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Gender Neutral Pronouns: An  
Engaged Study

By

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## Introduction

In this work I demonstrate curiosity for the changing value of pronouns as linguistic markers of gender identity and how the uptake of gender-neutral pronouns might impact and rescale collective conceptualizations of masculinity, femininity, and gender as a whole. With an applied feminist and queer studies perspective, I contribute new understandings of gender expression, linguistic practice, and identity construction and illuminate the ways in which language informs collective ways of being in the world. More precisely my research questions are as follows: 1) What are the limitations and simultaneous potentials of gender-neutral language use, specifically gender-neutral pronouns? 2) How does gender non-specific pronominal usage impact gender ideologies or the gender binary? 3) How might new patterns of patterns of pronominal usage be facilitated in public spaces? 4) What is the current state of public opinion on issues of gender inclusivity and gender neutrality? By acknowledging the potential ambivalence of pronominal uptake that includes gender non-specific referents, I advocate for gender equality and inclusivity in public spaces and draw attention to the ways in which linguistic practice impacts our collective socio-cultural and socio-political reality.

As a sort of provisional hypothesis for this research, I expected to witness the ways in which pre-existing conceptualizations of gender have informed the current employment of gender non-specific pronominal usage. I suspected that in some ways the use of gender non-specific pronouns works to dismantle binary ways of thinking or acts as a defiance of social order; however, I also anticipated their simultaneous and paradoxical resonance with problematic, binary gender ideologies. What I found, however, is that four main communities of

thought dominate public opinion and discourse on issues of linguistic practice and its relationship to gender ideology- gender queer advocates, gender queer critics, gender conforming allies, and politically motivated speakers. The four communities which I observed in this research study have not been acknowledged by pre-existing literature and are largely excluded from academic discourse entirely. In addition to their unique perspectives and opinions about gender inclusive practices, I also found that the four communities are characterized by distinct understandings of identity and the role it plays as a concept in the social world. The exclusion of these four diverse perspectives from bodies of literature dedicated to gender ideology and linguistic practice has limited the progression of scholarly conversation about pronominal usage. Ultimately, I believe that this failure of pre-existing literature to adopt a more holistic approach, by including perspectives of advocates, critics, allies, and politically motivated speakers, has contributed to a disconnect between scholars and the general public about whom they intend to research and write. This research considers the methods through which gender-neutral pronominal use and uptake should/might be adopted in a way that supports inclusivity without inadvertently reiterating the very issue this form of linguistic practice initially serves to negate. Through this study, I investigate the implementation of gender-neutral pronouns and practices which aim to reduce gender exclusivity in public spaces and synthesize several seemingly contradictory bodies of literature to provide the most holistic and thorough understanding of gender neutrality in language as possible.

Exploring the relationships between pronominal usage, gender ideology, and linguistic uptake in this study will allow for a better understanding of our collective society as well as generate necessary conversation about the ways in which individual actions can greatly impact the lives of others. I feel that questioning changing linguistic practices and considering the

entanglement of what is understood to be progress with the past will allow for a more holistic understanding of social processes. By studying pronominal usage in this way- its relationship to gender equality, political affiliation, and perceived social progress- I illustrate not only the ways in which speakers and speech communities may or may not find agency in language but also the shortcomings of pre-existing literature and academia in the pursuit of progress. An investigation of gender-neutral pronouns allows me to reflect on collective conceptualizations of gender while also providing a lens through which we might imagine a more diverse and inclusive future.

## **Literature Review**

Here I build upon and contribute to pre-existing scholarship which centers on the institution of gender as a locus of identity, power, and sociocultural progress. To be more specific, in my research I place radical feminist perspectives and transfeminist perspectives in conversation with one another in order to take a more holistic approach and fill a literary gap which has neglected the public state of opinion on gender ideology and pronominal usage. In addition, I incorporate and build off pre-existing literature which has addressed the application of linguistic gender neutrality and the practices through which gender neutrality and inclusivity may be achieved. The four communities of thought- gender queer advocates, gender queer critics, gender conforming allies, and politically motivated speakers- are neglected in bodies of literature associated with gender ideology and linguistic practice. Through an evaluation of transfeminist literature, gender critical literature, and applied literature I exemplify and address this failure of scholarship to appropriately reflect the current state of opinion on the potentials and limitations of gender-neutral pronoun use and its role in creating gender inclusivity and equality. Although each body of literature which I address does indeed relate in some way to the four communities of thought which I have identified, they fail to comprehensively consider the ways in which

opposing ideologies around pronoun use and gender neutrality are at play with one another in society.

### **Transfeminist Literature**

Anne Bodine, in her work entitled, “Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular ‘They’, Sex-Indefinite ‘He’, and ‘He or She,’” argues against the sex indefinite “he” as a universal pronoun and advocates for the use of third person singular they, which has existed throughout history. She confronts the work of prescriptive grammarians with a feminist perspective and questions the ideological power held within language and its use (Bodine, 1975). Bodine, like most scholars theorizing language through a transfeminist lens, explores the ways in which the use of sex indefinite pronouns as a gender neutral and inclusive speech pattern might impact the field of linguistics as a whole (Bodine 1975). She positions personal reference, including pronouns, as one of the most socially significant aspects of language which may become the “target of deliberate efforts to bring symbolic representation of interpersonal relations into line with the way those relationships are structured in either the ideal or behavioral patterning” of a speech community (Bodine 144, 1975). As she theorizes language and sex-based hierarchy in this piece, she expects that as the push for gender equality strengthens, third person pronouns will evolve to reflect new ideologies and social practices (Bodine 1975). Like Bodine, I employ feminist theory in my work. While Bodine seems to merely advocate for the use of singular they, gender nonspecific pronouns, and acknowledges their possible emergence over time, I consider the social impacts and diverse opinions surrounding the issue of pronominal usage and gender equality.

Further exemplifying the difficulty of transfeminist literature to comprehensively explore the nuances of gender inclusive practices the article, “Singular *they* and the syntactic

representation of gender in English,” written by Bronwick Bjorkman, analyzes the historical use of singular they as a universal, unmarked pronoun (Bjorkman, 2017). In discussing the syntactical impacts of gender nonspecific pronouns, she offers a structural and grammatical analysis of gender but even still does not fully recognize the varying communities of thought that predominate public opinion. She argues that the use of third person pronouns to reference singularity has “implications for our understanding of both noun variable pronouns, and the role of gender in regulating pronominal coreference” (Bjorkman 2, 2017). Similar to Bodine, Bjorkman considers they pronouns to be innovative and radical in the face of gender inequality and exclusivity. Her formal linguistic approach to this question of gendered representation and language use will provide my work with technical linguistic and historical background information; however, like other scholars I have already and will later mention in this section, her work neglects ideological variety and ignores the limitations of gender neutrality. Although I do plan to make use of her work, I humanize the concepts she explores through my reliance on virtual reddit conversations, and I pay greater attention to the impacts of gender-neutral linguistic practice on communal spaces and individual experience rather than the grammatical, syntactic representations of gender in pronominal usage.

Centered on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth with health organizations, Brown et. al. (2020) advocates for gender affirming linguistic practices and theoretically postures their work in uniform with that of Bodine (1975) and Bjorkman (2017). Specifically, the study explores the ways in which in-community discussions, enacted by LGBTQ adolescents, characterize personal pronouns and their importance for transgender and gender diverse (TGD) people. The study is presented methodologically as a “secondary qualitative analysis” consisting of 66 interviews with TGD youth from parts of Canada and the United States (Brown et. al.,

2020). Emerging from this study were four main themes which described features of personal, preferred pronoun use as perceived and related to transgender and gender diverse individuals which are, 1) positive views on pronoun checking, 2) importance of appropriate pronouns, 3) pronouns in the learning process, and 4) navigating complex contexts (Brown et. al., 2020). The study and its following report rely on accounts of TGD youth about in-group understandings of pronoun use in relation to social justice, acknowledges both the limitations and strengths of “progressive” linguistic practice, and ultimately advocates for the uptake of such inclusive speech patterns in health care spaces. Similar to Bodine (1975) and Bjorkman (2017), and as is characteristic of transfeminist literature that is linguistically oriented, Brown et. al. (2020) discusses the potentials of gender-neutral linguistic practices and develops a seemingly unrefined argument in that they do not also acknowledge the potential shortcomings of gender neutrality or the ideological diversity that exists within the LGBTQ+ community during in-group conversations.

Improving upon the approaches of Bodine (1975), Bjorkman (2017), and Brown et. al. (2020), Lucy Nicholas and Sal Clark, in their article “Leave those kids alone: On the uses and abuses and feminist queer potential of non-binary and genderqueer,” synthesize contrary theories about nonbinary and genderqueer identities, concepts, and practices and argue that the expansion of gender is not antithetical to the abolition of gender. They explore the concept of hyper-identity politics and its critiques while simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of gender expansion under a binary system. At its foundation, the argument of their paper is that gender proliferations, such as non-binary identity and gender-neutral pronouns, are effective and pragmatic advances towards dismantling the gender binary (Nicholas et. al. 2020). To begin, Nicholas and Clark consider how to mitigate the potential collapse of genderqueer and non-



binary to normativity by imbuing them with a queer ethos. In order to explore the implications and possible sociocultural/political impacts of gender proliferations to the feminist degendering movement, they evaluate gender critical perspectives and transfeminist perspectives at once; however, they primarily focus on personal identity and largely exclude any conversation of political motivations for queering one's identity and speech patterns. Ultimately, through their review of prominent and opposing bodies of literature, they conclude that gender queer identities and linguistic practices will not result in either liberation from or perpetuation of the gender binary. Although Nicholas and Clark (2020) do in fact incorporate opposing bodies of literature on this topic, like the other works listed here, they neglect the political motivations and implications that may give life to and arise from the employment of gender-neutral terminology and practice.

As demonstrated in the works of Bodine (1975), Bjorkman (2017), Brown et. al. (2020), and Nicholas and Clark (2020), transfeminist literature dedicated to linguistic practice and gender ideology, as a corpus, lacks a certain amount of scrupulousness and tends to focus only on the potential of gender inclusive language reform. While this issue is of course, as I have presented, prevalent in transfeminist, linguistically oriented works it also seems to afflict scholars who adopt differing theoretical approaches. In the following section, devoted to studies that contribute a more gender critical perspective to the scholarly conversation about gender inclusivity in linguistic practice, this partiality and blindness to ideological variety is demonstrated in reverse.

## **Gender Critical Literature**

As an inversion of the transfeminist literature included in my review, gender critical literature, which I will reference here, postures itself against trans ideology and maintains confidence in the current linguistic and ideological gender structure. The works cited in this section do not necessarily denounce transfeminism or the queering of gender itself but instead believe that the modification of linguistic practice, under the preexisting gender binary, is not an effective or pragmatic approach to gender reform for several reasons which I will outline below. In opposition to the aforementioned transfeminist literature, I include work that assumes a more gender critical feminist perspective, such as that of Sheila Jeffreys (2014), Luce Irigaray (2013), and Judith Lorber (2000, 2018).

In her evocative book *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*. Jeffreys assumes a “radical feminist” perspective in her work and explores the ways in which transgenderism restructures and potentially reifies the concept of gender more broadly (Jeffreys 2014). Through her work, she reveals her belief in that the ways in which gender is utilized and employed in the processes of queering gender will result in the reiteration of harmful gender ideologies (Jeffreys 2014). Jeffreys recognizes the “gender belief system” and the ways in which it subordinates women through the assumption of naturalized gender differences; however, simultaneously, she believes, and her book focuses on, transgenderism as a problematic symptom of the system that harms many individuals by its encapsulation of gender (Jeffreys 2014). Her book questions gender stereotyping in the transgender and LGBTQIA communities and offers a provocative argument against gender queering and instead advocates for the abolition of gender, as a structure, entirely. Although I find her analysis, perspective, and framing of the topic rather extreme (in that she likens transgenderism to eugenics), I also explore the concept of gender abolition. Jeffreys does an exquisite job acknowledging the shortcomings

of gender proliferations and neutrality but ignores the potential for positive social transformation through linguistic reform.

Similar to Jeffreys (2014), Luce Irigaray argues against the neutralization of grammatical gender and promotes the (re)valorization of feminine words, objects, and subjectivities. She adopts a unique feminist approach toward the linguistic phenomenon or practice of objectifying women and the feminine. Although similar to Bodine (1975) in her advocacy for the employment of singular they, Irigaray seems to align slightly more with Jeffreys (2014) in that she adopts a conceptual gender abolitionist approach. While she does posit that gendered language and grammar reinforces the objectification and subversion of women, she ultimately concludes that neutralizing grammatical gender merely abolishes the differences between sexed subjectivities and therefore believes that abandoning gendered language would be counterintuitive in the movement for gender inclusivity and equality (Irigaray 2013). Irigaray seems to toggle between a progressive and conservative approach to reforming the genderedness of language: she acknowledges that language reifies the binary and says that a transformation will only occur through the (re) valorization of the feminine and feminine words (Irigaray 2013). Although the work of Irigaray informs my general approach to the topic, she, like most scholars involved in this conversation, does not fully recognize the complexity and nuance of the implementation and implications of gender-neutral linguistic practice. She grapples with the “positive connotation of the masculine as word gender” which “derives from the time of the establishment of patriarchal and phallogocentric power” and that subsequently devalued feminine word gender (Irigaray 120, 2013). Like Jeffreys (2014) and her predecessor Irigaray (2013), I acknowledge the ways in which language use (in this case pronouns, including those which have been labeled as non-binary) works to reify detrimental conceptualizations of gender but in

contrast, I also explore the potential for positive social impact through the lived experiences of gender queer folks.

To further reveal the gap in relevant literature I invoke Judith Lorber and her foundational article titled, “Using Gender to Undo Gender: a feminist degendering movement,” which advocates for the deconstruction of the gender binary, and therefore the unequal valuation of femininity and masculinity, in its entirety. Similar to both Jeffreys (2014) and Irigaray (2013) in her abolitionist rather than proliferationist approach she remains firm in her claim that binary ways of thinking about gender continue to undergird societal structure and therefore any expansion of gendered/agendered identifications. In her structural analysis of gendered social organization, she refers to gendering as a process in the manufacturing of social order and argues that the gendered social order can and should be subverted at the level of biological assumptions rather than linguistically which she regards as topical (Lorber 2000). Lorber calls to action a feminist movement dedicated to the degendering of society while attempting to navigate the feminist paradox which refers to the ways in which erasure leads to invocation of gender stereotypes as gender equality. Ultimately, she urges for a “feminist degendering movement” that does not erase or neutralize masculinity or femininity but instead disbands any sort of gender connotations or stereotypes that lead to hierarchy and hegemony.

In her later work, “Paradoxes of Gender Redux,” Judith Lorber again seems to resist the exponential multiplication of gender identities, which has occurred due to the expansion of transfeminist thought and the concept of transgenderism more broadly as an umbrella term rather than an individual identifier only. She identifies many recent iterations of gender expansion such as gender queer, non-binary, indeterminant, bigender, agender, gender fluid, etc., and observes that although such proliferations blur the points and poles of the gender spectrum, they do not, in

her opinion, disrupt the gendered social order (Lorber 2018). Lorber struggles to reconcile or recognize the ways in which the creation of multiple genders within a society organized around a binary structure of gender, will actually be able to effect structural and long-lasting change that will free individuals from identity constraints. Throughout this piece, she maintains her position that the emergent non-binary identity and all its variant forms are “too heterogenous and too fragmented” to effect change on the structural and political level but simultaneously fails to acknowledge the potential for change on the individual and interactional level.

While the works of Jeffreys (2014), Irigaray (2013), and Lorber (2000, 2018) thoroughly dissect the limitations of gender neutrality to generate mass change on the structural and political level, they neglect the individual in their discussions of linguistic reform and gender proliferation. Just as the transfeminist works succumb to partiality by neglecting potential shortcomings of linguistic reform and gender neutrality, works informed by a gender critical perspective also fail to thoughtfully consider the varying levels at which linguistic change may have positive impacts on gendered social order. As I have demonstrated in both transfeminist and gender critical literature, this phenomenon of unscrupulousness pervades another body of works relating to linguistic and gender reform which I will continue to outline below.

### **Applied Literature**

To ground my research, I also build upon the body of literature which discusses the impacts and processes of application of gender-neutral language in public spaces, such as the work of Lal Zimman (2018), Bradley et. al. (2019), and Ehrlich et. al. (1992). Each of these works discuss the practical application of linguistic reform and offer methodological insight into the ways in which linguistic gender neutrality may be implemented and taken up by speakers.

Similar to the issues I have outlined in the previous two sections, transfeminist literature and gender critical literature, the applied literature, which I invoke here, again reveals a lack of consideration of the diverse in-group opinions about linguistic and practical gender neutrality and unwaveringly advocates for its implementation.

In his work entitled “Pronouns and Possibilities: Transgender Language Activist, and Reform,” Zimman discusses the importance of language in the experiences of trans individuals. He describes the power of language usage in his attempt to advocate for more inclusive, and less inherently gendered ways of speaking which promote inclusivity, diversity, and acceptance particularly of transgender people. According to Zimman, transgenderism highlights the integral role of language in identity formation and subsequently offers a brief educational condensation of linguistic strategies that the gender queer community has developed to promote acceptance, inclusivity, and normalization (Zimman 2018). His work presents itself as an informative guide to adopting gender neutral and more inclusive linguistic speech practices with gender non-conforming folks in mind; however, he does not account for the ideological disconnect between varying sects of the LGBTQ+ community (Zimman 2018). His argument and advice are developed around the principle that cissexist language patterns are constituted by and constitutive of the gender binary (Zimman 2018). While I agree with Zimman’s position and advocacy for gender queer and trans acceptance, I hope to further address the reasons why this form of pronominal use has become desirable for specific demographics of people who are adopting/embracing nonbinary gender expressions. I do not intend to deny Zimman’s approach to language and gender queer inclusivity through speech, but I acknowledge both the limitations and potentials of this form of progressive linguistic practice, which he fails to do.

In their report on an experiment which investigated the efficacy of singular they and neopronouns as markers of gender neutrality and non-binary identity, Bradley et. al. (2019) works to better understand the ways in which pronouns are interpreted by both speakers and receivers. Although like Zimman (2018) in their applied perspective and advocacy for gender neutrality and inclusive linguistic practice, this study differs in its focus on the perceptions of speakers and receivers rather than serving as an instructional guide for interactional reformation. Their experiment addresses the need of speakers to refer to gender non-conforming antecedents for the purposes of inclusivity; however, they question the underexplored “distinction between gender- neutral (silent on gender) [and] non-binary (referring to gender- nonconforming referents) pronouns” and their ability to adequately convey identity unrestricted by predisposed understandings of gender tropes or general bias based on context (Bradley et. al. 2019, 1). Procedures for the experiment first had participants to read descriptions of individuals and choose a photo they believed to represent the person about which they had initially read- each participant read ten prompts which figured scholarship applications for a diverse set of individuals all classified, though unbeknownst to the participant, as masculine, feminine, and gender neutral/ non-binary (Bradley et. al. 2019, 2). The prompts featured randomly assigned pronouns, including conventional binary pronouns, singular they pronouns, and novel or neo pronouns and the photos shown pictured individuals that were categorized as either masculine, feminine, or androgynous with regards to physicality and material adornment. Using a Chi-squared test to determine the distribution of responses, the researchers found that their results indicated they pronouns as a viable option for representing gender non-conformity and gender neutrality for both speakers and receivers- because of the grammatical structure of the English language, as well as its historical use in instances of uncertainty, singular they, according to this

experiment seems to be naturally occurring option for reflecting “nonbinariness” (Bradley et. al. 2019). Like Zimman (2018), Bradley et. al. (2019) demonstrates the potentials of gender-neutral pronominal usage and practices but does not consider the multiplicity of gender nonconforming identities and the nuanced pronominal applications they would require.

Further exemplifying the viability of gender nonspecific pronoun use and literary blind spots Ehrlich and King (1992) join Zimman (2018) and Bradley et. al. (2019) in their discussion of linguistic reform and its application. In their article titled, “Gender-based language reform and the social construction of meaning,” Ehrlich and King intend to advocate for gender equity through linguistic practices and acknowledge potential reasons for success and failure in innovating language. They incorporate the work of many feminist scholars and linguistic theorists as they aim to address the efficacy of language reform in promoting equality and advancing social justice and progress more generally. In their investigation of language reform, they simultaneously explore the ways in which meaning is constructed both socially and linguistically and ultimately arrive at the conclusion that “linguistic meanings are, to a large extent, determined by the dominant cultures' social values and attitudes” (Ehrlich et. al. 1992, 152). To advance their claims and “given that language is not a neutral vehicle in the representation of reality,” (Ehrlich et. al. 1992, 152) the authors work through various examples in which non-sexist or progressive language reform has been “appropriated” by oppositional speech communities and subsequently undergo semantic reversal (Ehrlich et. al. 1992, 164). Ehrlich and King believe that the first step in reforming language successfully is general consensus in the innovating speech community around an appropriate linguistic solution, and second, the development of language guidelines around which speakers may collaborate on and incorporate adequate solutions- the LGBTQ+ community, as I will later discuss, has not yet



reached a general consensus or even begun to make space for comprehensive conversation about language reform.

Much of the existing literature that is dedicated to discourse on gender neutrality in linguistic practice assumes polarized perspectives that invalidate and ignore oppositional points of view. In scholarship two categories have emerged: studies that advocate for and agree with gender neutrality entirely, and studies that disagree and do not. Although it is indeed important to acknowledge both the limitations and potentials of gender neutrality- as works produced by each of these poles so do individually- it is equally important to recognize them simultaneously and holistically as collaborators rather than opponents. In my work I place transfeminist, positive perspectives on gender neutrality in direct conversation with negative, gender critical positions on gender neutrality with the intent of negotiating a means through which it might be possible to generate greater inclusivity and understanding between opposing perspectives on the issue. Currently there seems to be a gap in pre-existing literature that fails to explore contrasting perspectives and to imagine both perspectives' roles in informing the application of inclusive linguistic practice. Through the juxtaposition of transfeminism and gender critical feminism on the issue of gender-neutral language, I assist in the formulation of a more holistic and thorough approach to implementing progressive and inclusive language.

## **Methodology**

This study consists of digital ethnographic research. Specifically, I synthesized data from public online forums, primarily Reddit threads dedicated to conversation about pronominal usage and gender equality. I did not post or contribute to any of the forums from which I chose to obtain data for this study. Many online forums contribute to the creation of communities in

which individuals derive their understandings of themselves and society- I immersed myself in these communities in order to observe the ways in which pronominal usage is discussed within and beyond the gender queer community. I collected information from various anonymized sources and attempted to generate an applied study which will promote gender equality through linguistic practice. I focused on two specific Reddit threads, r/Nonbinary and r/genderfluid in order to generate a better understanding of the ways in which various communities discuss and conceptualize the topics of gender neutrality, non-binary identity, and linguistic practice. From these two threads I collected comments and posts that specifically related to the issue of gender-neutral pronominal usage. I then coded the data to elucidate the patterns most salient in the digital discussion.

## **Findings and Analysis**

Focusing on Reddit forums r/Nonbinary and r/genderfluid, I have encountered four emergent categories or perspectives under which/ from which individuals' responses to and application of gender neutrality in pronominal usage may be understood: *Gender Queer Advocates, Gender Queer Critics, Gender Conforming Allies, and Politically Motivated Speakers*. Upon coding my collected data thematically, I recognized the four major perspectives from which Reddit community members, of these two threads, discussed and expressed their positions on the matter of gender-neutral pronominal usage and gender inclusive interactional practices. Corresponding with each distinct community of thought, I also observed unique conceptualizations of identity and its role in constructing social order that contributed to the reddit users' opinions about gender neutrality and linguistic reform. Each community valorized identity- as individual, collective, and agentive- and its role in the construction and maintenance

of social order differently and therefore responded differently in conversation about gender ideology and its relationship to language.

### **Gender Queer Advocates**

The first perspective/category I identified, *gender queer advocates*, is composed of gender queer individuals- non-binary, transgender, fluid, etc.- that situate themselves as advocates for gender neutrality in pronominal usage as well as promote gender inclusive practices, such as asking others for their preferred pronouns in initial stages of social interactions. As a community that is promoting gender neutral language usage and interactional practice, the gender queer advocates intend to normalize gender queer identification as well as inclusive linguistic uptake and practice in face-to-face interaction. The comments and posts that allowed for the acknowledgement of this thematic, perspectival category are characterized by positivity toward gender neutral, nonbinary identities as well as gender neutral and inclusive interactional practices. The community members who have assumed this perspective advocate for the practice of asking others about their gender identity and preferred pronouns in conversation and intellectually embody transfeminist ideologies. Gender queer advocates believe that gender neutrality and inclusivity in linguistic practice will advance the normalization of gender nonconforming identification and that inclusive speech and interactional practices will lead to more accepting, tolerant, diverse, and safer spaces.

### **Normalizing non-binary identities and interactional practice**

One of the main reasons that members of the community I have labeled as the gender queer advocates encourages the proliferation of gender inclusive and gender-neutral linguistic practices is the assumption that, over time, increased exposure to such practices will lead to the normalization of non-binary and gender non-conforming people and their identities. The

comments left by gender queer advocates reveal their belief in the expansion of gender neutrality and the supposed, subsequent normalization of gender nonconformity. As individuals of the gender queer, non-binary community themselves, they center their identity as the focus of gender inclusive practices, such as prompting conversation about preferential pronoun usage in interactions.

*“We should be normalizing asking people how they want to be addressed or referred to. I understand it might make some more sensitive binary trans people uncomfortable at first. We can't build a world where sex, gender, and presentation truly exist independently for everyone until the idea that one should be able to tell just by looking” [sic]*

Despite recognizing the potential issues gender neutrality and gender inclusive practices could imbue upon the transgender community, the user quoted above, like many others, remains firm in their conviction that normalization of gender inclusive/ gender neutral linguistic and interactional practices offer the most promising solution and will lead to greater acceptance and visibility. Viewed as an inherently inclusive practice by the gender queer advocates, asking for pronouns exists as a form of mundane, routine activism that offers a long-term resolution to gender inequality by rewiring the ways in which people conceptualize gender as a social construct.

*“The problem is currently in our society our society views pronouns as a trans thing (which is rather silly) if we normalize asking people their pronouns just as*

*you would ask someone their name it creates a climate that's much safer for trans people. That's also why it's very encouraged for cis people to put their pronouns in their bio, or for heterosexual people to say partner while referring to their boyfriend or girlfriend. Normalizing these things creates a safer climate for queer people. If everyone wears pronoun pins and says partner, you won't be able to tell the queer people from the cis/heteronormative people which actually creates a climate where less people get outed. If we live in a society where the word partner isn't automatically associated with being gay, I would get outed a lot less."*

For the gender queer advocates, as is mentioned in this user's comment, it is desirable for people of all gender identities to make their pronouns public and accessible so that attention is not automatically or only directed towards those who are visibly gender non-conforming. This concept of normalization seems to drive the community's inclination towards gender neutrality, gender inclusive practices, and non-binary pronominal usage- alongside the achievement of normalization there is an assumption of an accompanying greater respect and inclusivity along the gender spectrum.

### **Awareness and Visibility**

In addition to their hope for normalization through the routinization of gender inclusive linguistic practice and gender-neutral speech patterns, several of the users seemed to personally appreciate being asked for their pronouns because they felt it afforded them true visibility and symbolized social awareness of the existence of non-binary and gender non-conforming people. While inclusivity, visibility, and social awareness are undoubtedly intricately and inherently related to one another, conversation about awareness and visibility seemed to differ from

discourse on inclusivity in that, overall, it was less isolated to particular settings. Unlike inclusivity, which was often discussed through anecdotal descriptions of inclusivity initiatives at work, school, and various other shared spaces, visibility and social awareness was primarily described through language that focused more intently on the feelings of individuals. Whether a user believed gender inclusive and neutral linguistic, interactional practices truly contributed to growing social awareness and visibility depended more heavily on individual experiences and preferences whereas the push for normalization was more universally shared in the gender queer advocates community. As this user demonstrates, for some non-binary and gender queer individuals, being asked to identify themselves or being asked for their preferred pronouns provides an opportunity to be honest about their gender that may not have occurred organically.

*“I think I may be the minority here, but I love when people ask me my pronouns? I’m a bit shy about being nonbinary so i don’t mention it or my pronouns to ppl unless we’ve been friends for like a few months, and most people assume to use she/her with me based off my appearance, so someone asking gives me the opportunity to open up about it and have one less person misgender me. but I understand for others being asked it could put them in a tricky situation.”*

This user, who identifies as non-binary, notes their appreciation for gender inclusive/neutral speech practices in that it seems fortuitous and provides them with the ability to have their identity recognized and their preferences adequately met.

### **Gender Queer Critics**

The community that I have identified as *gender queer critics* positions itself in opposition to the perspective of gender queer advocates. Composed of gender queer individuals who do not support the uptake of entirely gender-neutral linguistic use and practices, this community aims to defend the rights, visibility, and social acceptance of transgender individuals and to protect the privacy and safety of gender non-conforming folks as they navigate the world. From the posts and comments which contributed to this emergent theme, community, or perspective, a negative outlook on the practice of inquiring about pronouns during interactions was evident. The Reddit users involved in discourse about gender neutrality and inclusivity that I classified as gender queer critics have offered critiques of non-binary pronoun usage and the discursive practices which inevitably accompany the transition from a binary model of gender to a trinary model. Gender queer critics, as I have observed, experience a sense of discomfort with practices that originally intend to promote inclusivity, such as asking for preferred pronouns, because of the ways in which they often require non-conforming people to “out” themselves as queer in public, potentially unsafe spaces. In addition, many gender queer critics who identify as transgender or advocate for transgender rights, reject gender neutrality because of the ways in which its implementation and uptake in linguistic practice blurs the definition of gender and transgenderism in a way that reduces trans visibility and acceptance.

### **Concerns for privacy and safety**

Many gender queer critics, expressed concern about privacy and safety in their online discussions about how best to implement gender neutrality and inclusivity in interactions in various public settings. While the Reddit users classified into this category do recognize the validity of and embody gender nonconformity, they simultaneously seem to acknowledge the limitations of gender-neutral linguistic usage and practices when employed in a seemingly

innately gendered social order. Commiserating with other fellow members of the digital Reddit community, many users felt that being asked to identify their pronouns, either on documents or in social interactions, caused them to feel pressure to out themselves. They were hesitant to confirm their gender nonconformity through their preferred non-binary pronouns because they felt that in some ways it was a violation of privacy and a risk of personal safety. In addition, practices as such seem to place the burden of social awareness and activism on the shoulders of marginalized individuals or non-conforming individuals. The need to clarify, explain, defend one's gender identity to their peers unfairly hinders their perception of normal workplace involvement while also othering their identity in the first place. One user recalled their experience at work with distaste:

*“I leave the pronouns field blank at work for this reason. I kinda resent the pressure to out myself, and I don't feel like explaining what any/all actually means for me in that context. There is the option to use "ask" as your pronouns, but this seems like a hassle. So my best solution is to leave it blank and force people to guess, which means everyone just assumes I'm a cis man.”*

In this instance in particular, the user felt that their non-binary identity, and the need to explain their identity to coworkers, placed them in an uncomfortable situation that forced them to choose between validating their own identity or betraying it for the sake of privacy, safety, and comfort in the workplace. While individuals who conform to gender roles or binary gender identities are not expected to justify their identity and personally encourage acceptance and tolerance of their preferred pronouns, gender non-conforming or non-binary folks are made “other” or abnormal in



diversity and inclusion initiatives. Blatantly asking for pronouns, in this particular online community, seemed to frequently conjure up sentiments of personal violation and confusion. Taking a similar position, other users posted their experiences with and feelings about being asked to declare their gender non-conforming or non-binary identity:

*“I hate getting asked my pronouns. I don't want to have to choose between outing myself and lying when I'm just trying to live my life. If I care enough to correct you, I will, but most of the time I don't really care and I'm just trying to get through the day. (Also, around 90% of the time the people asking my pronouns just use the wrong ones anyway. Sometimes they very dramatically apologize after which just draws more unwanted attention and does nothing to make me feel accepted)”*

In this comment here, again, a perceived violation of privacy seems to ignite discomfort in this gender non-conforming individual as they are just trying to live their life. For this user in particular it seems that external validation from coworkers or other counterparts does not seem to be an integral part of achieving inclusion and personal validation of their gender identity. They express a sort of indifference to their peers' responses, uptake, and understanding of their personal gender identity and dislike the notion that diversity and inclusion can only be promoted through the probing and policing of gender non-conforming peoples in collective spaces.

*“I lived it. My work tried to do a diversity thing where everyone wrote their pronouns on a name tag. I called in sick because I could not deal with it.”*

*Normalization of a nightmare scenario doesn't fix anything. It just makes more nightmares. You're still going to put people through shit and drive them away. How about we don't out people period and just give them room and space to share. Normalize sharing, don't normalize inquisitions.”*

Additionally, asking individuals for their pronouns in social interactions, especially for those who embody or identify with gender nonconformity, places the responsibility to inform and educate others who may not be knowledgeable about non-binary identities on the individual, further increasing the violation of privacy and concerns for safety. By asking for individuals' preferred pronouns, as interpreted by members of the gender queer critics community I have identified, persons who do not identify with their gender assigned at birth may feel that their privacy and safety are at risk and are made responsible for the education of others. Although this seemingly gender inclusive practice is intended to promote acceptance, visibility, and, of course, inclusion, it seems to, in the opinion of the gender queer critics, paradoxically violate, isolate, and make vulnerable those who identify beyond the gender binary. Many of the users and comments that contributed to the revelation of this community of gender queer critics echo sentiments of violation and intrusion when forced to endure interactional and linguistic practices that are initially intended to encourage normalization, visibility, and acceptance overall. Furthermore, comments and users I have classified under the gender queer critic category illuminate the shortcomings of entirely gender-neutral linguistic practice in the case of pronominal uncertainty in social interactions. While some activists and advocates support a larger scale transition to gender neutral linguistic practices, such as defaulting to non-binary pronouns, gender queer critics recognize the limitations of such language use and acknowledge

the vast nature of gender identity and the ways in which even gender neutrality itself cannot appeal to or accommodate all people of all identifications.

*“They/them is misgendering someone if you do know what their pronouns are, and they aren't they/them. For example, if you know a trans woman who uses she/her pronouns, and you use they/them to avoid using the pronouns that are correct for her, it's misgendering even though they is an unknown-gender neutral pronoun. I describe it that way on purpose: it's only neutral if the person's correct pronouns are unknown.”*

Defaulting to nonbinary, they/them pronouns according to this user is not a viable solution for promoting inclusivity because it does not validate the identities of individuals who do identify with their gender assigned at birth and the subsequent linguistic markers by which that gender is accompanied nor does complete linguistic neutrality accommodate those who wish to be referred to with binary pronouns for any reason regardless of their biological sex. Similarly, one user felt that:

*“In my experience a trinary model is just a binary model with extra steps. I don't fit into two categories; I don't fit into three categories either. Adding more categories to a bad model isn't going to fix it.”*

According to users and comments classified as gender queer critics, universally gender-neutral language is insufficient when accounting for the vast complexity of gender identity. For the gender queer critic community, members of which identify beyond the gender binary, gender

neutral linguistic practices, such as asking for preferred pronouns in social interaction, does not support the gender inclusivity it intends but rather violates the privacy, safety, and comfort of gender queer individuals while also, according to some, inaccurately or inadequately aligning with their identities in the first place. Additionally, the use of entirely gender-neutral language fails to account for the vastness of gender as a spectrum and is, at times, contrary to the inclusivity for which it intends to advocate in that it fails to recognize the linguistic preferences of individuals who do choose to identify with one pole of the gender binary regardless of biological sex at birth.

### **Issues of transgender visibility and validity**

The second most prominent theme that manifested in the community of gender queer critics and their posts on Reddit, was concern for the impacts of gender neutrality and gender inclusive interactional practices on the experiences of individuals who identify as transgender. For binary transgender people, who disassociate from their assigned sex/gender at birth and in place identify with the opposite binary gender, achieving acceptance or “passing” as the gender as which they choose to live may be important for the affirmation of their identity. To ask a trans person for their preferred pronouns, when they are striving to gain social acceptance, recognition, and respect, may hinder their visibility and validity while also diminishing personal comfort and happiness. Users from the gender queer critic community which I have identified, expressed concerns for the wellbeing of the trans community with the implementation of gender-neutral linguistic uptake as well as gender inclusive interactional practices. Not only do individuals who have been categorized as gender queer critics experience a sort of violation or invasion of privacy, but also, they empathize with transgender folks who are intentionally working to be recognized as the binary gender which is opposite from their biological sex. Gender neutral

linguistic practices and universalized gender neutrality, according to gender queer critics on Reddit, invalidate and ignore the efforts of trans individuals who are seeking visibility and acceptance as are non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals.

*“I can understand why it would feel shitty for a trans person who’s trying to pass to be asked their pronouns, knowing that a cis person wouldn’t be asked that same question by most people. That being said, I am also all for not assuming anyone’s pronouns. I think the issue starts when people assume certain people’s pronouns but not others, because they don’t perceive them as gender conforming enough.”*

To be a binary trans person is to identify as, and “pass” as the gender identity opposite of biological sex- for trans people who have labored over their identity and gender presentation gender inclusive practices may result in diminished external validation and acceptance and may ultimately cause the erasure of transgenderism as an identity. Binary trans people seek to be recognized as their desired and internally true identity; therefore, when asked to clarify their pronouns or addressed with gender neutral, non-binary pronouns their identity may be dismissed. Although the individuals whose comments have composed this emergency community if gender queer critics on Reddit are gender non-conforming or non-binary themselves, they recognize the potential detriment that gender neutrality may wreak on the transgender community in their collective efforts to achieve visibility, acceptance, and integration into society. As one user indicates, there seems to be a disconnection, misalignment, or disagreement between different sects of the LGBTQUI+ community and how to address the issue of gender inclusivity and neutrality in a way that benefits all nonconforming individuals.

*“It's unfortunate, but this is one area where the needs of nonbinary and (at least some) binary trans people simply don't line up. Most of them want to pass as male or female and be gendered correctly based on their appearance alone, while most of us don't want to be gendered at all because unless we're literally decked out in Pride flags and pronoun pins, no one is ever going to gender us correctly. There's no short-term solution to this problem, and there may never be one at all. All we can do is decide which part of the community is going to have to suck it up and deal with some extra dysphoria.”*

In many ways transgender and nonbinary people, as different sects of a community which is often understood to be in ideological unison, appear to be out of lockstep with one another in terms of gender inclusive practices and linguistic gender neutrality.

### **Gender Conforming Allies**

The third community which I have identified as involved in this online discourse about gender identity, gender inclusivity, and gender neutrality is what I have chosen to label the *gender conforming allies*. This community or category emerged from comments and posts made by allies of gender non-conforming peoples and the LGBTQIA+ community who did not identify as gender queer themselves. Through their involvement in these Reddit threads, gender conforming allies intend to educate themselves on the topic of gender neutrality and inclusivity. Many of the comments and users that have been identified as gender conforming allies presented themselves as friends and family members of gender queer folks while some simply hoped to become more informed and socially aware. As the term allies, which I have used to classify this emergent theme and perspective might suggest, all the users, in their comments, adopted a

positive perspective on and approach to gender inclusive linguistic uptake and interactional practice as they sought information about how to best support the marginalized gender queer, LGBTQIA+ community. Because the users whose comments compose this category of gender conforming allies do not personally identify beyond the gender binary but rather aim to advocate for inclusivity, visibility, and equality for others, I have chosen to differentiate between their advocacy and the perspective of gender queer advocates.

### **Pursuing allyship**

The primary, if not only, reason behind the presence of gender conforming, cisgender individuals on reddit threads r/Nonbinary and r/genderfluid was the desire to seek information and to further pursue allyship. For many of the users who posted comments which ultimately become the collection of data for the gender conforming ally's community, their search for knowledge and allyship often occurred following an encounter with someone who identified as gender queer in some way. Instances such as a child, partner, family member or friend recently coming out seemed to most frequently lead gender conforming folks to join this online community and receive guidance from members of the gender queer, nonbinary community and their supposed expertise on the topic. Although the reddit forums are intended only to include gender nonconforming folks themselves, as is stated in the community guidelines, cisgender commenters were accepted if they were perceived to genuinely be in active pursuit of allyship.

*“How can I be an ally?”*

*“How do I be an ally?”*

Heading their comments and posts, gender conforming allies who joined these reddit threads frequently, and explicitly emphasized their intention to “be an ally,” search for guidance, and to promote normalization, inclusivity, and visibility in line with the goals of gender queer advocates

and their stance towards gender neutral linguistic and interactional practices. In many cases, the gender conforming users seemed to understand that their presence on these reddit threads which typically only allow gender queer users could result in discomfort for other community members. Most posts contained some sort of disclaimer or justification for their presence- the concern of the gender conforming community members about the impacts of their involvement is indicative of the very fine boundary between seeking allyship and perpetuating the othering of genderqueer individuals. For the gender conforming allies, it was necessary that they fully identify themselves and their intentions with the community so as to assuage any immediate distrust, dislike, and discomfort which might result in their ban from the online discourse. It became clear that in order to post with questions about the non-binary, gender queer experience and best practices for allyship, gender conforming users were seemingly required to include additional words of affirmation or validation in support of gender inclusivity and neutrality.

*“I was hoping this might be a good way to learn more about the community and to better understand other people's experiences and become a better ally.”*

*“I would like to start by saying I fully support the trans community, and my heart goes out to the adversities you all face. That being said, as a cis person, I have questions that I'm just curious about as I try to understand what it means to be trans. My intentions are not to be critical but just to try and learn.”*

As is evident in the two comments left by gender conforming individuals above, on these reddit threads, there is a clear understanding of who is permitted to assume space and what content is



allowed to be posted. The gender conforming users adhere strictly to community guidelines and throughout their posts they reiterate their intentions to fortify the gender queer community as an ally. Pursuing allyship on the reddit threads r/Nonbinary and r/genderfluid necessitated a certain level of justification and explanation to fend off hostility or distrust that might arise from gender queer community members based on the expectations set in the community guidelines as well as the group mentality as it organized specifically around the experiences of non-conforming identities.

### **Fear of making mistakes**

Alongside this pursuit of allyship and the need for gender conforming allies to clearly outline their intentions and justify their presence, I also observed the ways in which many posts made by allies contained an underlying sense of fear or worry about not only their own identity, as cisgender people, but also about the verbiage and ideology they invoked, regardless of intention, in their posts. This low-level fear does indeed correlate to and resemble the need to justify one's cisgender presence in these threads as I mentioned before on the pursuit of allyship; however, it differs in that it is characterized by significantly more intense language and more extensive discussion of intentionality. The comments that structure this subsection of the gender conforming ally's community differ from those which simply highlight the pursuit of allyship in that hold a sense of worry and urgency.

*“Hey everyone. I just want to quickly state that I am not nonbinary, but I do support each and everyone. This is my first post and I just had one question, so I hope y'all don't mind. If anyone finds anything in here offensive, please let me know so I can immediately correct myself.”*

One user in their comment above reveals their gender identity as gender conforming, declares their allyship, and insinuates a certain amount of worry about their performance of that allyship. They ask if any offense or distaste occurs as a result of their comment that they are “immediately” alerted so as to correct their mistake and educate themselves. The word immediately and the way in which it is used in this comment in particular seems to be indicative of an intense, yet underlying, fear of performing and demonstrating allyship adequately, effectively or properly. Although this user, like many others, has clearly announced their allyship with the gender non-conforming community as well as their hopes to improve their ability to support those who are marginalized due to their gender embodiment, they evidence a lack of confidence in their ability to do so. They made their intentions clear- that they simply hope to increase their knowledge on the topic, dissolve confusion, and be an ally- yet these users continue to fret over their verbiage and ideological positioning. They seem to understand that having good intentions alone would not reduce the chances that their comment be met by hostility or defensiveness. In addition to their declaration of allyship, this user also feels it necessary to admit guilt and inadequacy on the forefront of their virtual interactions. Again, in the following comment, traces of fear are produced and evidenced through the user’s word choice and extensive comment:

*“I don't personally have the experience, so I have questions, I do NOT challenge the validity of gender fluidity. I hope none of my ignorance comes off as insensitive or downright offensive. If something I say offends anyone, please*

*understand it was unintentional, but don't hesitate to let me know so that I can improve. Again, I really hope none of the ignorance in those questions came off as insulting or argumentative. I'm not here to attack anyone or to start some kind of debate, I'm genuinely trying to better understand people's feelings so that I can be a better ally."*

In this comment, there are multiple expressions of the same worrisome sentiment that this user feels about their presence on the reddit thread and with their involvement in online discourse about gender identity in general as a cisgendered individual. The capitalized "NOT" included while the user describes their curiosity and allyship clearly demonstrates their intense desire to pledge their allegiance towards gender equality and inclusivity. This user immediately characterizes themselves as the possessor of ignorance simply because they are curious for a deeper understanding of gender fluidity or gender neutrality and hope to anticipate potential upset caused by their presence. Repeatedly, this user emphasizes their wholesome intentions, acknowledges their intrusion and ignorance, and professes their attempt at allyship. Redundant in its nature, this comment reveals a sense of worry or fear held by the gender conforming ally who made the post- their intense desire to clarify intentions and avoid any form of conflict leads one to believe that gender queer community members have an expectation or suspicion of disingenuity from cisgender infiltrators while gender conforming infiltrators expect to be the recipients of hostility from gender queer users.

### **Politically Motivated Speakers**

Finally, the fourth category or perspective from which we can understand gender neutral linguistic practice and its application in public space is through the community I have identified

as *politically motivated speakers*. This category, unique in its composition, certainly overlaps and blends with the other three perspectives I have established; however, because of the intense politicization of gender identity(ies) in particular, I have chosen to highlight politically motivated speakers separately. The group which I have named politically motivated speakers describes those who engage in discourse about gender neutrality and inclusivity, either as an advocate or critic, for political purposes. Many of the comments that enabled the observation and development of this category/perspective were characterized by political rhetoric that invoked gender neutrality to declare affiliation with a particular political position. Unlike the other three categories, politically motivated speakers include varying perspectives on the issue of non-binary pronominal usage and inclusivity through interactional practice. The data that creates this community of thought does not adhere to a necessarily progressive or conservative political paradigm but rather illuminates the ways in which identity has become politicized and how discourse on gender has become a rhetorical tool that is wielded by a variety of political communities.

### **Declaration of political affiliation**

For many of the users classified as politically motivated speakers, their involvement in the gender queer community both in person and in online reddit discourse was motivated by factors other than their internal identification with a non-conforming gender. While, as I have mentioned, this category certainly overlaps in its composition with the other categories I have previously delineated, it may be differentiated through the posts' language use and invocation of political obligation. The politically motivated speakers seem to negotiate their position on the topics of gender neutrality and inclusivity, in terms of physical embodiment and language use, through an understanding of the issues politicization. Their choice to either identify as a non-

conforming gender (or lack thereof) or to take part in conversations dedicated to gender ideology, although not entirely, depended on and functioned as a political stance to the issue. Rather than understanding this topic of gender inclusive and neutral language or identity as one operating merely on the individual, internal level, the politically motivated speakers highlight the ways in which conversations about gender ideology reflect more than gender identities. One member of the politically motivated speakers, in their post to reddit, recognizes and appreciates the ability of gender neutrality and diverse labels of gender identity can create community:

*“If I'm being honest, I'd rather not go by a label but sometimes it just makes things easier and it helps me to connect with others who are similar to myself.”*

Despite their personal preference towards labeling their gender identity and manipulating their pronoun use to better suit their internal alignment with the spectrum of gender, this user chooses to linguistically flag themselves as gender nonconforming to connect with other likeminded individuals. Labeling oneself in this way, allows speakers and referents to understand qualities of one another, often political and ideological, that may or may not allude to shared values and positions. By taking up a linguistic marker in the form of atypical pronouns or gender labels, which identify this individual, and others as educated and most likely more liberal in their political affiliation, the formation of communities around the issue of gender neutrality, inclusivity, and ideology becomes possible.

*“I can't stop going back and forth on whether I'm just a male who sees gender as more of a performance than anything, or if I genuinely think that the term "male"”*

*doesn't fully define my gender identity...I'm also concerned this all may just be an unconscious attempt to get in to the LGBTQ+ community since all my close friends are a part of it, essentially scared this is something I made up just so I could be "one of them" and I'm just finding reasons to identify as NB when I'm actually not NB.”*

Grappling with their identity, the user who posted the comment above, additionally seems to recognize the potential for gender identity and pronominal usage to indicate political affiliation and to initiate group membership. Although this user does seem to be struggling with pinning down their own identity, they worry that they are not truly non-binary but more so want to identify as such to join a community in which their friends are involved and to make a statement about their core beliefs on the issues of gender ideology. Because the LGBTQIA+ community within which this ideology and collective is contained is most often associated with liberality in terms of politics, the adoption of gender-nonconforming identities and linguistic markers, such as pronouns, also signals or declares political affiliation. This ability for gender identity and pronominal usage to comment on more than one's internal alignment with gender ideals, is evident in that many individuals may not be non-binary but choose to adopt gender neutral pronouns.

*“A while back we were making volunteer shirts for the technical crew of our queer community, and we were including names and pronouns on each shirt. For one of our older members (70something) it wasn't something he had thought about before. Long story short, their shirt now says he/they, not because he*

*suddenly realized his gender is different than before but because it's the modern/young person's translation of how they felt about gender and gender roles all along."*

In the comment above, again, it becomes clear that gender and pronominal usage have, in some ways, been severed from internal, individual identification and additionally signal one's positionality in terms of political affiliation and political belief systems. The post describes the experience of an elderly man who, although he did not personally identify as non-binary or nonconforming, chose to employ gender neutral pronominal usage and linguistic practice in order to mark himself or align himself with a particular politicized viewpoint with which he resonated. For this individual and many others, pronominal usage does not directly reflect personal gender identity but rather comments on beliefs about gender as a spectrum and social construction that is differentiated from biological sex.

*"Still, just for the sake of complexity, nuance, differing perspectives, whatever we want to call it, I did initially change my pronouns on my social media to "he/they," not in order to co-opt other people's pronouns, not in order to secretly suggest that I was nonbinary (I hadn't known that myself yet), but just simply to support the notion that \*everyone\* can be called they. It's a gender-neutral pronoun. It applies to anyone, not just to those who claim it."*

For some members of the politically motivated speakers, adopting nonbinary or gender nonspecific pronouns serves as a means through which to advocate for gender neutrality in

linguistic practice despite their embodied gender identity. The user above mentions that at the time of changing their pronouns to be more gender inclusive they did not yet understand their own non-binary gender identity. Through their online presence this individual took an agentic and hopeful stance towards promoting gender inclusivity. Not only do they mimic the values of the gender queer advocates and the gender conforming allies by posting their “preferred” pronouns regardless of their internal identification with gender as part of their social media profiles but also this user represents the ideals of the category I have denoted as politically motivated speakers. For members of the politically motivated speakers, pronominal usage is severed from gender identity and its embodiment on the individual level- requesting or publicizing their use of non-binary, gender non-conforming pronouns virtually and in face-to-face interactions does not comment on their identity as a gendered individual but instead marks them with a certain level of perceived social awareness, tolerance, and progressiveness.

### **Embodied activism**

Members of the community which I have labeled as the politically motivated speakers, also understood their stance on and use of gender non-specific pronouns as a conduit through which embodied and linguistic activism might manifest more routinely in their lives. Their participation on reddit threads r/Nonbinary and r/genderfluid illuminates the ways in which pronominal usage and gender identity emerge and function independently from one another- in terms of an individual's selfhood, gender identity and pronominal usage do not exist as dependent variables. The politically motivated speakers adopt specific pronouns in order to advocate for gender inclusivity and neutrality in linguistic and interactional practice. For the user below, embodying pronominal androgyny is just as much an effort to embody their personal identity as it is to support others who also are not aligned with the gender binary.



*“I realize my current mental wellness is contingent on the battles others fought to open up this space of emotional/spiritual freedom I can access. Maybe I need to pay that forward by taking on some discomfort, asking for pronouns, and claiming NB identity as much for the sake of others as myself.”*

This individual recognizes the efforts of the ancestral advocates and activists who helped to foster the social and cultural climate today which allows for individuals to sever themselves from the binds of the gender binary and the subsequent structural and social implications. Although their decision to embody androgyny physically, linguistically, and ideologically may indeed derive from their own internal feelings about gender and their particular gender identity, they also feel that adopting a non-binary identity is a means through which they might pay homage to their predecessors. Deemed as “paying it forward” this individual understands their non-binary identity as a form of embodied gratitude for past activism as well as a current form of advocacy in the present world. Their identity is not only internally determined but also is dependent upon their conceptualization of activism- their identity is constructed both internally and externally as it is constituted by their interpersonal and intergenerational relationships to gender and activism. Again, in the following comment, it becomes evident that gender identity and pronominal usage are inherently linked to political affiliation and are often perceived as some form of embodied activism which operates through individuals in routinized fashion.

*“Based on my avatar, I've been referred to as a guy, which I don't like. I'd so much rather she/her, or even they/them, but I can't tell if I want they/them because*

*it's more inclusive, even if it doesn't include me, or if I want people to refer to me with neutral pronouns online because I think I would be comfortable with them in person.”*

For this reddit community member, employing nonbinary, third person singular pronouns functions as way to promote inclusivity in terms of gender. While attempting to unravel their personal gender identity and association to the gender binary, this community member ponders the effects of gender-neutral pronominal usage and linguistic practice. They consider switching their pronouns to reflect gender neutrality in order to advocate for expanded gender inclusivity even if that inclusivity does not necessarily include their individual, internal gender identity. In some ways this user seems to value the impact of individual pronoun use on collective understandings of the social construction of gender more than the ability for pronouns to reflect their gender. By embodying gender neutrality or androgyny in linguistic practice, this individual suggests that they also embody an activist approach to the issue of gender inequality and exclusivity that affects folks who do not identify as either pole on the gender binary- identity equates to activism.

*“So back to your question, I don't have a good relationship with the gender binary, I don't like its history, I don't like its implications, it's been harmful and toxic to me for my whole life, so I just opted out because it didn't make me happy. I opted out of the entire concept of gender actually (I'm Agender).”*

When identity is understood as a form of embodied activism it seems that linguistic markers

which would typically denote gender identity or biological sex also begin to function as markers of political affiliation and positionality in respect to one's stance on the issue of gender as a whole- as a structure- rather than merely on the individual level. As displayed by the user above, who commented that their decision to identify themselves as agender emerged from their issues with the historical trajectory of the gender binary and the ways in which it continues to scaffold society today, gender identity and accompanying linguistic markers are not only constituted by personal approximation to masculinity and femininity as characteristics of personhood. This user has identified as agender with a distaste for the structure of the gender binary and activism at the forefront of their decision making. Individuals like this user, who understand the act of identification as a form of activism, are indicative of a drastic change which has occurred to collective understandings of how identity is constructed and how it functions in the world as some kind of agentive, active catalyst for social change. For the politically motivated speakers, identity equates to activism.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Observing the reddit threads [r/Nonbinary](#) and [r/genderfluid](#), I identified four emergent communities of thought with respect to gender ideology and linguistic practice. Each of these is characterized by distinct conceptualizations about the potentials and limitations for gender neutrality as embodied forms and linguistic markers. The community I have labeled gender queer advocates demonstrated their support for gender neutral speech patterns and interactional practice through their posts on reddit and collectively rallied around the desire for normalization of non-binary identities and the potential for promoting inclusion and awareness. The gender queer critics positioned themselves in opposition to the advocates on the assumption that gender

inclusive speech patterns and interactional practices ignored the needs of binary trans folks and additionally raised concerns for the privacy and safety of individuals who may be gender non-conforming or non-binary in any way. As the third emergent community on these two reddit threads, the gender conforming allies consisted of folks who were not themselves non binary or gender queer but rather infiltrated these online communities in search of education and guidance, most often in the hopes of learning how to support a loved one who recently came out as gender nonconforming- the gender conforming allies sought out the noble title of ally while simultaneously demonstrating an overt fear of making a mistake or offending others. Lastly, the fourth observable community, the politically motivated speakers, centered themselves on the assumption that embodied gender identity and subsequent linguistic markers function not only on the individual level but are also indicative of political affiliation and one's approach to activism with relation to the social construction of gender.

Although the purpose of this paper was to investigate the ways in which members of more isolated or niche Reddit communities discuss gender ideology and gender neutrality the digital conversations between involved folks revealed a much more interesting trend. Specifically, it becomes obvious that the ways in which identity as a concept or entity may be and is understood is incredibly diverse and constantly changing. Gender queer advocates discussed identity primarily in terms of the individual. The language gender queer advocates used focused on gender neutral linguistic practices and their impacts on the experiences of individuals alone- they often spoke in terms of normalization for individuals, normalization so that individuals might find comfort, and most often, only discussed the issue of gender neutrality and linguistic practice from the perspective of individuals who were gender queer themselves. It seems that the gender queer advocates formulated their understanding of identity and its function

with the isolated individual in mind and in some ways neglected to consider the ways in which identity is constructed interactively between social actors. Contrastingly, gender queer critics recognized the interplay of individual identities in their consideration of the trans binary community and the ways in which it might be impacted by the promulgation of gender-neutral embodiment, speech patterns, and interactional practice. Gender queer critics recognized the ways in which the identities and interests of nonbinary folks and trans binary folks differed or conflicted and resisted the promotion of overarching gender neutrality because of that recognition as such. While gender queer advocates seem to centralize on the construction of identity on the individual level, the critics demonstrated an understanding of differing identities as being co-constitutive of one another through their hesitancy towards general gender neutrality in defense of various gender queer communities. Similarly, gender conforming allies also acknowledged the ways in which identities are in constant conversation with one another and are constructed socially and interactionally. Gender conforming allies, who do not personally identify as non-binary or gender queer but rather strive for allyship, understand the ways in which their conforming identities with gender impact the experiences of nonbinary communities around them- they seek allyship to combat the ways in which their hegemonic gender identities might serve to the detriment or “invisibilization” of gender nonconforming people. Through their desire for allyship and their hopes to advocate for and learn about gender nonconforming communities, the gender conforming allies reveal their understanding of the ways in which identities play with one another socially and through their interactions construct and inform one another. Lastly, the politically motivated speakers demonstrate a vastly different understanding of identity which frames selfhood and embodiment, in this case specifically that of gender identity, as a means through which one might obtain agency and enact activism socially. The

politically motivated speakers understand identity, gender identity in particular, as a declaration of political affiliation as well as a form of routinized, embodied activism that functions beyond the confines of an individual. Identity, in this way, for the politically motivated speaker, does not exist as a personal preference, an individual expression, or isolated occurrence, but rather is informed and created by politicized ideology. The community I have labeled as the politically motivated speakers have severed identity from the individual and understand it, conceptually, as an extension of one's political beliefs and the efforts of their historical, political, and social ancestors who have paved the way for current day activism with regard to the social construction of gender. Conceptualizing and embodying gender identity in this way offers a new perspective on not only identity but also activism and politics. In contrast to the gender queer advocates, gender queer critics, and gender conforming allies, the politically motivated speakers view identity as both socially constructed and politically active.

These four emergent communities of thought and their distinct understandings of the role of identity in the social world led me to extrapolate two additional conclusions from this study. First, a critique of literature dedicated to gender ideology. Pre-existing scholarship on this topic, as is evidenced in my extensive literature review, fails to account for the diversity of public opinion and perceptions on the issues of gender identity- most studies which I encountered were explicitly moored to one pole of thought rather than incorporating and considering multiple perspectives. Instead of accounting for diversity and complexity of thought, the majority of studies are confined to one position either in favor of or against the concept of non-binary identity and practice and fail to acknowledge the disconnect between academics and public communities. The terms of progress, and in this study the terms of gender neutrality, are often in the register of more elite, educated communities and appear to be inaccessible or undesirable to

folks who live their lives and produce their work untethered to academia. If scholars, and anthropologists specifically, are meant to observe community, observe publics and fields, why then are the works being produced so partial to one pole of thought? If producing works is intended to provoke scholarly conversation, why does so little conversation between contrasting perspectives seem to be had? Through this study a specific failure of academia presented itself to me- the inability to achieve holism. Although it is truly impossible to pursue absolute truth and to be entirely holistic in thought, I believe that we should, as both students and teachers, strive to incorporate, consider, and evaluate as many ways of thinking and being in the world from as many perspectives as possible. In my work I recognize and thoroughly discuss four differing perspectives on the issue of gender neutrality not because each community aligns with my own personal belief system but rather because each community of thought is a valuable voice in the larger conversation about life and gender. By incorporating four opposing perspectives, I was able to garner a larger understanding of and compassion for a broader set of ideas and was encouraged to challenge my own ideology and opinions about this topic. It is my belief that as students of the world and creators of scholarship that we should not be finding evidence to prove a point but should instead work to gather information, collect data, and observe fields to abstract a point and ultimately to allow others to do the same through the lens of our work. I feel this is a failure of pre-existing literature on the topic of gender ideology from all perspectives, progressive and conservative alike.

Along another, somewhat parallel vein, I offer a second critique focused more on the tendencies of academia than the isolated products of scholars. In my research for this study, I struggled greatly to find sources that did not promote gender neutral pronominal usage or that were situated in opposition to non-binary ontology. The sources I have presented and invoked,

with this perspective, are all that I could find. However, with sources that encourage and defend transfeminist ideology, I was overwhelmed with the extensive reservoir from which I could siphon literature. Although the four emergent communities of thought present in Reddit threads r/Nonbinary and r/genderfluid are indeed the findings of this work, this work has also allowed me to observe what I consider to be a major flaw in academic discourse- a phenomenon of blind progressivity and exclusionary scholarly conversation. There is an eagerness, I have observed, both in my pursuit of this project but also as a student, to produce the most progressive work, to offer the most radical commentary, and to be the most innovative in thought and while this quality is in some ways admirable it is also naive. We should, as a community of thinkers, readers, students, and teachers strive to make progress, of course, but not only for progress's sake. In the case of gender ideology and pronominal usage, which I have addressed here, I have noticed, especially in my time in higher education, that the most progressive practices were/are suggested and put in place, such as asking for pronouns in introductions and placing pronouns in email signatures. Without any consideration of the limitations of these practices, they have been pushed and implemented with the assumption that they are progressive. My work here clearly demonstrates why this constant and unhesitant desire for progress may produce many issues for many different communities of people- the public, academia, and even individuals within the LGBTQ+ community are not in lockstep about how best to address issues of gender inclusivity through linguistic practice. For us as a collective to blindly promote what we believe to be the most progressive and innovative approach to issues of identity cannot result in long lasting and truly beneficial change. In my work, which aims to function as a conversational resource that includes multiple opposing perspectives, I have intended to embody this sentiment- a thorough approach to progress, that is truly conversational regardless of personal conviction, not out of



fear or conservation but rather emergent from the desire for true ideological longevity and sociocultural transformation that reflects the needs of as many individuals and communities as possible.

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