story* by Nevena Džamonja and *Fuck Your Racist Prisons, Duck Your Racist Nation: Immigration Detention and The Prison-Industrial Complex* by EPIC. These selected titles address rape culture, intersectional anarchism, Asian dysphoria, Indigenous issues, immigrant rights, racism, and the prison industrial complex.

One of the first groups invited to pick publications was the Virginia-based activist group, the Virginia River Healers. Their mission states, "The Virginia River Healers are a regionalist water rights organization that aim to restore and protect the water quality of Virginia".¹² Their selections included titles that reflect the mission of their group including *Bodies of Water, a Field Guide and Audio Companion* by Ethan Krause and *Earth First Means Social War: Being an Anti-Capitalist Ecological Social Force* released by After The Fall

¹² "Mission.," River Healers, www.riverhealers.us/virginia-mission.

Press and Disruption. These selections fall in line with subject matter that one would expect this activist group to pick. Their other selections, such as the *Lesbian Avenger Handbook: A Handy Guide to Homemade Revolution* by The Lesbian Avenger Documentary Project and *My Wet Hot Drone Summer* by Lex Brown, are publications that communicate a more intersectional approach to revolutionary actions outside of strictly environmental issues. The group's selections show parallels between revolutionary tactics such as The Lesbian Avenger's section on planning an action - which can help inspire tactics for organization - that could then be applied to environmental activism.

Selections by groups like the Virginia River Healers activate the collection in ways that I wouldn't be able to do alone. Each selection expresses a different interpretation of the collection, which becomes central to the way these publications are being archived and presented. Each collaborator becomes a temporary librarian, helping to create a categorization for their selected titles. Anna-Sophie Springer describes the librarian as someone who "builds a rationalist system of collections and the user who accesses this structure to create something that will ultimately live outside the library".¹³ Instead of having one person controlling the structure of the library, various different librarians are able

¹³ Springer, Anna-Sophie, et al. *Fantasies of the Library*. K. Verlag, 2015.

to help provide a plethora of perspectives that continually redefine how the GenderFail library can provide content for various types of publics. The GenderFail library itself is an undefined collection of publications that look to foster engagement for various publics. These selections help to categorize the library by providing moments of articulation that are framed with an individualized public in mind.

The GenderFail library collection itself is made up of a large number of zines expressing vastly different interpretations of styles of zinemaking; zines in the collection range from unstapled and photocopied to perfectly cut and neatly folded. Each style of presentation reflects a unique attribute that communicates a varying set of ideologies. Works made with less emphasis on craft reflect a sense of urgency that frequently ties into the subject matter presented in the work. As a particular example, *Let's Talk About Content Baby* by The Down There Health Collective is an unstapled zine that is made in the traditional photocopied zine aesthetic. The "matter-of-fact" style, utilizing a handmade cut and paste technique, puts an emphasis on the content being discussed over the design quality of the zine.

At the other end of the spectrum are zine interpretations which put an emphasis on aesthetic concerns over content. *IS THIS NEGATIVE OR POSITIVE?* (2016), a publication by then first-

year visual communications MFA cohort Junyun Chen, Minjee Jeon, Tanruk Pairoj-Boriboon, Stephen Parks, and Drew Sisk, presents an investigation into the concept of the library led to a broader conversation about order and chaos. This zine's emphasis on design places it in a category of artist book as well as zine. This work was risograph printed, a style of printing that has been growing in popularity and is increasingly used by artists and designers. Though its emphasis on design is distinctly different from the urgency of the cut-and-paste technique of other zines, "IS THIS NEGATIVE OR POSITIVE?" invests itself in ethical concerns regarding accessibility through its use of risograph printing as a self-publishing technique.

Both styles of zinemaking share a level of accessibility that is built into the medium. These zines are both self-published, in one case by an activist group and in another by an MFA program, and do not need to wait to be published by an outside source. The ability to self-publish content with access to either a photocopier or risograph machine is one of the most valuable aspects of the medium. Accessibility and the "do-it-yourself" mentality is one of the main reasons why the GenderFail library puts an emphasis on zine collection over hardcover books. The ability to provide a platform, in part, for self-made publications through the GenderFail Archive Project is

one of the driving forces behind why GenderFail collects and promotes zine culture.

The other facet to the project is the body of collaborative sculptural displays that are presented with the GenderFail archive in a mobile presentation. When first conceiving this aspect of the project I knew that collaboration would be necessary to get the complexity of work required for the displays. The sculptural book displays created represent each artist invited to be a part of the project. Such collaborations are a direct result of my lack of experience as an object maker, which opens up the opportunity to work with other artists who have each contributed a unique set of skills to the project. So far, artists Colin Klockner, Hallie McNeill, Evan Galbicka, Jordan Loepky-Kolesnik, Raul De Lara and Grace Whiteside have been invited to create sculptural displays for the GenderFail Archive Project. Each of these artists have been selected by GenderFail because of their work's potential to be translated into designed objects that can help support artist-made publications. In each collaboration, artists are prompted to make a sculpture that can be used to display books from the GenderFail Archive. These sculptural displays are a reflection of each artist's personal aesthetic, which adds a variety of forms to the sculptural displays for the archive. Each collaboration is mediated through conversations that happen

throughout the process of the display's creation. The collaborations introduce a complexity to the project that I would not achieve by making these displays myself. The sculptures, which employ various types of materials including glass, wood, steel, epoxy, foam, and other materials, allow for a queer perspective of what a bookshelf can be.

One of the sculptural displays, *Dead Planet Cookbook Holder*, created by artist Raul de Lara in collaboration with GenderFail, was made specifically for Pallavi Sen's publication. In our collaboration, I reached out to de Lara and invited him to make a cookbook holder specifically for that publication. I contacted de Lara for this project in particular because of the interesting way that he handles and creates objects made out of wood. The sculptural display includes characteristics from a previous body of work in which Lara was making tongues made out of wood. The resulting sculptural display features two wooden red tongues holding open three books so that a viewer can work on three separate recipes from Sen's publication. In a text discussing the work of artist Ulises Carrión, James Langdon states, "the relation between a text and its container must be integral to the original conception of the book: the negotiation of this relationship must be of primary concern for both the makers and user of books."¹⁴ *Dead Planet Cookbook Holder* is an

¹⁴ Langdon, James. BOOK. Eastside Projects, 2010.

experiment in creating a sculptural display that is particular to one GenderFail publication while simultaneously coming up with a creative interpretation of a cookbook holder.

In 2018, the GenderFail Archive Project was invited to be a part of Past and Future Fictions at MoMA PS1, a Sunday Sessions event hosted by Art+Feminism that brings together projects and organizations whose missions focus on radical archiving. Since the project itself is a nomadic library, GenderFail set up a temporary mobile reading space in the VW Dome for the event. This event celebrated the various different archiving projects participating, which allowed for dialogues between the invited participants. One of the visitors to the event shared with me that they had read 80 pages of one of the publications selected for the GenderFail Archive. This statement became a testament to what the GenderFail Archive Project is all about: providing a unique reading experience for visitors to become enthralled in the action of reading and engage with artist-conceived publications.

While the project was on display at Sediment Arts in Richmond, Virginia, GenderFail was invited to host a panel discussion in conjunction with the month-long exhibition. *Publishing as a Site for Cultural Production* focused on the multiple uses of "printed matter" engaged by the panelists, discussing each of the invited panelists' approaches to

publishing, dissemination, and using the book as a curatorial platform. Since GenderFail is predicated on collaboration, I invited three Richmond-based artists, Nicole Killian, Lauren Thorson and Nontsikelelo Mutiti. The panel discussed the role of collaboration in each panelist's ongoing projects, including Killian's publication *Issues*, Thorson's project *Margin*, and Mutiti's independent digital archive *Reading Zimbabwe*. Each of these works are produced remotely, involving collaborators from across the United States and abroad.

At the end of the panel during the Q&A, one of the audience members asked how each of us frames the concept of cultural production in our practices. Below is an excerpt of Mutiti's response. She states:

A library is thinking of a place where people are coming to deposit content and not necessarily taking it out. These terms- they are now in fashion, and I think it's great to hear people define them for their own selves. I also want to add that making certain kinds of content visible, and not necessarily normalizing it, is important. There is a way that - because our project is called *Reading Zimbabwe* - it becomes kind of ghettoized as being just for those Zimbabweans in Harare. I am working to also elevate the work and to make sure that people understand that this is international; we are international people, we are not in a little dark corner and that it's for the dark corner people. This project is hopefully going to challenge how people document literature, and this is a pattern that anyone from any space can use. How can this knowledge be challenging these notions of

censorship, or what is being hidden, or what has not been made yet, and why?

 Mutiti's response resonates with one of the goals of the GenderFail Archive Project; it addresses making a personal collection visible outside of just a concentrated art publishing context. The future of the project will focus on bringing the archive to places where artist-made publications, especially by queer, non-binary and trans artists, and artists of color, are not readily available. The GenderFail Archive Project will seek out temporary reading intervention in communities that could benefit from having access to the type of content reflected in our collection. The GenderFail Archive is also going to start collaborating with other people's personal collections to expand upon the idea of a publically-conceived archive. My hope is that this project inspires people to excavate their own personal archives to uncover the agency that already exists in their own built experiences.

On Protest Signs and Performative Type

The election of Donald Trump brought the reminder that public spaces are not safe spaces for bodies that are not heterosexual, cisgender, or white. The people who voted for Donald Trump have made it clear through their acts of counter-protest that they support ideologies that promote xenophobia, racism, transphobia, and other forms of oppression that intersect with the rhetoric of white supremacy. My realization of the emerging agency of the alt-right, white supremacists, and other fascist hate groups has empowered me to create content that works to build up those people affected.

The forms of protest that have emerged since the election have been inspiring: the mobilization of high school students fighting against the presence of guns in their schools, people taking to the streets to protest the NRA, the countless American citizens coming together in support of immigrant rights and in protest against the end of DACA, the teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona who've walked off their jobs in support of fair pay and better educational funding. These protests are illustrations of collective forms of dissent in public spaces, which fall under the definition of the political as described by Hannah Arendt.

Hannah Arendt defines the political as “any action that is performed in public,” a fitting definition to the actions of protest listed above. Although these forms of protest are important, I find this distinction to be filtered by an ableist lens of political participation. In *Sick Women Theory*, Johanna Hedva responds to Arendt’s definition of the political by stating, “If being present in public is what is required to be political, then whole swatches of the population can be deemed a-political - simply because they are not physically able to get their bodies into the street”.¹⁵

In response to Arendt’s definition of the political, I think it’s important to share my own. For me, the political is showing empathy, perspective, acknowledgment, or support that coalesces with intention. In this climate of visible public forms of dissent, it’s important to find other sites of resistance that manifest outside of the visible public area. Those of us who are not always able to be present at public protests find other ways to enact forms of protest that may seem quiet, unimportant, or not “aggressive enough.” I have myself been shamed by people in the past for not going to protest events like the Women’s March whilst making work that involves queer protest signs. This person didn’t take into account the reasons why I would choose to not attend this event, one of them

¹⁵ Hedva, Johanna. “Sick Woman Theory.” Mask Magazine, maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory.

being my bipolar depression and anxiety that often makes it difficult for me to travel or deal with large crowds of people.

Public displays of protest influence my deployment of protest signs in my practice, but I look to create different articulations of these accepted notions of resistance and dissent. It is important to identify other acts of resistance that work in tandem to public forms of protest. As an artist, I am interested in looking at the history of queer resistance from the gay liberation movement to identity issues that have continued to affect queer people. The photographs of protest cited in my work act as a boundless form of strength that fuels my investigation into alternative sites of resistance. The protest in my work focuses on supporting queer, non-binary, and trans people to help fuel the spirit of future acts of resistance against the acts of oppression inflicted on our bodies.

The morning after the election of Donald Trump, I was sitting in my studio reflecting on ways that I was referring to protest culture in my practice. In my practice until that point, I had been appropriating the aesthetics of protest signage used during the early gay liberation movement from the 1970's through the 1990's. I was copying images of found protest signage by hand-painting the imagery on primed canvas, which focused on the action of sign painting itself. While looking through my

personal archive of protest sign imagery one day, I found an image from the 1970's featuring a group of gay men holding a sign that said "OUR FIGHT HAS JUST BEGUN".

I spent the rest of that day recreating my own version of that sign, incorporating the style of lettering used in the original. The sign that I created added the words "AGAIN AND AGAIN" to show the drawn-out nature of the struggle for queer liberation. That work became symbolic of a shift in my practice, in which I was finding ways to encourage other queer folks to utilize the agency we all share. *OUR FIGHT HAS JUST BEGUN AGAIN AND AGAIN* looked to expand upon queer histories of protest by signaling to the past as a way of finding strength within the present. The struggles for equality that queer, trans, and non-binary people face today are directly linked to the gay liberation movement. In my work I looked to these past movements to find inspiration for strategies of deploying resistance in contemporary society, which merge themselves with other struggles against dominant culture.

The use of signage in my work looks to question the authorship surrounding the gay liberation movement. The early gay liberation movement was largely led by white gay men, and the movement's focus reflected the goals and aims of a gay neoliberal agenda. This gay neoliberal agenda takes place in some privileged gay men's "individual right to be free from

state interference in exchange for and as long as that individual occupies a certain relationship to privilege".¹⁶ The protest sign paintings that I created in 2016 point to the pervasiveness of white gay male subjectivity in the early gay liberation movement. Two works in that series, *Fag-got #1* and *Fag-got #2*, reclaimed the imagery of two separate protest signs depicting the reclaimed use of the word 'faggot.' The paintings focused on the separation between the words 'fag' and 'got'. By reclaiming the use of the word 'faggot,' I wished to reflect on the way that white cisgendered homosexual bodies have taken up space in the gay liberation movement. In the archives that I've seen of protest activity during the gay liberation movement, white men have dominated the images. Using signage became an opening for my critique of the mainstream LGBT movement's focus on issues faced by white cisgender gay men in particular, instead of focusing on other issues that affect trans people and people of color.

When looking at my archive of protest documentation, I was struck by the qualities of the letters dictated on the protest signs. The vernacular hand lettering of these signs is an important characteristic to these acts of protest because of the

¹⁶ Weiss, Margot. "Gay Shame and BDSM Pride: Neoliberalism, Privacy, and Sexual Politics." *Radical History Review*, Duke University Press, 1 Jan. 2008, read.dukeupress.edu/radical-history-review/article-abstract/2008/100/87/22104/Gay-Shame-and-BDSM-Pride-Neoliberalism-Privacy-and.

way that it directly communicates the residue of political activity. This initiated my interest in vernacular typography, which is defined by Molly B. Woodward as “the found lettering that exists in the built environment and surrounds us every day”.¹⁷ The unique quality of hand-lettered signage reflects the urgency by which the objects were created for protest. Each protest sign photographed was crystallized in that moment to become emblematic of a precise moment in time. I wished to use the vernacular type extracted from the signs to expand upon that particular moment of protest.

While finding and collecting vernacular typography for my studio practice, I started an archive of letters sourced from various signs. One sign in particular, “Mother Nature is a Lesbian,” struck me due to the expressive nature of the lettering and the power behind what the sign stated. The sign was created by Betty Lane at the Christopher Street Gay Liberation event in March of 1974. When I first came across the sign, I was struck by its hand lettering as much as I was struck by the message displayed. Using the found letters from the sign’s phrase “Mother Nature is a Lesbian” as a starting point, I created a full typeset. The typeset became a collaboration between myself and the woman holding the sign in the photograph. The font enables the possibility of extending a moment of

¹⁷ Moss, Jeremiah. “Vernacular Typography.” Jeremiah' Vanishing New York, vanishingnewyork.blogspot.com/2012/02/vernacular-typography.html.

protest outside of the urgency of the event to activate it in a way that it was never imagined. The typeface was created to be used for acts of future protest. It is an open-source file, and though its intended use is for queer people and people of color, I acknowledge that I have no control over who ultimately chooses to use it.

Following the creation of the font, I have employed it in various text works that intersect with protest, such as a body of prints that incorporate other statements inspired by the original sign. The paper used to create the work was donated to me by my close friend, artist Maria Tínavaut. The paper had residual marks from its previous use, which lent a collaborative and personal nature to the prints and gave them an additional layer of aesthetic consideration. The resulting fifteen unique risograph prints are personal declarations that give insight into my personal ethics. The works were not meant to be considered protest signs, but to act as supportive statements used in a realm of protest. The prints were made within 48 hours, so that the statements would be created within a state of urgency. This body of work, like other works that I make that are inspired by protest events, is not meant to be an act of protest itself. Rather, the statements are used to show solidarity and to help people feel supported in this unstable political climate.

After these fifteen unique prints were created, I furthered this investigation and created one final statement inspired by this series. The statement "Radical Softness as a Boundless Form of Resistance" resulted from my attempt to locate a level of specificity in my own language that had the type of resonance that first attracted me to the "Mother Nature is a Lesbian" protest sign. The phrase "radical softness as a boundless form of resistance" spoke to a type of resistance that is performed quietly, daily, and often by many queer people like myself. Since creating this statement I have been trying to work out its exact meaning. A radical softness is something that doesn't always get voiced or enacted; it is an internal feeling that drives how we carry ourselves in the world. This softness is the tenderness of our identities that gives us strength in are willingness to survive. This softness is the result of the beauty of our friendships, support systems, or chosen families. This softness - which can express unapologetically - is a source of strength that can never be taken away from us, even in death. I believe in a radical softness that I try to enact as often as I feel able, allowing myself the opportunity to embrace the vulnerability in myself as a boundless source of strength.

During the fall semester of 2017, I took a graduate workshop class on pedagogy with assistant professor Nicole Killian. In this class we were asked to do a collaborative

project centered on performing pedagogy. Taylor Stewart, one of the designers in the class, proposed that we make a series of posters in support of the adjuncts organizing for fair pay at VCUarts. The "Mother Nature is a Lesbian" font was used in the design for one of the posters in the series. In their mission statement, VCU Adjuncts Organizing for Fair Pay states "VCUarts AAFP seeks equitable and fair pay for all adjunct faculty members at VCUarts".¹⁸ The design project culminated in eight unique posters, which the class printed on my risograph machine. The posters were installed in the Pollak building and given out at the VCUarts Adjuncts for Fair Pay rally and petition drop on December 9th, 2017.

Seeing our posters deployed in an action of protest reminded me of the power of a designed object. In my poster, the "Mother Nature is a Lesbian" typeface used in context with regular design fonts created a greater activation for both typefaces. Due to the rigid nature of the font, its use is more effective when it is displayed with other fonts, which in this instance was Courier Prime. The friction between the two design elements causes the viewer to slow down and digest the words being displayed. My typeface is also used as a way to highlight certain words and bring attention to important aspects of the information being communicated. Design functionality, as it is

¹⁸ "Mission." VCU Adjuncts for Fair Pay, adjunctsforfairpay.com/mission.

typically understood, was not the main goal for this typeface. Since it was designed from the hand lettering of a protest sign, its goal is to disrupt the notion of what a functional typeface can be. In a certain sense, I wished to throw a wrench into what is considered to be functional, and what functionality looks like.

After using this statement in service of the Adjuncts for Fair Pay rally, I decided it was time to retire my use of the typeface. I feel that I have done as much as I can with it, and will continue to have it available as an open-source typeface for other queer people who might find a use for it. Inspired by that previous gesture of creating a typeface based off of a protest sign from the gay liberation movement, I created another typeset based off of two additional protest signs. The typeset, named after the statements "I am your worst fear, I am your best fantasy" and "First gay americans," considers uppercase letters as not having any hierarchical importance over lowercase letters. Each set of characters is unique and portrays two different moments of protest from the early days of the gay liberation movement.

These typesets are a practice in queer occupation. As a type designer, my goals are not to make a perfectly designed typeset, but to look at any given project as a conceptual gesture that employs design in the realization of the idea. In

my temporary occupation as an amateur type designer, my value system for my success is different than that of other graphic designers. My typefaces are clunky, close, and poorly designed, and come from the vernacular type of hand-lettered protest signs. These typefaces are crude, unevenly spaced, and not very user-friendly compared to other typesets that follow typical conventions of type design; a knowledge that I actually do not have. My typesets have the most basic character systems, limited to the A-Z alphabet, numbers, and a few common symbols such as the question mark, exclamation point, and period. My interest lies in the hand-lettering done by queer people protesting during the early days of the gay liberation movement, a certain romanticization of the ethos of the Stonewall Riots. I continue this ongoing body of work to extend a moment of protest past a singular event. The action of taking hand lettering from a protest sign and formatting it into a usable typeset exists outside of the typical value systems that define a successfully-designed typeset. In my role as a queer amateur type designer, I look to present these messy, queer letter forms as a conceptual gesture in mapping a lived queer history.

As designed objects, my typefaces reveal themselves when placed next to "well-designed" typesets by calling attention to the perfectly-designed typesets' uniformity. I allow myself the freedom to take risks without the weight of the history of type

design on my shoulders, looking instead to deal with the conceptual weight of gay protest history. I am aware that this lack of knowledge, skill, and historical references puts me in a place of vulnerability when I intersect with educated type designers. Therefore it's important as an amateur type designer for me to have conversations with type designers in the field in which I am claiming space. In a conversation about my typefaces, Richmond-based type designer Kelsey Elder stated:

Leveraging the authority afforded to language by typographic form, Suemnicht's typefaces pull dissenting letterforms and narratives from queer history into contemporary context. Through the act of digitization, the work simultaneously functions as an archive as well as a platform of visibility for voices largely excluded from the field in which the work is positioned. Formally 'nice,' the letterforms transcend static interpretation when in context of the language present on their specimens and Suemnicht's open source distribution model. The letterforms become a site of significance. The typeface a metaphor. The publishing model and access to the typefaces, an act of dissent. The work is unapologetic to its trespasses, and pushes against hegemonic aesthetics and values. By employing aspects of lived experience and culture which are external to the typographic field itself, Suemnicht importantly exposes the lack of divergent narratives currently present while simultaneously providing a platform for them.

In my conversations with Elder, I was made aware of the lack of queer voices in the type community at large. These conversations enlightened me to the ways that my "messy" typeset has an unintended function as a potential site of agency for other queer designers in the "perfectly" designed world of typesets made overwhelmingly by cisgender white men. In my

future explorations of type design and protest, I will further investigate forms of dissent that highlight rigid systems of control which look to silence the queer messes that I hope to promote.

This is Not Another Photo of a Gay Cisgender White Man

This is an essay about the depiction of the gay male form in contemporary art. This manifesto is a call for an expanded queer aesthetics that puts as much emphasis on intersectionality as it does on the sexualized gay male form. This collection of thoughts or dissatisfactions questions the proliferation of images that perpetuate a body type that does not reflect the complexity of a queer body in flux.

During the gay liberation movement, showing the body of a sexualized, white, cis, gay male was a powerful symbol in a homophobic society. Symbols of healthy, fit, gay men, especially in contrast to media images of gay men wasting away because of the AIDS epidemic, were an example of survival. What do these images produce now, in a cultural landscape where fit, gay, cis men - especially those with white privilege and economic privilege - have forms of access that trans people, non-binary people and queer people of color do not?

Sex sells. These images of fit gay cis white men are everywhere. Contemporary queer photography is flooded with these "idealized" images of white gay bodies.¹⁹ These

¹⁹ This is in no way meant to be anti sex-positive. My argument here is for a more critical and thoughtful depiction of queer bodies. Queer art is flooded with one-dimensional representations that flatten the complexity of what a queer body is, and what it can be.

artists/photographers have celebrated the gay male form and given it a visibility akin to its straight counterparts' photographs of idealized white women. These images have overpopulated queer art production to a point where a large amount of space is being taken up to accommodate them. But what do these images communicate to society at large? And what do they tell the queer community? When bodies do not fit into this conception of what a queer body looks like, are they unworthy of representation? While the non-gay world (dominant culture) continues to digest this normalized white gay male body, how do trans bodies, fat femme bodies, and non-binary bodies fit into these fixed narratives of the queer body?

Queer bodies are often in transition between what they are and what they wish they could be. A queer body is fluid, changing, and imperfect.²⁰ I don't believe there is any one model, type, or description of what a normal queer body looks like. A body can be much more than its physical form; it's a thought, an aspiration, a futurity, a not-quite-there-yet. A queer body isn't always fully realized, and a photograph can be deceiving to its actual and intended form. But, like climbing your way out of a deep depression, there are moments when you feel at home in a body, while tomorrow might not feel exactly

²⁰ "Imperfect" in relation to dominant culture does not in any way mean bad, undesirable, or damaged. To be imperfect in a system of beauty standards that are transphobic, ableist, fat-phobic, racist, and heterosexist is a really powerful gesture.

that comfortable. A queer body doesn't have a final form, or at least not exactly in the same way that a "fit cisgendered white gay male" or "gym rat" might consider their bodies to be nearing a socially-constructed conception of beauty.²¹

Through writing, the queer body can incite the fluidity of one's imagination to expand upon a complexity that could never be fully understood from a single image. In an interview with Che Gossett, Juliana Huxtable states "to me, writing and performance are really immediate ways to dictate the terms on which I'm establishing my own history".²² A sole photograph traps a queer subjectivity in a suspended moment of fixity, creating a need for a written and spoken articulation to fill in the information that is left unknown from an image alone.

I look to language to fill the gaps that are created within a queer body's fluidity between what it is and what it can be. Words can help to express what our bodies do not have the ability, privilege, or mental capacity to be, yet. In an interview about Badlands Unlimited's New Lovers Series of erotic novels, Paul Chan stated, "I'm tapped out. I'm done. The drugs

²¹ This is not to say or assume that those who are perceived to have "perfect bodies" do not suffer from body positivity issues. This is meant to express that the ideal of being the ultimate symbol of perfection is damaging to those who suffer from society's pursuit of "the perfect body." This commentary speaks to society at large, rather than taking a focus on the personal pursuit of one's own conception of what their ideal body looks like.

²² Gossett, Che A. and Juliana Huxtable. "Existing In The World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility." Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility. The MIT Press, 2017.

don't work, but the words still do. That's the strange thing".²³ He made these comments regarding the ways that our culture is visually tapped out on photographic depictions of the erotic. In referring to Chan's statement, I don't mean for this text to limit my exploration of what a gay or queer body communicates by focusing solely on its connotations of "porn" or "sex." Rather, I seek to illustrate the power that language has to put into words an intensity that a photograph wouldn't be able to do on its own. Language's ability to speak to what a body can't say on its own is not only powerful, but it destabilizes a public rhetoric which uses stereotypes to limit what a body can represent.

Returning to the fit cisgender gay male body, giving context to what these images are doing is necessary. I want to hear from the queer artists, photographers, and curators who decide to perpetuate these idealizations. What do they feel these images communicate? I don't feel that an image can speak for itself; not these images. These images need more context, intention, and purpose. On social media platforms like Instagram, queer photography is dominated by images of fit cisgender white gay men. These photographs populate Instagram feeds like my own, yet on the same feed they are contrasted by

²³ Krasinski, Jennifer. "New Lovers: An Interview with Paul Chan." *The Paris Review*, 10 Mar. 2015, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/03/10/new-lovers-an-interview-with-paul-chan/.

queer content that faces the reality of most of the queer population. What does the perpetuation of images of gay white men communicate in a political climate where trans women of color are being killed at an alarming rate.²⁴ Do these images advocate at all for queer people who are not cisgender, white and "fit"?

I am not claiming that these images are trying to be anything but what they are; pictures of "sexy" gay men being taken by other "sexy" gay men. I am, rather, pushing a call for more visibility for queer artistic expression that does not focus on these socially-accepted bodies. This type of work does exist²⁵ and there are many queer, trans and non-binary artists doing work that makes space for the expanded queer expression that I am so desperate for. Although this queer content does push these conversations past the cisgendered white gay male body, the creation of this type of politicized work is put upon those who are most affected by our racist, sexist and fat-phobic society. What is the responsibility for those artists who have white privilege, economic privilege, and class privilege to use

²⁴ In 2016, twenty-eight trans people were killed in the United States , and that number was nearly matched in 2017.

²⁵ This is a non-comprehensive list of LGBTQIA artists and photographers that I feel are depicting the queer, trans and non-binary body in an expanded way: Wu Tsang, Reina Gossett, A.L. Steiner, Troy Michie, Zackary Drucker, Catherine Opie, A.K. Burns, Jacolby Satterwhite, Juliana Huxtable, K8 Hardy, Chris E. Vargas, Jess T. Dugan, and Community Action Center (A.L.Steiner and A.K. Burns).

their platform to advocate for issues that extend outside of their own subject position?

What I am calling for is queer accomplices,²⁶ people who make work that promotes an expanded queer subjectivity. A type of work that helps envision equity outside of a body type. A positioning of allyship that extends through the LGBTQIA community and doesn't try and keep the "old boys club" mentality; a mentality composed of a two-dimensional community with a sole focus on those who are socially attracted to others of their own sex. An allyship that addresses an intersectionality akin to a more radical definition of queerness,²⁷ one that exists in contrast to the aims of the mainstream gay community's focus on assimilating to the goals of straight culture. One that has no tolerance for gay artists, photographers, and creatives that don't look outside of their own privilege. One that distinguishes when work is merely an act

²⁶ A queer accomplice is a person who will put implicate themselves for another person, to support another when having oppression enacted in them.. A queer accomplice looks at the privilege that they have access to and uses it to leverage for others who do not. A queer accomplice is a co-conspirator in a crime against the crime of normalization. A queer accomplice acknowledges their privilege and actively does something about it.

²⁷ Here I think it's important to identify how I define what a queer identity is for myself. The way I formulate my queer identity is always in context with resistance as an action of refusal. A refusal of the LGBT movement's focus on politics that only benefit white cisgender men. A refusal of the limitation that results from the corporatization of queerness. A refusal of the perpetuation of queer aesthetics that value ableism, whiteness, and maleness as defining characteristics. A refusal against dodging accountability for even what seems to be the smallest act of oppression. Refusal as a continuing practice of discontent that forces you to confront the complacency of your privilege.

of oppression wearing the thinly-veiled mask of being "other".²⁸ One that does not perpetuate a type of lifestyle which ultimately becomes a form of white primacy.²⁹ I see no difference in the lifestyles of certain privileged gay cisgender white men who perpetuate sexism, entitlement, and exclusion. It's not only important, but necessary, for those with cisgender, white, and economic privilege to advocate for those who do not. Simply being gay doesn't shield you from being an oppressor if your actions mimic primacy, or "the fact of being primary, preeminent, or more important." These people who choose to be passive, indifferent, or silent in response to acts of violence towards queer and trans people and people of color are oppressors regardless of their sexual orientation.

²⁸ Being gay doesn't shield you from enforcing acts of oppression if you are complicit in racist, transphobic, fat phobic, and hyper-capitalist sentiments. Only photographing other privileged fit white cisgendered gay male bodies perpetuates an ideal that limits the reality of the queer body and reinforces a gay assimilationist position of power. Reinforcing this one body type reinforces the "pornified body"(This is a quote from *Testo Junkie* by Paul B. Preciado. The full quote reads "Until now, we've been aware of the direct relationship between the pornification of the body and the level of oppression. Throughout history, the most pornified bodies have been those of non-human animals, women and children, the racialized bodies of the slave, the bodies of young workers and the homosexual body.") that has limited queer subjects by perpetuating the sexualized "other" put upon queer bodies by the heteronormative world.

²⁹ In my original draft of this essay I used the term "white supremacy" instead of "white primacy." I feel that the definition of supremacy does apply to the point that I am illustrating in the text above. I am hesitant to use the term "white supremacy" for fear of excluding people from hearing my point. Supremacy is defined as "the state or condition of being superior to all others in authority, power, or status." This footnote is an alternative reading of an act of white supremacy.

On Whitewashing and Queer Resistance

One question that I continue to ask myself is how *queer* can be enacted rather than just proclaimed. The academization of *queer* keeps it in a place of inaction. Many people utilize queer subjectivities in their daily lives, by which "queerness" enacts itself in an inclusive intersectional way. For me, *queer* is a site of resistance. *Queer* has been used in so many different contexts, merging itself with the pursuit of capitalism (pinkwashing, gay pride, corporate endorsements), white gay male subjectivities (gay marriage, sexism, hyper-masculinity), and other pursuits that filter queerness through a white, cisgendered, privileged perspective. I am interested in a queer struggle that is not limited to a critique of gender and sexuality, but extends itself intersectionally to critique injustices towards other marginalized people.

Queer resistance can be defined in context with other struggles against dominant culture. Forms of oppression which include white supremacy, police brutality, capitalism, anti-environmentalism, rape culture, anti-immigrant rights perspectives, and other oppressors are situated within "normative" culture. "Normative" in this sense is any action that presents itself within the values of contemporary culture at large. For example, Donald Trump's endorsement of white

nationalists who protested in Charlottesville (through his proclamation that there are "good people on both sides"³⁰ normalizes the actions of white supremacists within dominant culture. This proclamation, made by one of the most powerful white, cisgender, heterosexual men in the world, gives a window into a worldview that some white, cisgender men and women view as acceptable. White supremacy, neo-fascism, and white nationalism are queer issues; any actions that normalize oppression are queer issues.

I was recently looking through my social media feed and saw an article from *out.com* titled *The 50 Biggest Homophobes of the Last 50 Years*, by Lucas Grindley. The first homophobe listed was "The police." Images depicting police brutality against queer people were paired with written commentary, where Grindley stated that "It might be hard to imagine now, with gay officers marching the pride parades and big-city squads having dedicated LGBT Liaisons".³¹ The Advocate wrote in 1973 that gay people had come to think of police "as their natural enemies".³² This statement summarizes the disjuncture between mainstream gay assimilation policies and anti-assimilated queer politics. The

³⁰ Gray, Rosie. "Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protesters: 'Some Very Fine People on Both Sides'." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 15 Aug. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/trump-defends-white-nationalist-protesters-some-very-fine-people-on-both-sides/537012/.

³¹ Grindley, Lucas. "The 50 Biggest Homophobes of the Last 50 Years." *ADVOCATE*, 9 May 2017, www.advocate.com/people/2016/6/21/50-biggest-homophobes-last-50-years#slide-1.

³² *Ibid.*

police have never been friendly to queer people of color, trans folks, or non-binary people, while police violence is something that privileged gay white men haven't had to deal with since the beginning of the gay liberation movement. Although Grindley's article mentions the history of homophobia among the police, it isolates their brutality as historical and does not give any insight on the current police brutality that queer folks face today. This post is just one example of how divided the LGBTQIA community is at large.

Stonewall, Exclusion, and the Corporatization of Gay Pride Events

The Stonewall riots, which have been recognized as the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement, were started as a result of police brutality against trans women of color, gay men, and other queer people. The riots were started by two trans women of color, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, who were largely ignored after these events due to the whitewashing in the early Gay Liberation movement. During the 1973 gay pride celebration in New York City, Sylvia Rivera had to fight her way on stage to give a speech after being pushed out of the movement. In her speech, Rivera denounced the liberal, white gay revolution and looked to an actual revolution where queer and

trans people of color were at the center of the movement. Rivera stated:

I've been trying to get up here ALL day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail! That write me every motherfuckin' week and ask for your help. And you all don't do a goddamn thing for them. Have you ever been beaten up? And raped? And jailed?" She continues, "I have been beaten, I have had my nose broken, I have been thrown in jail, I have lost my job, I have lost my apartment, for gay liberation. And you all treat me this way? What the fuck's wrong with you all?"³³

The participation of police at LGBTQIA pride fests undermines an event started in response to harassment by the NYPD at the Stonewall Inn. The uniformed police and "PRIDE"-detailed vehicles promote spaces made for cisgender gay men, who feel comfortable in their interactions with police at these events in ways that some queer, trans, and non-binary people of color might not. The first gay pride event started to honor the Stonewall riots started by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Since then, pride events have shifted their focus to corporate sponsorships, which have become one of their defining aspects. Corporations have clearly shown us that queer people are now, indeed, profitable. Companies focus on their corporate interests at pride events and disregard the events' history. Those who wish to forget about queer history further deny the

³³ Rivera, Sylvia. 'Y'all Better Quiet Down' (1973) : Sylvia Rivera : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming." Internet Archive, 1 Jan. 1973, archive.org/details/SylviaRiveraYallBetterQuietDown1973.

intersectional struggles of queer liberation. Queer voices are silenced at large by selling out events to corporate interests, which value profits over the lived perspectives of queer people. Thus, the goals of these events are put into question.

Is this event for me? What am I actually celebrating? What has been compromised by the corporate sponsorship at pride events? If I'm not a profitable 'queer' what is my worth in these systems? How do these events help advocate for non-binary people, trans people, and people of color? Do these events have my interests in mind? How do these corporations help advocate for homeless queer youth? Couldn't all the money spent at these events be donated to organizations that actually help queer people? By calling out these events am I a self-hating queer person? Or do I resist celebrating an event that clearly isn't made for me, or made for others who find it hard to celebrate when Pride has shifted its focus away from them?

Activist Mattilda (a.k.a Matt Bernstein Sycamore), one of the initiators of the San Francisco-based activist group Gay Shame, has been working for years to address the issues of police presence at Pride parades and the lack of intersectionality at these events. Gay Shame started as a "challenge to the assimilationist agendas of mainstream pride

celebrations”³⁴ and has been critical of corporate sponsorships at these events. Groups like Gay Shame hold mainstream gay organizations accountable for actions that perpetuate oppression by ignoring trans people and queer people of color, instead privileging their own goals of assimilation for white gay men into dominant culture. Gay men who have white privilege, economic privilege, and are able-bodied need to be held accountable for their narrow definition of equality that promotes, as Lisa Duggan says, “access to the institutions of domestic privacy, the ‘free’ market, and patriotism”³⁵ over issues affecting queer people of color, homeless queer youth, and other marginalized queer folks who don't have access to those institutions.

Issues such as gay marriage have become a defining symbol within gay assimilationist politics. Gay marriage has become a symbol of equality that only exists, however, for those who already have economic and social privileges. When talking about marriage, Gay Shame once stated that “Marriage is the central institution of that misogynist, racist system of domination and oppression known as heterosexuality”.³⁶ Singling out gay marriage

³⁴ Jason Ruiz; *The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore*. *Radical History Review* 1 January 2008; 2008 (100): 237–247.

³⁵ Duggan, Lisa. *“Que(e)Rying Homonormativity.”* *Sexuality and Gender at Home: Experience, Politics, Transgression*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

³⁶ Jason Ruiz; *The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore*. *Radical History Review* 1 January 2008; 2008 (100): 237–247.

as the defining aspect of the LGBTQIA fight for equality looks to a model set by heteronormativity, the nuclear family, and capitalism, mimicking the same lifestyles that look to silence those who choose not to participate in those lifestyles. In *Same-Sex Marriage and the Queer Politics of Dissensus*, Ben Trott states that:

Where, for instance, in the framing or enacting of "marriage equality," is the equality of those who fall outside or between, move within, or refuse the binary that makes it possible to even talk of "Same" and "Opposite" sexes? Where is the equality of those intimacies, relationships, and modes of kinship that are ineligible to the institution of marriage? Are they counted? Countable?³⁷

The privilege of gay marriage exists in a capitalist system that benefits those who have access to the most privileges in society. An examination of the corporate sponsorship at LGBTQIA pride fests around the world reveals ways in which gay assimilation and capitalism have had a negative effect on the modern LGBTQIA fight for equality. LGBTQIA pride events generally happen in the month of June, the same month as the Stonewall riots which became the catalyst for the Gay Liberation movement. The nation's first pride parade was on June 28, 1970, to commemorate the first anniversary of the Stonewall riots. Celebrations of a historic event in which trans women, queer people of color, lesbians, and gay men fought against continuous

³⁷ Ben Trott; *Same-Sex Marriage and the Queer Politics of Dissensus*. South Atlantic Quarterly 1 April 2016; 115 (2): 411–423.

harassment by police have transformed into sponsored events that focus on capitalizing upon the queer people who fought against dominant culture from the beginning. This shift is protested by those such as the Washington D.C.- based group, No Justice No Pride, who protested against the inclusion of Wells Fargo in the 2017 Capital Pride event. The group criticized Wells Fargo for “its lending to private prisons and investment in the Dakota Access Pipeline, and weapons manufacturer Northrop Grumman”.³⁸ Corporate sponsorship like this at pride events such as Capital Pride show how mainstream pride events have almost seamlessly merged themselves with corporations that actively fight against an intersectional queer critique.

No Justice No Pride also fought the exclusion of issues that affect people of color at gay pride events by helping to shut down the 2017 Capital Pride Parade in Washington D.C., stating that the organizers “ignored the concerns of Native Americans and people of color generally, transgender people, and other marginalized populations”.³⁹ Groups like No Justice No Pride aim to end the mainstream LGBT movement’s complicity with oppressive systems, including corporate interests and other

³⁸ Moyer, Justin Wm. “Activists Say Capital Pride Overtaken by Corporations and Rich Gay Men.” The Washington Post, WP Company, 8 June 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/local/activists-say-capital-pride-overtaken-by-corporations-and-rich-gay-men/2017/06/08/73a8567c-4ae2-11e7-884a-930f9cd77076_story.html?utm_term=.c8a596712595.

³⁹ The Advocate. “Why LGBTQ Protesters Blocked the Capital Pride Parade.” ADVOCATE, Advocate.com, 13 June 2017, www.advocate.com/pride/2017/6/13/why-lgbtq-protesters-blocked-capital-pride-parade.

sponsorships that continue to further the marginalization of queer and trans individuals. The group is also invested in other intersectional queer issues including protesting Trump's military ban on transgender people and criticizing corporate interests in organizations like the Human Rights Campaign. Although No Justice No Pride's main protest is directed at the Capital Pride event, the group has involved themselves in many other issues affecting queer people of color and trans people. The multifaceted aims of this group employ intersectionality as one of the defining aspects of how a queer identity is actively tied to an ongoing stance of resistance.

While attending the Richmond Pride event during the summer of 2016, I was struck by the overwhelming number of sponsorships at this small event. After my experiences at Richmond Pride, I created a zine with direct commentary about the corporate sponsorship of LGBT pride events. For the publication, titled *Sponsor*, I researched the 2016 NYC Pride sponsorships at one of the world's largest LGBT pride events. I was struck by the amount of information on the website that was dedicated to the sponsorship of the events, rather than acting as a platform for discussing queer issues. The zine displayed every single sponsor that was a part of the 2016 New York City Pride. I then employed spray paint on the pages as a censorship tool to block out every corporation that was advertising that year. *Sponsor* drew

attention to the large amount of sponsorship at the event by employing the aesthetics of spray paint to create a physical barrier between the sponsor and the viewer. The saturation of the corporate logo was enthralling to me, and motivated me to investigate the effects that capitalism has on queer culture.

At gay pride events people of color are still pushed out of the movement at large, which has resulted in routine protests such as Black Lives Matter activists' protests against police presence at Pride. Chong-suk Han has addressed the issue of black expulsion from gay pride events, stating that gay organizations have tried to reinforce whiteness to obtain more institutional support. In his essay *They Don't Want to Cruise Your Type: Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Exclusion*, Han quoted Allan Bérubé in describing such exclusion as:

...mirroring the whiteness of men who run powerful institutions as a strategy for winning credibility, acceptance, and integration; excluding people of color from gay institutions; selling gay as white to raise money, make a profit, and gain economic power; and daily wearing the pale protective coloring that camouflages the unquestioned assumptions and unearned privileges of gay whiteness.⁴⁰

Whitewashing Queerness

⁴⁰ Chong-suk Han (2007) *They Don't Want To Cruise Your Type: Gay Men of Color and the Racial Politics of Exclusion*, *Social Identities*, 13:1, 51-67.

Outside of gay pride events, trans women of color are still being pushed out of the LGBTQ+ movement by white gay men. In 2017, Netflix released the documentary *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson*, written and directed by David France. In the documentary, France incorporated footage of the lives of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera to show how both were pushed out of the gay liberation movement. The documentary places Rivera's homelessness in context with the neglect of the movement at large, which focused on issues affecting white gay men while leaving out the struggles of trans folks and people of color. Shortly after the release of the documentary, David France was accused of stealing work from transgender activist, filmmaker and writer Reina Gossett. While France's documentary details how, as a whole, white gay men took space away from trans women of color during the early Gay Liberation Movement, France himself reflects the same behavior; as a white gay man, he took advantage of the labor, work, and research of another trans woman of color. The acts of France are not surprising and perpetuate the history of gay assimilationist politics and the erasure of trans women of color. In an Instagram post, Reina Gossett details how David France stole her work:

#deepshare #realtruth this week while I'm borrowing money to pay rent, david france is releasing his multimillion dollar netflix deal on marsha p johnson. i'm still lost in the music trying to #pay it no mind and reeling on how this movie came to be and make so much \$ off of our

lives and ideas. david got inspired to make this film from a grant application video that @sashawortzel & I made and sent to Kalamazoo/Arcus Foundation social justice center while he was visiting. He told the people who worked there -i shit you not- that he should be the one to do this film, got a grant from Sundance/Arcus using my language and research about STAR, got Vimeo to remove my video of Sylvia's critical "y'all better quiet down" speech, ripped off decades of my archival research that i experienced so much violence to get, had his staff call Sasha up at work to get our contacts then hired my and Sasha's *ADVISOR* to our Marsha film Kimberly Reed to be his producer. And that's just the shit I have the spoons to name.

TRUST\THERE'S\SO\MUCH\MORE\. This kind of extraction/excavation of black life, disabled life, poor life, trans life is so old and so deeply connected to the violence Marsha had to deal with throughout her life. So I feel so much rage and grief over all of this & STAR must have some serious level plan on moving through many---and clearly by any means necessary---to get the message out... So tonight I'm channeling high priestess energy to show me the honey throne cuz this storm queen is 🙄🙄🙄

Activist and writer Janet Mock came to Reina Gossett's defense in a Twitter post, stating "A black trans woman's work about a black trans woman was used to make a film by a credentialed white cis man aided by Netflix's millions".⁴¹ Mock went on to advocate for others to support Reina Gossett and to

⁴¹ Mock, Janet (janetmock).

"A black trans woman's work about a black trans woman was used to make a film by a credentialed white cis man aided by Netflix's millions." 7 Oct 2017, 10:43 AM. Tweet.

give her the credit she deserves for her work on the digital archives of Marsha P. Johnson & Sylvia Rivera. In *Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures*, Jeannine Tang states

Reina Gosset's research has made increasingly clear how both Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were fundamental to the founding of the Gay Liberation Front, before being forced out by conservative liberalizing impulses in the movement. Johnson and Rivera's foundational anti-policing, anti-prison, welfare and shelter organizing were replaced with more conservative LGB organizing that focused on legal rights rather than structural economic reforms.⁴²

When the initiatives of artists such as Reina Gossett are sabotaged by those who benefit from white cisgender privilege, they reinforce the history of the white gay liberation movement conservatism that has been built upon the labor of trans women of color fighting injustices that affect queer people and people of color. Reina Gossett was able to show her short film *Happy Birthday* in the 2017 New Museum exhibition *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*. For an exhibition on queer and trans artists in the United States, *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* still lacked critical perspectives, and was still heavily oriented towards a white perspective. While Reina Gossett was able to show her film in the exhibition, other critical voices were still excluded from the

⁴² Tang, Jeannine. "Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures." *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. The MIT Press, 2017, pp. 363–392.

show. The exhibition intended to "investigate gender's place in contemporary art and culture at a moment of political upheaval and renewed culture wars",⁴³ yet the show included no indigenous perspectives. Indigenous artist Demian DineYazhi made a comment on my Instagram post regarding the Trigger show, stating:

This exhibition by the New Museum left out a strong indigenous perspective on gender, which is pretty unethical in a country and a city that enacted so much assimilation and genocidal acts against indigenous peoples. Transphobia begins in the states through colonization. To leave out indigenous peoples time and time again is perpetuating settler colonial violence and erasure.

In the numerous articles and discussions as well as the panel that I engaged with about the exhibition, there was still a glaring lack of conversation on the exhibition's exclusion of indigenous perspectives. *Trigger* curator Johanna Burton's neglect of indigenous voices is a continuation of the type of exclusionary action engaged in by David France. After reading the comment from DinéYazhi, I searched various exhibition reviews and found no mention of this glaring omission from the exhibition. This illustrates a further form of oppression in which artists like DinéYazhi and Gossett are forced to advocate for their own issues when facing the erasure of the perspectives of trans women of color and indigenous people.

⁴³ "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon." *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* :: New Museum, www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/trigger-gender-as-a-tool-and-as-a-weapon.

Whitewashing, or the covering up and exclusion of the work, labor, and activism of non-white subjects, is a major problem in the LGBTQIA movement because it erases black, brown, and indigenous voices from conversations and historical engagement surrounding LGBTQIA issues. This whitewashing of queer history can be seen in *Stonewall*, a 2015 drama history film that depicts the events of the Stonewall riots in 1969. The film's sole protagonist, Danny Winters, is played by an able-bodied white actor Jeremy Irvine, which portrays the riot from a white, male, and cisgender perspective. David Leitch, executive director of the Mattachine Society, commented on the film, stating: "It was terrible to center the movie on the white kid. It was a silly trope that plays with a lot of audiences, but at this point historically that theme is overplayed. Having him throw the first brick was bad. That was all crap – that was all drama. But then it's just a Broadway show – it's not real".⁴⁴

This film became symbolic of how dominant culture has been trying to commodify queer subjectivity as a selling point for white heteronormative culture. The director justified his use of a white gay male protagonist, stating that "he'd made the movie for as wide an audience as possible, and that "straight-acting"

⁴⁴ Smith, Nigel M. "Gay Rights Activists Give Their Verdict on Stonewall: 'This Film Is No Credit to the History It Purports to Portray'." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 25 Sept. 2015, www.theguardian.com/film/2015/sep/25/stonewall-film-gay-rights-activists-give-their-verdict.

Danny was an “easy in” for heterosexual viewers”.⁴⁵ His act to “cast a wide net” shows how his intentions were for the whitewashed *Stonewall* to be consumed and digested to sell to a conservative gay and straight consumer base. This type of whitewashing is dangerous for the large population of queer people of color, especially trans women of color, who are omitted from queer history and also live at the dangerous intersections of racism, transphobia, and homophobia. Thankfully, due to this criticism the movie received negative reviews, resulting in bad box office sales.

The whitewashing in movies like *Stonewall* illustrates how the LGBT movement has catered to white gay men. Gay assimilationist politics have divided the LGBT movement; while some have assimilated into dominant culture by capitalizing on their privilege, trans women and queer people of color still seek to not be silenced, killed, or left out of the conversation. Certain gay men are able to take advantage of the institutions that are made for bodies that are white, cisgender, and able-bodied. The term that summarizes this critique of gay assimilationist politics, “homonormativity,” has been used in various queer theory texts, including Eric Stanley’s essay “That’s Revolting!” In an interview, activist Mattilda (a.k.a

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Matt Bernstein Sycamore) provides a definition of
"homonormative:"

In much the same way that heterosexist is really useful for thinking about homophobia, *homonormative* offers us the potential to see the violence that occurs when gays show unquestioning loyalty to many of the things that at this point are routinely challenged even within mainstream straight dominant cultures... it's beyond heteronormative because it's on a different level, it's imitating straight people better than they would ever do it, perfecting the tools of oppression and rationalizing it to this extreme violence.⁴⁶

Homonormativity and a Seat at the Table

One of the main aspects of homonormativity that becomes problematic is its intersection with capitalism. The inclusion of gays and lesbians at large multinational companies is not "progress" for most of the LGBTQIA community, who face job discrimination at even the most basic levels of employment.⁴⁷ In the deployment of queerness as a form of resistance, queer identity should be framed within anti-capitalist and marxist discourses, which structure a critical perspective on the effects of neoliberalism, capitalism, and income inequality. For

⁴⁶ Ruiz, Jason. The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore. *Radical History Review* 1 January 2008; 2008 (100): 237–247.

⁴⁷ "2017 Workplace Equality Fact Sheet." *Out & Equal*, 13 Dec. 2017, outandequal.org/2017-workplace-equality-fact-sheet/.

a homonormative perspective, the main goal is having a seat at a problematic "table" that was built on the suffering and exploitation of those who do not have economic, white, and educational privilege. This is not to undermine the levels of progress that have been accomplished in the last fifty years, but to think critically about who has benefited by this progress and what this group of people has done for those who are not seated at the table with them.

In my work I consider a queer subjectivity to introduce a level of criticality that looks to everyone who wasn't invited to that table, and demands that the table not make room for others to be included, but for the table to be destroyed and rebuilt. It is important to consider how one is oriented towards wanting a seat at this "table" within an assimilationist and homonormative perspective to begin with. This idea of orientation and "a seat at the table" has been written about in a unique way in Sara Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology*. In her book she talks about the writing of Edmund Husserl, stating that "we get a sense of how being directed towards some objects and not others involves a more general orientation towards the world".⁴⁸ A homonormative queer person begins to orient themselves toward the table to fit into a heterosexual lifestyle

⁴⁸ Ahmed, Sara. "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 12 no. 4, 2006, pp. 543-574.

that looks to deny their unique subjectivity, giving them a false notion of safety and survival.

Therefore, by sitting at this table, the subject conforms to the social norms of a racist, heterosexist, and transphobic culture. Their position at the table makes no room for others who don't fit into the normative social expectations of who gets a seat. Yet, their seat at the table becomes a stand-in for a groundless symbol of mainstream LGBT progress. Rather than actually destroying this conceptual "table," one must, as Sara Ahmed states "consider how the table itself may have a background",⁴⁹ therefore opening the possibility of asking why one would want to be included at the table at all. Investigating the background of the table introduces a critique of gay assimilation by looking past a one-dimensional goal of inclusion and reintroducing a criticality that is needed in the mainstream gay rights agenda.

What a "seat at the table" represents within queer resistance is the actualization of a place in the world where, regardless of social status, race, gender identity, sexual preference, and physical ability, people have an opportunity to be. This idea is practiced daily within queer communities that provide systems of support, which exist in contrast to social policy that looks to silence marginalized queer bodies. This

⁴⁹ Ibid.

idea of "queer futurity" has been summarized by José Esteban Muñoz in the book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*.

The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel *a then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasure of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing".⁵⁰

Muñoz articulates the power of looking inwards towards a future where a queer subjectivity can be enacted in order to work up against the painful reality of the present. A cisgender financially-stable gay male subject who does not actively help to work towards a queer futurity where everyone is offered the opportunity to survive becomes equal to the oppressor. There is no difference between a heteronormative and homonormative subject position if they both do not wish to think past the limitations of capitalism, white supremacy, and the gender binary. Therefore, it's important to hold accountable those

⁵⁰ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.

privileged members of the LGBTQIA community who wish to assimilate into mainstream culture without actively resisting policy that affects marginalized queer folks. A queer resistance is one that continually looks towards the future while actively dealing with the problems of the present.

On The Undercommons and Queer Resistance

In contrast to the above description of those gay people who choose to assimilate into dominant culture, I wish to elaborate on an anti-assimilationist positioning that queer people, like myself, look to, in what Fred Moten describes as the "undercommons." In the introduction to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Jack Halberstam talks about the idea of the undercommons that is introduced in the text, stating:

If you want to know what the undercommons wants, what Moten and Harney want, what black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people want, what we (the "We" who cohabit in the space of the undercommons) want, it is this – we cannot be satisfied with the recognition and acknowledgment generated by the very systems that denies a) that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls. We cannot say what new structures will

replace the ones we live with yet, because once we have torn shit down, we will inevitably see more and see differently and feel a new sense of wanting and being and becoming. What we want after "the break" will be different from what we think we want before the break and both are necessarily different from the desire that issues from being in the break.⁵¹

This passage above by Halberstam speaks to my desires to reimagine the structures that queer people can inhabit, take part, and build upon. This "undercommons" is a form of future world-making, one that creates spaces, programs, and futures for those black people, indigenous people, queers, and poor people who are the most affected by acts of oppression by dominant culture. As a queer non-binary person, I wish to foster the spaces of an "undercommons." I want these spaces to be flooded with actions of queer resistance against the system that looks to placate us into our privilege. I want to illustrate my anger towards the community of other gay and queer people, especially those who are white, wealthy, and cisgender, who are complacent in their privilege.

My illustration of queer resistance is directed towards this new generation of other white gay and queer people who have had access to the privilege and education necessary to take action against the same system that they benefit from. These

⁵¹ Halberstam, Jack. "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons." *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, Minor Compositions, 2013, pp. 5–12.

acts of queer resistance are messy, inconvenient, and laborious. They require white queer people to speak up against other white queer people who enact oppression against people of color through language, exclusions, and cultural appropriations. These conversations require other white queer people to take accountability for the content, language, and behaviors that they perpetuate. A queer resistance is a lifelong commitment to failure, education, and refusal.

In such an illustration of resistance, queer identity does not assume a fixed subject position like that of gay and lesbian identification within the LGBTQIA spectrum; rather, it takes a fluid position of categorization. It is important to consider a queer identification as a departure from the mainstream aims of gay assimilationist politics. *Queer* is a contentious identity position that means different things for different people. Through the academicization of queer theory, the discourse on how "queerness is enacted" has been positioned in the realm of educational privilege, which contrasts its real-world application. The academicization of queerness adds a level of contradiction to my claim of its various uses as a tool of resistance. Queer theory has a level of inaccessibility built into it through its articulation in institutional spaces. Here it is important to stress the actions of activists, artists, and communities enacting queerness in the real world. Queerness is a malleable term which is often articulated in contradicting ways

that generally service the goals of each public that takes on its complex history. This built-in contradiction therefore plays to the fluidity of what queerness represents. The term, like its various uses and embodiments, is fluid and unfixed.

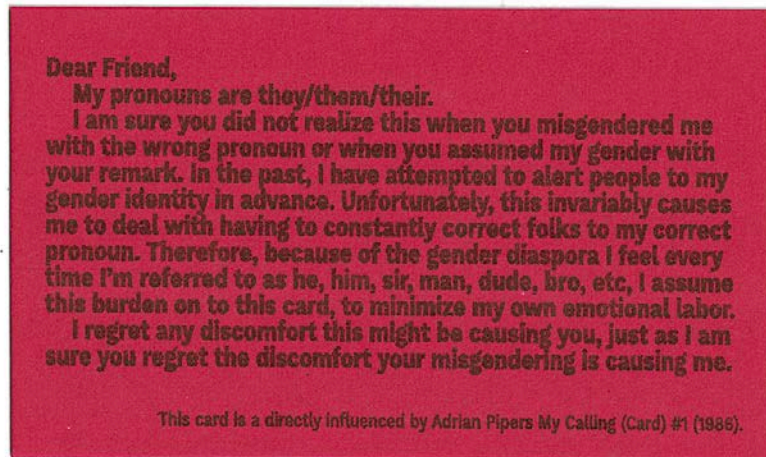
Queerness is influenced by both enactments of 'queer theory' and 'queer resistance,' allowing artists like myself the opportunity to try and bridge the gap between these two discursive uses of queer identity. In page 9 of *The Undercommons*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney discuss the refusal of the subversive intellectual, stating, "In fact, the subversive intellectual enjoys the ride and wants it to be faster, wilder; she does not want a room of his or her own, she wants to be in the world, in the world with others and making the world anew."⁵² Moten and Harney speak to what I am trying to pinpoint, identifying the space in between a 'queer theory' and a 'queer resistance,' one that requires an active participation in the queer lived experience. It is a space that produces content that non-institutionally trained artists, activists, and community members can find relevant to their experiences.

As a white non-binary citizen of the United States of America, I look to my identity as a practice in working through the contradictions presented by a queer subject position. As a person with white privilege, I take on the baggage of past

⁵² Ibid.

actions of white queers who have co-opted the labor of people of color. As a cultural producer of content consumed in large by a queer public, I look to be accountable for the work I put out into the world. As a person who is about to get a Master of Fine Arts degree from one of the top graduate programs in the United States, I need to acknowledge the privilege behind my articulations of queer subjectivity. As a publisher of content disseminated into the world, I look to the agency of printed matter as an articulation of queer resistance.

My Pronoun (Card) #1: On Passing, Whiteness and Mental Health



As a white artist, I feel that accountability is paramount to the enactment of an intersectional queer practice, and is an ongoing process. The ability to acknowledge one's ignorance and take action in addressing mistakes is important to the enactment of a queer subjectivity that claims intersectionality. This practice of accountability was necessary in confronting a work I made in February of 2018. In my work *My Pronoun (Card) #1*, I reimagined Adrian Piper's *My Calling (Card) #1*, but did not spend enough time thinking through my act of cultural appropriation as a white person in relation to the conceptual merits of the original work. In *My Calling (Card) #1*, Adrian Piper undercuts misperceptions of her race as a light-skinned black woman in a racist society. With *My Calling (Card) #1*, Adrian Piper directly confronts anyone who utters a racist

remark in her presence by handing them a card that implicates that person in their racist remarks. As a white, non-binary queer person who often passes for a white gay (and sometimes straight) man, I looked to make a connection between my act of passing with the violence of misgendering. Although I credited Adrian Piper in my reimagining of the card, I did not separate myself enough from *My Calling (Card) #1*.

I don't believe this is a blatant act of cultural appropriation due to the clear reference to Adrian Piper's original work, but I do believe this action speaks to a history of white people's ignorance when focusing on queer issues. *My Pronoun (Card) #1* was intended to re-imagine the presumption of passing in relation to gender identity. In my reclamation of Adrian Piper's *My Calling (Card) #1*, I formatted my card as closely to the original as I could, to maintain the reference to the original card. I thought that sticking to the original form of Piper's card and framing myself in relation to her work would create a dialogue between both projects. Adrian Piper's name is stated clearly on the card, but not everyone who comes into contact with these cards will understand the reference to the original work. My card was created as an open-source project for anyone to use as a tool that would prevent them from doing the emotional labor of calling out the act of misgendering. Although not everyone using this card might be white, most people

interacting with this card won't know the context of Adrian Piper's work. This work relies on knowing the context of the *My Calling (Card) #1* to fully understand its gesture.

As a white person, I did not realize how this action would undermine the original work. In the creation of this card I did not consider how much my whiteness changed the original intention of Adrian Piper's piece. This realization came after two people of color voiced their concerns over how close my card was to Adrian Piper's original work. I posted about this project on the GenderFail Instagram account before fully understanding the implications of this gesture. Although the original purpose of the card was to create a resource that could be used to limit the emotional labor of people having to correct others on their correct pronouns, I can't help but think of the labor that those two people of color had to do to educate me on my ignorance. In *Out of Order, Out of Sight* Adrian Piper stated:

Those of us at the margins require extra effort from those of you in the center, if you genuinely want to welcome us in. Good intentions are not enough. It is also necessary that you acknowledge and confront your own ambivalences about us honestly, and get them under the control of your political conscience so they don't control you instead. [How dare you cast aspersions of my motives? Bitch!] It would also be help if you would go out of your way to avoid imposing familiar labels that don't fit, and take the time to gather the facts, confront our complex singularity. And find – or create – the labels that do. [Maybe you'd rather not be written about at all, hmmm?] if you don't do these

things, you will have not welcomed us in but merely waved from a distance at the simplistic stereotypes that stand between us.⁵³

Instead of going out of my way to create my own card that reflected my personal experience, I used the form, tone, and structure of Adrian Piper's work. This, outside of an enactment of my own failure of imagine, was an ambivalence to another's experience. *My Pronoun (Card) #1* was not specific enough and didn't confront my own feelings of oppression when I am misgendered. I find a sense of irony in my gesture of using Piper's work. I didn't "take the time to gather the facts" to confront my own complex subjectivity, and like those countless people who have misgendered me, I too assumed that my citation of Piper's original card was enough to fully understand the complex gesture that I was attempting to make. This failure was in trying to make Piper's gesture universal, rather than trying to find a new form that reflected the frustration and complexity of my assumed gender identity.

Since sharing this post, multiple people have contacted me about getting copies of the card. I do not intend to redact my invitation to send these cards out, but wish to send this essay as an additional part of the project. I personally will not be printing any other copies of the cards but will share the files with any parties that wish to use them. Since I shared this

⁵³ Piper, Adrian. *Out of Order, out of Sight: Selected Writings in Art Criticism 1967-1992*. The MIT Press, 1996.

project with the public as an open-source project, I feel that it's up to each person to make a decision about whether they feel comfortable using this resource. My only wish is that these cards should never be sold for any amount of money and are to be given out for free to anyone who wishes to use them.

In reaction to this original card, I will be producing another pronoun card that distances itself from such a close relation to the original calling card. I now understand that Adrian Piper is very selective about how her works are circulated in the world. The card that I based off of hers is not in service of her work, and recontextualizes it in ways outside of her original intentions. The reason I address this is to encourage other white queer people to think about the implications of their work and their actions; it is paramount to listen to those who come forward with concerns over the work that we are putting out in the world. Intersectionality does not happen through good intentions alone. It requires action, dialogue, and transparency when facing the gaps of knowledge we all have in our understanding of subject positions outside of our own.

Acknowledging my failure to be intersectional in *My Pronoun (Card) #1* has led me to use my ignorance as an opportunity to expand upon my own thoughts. This project ultimately became about the friction between passing as a white straight man and

being queer and non-binary, the action of accountability in pursuit of an intersectional practice, and the history of cultural appropriation by white queers of the work of people of color. Here, failure has become a site of agency by allowing me the opportunity to not only take accountability for my actions, but to elaborate further on the original intentions of the work. Failure has become a site of cultural production; a site for growth in my understanding of the work I put out into the world. *My Pronoun (Card) #1* now has the opportunity to look further into not only the violence of being misgendered but the complexity of passing as a cisgender white man.

My ability to sometimes pass as both cisgendered and male allows me a level of privilege that comes at the price of my mental health. As a non-binary queer person who does not identify as male, my assumed maleness is both a site of privilege and of a violence of naming. The past traumas I have experienced from both homophobia and transphobia often make it harder for me to express myself in ways that blur the expectations of my assumed gender. This then becomes a point of contention, in which passing becomes a symbol of my mental health issues- oftentimes due to lack of mental and physical energy to dress outside of a presumed male costuming. Such passing comes at the price of dealing with the action of being

misgendered on a daily basis, but also becomes a site of privilege due to such presumed white maleness.

It's important to detail the complexities of a non-binary identity in relation to one's general uniform and outward appearance. Here I want to stress that I do not feel either male or female. These two options do not encompass how I feel on the inside and cause me discomfort with my place in the world. The majority of the U.S. population's assumption that there are only two genders lies at the heart of why I created *My Pronoun (Card) #1*. As a non-binary person, I generally dress in ways that place me in society's box of "male." I oftentimes am not able to give voice to the complexity of my gender and these assumptions entrap me into a cisgender maleness that has been forced onto me by society. Constantly being referred to as "him," "sir," "dude," "bro," and other terms that drown me in the presumption of maleness takes a toll on my mental health.

Mental health is one area that is profoundly affected by my presumed maleness. The way I dress is oftentimes in direct correlation with depression, anxiety, and an undiagnosed bipolar disorder. Most days I do not have the mental or physical energy to put effort into the clothing that I would like to wear, and thus fall into the "costume" that generally fits into the presumption of maleness. I do not dress in the style or way that I would ideally like to present myself in, and this directly

correlates with my mental health issues. As a non-binary queer person I am always coming up against a presumed assumption of what a "queer" or "non-binary" expression looks like. An expectation for an elaborate, performative, gender-bending costume is often put upon queer and non-binary people by the cisgendered world (and sometimes by queer community). My gender identity does not take on the expressions of what society expects from a non-binary person. My mental health affects the costuming I use to "get by," which excludes me from a presumed non-binary identity, while simultaneously entrapping me into a presumed gender that negatively impacts my own mental health. My genderqueer identity is not defined by the costume I put on, or lack thereof, in the expression of my identity.

By passing I am allowed the privilege to access spaces that society gives white men. In an interview with Che Gossett, Juliana Huxtable talked about the idea of what passing signifies for black trans women compared to white trans people.

Passing is a means to safety, the ability to navigate the world with a bit of rest. It's so very different from what a lot of white trans people experience. I think sometimes it's easier for them to operate in a sort of genderqueer/genderpunk way, but as a privilege. You're allowed to operate in the space of gender variance. But that space for us can really be—and feel—like a prison.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Gossett, Che A. and Juliana Huxtable. "Existing In The World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility." *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. The MIT Press, 2017.

For white trans and non-binary folks, the ability to pass (especially when operating "in the space of gender variance") provides levels of privilege that are directly tied to our whiteness. Although my own passing adds to my mental health issues, I cannot escape the intersection with my white privilege. Here, levels of visibility are always buffered by our whiteness, allowing a white trans or non-binary person a level of safety in our play or refusal of the gender binary. This is not to discount the trauma that transphobia inflicts on all trans or non-binary people, but to acknowledge the access and privilege given to white people.

The performance, play, or refusal of my costuming exists in relationship to my mental health and is important to the messiness of passing. It's important to state that I do not go out of my way to dress as a male or even buy clothes that are exclusively made for self-identifying men. The clothes I wear are generally neutral or black, and do not stand out in any way. This is not to say that my costuming is always nondescript; it sometimes does reflect an expression that allows me to live my truth in ways I do not always feel comfortable performing. However, I oftentimes want to fade into the background and not be noticed by cisgendered men due to my mental health issues and discomfort with my gender identity. This ability for white subjects to fade into the background and oftentimes go unnoticed

is a concept that Sara Ahmed explores in her work *A Phenomenology of Whiteness*. Ahmed states,

I want to suggest here that whiteness could be understood as 'the behind.' White bodies are habitual insofar as they 'trail behind' actions: they do not get 'stressed' in their encounters with objects or others, as their whiteness 'goes unnoticed.' Whiteness would be what lags behind; white bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not orientated 'towards' it, and this 'not' is what allows whiteness to cohere, as that which bodies are orientated around. When bodies 'lag behind', then they extend their reach.⁵⁵

As a white subject I am offered the ability to go unnoticed in ways that people of color are not, due to the way that public spaces are made for white bodies. In this illustration I do not want to discount the violence that is also inflicted on white queer and non-binary bodies, having myself been physically assaulted in public spaces, called a faggot, and had trash throw at me. I, however, do not face the intersections with oppression that non-white people face, especially those who also blur the expectations of the gender binary. I am targeted by forms of oppression in response to my non-binary identity alone, and do not face the intersections of violence faced by queer, non-binary, and trans people of color.

Again, I recognize the need to acknowledge this privilege of being able to fade into the background as a presumed white

⁵⁵ Ahmed, Sara. *A Phenomenology of Whiteness*. *Feminist Theory*, Vol 8, Issue 2, pp. 149 - 168.

male. Passing is complex, and is something that dominant society puts on a queer subject to fit the narrow conception of the two-choice gender binary. Mental health is an important topic in the performativity of gender identity that I feel is not addressed enough in conversations on passing. Passing is not something I do to assimilate into dominant culture- it is an expectation from a straight cisgender worldview. I am interested in conversations that speak to queer, non-binary, and trans subjectivities that are not defined by our costuming, but are defined by our actions, desires, and lived experiences.

It's important to bring this back to *My Pronoun (Card) #1* and my gesture of repurposing the work of Adrian Piper by focusing on the idea of passing. The type of passing that Piper's work comments on is different from my own experience of passing in one huge way: my whiteness. Outside of the fact that I didn't ask permission or try to contact Adrian Piper in any way, the work I made did not account for my white privilege. Oftentimes when I am misgendered by another person they identify me as a cisgender white man; a position that affords the most privilege in our society. Adrian Piper, on the other hand, experienced misidentification as a white woman rather than a light-skinned black woman whenever a person made a racist remark. The gesture of Adrian Piper handing a card to a person who has wrongly assumed the sharing of white privilege

implicates that person in their racism. In contrast, my gesture implicates a person in their presumption of my cisgenderism while being a white person. I, like many other white artists before me, have not fully accounted for the intersection of my own whiteness in the reclamation of a work that is so specifically about racism and white privilege.

This illustration of my failure to address these concerns in my original work speaks to the messiness of cultural appropriation, citation, and personal reference. I thought that the use of a direct and honest citation of the original work was enough to excuse how my appropriation of the original form of Piper's card included the design details. One major failure was my lack of originality in coming up with a new form that would better reflect my pursuit to comment on the complexities of passing, while also divorcing it from the original form of Adrian Piper's work. My failure has allowed me the opportunity to use accountability as a source of productivity; to fill the gaps in my knowledge and inspire new investigations in the practice of intersectionality. In an interview with Jason Ruiz, Mattilda, an activist known for their work with the group Gay Shame, stated "We can actually envision something else, or at

least try, fail miserably, and create something in that failure".⁵⁶

This notion of failure as an opportunity for growth and accountability is something that has been a point of strength for queer subjectivity. A queer subject is one that always fails unapologetically in heteronormativity. My regard for failure as a potential site of agency is directly influenced by Jack Halberstam's influential book *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam states in Chapter 3:

How else might we imagine failure, and in terms of what kinds of desired political outcomes? How has failure been wielded for different political projects? And what kind of pedagogy, what kind of epistemology lurks behind those activities that have been awarded the term *failure* in Anglo-American culture?⁵⁷

This essay on the failure of *My Pronoun (Card) #1* illustrates a gesture that strives towards intersectionality. My hope is that in this illustration of accountability, in which I address my lack of when appropriating Adrian Piper's *My Calling (Card) #1*, can be a 'calling in' to other queers with white privilege who blur the lines of citation and appropriation. This work towards accountability is one manifestation of a "GenderFail" that I have never had the opportunity to fully

⁵⁶ Jason Ruiz; *The Violence of Assimilation: An Interview with Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore*. *Radical History Review* 1 January 2008; 2008 (100): 237–247.

⁵⁷ Halberstam, Judith. "Chapter 3: Argument, Sources, Examples." *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke University Press, 2011, pp. 87–121.

articulate. A "GenderFail" is dominant culture's assumption of my identity as male because of society's insistence on the policing of the gender binary. A "GenderFail" is my own failure of regard for intersectionality in the appropriation of Adrian Piper's work. A "GenderFail" is an opportunity for growth following actions stemmed from the ignorance of a colonized mind. A "GenderFail" is the lack of intersectionality that white queers perform on a daily basis. "GenderFail" is a term I will continue to define, enact, and perform in my future works and failures.

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