

Trans self-identification and the language of neoliberal selfhood: Agency, power, and the limits of monologic discourse

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1. Introduction

One thing that sociocultural linguists share with transgender communities is a strong interest in the power of individuals to assert agency over linguistic patterns. For trans people, one of the key guiding principles of everyday political work is the practice of *gender self-determination*, in which each individual is the ultimate authority on their own gender identity.¹ Faced with an often hostile and dangerous world, gender self-determination constitutes “a collective praxis against the brutal pragmatism of the present, the liquidation of the past, and the austerity of the future” (per Stanley 2014:89). In this sense, it is a form of resistance to normative structures of genital-based gender assignment. As a radical alternative to those normative systems, gender self-determination is realized first and foremost through the linguistic practice of *self-identification*, which is the focus of this article.

There are clear connections between the principles espoused by sociocultural linguists and the ways language is understood in transgender communities. The core ideology of linguistics – descriptivism – itself provides a ground of commonality as the linguist’s challenge to the power of intellectual authorities to dictate lexical meaning and grammatical correctness. Actual speakers’ actual usage is of critical importance, particularly in functionalist theories of language, but sociocultural linguists are particularly attentive to the question of *whose* usage will be considered determinative in the process of describing a language. This is precisely where trans language ideologies pick up and offer a potential response. Though linguists situate meaning as distributed across a (generally undefined) group of language users, trans people place definitional authority in each individual, at least when it comes to gender. From this perspective each person determines how their identity should be spoken about and understood.

The role of individual agency in sociocultural linguistics (Bucholtz & Hall 2008) has varied over time and across disciplinary traditions. It was manifested in early sociolinguistic research in the form of a preoccupation with the degree to which speakers are aware of their sociolinguistic behavior (Labov 1972). More recent research continues the interest in the sociolinguistic reflexes of agency, such as the chapters of Babel’s (2016) volume, which take a variety of experimental, variationist, and discursive perspectives on sociolinguistic awareness and control. Linguistic anthropologists, on the other hand, have tended to focus on the sociocultural and political contexts that produce different agencies and how linguistic resources like grammatical or thematic role, for instance, can be appropriated, as well as the limits on those appropriations (e.g., Duranti 2004, Ahearn 2001).

¹ I use singular *they* as a generic pronoun in this piece in solidarity with those advocating for more inclusive gender-neutral language.

This article explores some of the ways self-identification surfaces in the linguistic practices common across many trans communities in order to make sense of the gap between trans people's theories of gender and those imposed by powerful institutions and discourses. Three particular manifestations of linguistic self-determination are highlighted here: the use of gendered identity category labels, third person pronouns, and body part terminology. The observations offered on these subjects are based on a series of ethnographic projects carried out between 2006 and 2016 in trans communities across several metropolitan areas in the United States, including the San Francisco Bay Area; Portland, Oregon; Denver, Colorado; and in several online spaces frequented by trans people. However, the analysis below goes beyond mere description by treating this kind of individualized linguistic agency as the product of cultural practice rather than an asocial cognitive given. Such a perspective introduces another question, which concerns why this form of agency arose in the particular time and place that it has.

This question is one focus of this article, which investigates gender self-identification as an enactment of neoliberal personhood – a model of the social subject without which trans identification as we know it would not be possible. The highly individualistic view of the self that is packaged into neoliberal cultural formations constructs each person as a solitary actor, driven by pursuits like self-knowledge and self-improvement, which have become moral imperatives in a world where one's most valuable commodity is the self (Cameron 2005, Inoue 2007). The key contribution of neoliberalism as an idea for understanding late modern subjectivity, at least for the purposes of this discussion, is how the same system that produces subjects who are free to act agentively in their own self-interest – including when that interest leads them to identify with various gender categories – also invisibilizes the structural inequalities that constrain certain individuals' agencies far more than others. Thus while mindful of the critical function of self-definition in the creation of newly possible gender subjectivities, this article shines light on the inequities that are glossed over by an exclusive focus on the inner self as the source of authentic identity. The article closes with a discussion of privilege and hierarchy within trans communities through examination of the interpolative call presented with Caitlyn Jenner's iconic coming out moment on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 2015. The textual element of Jenner's glamorous covershoot, in which she entreats the reader, "Call me Caitlyn," illustrates the inescapably dialogic nature of identification – an element appropriated by less privileged trans women on social media who wanted to know, "Where's my *Vanity Fair* cover?"

2. Self-determination, self-identification, and trans agencies

Self-identification is a lynchpin of transgender identity politics in the United States and, increasingly, throughout the globalizing world. In everyday trans discourse, as well as much of the new literature on trans experience, trans people are often characterized as individuals who do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth (e.g. Serano 2007, Stryker 2008). Identification as trans, in this model, does not require identification *with* a particular gender identity, but it does require some form of disidentification *from* one's assigned sex. Trans identities must be articulated against the force of normative gender assignment and socialization and in the face of cultural hostility, violence, and delegitimation. In this context, self-determination delivers a means of working against these pressures and articulating an alternative vision of how gender identity could be

authorized and legitimized (Stanley 2014; Spade 2011).

In past waves of research on trans identities, trans people have often been evaluated in terms of their success at dismantling the gender binary. The 1990s brought on a new wave of research on non-normative gender identities and practices in which the political implications of trans existence were a matter of vociferous debate. Generally, disputes over normativity and subversion – that is, the extent to which trans people’s very being inherently disrupts or dismantles normative gender roles. Scholars like hooks (1992), Butler (1993), Lorber (1994), Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997), and Hubbard (1998), among many others, disagreed about the subversive potential of trans people’s gender transitions. Notably, trans people themselves were generally not included in these academic conversations, and it is only through the more recent establishment of trans studies as a distinctive field that less objectifying perspectives have been represented. Research like that by Speer and Green (2007), Edelman (2009), and Zimman (2009) emphasizes the ways trans people strategically deploy gender normativities in order to maintain things like physical safety, obtain access to medical care, or receive gender recognition, while at other times dispensing with those norms. Though completely dismantling gender is the goal of some trans people, a more consistently shared political project of trans communities in the United States is not one of destroying gender, but of undoing the idea that a person’s sex characteristics should determine how others should interact with or talk about them. In the absence of the expectation that the body provides knowledge about gendered subjectivity, self-identification takes center stage as a means of reframing gender categorization in ways that maintain individual agency. This shift has intensified over the past few decades, as a comparison with Valentine (2007) makes clear. Valentine describes the imposition of certain trans people’s ideas about gender over those with less institutional privilege. For example, he discusses one young trans woman of color who was castigated in a trans support/discussion group for identifying herself simultaneously as a (*trans*) woman and as *gay* (in reference to her attraction to men). The participants in the research discussed below, by contrast, went to lengths to avoid policing other trans people’s identities in this way, instead insisting that anyone who identifies as a woman is a woman and anyone who identifies as gay is gay, even if those identities appear to contradictory to others.

Agency also serves as a point of disjuncture between discourses about identity in trans communities compared to those concerning mainstream lesbian and gay identities. In homonormative discourses (Duggan 2003), agency and choice are rejected as a potential part of the development of sexual orientation. In the effort to blunt the impact of homophobic contentions that gay people can and should become straight, gay politics have converged around the idea of sexual attraction as biologically predetermined by a characteristic like a hypothetical “gay gene” (Allen 1997, Hamer & Copeland 1994, Pillard 1997). The etiology of trans identities has also been associated with physiological characteristics like “brain sex” (though cf. Fausto-Sterling 2000), but trans communities maintain a more complex interest in individual choice because of their sustained relationship with medical and legal gatekeeping structures. Historically, and in many parts of the world today, trans people have faced an intense series of trials and tests before being given access to body-changing medical interventions like hormones and surgery and to institutional validations of their self-identified genders like identification documents (see, for instance, the evolving Standards of Care beginning with criteria laid

out by Benjamin 1966). Over the past few decades, many medical providers have shifted to a system of informed consent, prompted in large part by demands made by trans patients who have objected to having their identities pathologized, controlled by cis (i.e., *non-trans*) people's impressions of who will have a "successful" transition, and forced to follow a singular path toward a particular kind of embodiment irrespective of individual preferences. Informed consent is the model in which most health care is practiced in the United States, including some of the same procedures trans people make use of (e.g. hormone replacement therapy, breast augmentation, other forms of plastic/reconstructive surgery, etc.): patients are informed about the benefits and risks of the available options and are then free to choose which of them they wish to employ, if any. In places like the San Francisco Bay Area, one of the primary sites of the ethnographic research discussed in this article, individuals are presented with the option to select the hormonal and surgical procedures they would like to pursue, and it is not uncommon to find people who have opted for something other than the traditionalist path of lifelong hormone therapy and a specific series of surgeries including sterilization and genital reconstruction, which are often prerequisites to changing a trans person's legal sex (Aizura 2006, Hutton 2011). Again, self-determination offers a powerful alternative mode of bodily and social transformation, of which individual agency is a critical component.

Though feeling or identifying as trans is not generally portrayed as a choice in trans discourses, there is a recognition that a gender role transition involves some degree of agency in a way that does not find parallel in lesbian and gay discourses. Trans activism has primarily focused on increasing and calling attention to that agency, rather than minimizing its existence. Medical and legal changes are not the only way in which trans agency is valued, however. A critical part of gender self-identification is linguistic, as this model attempts to create a space for each individual to select what kinds of gendered language others use to talk about them.

3. The language of sex assignment and gender self-identification

Normatively speaking, gender is assigned at birth, if not earlier. The gender assignment system is a complex one that draws on the authority of medical figures like obstetricians, geneticists, and ultrasound technicians as well as on "common sense" cultural and moral notions about how genders and bodies should be organized. By the time of birth, most infants are, or have already been, designated as female or male on the basis of external genitalia. This performative declaration of gender (Livia & Hall 1997) carries lifelong consequences, as gender differences are thought to be closely connected to – if not directly caused by – "biological sex." Of course, not all bodies fall so neatly into the binary categories that constitute sex in contemporary Western thought, as other scholars have discussed in detail (Kessler 1998; Karkazis 2008; King 2015). It is part of the culturally-bound construction of gender and sex that ambiguously sexed bodies are, at best, swept under the rug and, at worst, surgically reconfigured in potentially devastating ways so that the sexual variability of the body can literally be erased.

The gender assignment process, however, is not limited to the moment of birth. Gender attributions ordinarily occur in nearly every interaction (Speer & Green 2007), manifested linguistically through whatever gendered linguistic forms a language maintains, such as terms of address or gender marked grammatical forms like pronouns, adjectives, or nouns. Though gender attributions often derive from presumptions about a

person's physiology, they also depend on socially learned gender practices, making clothing style, hair length, bodily hexis, and similar factors a significant part of the process. However, particularly in ambiguous cases, the body takes on special salience as the central authorization for the use of *she* or *he*, for instance. This practice of gender assignment is driven by the notion that there is one "correct" set of gendered forms to use for each referent, and that this correctness is driven primarily by an individual's sex.

The salience of the body thus proves to be a significant part of trans experience. A person with conventionally feminine dress and comportment may be referred to as *he* by strangers if her body size, say, leads others to perceive her as "biologically male." Likewise, someone who is initially read as male based on style of presentation may be greeted with a *Ma'am* after he is heard speaking in a high-pitched voice. Of course, gender attribution happens in trans communities as well. In these contexts, however, they are handled in one of two alternative ways. First, members of trans communities tend to prioritize gender presentation over physiological cues such that a person in a dress and high heels is more likely to be referred to as *she* even her physiological characteristics might suggest that she was assigned male at birth. However, trans communities have been moving in recent years toward another system of selecting gendered linguistic forms, which is to ask individuals about their gender identities and how they prefer to be talked about rather than making assumptions on the basis of either physiology or gender presentation. Not all trans communities, nor all individuals within such communities, engage in this practice regularly, but it is increasingly seen by trans people as an ideal way of managing gender assignment.

Asking individuals how they identify and treating their answer as authoritative places a high value on the production of self-knowledge in the identification of an authentic self. This kind of discursive move is hardly unique to trans experience; Crapanzano's (1996) analysis of Herculine Barbin's autobiographical texts (Foucault 1980), for instance, identifies narratives of a unitary self as one of the means by which modern subjecthood is achieved. The individual is not the only potential source of knowledge about the self, but in a cultural context that places individual self-determination at the zenith of American sociopolitical ideals of good citizenship, even a marginalized subject can be mobilized as its own authentication. But the connection between individuality and trans subjectivities goes deeper. The idea of self-knowledge depends on an understanding of an internally-felt self – a discrete, invisible entity that may not be predictable based on external presentation. In fact, it is this separation between inner and outer selves that makes contemporary understandings of trans identity possible, driven as they are by a separation between the internal self/mind and the external self/body. Without this separation, trans identity would be a different beast entirely.

Only the individual can know, and hence define, their own gender in this system, and that individual determination is seen as far more important and truer than whatever institutions may say about a person's legal or medical status. Though this may appear to equalize trans people's access to social affirmation, I argue below that this apparent equality masks a deeper disparity of access to their self-identified genders. Trans people's understandings of gender and sex thus represent a push-back against powerful discourses around genital- or genetics-based essentialism (Stryker 2008), but there are also problematic elements of the ways gender self-determination is framed, which I will

explore at length in the discussion below. First, however, I will discuss several ways in which the ethos of self-identification is manifested linguistically. Importantly, these linguistic strategies are found not just in the speech of trans individuals, but are also presented as a call to others to join in the process of linguistic affirmation. The dialogic aspect of linguistic self-identification will be discussed further in the final section of this article.

Gender and the lexicon

The most obvious ways in which gender self-identification takes shape linguistically is through overtly gendered lexical items like the words that mark an individual as a *woman*, *man*, or simply *person*; a *sister*, *brother*, or *sibling*; a *mother*, *father*, or *parent*; a *waiter*, *waitress*, or *server*; and so on. Language thus plays an inescapable role for trans people in the process of coming out and transitioning (see also Kulick 1999). Because language is pervasively gendered even in languages like English, which lacks a grammatical gender system in most respects, some consideration of language is necessary whenever a trans person seeks validation from the cis world.

The connection between gender and language is generally understood to be indirect – an idea owed to theorists of indexicality like Silverstein (1985), Ochs (1992) and Eckert (2008). Ochs explains that linguistic practices associated with women and men typically form not because linguistic strategies like, for instance, politeness or the use of rising intonation in declaratives actually *mean* femininity, but because these linguistic resources are linked to stances that women in certain communities might take more often than their male counterparts. This kind of *indirect indexicality*, to use Ochs' terminology, accounts for most of linguistic practices that might be referred to as "feminine" or "masculine." *Direct indexes* of gender are those relatively rare instances in which a linguistic form refers directly and exclusively to members of one gender or another. The primary examples of direct indexes of gender in English are precisely the words referenced above: *woman* or *man*, *daughter* or *son*, and so on, as well as the third person pronouns *she* or *he*.² Silverstein (1985) refers to these kinds of forms as having a *presupposed indexicality*. That is, referring to someone as, say, "the woman in the hat," or even simply as "her," presupposes (rather than overtly claims) that the person being referred to is a woman. These presuppositions are tested in the case of transgender people and this is why direct indexes of gender are so critically important as either affirmation or rejection of trans identities. As Livia (2000) points out, it is more difficult to argue about the legitimacy of a person's gender identification when the claim to that identity is presupposed rather than overtly asserted.³ Exploiting presupposed indexicalities of this

² In practice, even direct indexes of gender can be transformed into indirect, or creative, indexes, as when gay men appropriate the pronoun *she* to refer to one another despite not identifying as women, or when sports coaches refer to male athletes as "she" to insult them.

³ While a statement like "that person is a woman" can be a matter of dispute (e.g. "no, that person is a man"), disputing a statement like "I spoke with her" (e.g. "no you didn't") would be interpreted with respect whether the speaker spoke to the person in question, not to whether that person should be referred to as "her" to begin with (Livia 2000).

sort is one strategy for trans persons to validate their own and one another's gender identities.

In this way, trans people question the systems through which a person is assigned language like *woman / man* or *she / he*; moreover, they are asking cis people to question the logic as well. Rather than looking for a "correct definition" or objectively identified criteria for using these direct indexes of gender, a trans-affirming system of lexical meaning treat directs indexes of gender as open to self-identification and self-definition. Because the individual is framed in these discourses as the ultimate source of authority about their own gender, gender identity itself can only be defined in terms the categories with which a person overtly aligns. The practice is common enough that I have encountered it across all of the communities in which I have worked,⁴ including the online spaces that form a critical part of many trans people's community-building process. Indeed, these expectations are clearest when they are violated, which sometimes leads to extremely caustic interactions. The spread of these ideas is no doubt catalyzed by the role of technologically-mediated communication in forging connections across geographically separated trans communities.

There are several linguistic strategies through which the importance of lexical self-determination is constructed in trans communities, all of which are grounded in a performative theory of identity. First, community members are generally expected to talk only about their own identifications, and to avoid labeling others' identities unless that individual has indicated how they want to be described. Within trans communities, people are said to have free reign to claim labels like *woman*, *man*, or a non-binary identity label like *genderqueer*, without respect to their transition history, current embodiment, or gender expression. All that is required is that an overt, verbal claim be made – a classic performative utterance (Austin 1962, Hall 2000). By the same token, it could be a potentially serious faux pas to assume that someone identifies as a woman or man based on factors other than overt claims, such as their bodies or mode of gender presentation. At times, these expectations are violated, and the tension that can arise from such violations is perhaps best exemplified by the use of politically and emotionally loaded identity labels.

For instance, Jessica, a white trans woman in her early 20s from Portland, Oregon who split her time between studying math and science and occasionally doing online camwork (i.e. webcam-mediated sex work), told me about an interaction in which she was reprimanded by friends for using the word *tranny*, a term she regularly employs in reference to herself. Her mistake was not in referring to herself as a *tranny*, but in describing an entire group of people consisting of herself and several other trans women as a "bunch of trannies." *Tranny* is an intensely charged word that has received much attention and debate within trans communities because of its history as a slur and the discomfort it elicits for many trans women in particular. If there is a consensus on how to

⁴ This is not universally true, however. There is a subset of the trans community who are sometimes referred to as proponents of the "Harry Benjamin syndrome" as a condition that is reflected by the diagnostic criteria layed out by Benjamin (1966) for identification of the "true transsexual." Some who see themselves as having Harry Benjamin syndrome advocate for a return to older standards of care in which only certain segments of the trans-identifying personality receive medical validation.

address this tension, it is the principle that even within the community, people should be cautious when using this word and take care to apply it only to themselves. While it is largely acceptable to use it as a self-identified label, at least for trans feminine individuals, it is not acceptable to apply that word to others without knowledge of their feelings toward it. However, other-identification is seen as problematic even when the language in question is not considered potentially offensive (e.g. describing someone as a *woman* without knowing that they identify with the term). To deal with this issue, many trans communities have established the norm of directly asking how an individual identifies or how they would like to be referred to. It is now a frequent occurrence for trans individuals meeting for the first time to ask one another what kinds of gendered language – especially pronouns – should be used.

There is another significant way this orientation to self-definition persists in trans discourse, which is evident when speakers are asked to delineate the meaning of gender identity labels. The gender scholars I cited above as having critiqued trans people for reinforcing gender norms often focus their criticism on the way trans people invoke gender stereotypes to validate their identities. For example, Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997) analyze identity narratives elicited from participants in a psychological support group for trans people and find that participants refer to things like childhood play preferences, the gender of close friends and other intimates, or the degree to which they felt they fit in with norms for each gender. Findings of studies of this sort are questionable from the start because they fail to interrogate the power dynamics between cis researchers and those of trans participants, especially where medicine and psychology are involved. Whether due to the dynamics of the research encounter or changes in the trans community over time, it is clear that these patterns diverge significantly from the narratives produced by the approximately 100 trans people I have interviewed over the past 10 years. Instead, I find that few of these interviewees felt compelled to defend the validity of their experiences in the way other authors describe. When pressed on the matter, few appealed to any kind of fixed criteria, let alone stereotypes or normative expectations. Instead, when I asked them to define words like *woman* or *man*, by far the most common response was a direct appeal self-identification. That is, when asked about the meaning and scope of gender identity labels like *woman* or *man*, *feminine* or *masculine*, *trans* or *cis*, the typical response maintains that a woman is a person who self-identifies as a woman, a man is a person who self-identifies as a man, and so on down the line. This strategy creates a decentralized understanding of gender in which one person's idea of womanhood may have little to do with the next's.

The typical approach to self-identification is for an individual to identify the words they want others to use in reference to them. However, it is equally possible to *resist* self-identification as an alternate way of enacting self determination. The practice of resisting identity labels is exemplified by one the participants in my two year ethnographic project on the changing voices of trans masculine people who were just beginning testosterone therapy in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2010-2012. Devin, as I call him, was at the time of the project a 24 year old white genderqueer⁵ trans person who

⁵ *Genderqueer* usually refers to those who do not identify as strictly female or strictly male. In the six years since these data were collected, *non-binary* has become a more frequently used term for this group of identities at the time of this writing.

grew up in a middle-class San Francisco Bay Area suburb and worked as an educator for an environmental organization. Although he did use the words *genderqueer* and *trans* to label himself, my attempts at discovering the other words he aligned himself with proved frustrating for both of us, as Devin felt a deep satisfaction with all of the other gender labels to which he had access. It may seem at first blush that this refusal to self-identify undermines the discourse of individual self-determination. Yet nothing could be further from the truth, because the way Devin and other trans people who avoid labels situate themselves actually heightens their status as individuals whose path will be defined by them alone. When Devin tells me that he does not see himself as a man or woman, but rather as *just a person* or simply *as himself*, he is rejecting the entire enterprise of sharing gender identities with others and instead situates himself as a unique individual whose particularities should be seen as separate from any kind of social structure like gender. What appears as a radical rejection of the system of self-identification is in this case still grounded in that same system's core principles.

The ideal of self-identification, however, is not absolute.⁶ This is reflected by the coining of the word *cisgender*. Derived from the Latin prefix *cis-*, meaning 'on the same side,' *cisgender* emerged as a term within trans communities as a way to refer to those who are not transgender. The word parallels the marking of other unmarked social categories, like being white, male, or straight. Members of normative categories may object to being categorized as such because they don't see their race, gender, sexuality, etc. as important. Most *cis* people are unaware of the word, and so couldn't possibly identify with it; it certainly isn't a word that cis people came up with to describe themselves. Furthermore, some cis people who do know the word don't like to apply it to themselves because they think of themselves as simply women or men. Cis people occasionally even interpret the word as an insult. For trans people, though, identifying cis people as simply "women" or "men" without modification suggests that trans women and men don't fully qualify for those descriptors – not far off from calling cis people "real women" and "real men". It is therefore a vital component of contemporary trans activism to have a symmetrical way of distinguishing a person's status as trans or cis. Despite the wide reach of self-identification discourses, then, it's clear that there are circumstances in which individuals' self-identification is seen as reinforcing transphobia rather than destabilizing it. Such exceptions do not undermine the validity of self-identification among trans people, but it does suggest that there is a complexity to identification that is not captured by the notion of gender self-determination.

To understand the meanings of self-identification, we have to think about the immediate sociocultural context in which such practices occur. I have already discussed how self-identification can be seen as pushing back against hegemonic ideologies about the power of genitals or genetics to determine a person's sex or gender. However, the emphasis on individual self-definition described in this section should also be seen in relation to the politics within trans communities in the late 20th and early 21st century. At

⁶ An anonymous reviewer inquired as to whether this community sees other identities, such as age and race, as open to self-identification. Because this comparison can be extremely inflammatory (in part because of the way it is mobilized to deauthenticate trans people's identities), it deserves a deeper and more careful examination than I can provide currently. For this reason I leave the topic for discussion in other spaces.

least since the late 1990s, when I first came in contact with trans politics in the San Francisco Bay Area and online, certain factions of the trans and gender non-conforming population, broadly defined, have spoken out about being marginalized, delegitimized, and excluded from more mainstream trans spaces. Specifically, non-binary trans people – i.e., individuals who situate themselves in between, or entirely outside of, the gender binary – have historically been erased or delegitimized and generally treated as “not trans enough” to belong (Catalano 2015). This notion of being “not trans enough” persists as a source of anxiety and exclusion, and the shift toward a model of gender identity that is entirely individually-determined should be seen as emanating in part from efforts to address these problems (however successfully or unsuccessfully; see Jones, this issue).

Pronouns

Along with words that carry gendered semantics like *man*, *mother* and *Miss*, Ochs identifies gendered pronouns as another type of direct index of gender to be found in languages like English. In a language without much in the way of grammatical gender, the third person singular pronouns *he/him/his* and *she/her/hers* are the most frequently occurring linguistic clues about how speakers perceive one another’s genders. For trans people, the occasions on which one hears an interlocutor use a singular third person pronoun in the referent’s presence are enormously significant. Asking people to change the pronouns they use is often a milestone of a person’s transition, and being “pronounced” correctly (to use the community’s own language) marks the moment in which a gender identity leaves the mind of a trans person and enters a new reality on the lips of an interlocutor..

Though they lack semantic meaning, pronouns carry indexical meaning, which is to say their referent is determined by context. They also represent an element of grammar that seems to be processed without much conscious thought, at least in contrast with lexical choices that require more self-conscious deliberation. When an English speaker selects a third person singular pronoun, this choice typically happens in lock-step with the assessment of the referent’s gender: “this person appears female, so I will say *she*,” or else “this person appears male, so I will say *he*.” These assessments are supposed to be instantaneous and uncomplicated, accomplished on the basis of clear and unambiguous markers of sex. The automaticity of pronouns is a big part of why pronouns carry so much import for trans people: someone might be saying all the right things to affirm trans identities when they are putting thought into their language, but the pronouns they use have the potential to reveal more deeply ingrained patterns of thought; simply put, pronouns can reveal what you *really* think about someone’s gender. At the same time, the automaticity and frequency of pronouns is precisely what makes the use of new pronouns like *ze* and *hir* more cognitively challenging than, say, switching from one binary pronoun to another.

The fact that interactants are supposed to be able to make gender assignments immediately based on bodily cues is evidenced by the strong anxiety many (cis) people experience at the thought of not knowing how to make sense of someone’s gender and, by extension, not knowing whether to refer to them as *she* or *he*. This fear is driven by the ideology that there are two sexes, which are naturally distinct, objectively identifiable, and non-overlapping and that these sexes correspond with gender roles. Expectations of this sort make unanticipated combinations of sex/gender characteristics confusing, if not

disconcerting. The idea that someone's sex or gender might be unclear threatens the very foundation of this framework, but when confusion arises, the problem can be framed as a sign of aberrance on the part of the ambiguous individual rather than a sign of failure of the gender attribution system.

As I mentioned above, trans-inclusive language practices are not just about the language trans people use – they also challenge the way cis people talk. Cis people may find it challenging to negotiate the use of gendered pronouns in reference to trans people, as several new practices may be involved: using pronouns in ways that may work against speakers' gut reactions on how to gender someone; changing the pronouns used in reference to someone as they progress through a transition (sometimes more than once!); and even using new, unfamiliar pronouns (such as the gender neutral *ze* and *hir*) or using familiar pronouns in new ways (such as singular *they* to index a singular referent). Of course, trans people have to deal with the same challenges, and have developed strategies for these challenges accordingly, including one aimed specifically at resolving pronoun ambiguity: seeking the input of the person to whom you are referring. For many cis people, the idea of asking someone whether they prefer to be called *she*, *he*, *they*, or some other pronoun may sound something like a nightmare come to life, but it has become a standard practice in many trans communities, where the question can be incorporated into ordinary interactions without any threat to interactional harmony.

It is possible for trans people to ask one another about pronoun preferences without causing offense because gendered pronoun usage in trans communities is driven by a fundamentally different logic than that governing more normative uses of these forms. Rather than deriving from the referent's appearance, pronouns are framed as a matter of individual choice. This may seem like a simple extension of the principles described above: if the definition of *man* is open for self-definition and self-selection, then pronouns will go along for the ride. This is the way trans communities have been operating for decades, after all – people who self-identified as women would be called *she* and those who self-identified as men would be called *he*. Yet the growing diversification of gender identities included under the “trans” umbrella label has meant that linking pronouns to specific gender identities is not necessarily any more effective for divining someone's pronouns preferences than is reliance on physical appearance. For this reason, there has been a further shift underway in trans communities over the last several years, in which pronouns have been reconceptualized as their own distinct arena for linguistic self-identification, separate from gender identity.

In other words, pronoun preference is not something that can be deduced from knowing a person's gender identity. Someone who self-identifies as a woman is likely to prefer *she/her/hers* pronouns, but it is entirely possible that such an individual would prefer to be referred to with singular *they/them/their(s)*, for instance. Someone who identifies as non-binary may have any number of pronoun preferences, while people who are still making sense of their relationship with gender, or perhaps just beginning to transition, may not yet be ready to ask people to change their pronoun usage. Just as trans people have long pushed to decouple pronouns from sex assignment at birth, non-binary trans communities in particular are pushing to further decouple pronouns from gender presentation or identity. One reflection of this push can be observed in efforts to change how we refer to gendered pronouns at a metalinguistic level. Conventionally, pronouns are labeled by reference to the gender with which they are associated: *she* is referred to as

a “female” or “feminine” pronoun, while *he* is “male” or “masculine.” These linkages between identities and linguistic forms proves problematic for trans people who may prefer to be referred to as *he*, but who do not identify as male, for instance. Non-binary-identified speakers have led this effort, which includes referring to pronouns in terms of their form. For instance, I might introduce myself to a community member by saying, “My name is Lal, and I use *he/him/his* pronouns.”⁷ Because the logic of pronoun assignment decouples appearance and behavior from gender, it is not just trans or ambiguously gendered people are asked about pronoun preferences; the trans language activist’s goal in this case is to normalize such questions for any interaction.

The practices regarding pronouns that I have just described are a relatively recent addition to the arsenal of linguistic tools for trans identity work. Though the practice is not entirely novel, it is only within the last decade that asking for pronoun preferences has become a common part of interacting in trans (or trans-friendly) spaces. For instance, when I began my ethnographic fieldwork in San Francisco in 2010, the community center groups I attended did not generally prompt everyone to share their pronoun preferences during group introductions, even though each session began with people sharing their names and how their week has gone. By 2016, virtually every trans event I attend that involves self-introductions will request people provide their pronouns along with their names. The short timeline on which such changes can be observed highlights the productivity of self-identification as an approach to language use. In the next section of this article, I discuss another approach to self-identification through language that promises an even more radical departure from cis-normative theories of gender and sex.

Sexual embodiment

As I described above, attempts to define *trans* from inside trans communities tend to focus on disalignment between a person’s self-defined gender identity and the gender role assigned to them at birth. In characterizations coming from outside of trans communities, however, the emphasis is often on a disalignment between gender identity and “biological sex” (see Prosser 2007, Solomon 2010 for in-depth explorations of this concept). This kind of division reflects a well-worn distinction between sex, as a matter of objective, physiological reality, versus gender, a social construction that is separate from the body. The sex/gender split was a critical tool in second-wave feminism that allowed scholars and activists to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of normative expectations placed on women (and men). Decades later, the problematization of the sex/gender distinction was a major part of how feminism shifted as it entered its third wave. Influential theorists like Butler (1990, 1993), Delphy (1993), and Nicholson (1994) have argued that sex, like gender, is a matter of social construction. Evidence from this sentiment has been presented from fields ranging from sociology (Kessler 1998), to anthropology (Herdt 1993), to biology (Fausto-Sterling 2000), to history (Laqueur 1990). Together, this

⁷ Of course, this sense of *use* is not quite literal, since most speakers do not refer to themselves consistently in the third person. However, phrases like “preferred pronouns” and questions like “what pronouns do you prefer?” have been critiqued by activists and scholars like Spade (2011), who points out that the word *preference* could have the effect of downplaying the importance of using pronouns respectfully. Some people simply say “my pronouns are he/him/his.”

literature underscores that different kinds of categorizations of bodily sex are entirely possible, and that the dominant two-sex model should be seen as culturally- and historically-situated.

The construction of sex has also been an area of keen interest from socio-cultural linguists. Feminist perspectives like those presented by Cameron (1992) and Braun and Kitzinger (2001) established the way genital terminology reflects both misogynistic and heterosexist ideology. For instance, Cameron (1992) highlights the frequency with which metaphors for the penis draw on imagery of weapons, war, and violence. Braun and Kitzinger (2001) investigate the presumption of heterosexuality in dictionary definitions for genital parts and show how the vagina is cast as passive, functioning primarily as a place for a man to put his penis. More recently, discussions of queer and transgender embodiment has come into focus as well, as in Borba and Ostermann's (2007) discussion of Brazilian *travestis* bodies, King's (2015) treatment of intersex embodiment, Zimman and Hall's (Zimman & Hall 2009; Zimman 2014) analyses of genital terminology among trans men, and Edelman and Zimman's (2014) exploration of the role of language in establishing the normativity and erotic value of trans bodies. Each of these projects demonstrates how talk about non-normatively sexed bodies reveals the importance of language in constructing particular conceptualizations of sex. Far from "natural" or strictly "biological" in nature, sex is variable, fluid, ideological, and a matter of discursive practice.

The dataset that form the basis of Zimman and Hall (2010) and Zimman (2014) are also informative here. The data consist of posts and comments collected from an online community for trans men and others who were assigned female at birth but who do not identify as such.⁸ The group was especially active between around 2003 and 2013, with hundreds of members who participated regularly in discussion and several hundred more registered members who rarely or never made their own posts. Talk about the body was among the most common pastimes in this community of practice, and at times clashes arose between members concerning how trans bodies should be discussed. However, there was also a shared rejection of the idea that trans men are "biologically female" and that, by extension, trans women are "biologically male." Instead, members framed sex, too, as a matter of self-identification. Rather than treating certain bodies, or parts, as inherently female or male, members of this community deconstruct the elements of body part semantics and reconstruct them in ways that reflect their self-identified genders. In this community, sex as emanating from gender identity – a reversal of the normative ideology that sex precedes, and in some sense causes, gender.

The reconstruction of trans masculine bodies as male bodies is most clearly enacted through the use of traditionally "male" terminology, which is usually of the colloquial rather than technical variety. Trans men in this community most often talk about their genitals with words like *cock* and *dick*, unambiguously gendering themselves as male even if the body parts in question would be considered female by medico-

⁸ The precise scope of community members' identities is hard to specify. The group was overtly dedicated to "FTMs" – female-to-male trans people. However, it had numerous participants who did not identify with this label, most of whom would characterize themselves as non-binary or as simply "men" (who may or may not identify with their trans experience), as well as trans allies.

scientific authorities. Drawing on their knowledge of the continuum that exists between clitorises and penises (Fausto-Sterling 2000), trans men also frequently point to the genital growth testosterone causes as placing their anatomy in a physiologically ambiguous grey area. The practice of referring to trans men's unmodified genitals as *dicks* challenges the core meaning of such a word, which presupposes contiguity between genitals and gender. Zimman (2014) discusses how dictionary definitions for genital terms typically include both a gendered component and a physiological component, which fuse certain each genital component to one, and only one, sex/gender category. Trans people thus face the task of developing identity-affirming ways to deal with this conflation of gender and sex. One of the common ways this relationship is subverted in this community is by pairing commonplace body part language with unexpected referents (e.g. calling a body part a *cock* when others might call it a *clitoris*) and even blending seemingly contradictory elements (e.g. words like *boypussy* or *mangina*). If the connection between genitals and genders is disrupted, a new understanding of sexual embodiment is necessary. When this topic is raised explicitly in this online community, members explain that a male body is nothing more than the body of a male-identified person, whatever that body might look like. Under this logic, a trans man can use a word like *cock* because the word is associated with men's genitals. Biological sex is not determined by the body in this system, but by the subjectivity of the person who animates it.

This description is a truncated account of the ways trans men talk about their bodies; Zimman (2014) provides a more in-depth discussion that emphasizes the power of language to reformulate the gendered meanings of the body. However, Edelman & Zimman (2014, under review), take a different tack by investigating the power structures that enable some trans people to have their gender identities and self-selected language affirmed while others are left without legitimation. So even as these practices show how far linguistic self-identification can go – far enough to disrupt what are thought to be basic “facts” about the natural world – to end the discussion there would be to miss the importance of the sociocultural context in which the notion of gendered self-identification has emerged.

4. The cultural context of self-identification: Neoliberal selves in a monologic world

The picture I've painted of self-identification so far is a rather lonely one. Identity emerges from the inside out, through the kind of self-knowledge that can only be produced, known, and verified by the individual. One question that might arise in the study of self-identification is how this set of practices arose in the particular time and place that it has. The conditions of what has been called late modernity (e.g. Harvey 2005) have often been characterized by the shift toward neoliberalism, an economic philosophy that also functions as a mode of cultural formation. Though some have argued that it has been overused as a theoretical frame, neoliberalism provides an incisive lens for examining the practice of self-identification because it highlights a particular kind of agentive individuality. Neoliberalism is girded in the idea that allowing individuals to act freely, without restriction, produces a kind of trickle-down equality in which action, rather than circumstance, determines each person's fate. The “self” in this theory of personhood is generic, without identity or circumstance, and in that sense necessarily takes on all of the social characteristics of a “generic person” – one unmarked by gender,

race, class, or sexuality. This neoliberal subject is constructed as free to act, unbidden, and in this way neoliberalism erases the uneven circumstances in which individuals' "free action" occurs. The individual is solely responsible for his [sic] own successes and failures, and in this way the realities of systemic inequality are denied.

Discussions of neoliberalism have also captured the irony of self-determination: the same system that *produces* the free subject also *erases* the constraints over that freedom. Inoue's (2007) account of gendered self-making in a Tokyo corporation captures this paradox quite perfectly. She describes how the corporation dealt with workplace gender inequities by offering workshops for women that purported to train attendees to more assertively express their professional ambitions to their (male) managers. The program was designed to "empower" women by giving them the means to realize their own professional desires, but it also located in the problem of underrepresentation of women in corporate leadership in the actions – or rather inaction – of women themselves. In typical neoliberal form, success is attributed to individual agents who use their freedom to fulfill the moral imperative of self-improvement. Lack of success, then, can only be attributed to personal shortcomings of those who fail rather than their different degrees of access to various forms of agency. The very process that creates free agents also erases the constraints actual individuals face when they exercise that freedom.

In this context, the practice of gender self-identification takes on a new political character that situates trans identity practices on a broader historical arc toward greater and greater individual self-determination. As the earlier parts of this paper have emphasized, self-identification can be understood as a form of radical resistance to cissexism.⁹ It is a path that strikes a blow against hegemonic gender assignments in which a person has no input into how their lives will indelibly – even violently – be shaped to fit norms for their assigned sex. Yet what is hidden behind this resistance are the disparities that exist within trans communities and the differential levels of access trans people have to empowerment through linguistic self-determination. For instance, Edelman and Zimman (under review; Zimman 2012) investigate discourses about gender differences in the voice that predominate in interviews with trans masculine individuals who are experiencing hormone-induced vocal masculinization (Zimman *ibid.*, 2015, 2016). In their analysis of language ideologies about the voice, the authors highlight the ways that a more normatively masculine body – and pitch range – provide greater freedom to engage in any kind of gender expression without concern for the ways that employing normatively feminine speech traits might undermine their access to gender recognition.

Embodiment, of course, serves as one of the most powerful authenticators of a trans person's identity (Speer & Green 2007). Trans women who look unexceptionally female generally have little trouble getting others to identify them as women, whereas trans men with very masculine bodies are likely to be gendered as male with little-to-no effort. The trans men I recorded regularly during the early phases of their transitions certainly experienced this contrast, as those whose bodies masculinized rapidly and

⁹ *Cissexism* refers to the cultural mode of thinking in which everyone is presumed to be *cis* (unless they "look trans,") and cis experience is presumed to be normal and natural (Serano 2007).

dramatically had far less trouble getting people in their lives to gender them in accordance with their wishes than they had previously. Those with less normatively gendered bodies, by contrast, generally have to do much more rhetorical work to receive gender recognition. Non-binary individuals, meanwhile, are likely to be misgendered¹⁰ on a regular basis, regardless of their appearance, because of the strength of the ideology that everyone can be categorized as either female or male. This means that within trans communities, there are several dimensions on which access to gender affirmation is regulated. One is embodiment, where the cultural value placed on physical sex is reproduced in ways that affirm the identities of those who don't "look trans." Another is the type of identity articulated, with more normative gender identities receiving far more acceptance than those outside of the female/male binary. But it is important to remember that the reading of identity through the body is mediated by other aspects of identity, such as race and class. While racism results in Eurocentric ideas about what female and male embodiment look like, material wealth provides access to an array of body-changing technologies (including clothing, hair styling, and so on). These connections form the foundation for my final thoughts about privilege and gender acceptance below.

The tensions surrounding self-identification recall the debates over identity and desire that loomed large in the field of language and sexuality following the turn of the century (Kulick 2000; Kulick & Cameron 2003; Bucholtz & Hall 2004, 2005). The theory of identity that emerged from this exchange stressed that identity is not a static property of individuals that pre-exists discourse but rather a dynamic accomplishment that is co-produced in interaction. In other words, identity is *dialogic*. The way trans communities frame self-identification may suggest that identity construction is a solidarity endeavor, but the dialogic qualities of gendered language are not lost on trans people. Self-identification is made on the basis of individual self-knowledge, but the discursive implications of self-identification are far from solitary. After all, trans people don't just use their self-identified pronouns and identity labels in reference to themselves; they are also seeking for others to mirror their linguistic practices. Few trans people receive gender validation without a fight, at least at the beginning of their transitions, and the emotional pain of being misgendered is a widely shared aspect of trans experience. The constant struggle over linguistic agency trans people face creates a tension in which they see gendered language as a matter of self-determination even as they know that at least some of the people they interact with do not acknowledge any such right.

"Call me Caitlyn"

The question of differential degrees of privilege within the trans community can be illustrated by attending to the performative moment in which Caitlyn Jenner came out as a trans woman on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in June of 2015. Jenner is a particularly useful example here because her appearance on this magazine cover sparked a response among both the general population and among trans people whose coming out was not marked by an elegant and identity-affirming photo shoot for a international glamor magazine.

Jenner first came to prominence in the 1970s as a gold medal-winning Olympic athlete and maintained her fame over the decades since through post-Olympic sponsorships with brands like Wheaties cereal, her immediate family members' reality

¹⁰ Being perceived as a gender one does not identify with (usually based on apparent sex).

television-fuelled fame, and by taking on a public image as a conservative businessperson. Jenner's coming out experience was perhaps the most culturally transformative unveiling of this sort since Christine Jorgensen's famed transition in 1952, which constituted the American public's first contact with the modern transsexual (Meyerowitz 2002; Stryker 2008). Though their experiences differed in many ways, there are also certain parallels between Jorgensen and Jenner, both beautiful white women who had previously occupied well-regarded masculine social roles (Jenner, an athlete, and Jorgensen, an Army private) prior to coming out. They both possessed the financial means to transition medically without facing the extensive barriers and waiting periods commonly faced by less economically privileged trans people, and both made front-page news simply for being trans. Their beauty and the profundity of the changes they experienced is undoubtedly part of the attention to their transitions when compared to, say, Chaz Bono, the son of Cher and Sonny Bono, who publically came out as a trans man in 2008 after being known as masculine-presenting lesbian for many years (see also Serano 2007 on the disparate attention paid to trans women versus trans men) or even Renee Richards, whose transition was met with more negative attention than either Jorgensen's or Jenner's.

The sentiment in the public response to Jenner's transition can be represented quantitatively, as she was recognized by Guinness for setting a time record that recalled her Olympic accomplishments: just four hours and three minutes after opening a Twitter account under her new name on June 1, 2015, Jenner became the fastest person to reach 1 million followers on that platform to date (*The Guardian*, June 2, 2015). Though her support was far from universal, Jenner herself has claimed that she has "gotten more flak for being a conservative Republican than [she has] for being trans" (*USA Today*, February 19, 2016). Her dramatic transformation into a beautiful sophisticate, as captured by renowned photographer Annie Leibovitz for a global magazine of fame and glamor, surely had something to do with the overall tenor of the response.

The cover of the July 2015 issue of *Vanity Fair* shows Caitlyn Jenner in a white bustier, legs, arms, and shoulders exposed. Her legs are crossed slightly as she leans onto a stool behind her, halfway seated, with her arms crossed demurely behind her back. Long brown curls cascade over her right shoulder and her face displays a coy, knowing smile with a Mona Lisa quality. Though placing herself in our own gaze, she seems to beckon us into hers. This call is intensified by the text running across Jenner's hourglass midsection, speaking in her voice: "Call me Caitlyn." Her imperative calls the reader into the role of intimate interlocutor who is the recipient of this bald-faced command. The interpolation is unavoidable, even for those who refuse it, as when a former child actor tweeted, without feeling the need for further contextualization, "Sorry...still calling you Bruce" (Jenner's former first name) on the day of her big reveal (*Daily Mail*, June 2, 2015). The Tweet was deleted, complete with apology, but not before being retweeted by at least 3,350 other users.

In the days and weeks that followed the *Vanity Fair* article, murmurs in the trans community focused on the largely positive treatment Jenner seemed to receive. Though the situation was taken as a mark of success for the community's political efforts, many also wondered why Jenner was being treated with so much more respect than the majority trans women, who still face overwhelming rates of discrimination, poverty, and violence (e.g. Grant et al. 2012). Soon after, templates began to circulate on social media that

allowed individual trans people – mostly trans women and transfeminine individuals, as it turned out – to put their own photo on a mock Vanity Fair cover, complete with the same phrase, “Call me [name].” Well over 200 images were collected by one dedicated Tumblr account entitled “My Vanity Fair Cover.” The popularity of this brief, yet powerful, movement reflects two aspects of the state of affairs for trans people in the United States. On one hand, the positive responses to Jenner’s transition helped make 2015 a major year of change for the public representation of trans experience. On the other, 2015 was a year of incredible violence for trans women of color, whose murders were reported at a higher rate than any other year on record (Atkinson 2015).

The support that Jenner experienced suggested a significant change in the response of a population that only a few years earlier might have been far more hostile to the idea of a beloved sports figure transitioning. Indeed, only a few *months* before Jenner officially came out, her increasingly feminine appearance was widely mocked, particularly in sports news coverage. The quick turnaround of this attitude once Jenner began presenting herself in a more conventionally feminine way points to the less positive side of the responses trans people had to the Jenner media-storm. To summarize the heart of the critique that was mounted against the attention she received, Jenner’s experience as a trans woman is far from typical, and the apparent ease of her transition fails to represent the difficulties that the average trans woman experiences upon coming out. For many trans people, the public focus on the acceptance that Jenner experienced erases the brutal reality in which most trans women live. The gap is evident: some trans women are being photographed in luxury sports cars and starring on their own reality television programs while others make it into the media’s eye only after a violent death, leaving no trace of the trans women who thrive in spite of their subjugation. In short, Jenner’s success cannot be separated from her whiteness, her wealth, and her corresponding ability to present herself as an exceptionally beautiful, stylish, sophisticated woman.

The #MyVanityFairCover meme can be understood as an attempt to capture the smallest taste of what Jenner had when she claimed those words, “Call me Caitlyn.” By appropriating her language, trans people whose self-identifications generally go unheard could collectively revoice the power Jenner asserts. The description of the Tumblr blog responsible for the hashtag includes the following text, which reveals the motivation behind the reproduction of Jenner’s cover:

This is a trans pride blog made to showcase the wonderful variety that exists within the transgender community above and beyond what we’re showing in the mainstream media. Ever since Vanity Fair announced their Caitlyn Jenner’s [sic] cover story, many trans people have voiced their concerns that the world only seems to embrace us if we’re wealthy enough or lucky enough to adhere to white, cisnormative beauty standards. [...] And whether we fit those standards or not, we’re beautiful, and we all deserve to feel beautiful, and to be acknowledged by the world. [...] As a good friend of mine said Monday ‘Where’s my Vanity Fair cover?’”

Trans people’s efforts to instill pride in one another are a critical aspect of the role trans communities play in their members’ lives. Yet it remains the case that these trans

individuals were *not* on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, and few of them have had access to the privileges Jenner enjoys. While Jenner has the institutional support and material resources to instruct the reader to call her Caitlyn, her empowerment was for many trans people a reminder of the power they lack.

Jenner's ability to declare her identity and be received in the way she was highlights the uneven effects of self-identification. Though all trans people purportedly share an ability to define themselves linguistically, the responses to those self-identifications are anything but equal. Structural privilege shapes the body and thus provides a solid foundation on which individualistic claims about identity can be made, but many trans people find themselves on unstable ground. In the absence of a million followers on Twitter, who is listening to the self-identification in which trans people are engaged?

5. Conclusion

This article has traced the contours of gender self-identification as a linguistic process within transgender community that is grounded in radical resistance to normative genital-based systems of gender assignment. However, to end the analysis here would be to miss the larger significance of self-identification itself. Self-identification is certainly not limited to trans subjects. A cursory Google search of *self-identified* might include instances of this phrase followed by *Democrats, Republicans, or Independents; ethnicity or multiracial individuals; Evangelicals, Christians, or Jews; veterans, virgins, and even vampires*, in addition to numerous identifiers related to gender and sexual orientation. Rather than being uniquely characteristic of trans people's identities, self-identification is made possible by the larger cultural system from which it has emerged. One critical element of the late modern cultural context is the tenant of neoliberalism, which functions not only as an economic and political philosophy, but also as a theory of self. The neoliberal self is an autonomous individual who, provided with a set of choices, will exercise agency in accordance with their own self-interest, without regard for power relations or social subjectivity. What this notion erases is that choice itself is an unevenly distributed resource, and that even when two individuals are presented with the same choice, the results may differ dramatically.

Neoliberal selfhood produces a subjectivity in which individuals who exercise their autonomy can, at times, make choices that run counter to dominant cultural ideologies like gender norms. Such is the case with gender self-identification, which draws on the well-worn Western distinction between a true inner versus its outer bodily shell. For transgender identities to make sense, the inner self must be able to exercise a certain agency – at least enough to say that the gender it was assigned is in some way not desirable, comfortable, or authentic-feeling. The power of self-identification is thus rooted in the determinations of a neoliberal subject. Yet here, too, the freedom to act is not available to all, nor does that freedom guarantee a warm reception. When each person is free to determine their own fate, and hence responsible for its quality, unfulfilled goals suggest a failure of the person rather than a failure of the processes that govern achievement. The same process that produces the free subject also erases the power disparities it creates.

Recognizing the cultural basis of gender self-determination helps account for the disjunctures between self-identification as a linguistic practice and the way identification

has been theorized in sociocultural linguistics. From the perspective of a theory like the tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall 2004, 2005), even self-identifications are always necessarily dialogic. If there is one great shortcoming to the discourse of self-identification, it is that it does not identify the role of the interlocutor. If gender is for each of us to define for ourselves, at what point does the other step into the picture? The goal of this discussion is not to undermine the elements of empowerment that self-determination offers. As trans theorists like Stanley (2014) have described, gender self-determination is a matter of liberation in the face of brutality and trauma. Instead, this article contextualizes one set of trans self-identification practices in their sociopolitical context in order to highlight the erasure of power dynamics within different segments of the trans population. The deployment of gender self-determination as a radical transformative politics carries ideological baggage that must be acknowledged: an exclusive focus on the freedom to self-identify masks the way power provides legitimation of some identifications while denying that legitimacy to others. Identity is a dialogic accomplishment, and a politics of trans liberation that sees beyond neoliberal subjectivity requires more than trans monologues. Despite its subversive potential, self-identification runs the risk of promising access to a form of power that ultimately proves out of reach. But it would be a mistake to conclude that the power derived from self-identification is entirely illusory; after all, trans activists have already effected a great deal of change in the language ordinarily used to refer to trans people, even if the acceptance of those changing norms is far from universal. What may ultimately be necessary to further that success, however, is a more overt recognition of the dialogic aspects of gender identification. Such a model of model of trans identity, with an explicit role for the interlocutor, would push forth an interpolative call of its own: a call to consider the political implications of our language as we construct one another.

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