

COMPOSING, GENDER, AND COMPOSING GENDER: THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF GENDER VARIANCES IN ONLINE SPACES

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of  
Texas State University-San Marcos  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of ARTS

by

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San Marcos, Texas  
December 2009

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank the members of my thesis committee for their time and dedication to this project. Their unwavering support guided me through equal moments of inspiration and frustration, and this project would have suffered greatly without their feedback and guidance.

To my girlfriend, Sarah: I appreciate your willingness to discuss this project with me at multiple stages of each draft. Your support and patience has sustained me through the completion of this thesis, and I am thankful for your love and constant care.

Many thanks, too, to my family—my mother, my father, two sisters, and step-father for their love and encouragement, not only during the completion of this project, but during my entire career as a graduate student. I consider myself to be very lucky to have such a supportive family.

I would also like to thank my friends, who have provided valuable feedback on this project in the form of peer review, and have lent me their ears during my most frantic and stressed moments.

And finally, I would be remiss if I neglected to acknowledge Sinclair Sexsmith for her gender activism and celebration of queer genders. Though she is unaware of this project, she has inspired me to share with others a fuller understanding of gender, and I am grateful for her contributions.

This manuscript was submitted October 20, 2009.

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## CHAPTER I

### LAYING THE FOUNDATION: A DISCUSSION OF GENDER IDENTITY, WEBLOGS, AND METHODOLOGY

I recently found an old diary entry, scribbled onto a piece of hotel stationary instead of a diary, from when I was a young girl. In it, I write about my car ride from my hometown of Brownsville, Texas, to San Antonio, about five hours away. I describe a rest stop on the way as filled with “a million flies and mosquitoes,” and exclaim that “there was a man in the women’s restroom!!!!!!” The use of so many exclamation marks, which I now find humorous, helps me remember how shocking I found this occurrence. He was breaking the rules! Clearly, gender norms were already entrenched in my consciousness at such a young age.

I enjoyed the rituals of femininity. My mother dressed me in ruffles and dresses, and this pleased me. However, once I began to realize that gender transgressions happened—that not all men were masculine and all women feminine—I became somewhat fixated on gender variances and transgressions. Even at an early age, I began to detect messages about gender from the pervasive images from 1980s popular culture. I had an abundance of Barbie dolls, and images of popular actresses in movies and in television graced the glossy weekly gossip magazines. These images helped reinforce

gender by depicting American cultural standards of beauty that I already sensed were superficial. My mother was always sure to tell me that the images did not depict reality; rather, they were altered to fit a societal expectation of feminine gender and beauty to which few people, if anyone, actually lived up. These iterations helped me begin to understand the ways that gender was constructed and re-constructed to fit societal standards.

As I became aware of myself as a gendered individual in my teenage years, I realized that gender as something that is heavily mediated by culture, something with easily distinguishable boundaries that one should not transgress. I began to realize the ways in which gender can be inextricably tied to sexuality, and became even more intrigued with how people self-identify, the reasons behind their self-identification, and the conscious and subconscious steps that are undertaken to enact these identities. In most cases, I began to realize, our gender is largely dictated by social norms: men are expected to look strong and fit, and behave with courage, bravery, strength, and dignity. Women, too, are expected to embody a feminine social norm, and accordingly, are expected to behave passively and assume secondary positions in public and private life. In turn, these appearances and behaviors inform one's sexual identity and appeal.

My perceptions of gender, not surprisingly, became more complicated as my sexual identity began to emerge. Until my adolescence, I had experienced occasional crushes on boys in my classes, and thought nothing of it. In my first year of high school, however, I developed a crush on a female friend of mine's sister—something that troubled me greatly. My first reaction to this crush was horror—I did not identify with the few lesbians that had any visibility in the 1990s. In particular, I can recall thinking, with

shame, that I was “not like” Melissa Etheridge—I was not masculine (as I perceived her to be, though I now disagree), and did not want to woo girls to my window, as she sings in her popular 1994 hit. This shame persisted throughout my high school years; I kept these feelings of desire to myself, hoping that that I could stifle them if I did not speak about them. I regret that I kept that silence for five more years before admitting my same-sex attraction to others.

My preoccupation with gender as a construct in one’s life intersected with another cultural development of the 1990s that impacted me significantly: the development and rise of the Internet. Connecting with people online in a new, electronic medium provided me with the chance to meet other people with similar interests all over the nation. I began “signing on” every day after school to “chat” with my new friends, so much so that my parents felt the need to put a limit on my time online (much to my chagrin). At the time, my behavior and actions were not understood by either my family or my friends. They could not understand why I would want to face a computer screen for hours on end when I had many opportunities to interact face-to-face with my “real life” friends. However, I understood—and craved—the opportunities that an online presence afforded me. A mere fifteen years later, social networks abound, and connecting online via Facebook, Myspace, Twitter, and the like is the norm. Being online is no longer as strange—people across the world use the Internet to connect via social network and other forms of computer-mediated communication. Blogs, in particular, have emerged as a popular way to interact online; an estimated 113 million blogs exist in the United States, and 32 million Americans report reading blogs regularly (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 1).

In their “About” page, Technorati, a popular blog search engine, defines a blog as “a Web site, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video” (“About”). It is typical for blogs to display their entries in reverse chronological order, with the most recent entry appearing at the top of the page. The collective blogging community is often referred to as the “blogosphere.” In 2008, Technorati conducted a study on blogs—blogging trends, statistics about blogs and blog readers, and the impact blogs have made on our culture. Their findings suggest that blogs have enjoyed a steady increase in popularity up to 2008; it is likely that they will remain influential for years to come due to their unique ability to bring common-minded individuals together.

My own personal interest in online culture grew with the Web’s steady increase in popularity. I began to read the first versions of weblogs, personal e-journals with personal narratives and photos, as a freshman in college, and signed up with LiveJournal, one of the first social networking sites, in 2001. My growing awareness of my own sexuality provided me with one of many subjects that I researched online. Like so many others, I was hungry for information that I could not access from within the physical parameters of my hometown. I began to discover new types of music that local radio stations ignored and information about sexuality that was not available in the meager offerings of the local bookstores. Aside from delving into my interests online, I also connected to meet similar individuals. When I was in high school, this meant chat rooms and instant messaging, but as Internet culture became more mainstream, so did the number of options its users had in terms of connecting with one another. The popularity of ‘90s Internet mainstays

like chat rooms and instant messaging declined; and by the early 2000s, the popularity of blogs, as well as other social networks like Friendster, was rising (Boneva et al., 633).

Websites with regard to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (GLBTQ) content, too, were becoming more popular. In 2003, I began reading AfterEllen.com, a prominent website in mainstream lesbian culture that covers lesbian and bisexual women's media appearances. As I became a more frequent reader, and witnessed the steep growth of readers this website (and others like it) garnered, I began to realize the prominent role of the Internet in building a sense of community and fostering connection between the lesbian and queer communities. As evidenced by its increasing readership (AfterEllen boasted over 700,000 readers in 2008), members of the GLBTQ community were hungry for this kind of online meeting space (AfterEllen.com). On a personal level, too, I noticed that I did not experience the level of community and connectivity in the GLBTQ community in person as much as I did online in forums like AfterEllen.

These interests began to trickle over into my identity as a graduate student. In my field of rhetoric and composition, these topics became areas of academic inquiry. I started to connect gender and sexuality to writing, and became interested in investigating the complex role of these identities in the writing and learning process. I also began to understand the construction of identity as a rhetorical process shaped by cultural norms and values. However, the deeper I researched these subjects, I realized that gender was being treated topically by many of these scholars. It frustrated me that some academics claimed the importance of gender and sexuality in writing, yet few even acknowledged gender as something that surpassed a binary nature. Some scholars addressed the role of

sexuality in writing, but they, too, often essentialized gender, and conflated it with sexual identity. This frustration eventually sparked my interest for this thesis.

The purpose of this thesis is to identify the ways in which the electronic medium of weblog problematizes the essentialism of the gender binary and reconstructs gender in the form of masculine female gender identities. I will examine one blog, Sugarbutch Chronicles (SBC), and two photograph blogs, Top Hot Butches (THB) and Queer Eye Candy (QEC), to serve as a microcosm of the blogosphere. In theorizing on the role of the medium in this construction, I will synthesize strands of research on female masculinity, blogs, and visual rhetoric from the fields of rhetoric and composition, computers and writing, and gender and sexuality studies. In rhetoric and composition, scholars who examine computers and writing and sexuality and literacy inform my research; gender studies and queer theory provide an interdisciplinary perspective of this project. In synthesizing the arguments in these conversations, I propose to highlight a gap in literature regarding the study of gender and gender identity by examining the various gender identities conveyed in Sugarbutch Chronicles. This discrepancy suggests an essentialist understanding of gender as natural, stable, and fixed throughout one's lifetime.

In contrast, this blog focuses on a purposefully crafted gender reconstruction: the queer butch identity. It is indicative of the ways that we are making meaning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; through the power of community-building, new discursive practices are arising online that are changing the way we understand the world. Though this knowledge is not produced in the traditionally sanctioned spaces of the academy, much knowledge can be

gained about how such a discourse is created and sustained in this medium by examining how it constructs and complicates gender identity.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

I first began reading Sugarbutch Chronicles in the summer of 2008, and was immediately fascinated by the blogger's ability to discuss gender identities as part of a gender galaxy. The blogger, Sinclair Sexsmith, uses this term to dispel the more traditional, linear conceptualization of gender as on a spectrum. Although she cites that this blog is a personal project, she also says that she was motivated to provide a public forum for the discussion and promotion of these ideas. Therefore, the overarching question that guides this project is "In what ways does Sugarbutch Chronicles construct and complicate gender identity?" In consideration of this question, I must also address the ways that other mediated online spaces connected to Sugarbutch Chronicles, such as Top Hot Butches, support or complicate notions of online female masculinity. Furthermore, in examining gender identity as it is constructed and complicated in these forums, I will also examine the ways that the queer female blogging community facilitates an awareness of a gendered literacy. In answering these concerns, I will begin to unearth the effects of these mediums on online gender construction and presentation.

To answer the overarching research question, I will conduct a rhetorical analysis of blog content, images (excluding advertisements), comment threads, tags, and categories within the blog with the benefit of an ethnographic perspective. Because I have been a frequent visitor of Sugarbutch for over one year, I have observed the activity on this site to the extent that I have become a part of the community. This two-pronged research method allows me to conduct a rhetorical analysis while also observing activity

on the site over an extended period of time. Though Sugarbutch Chronicles is the primary site of my research, I will also analyze web content from two other related websites, Top Hot Butches and Queer Eye Candy, because they are linked from and supplement the blog. These webpages provide visual cues, and act as a site for exploration of visual rhetoric: how do these images convey a sense of butch identity? I have included these websites as secondary sites of research because the Sugarbutch brand has extended itself to these mediums. In each of these sites, I identify the ways that each site supports, counters, and complicates the blogger's definition of gender, and analyze the role that each medium plays in these gender presentations.

## **METHODS**

To gauge the relevance of this content, I employed tags and categories to assist my search for specific information. In *Tagging: People-Powered Metadata for the Social Web*, Gene Smith writes that tags are “keywords added by users” that are can be clicked with the mouse to “explore an information space” (5, 104). Categories, in contrast, taxonomize information into appropriately labeled groups. In other words, categories work hierarchically to organize information, whereas tags can function to indicate the presence of information that can be found in multiple categories. Both tags and categories are useful in examining blogs like Sugarbutch Chronicles because they both index information on the web in ways specific to the medium.

I will begin by examining several predetermined categories on the website as predetermined by Sinclair. The names of some categories indicate their irrelevance immediately; for example, many categories are named for each of the women that the blogger has dated in the past three years, indicating that the majority of the content of

those entries would be relationship-related. Because the focus on this thesis is not related to queer or butch/femme relationships, I eliminated posts that fell into categories like these (“a girl: Allyson,” “a girl: Callie,” etc.). By examining the titles and content of entries in other categories, I was able to deduce that the content of such entries did not fit the scope of this project, and these entries were eliminated. I deduced that entries under the category “theory—ssu,” contained the most relevant information. An entry in this category, however, does not necessarily indicate a discussion of butch identity. As previously mentioned, Sugarbutch Chronicles also serves as a site that explores sexual identity and practices; many of these posts can also be accessed under this particular category. Therefore, I utilized four tags to further refine my search: “butch,” “butch identity,” “gender,” and “masculinity.” However, because the content of these posts was explicitly sexual, other tags, such as “sex,” “fucking,” and other related words, were present. The presence of tags like these indicated that led me realize that these posts fell outside the scope of this project, and entries containing these tags were eliminated. Because Sugarbutch Chronicles also contains an emphasis on butch and queer sex practices, which is related to but not directly relevant to my research question, a significant portion of posts and entries will not be explicitly relevant to this project.

To locate the most relevant entries, I sorted through the remaining entries that fell into the “theory: ssu” category, which contained 77 entries. I then sorted through three of the four subcategories of this category: “on butches,” “semantics, and “theory.” The fourth subcategory is entitled “in praise of femmes” and was eliminated due to the scope of this project. From these subcategories, I picked four entries, for a total of twelve entries. The entries that were selected for analysis were selected due to their relevance to

the topic at hand. All entries have all been written in the past three years, with the earliest entry posted in March 2007 and the latest entry posted in September 2009.

I will supplement the findings from this blog analysis in two additional ways. First, I will include the launch of one photo blog, Top Hot Butches, and the events that unfold in the following week, as a secondary site of analysis. Top Hot Butches was launched in June 2009 in response to an event in the lesbian blogosphere—the AfterEllen.com annual Hot 100, a user-generated list of the most popular (sexiest) lesbian or queer women in the media and pop culture. AfterEllen.com wanted “to give lesbian/bi women a way to express what, or who, we find attractive, since our voice is largely missing from mainstream, heterocentric pop culture.” However, as Sinclair (and many readers) noticed, the list comprises mostly traditionally feminine women in accordance with cultural gender and beauty standards. This list was an attempt to remedy the neglect of masculine women in popular culture, and generated much praise for its celebration of butch gender identity. However, many of the comments expressed disappointment for what they perceived to be a conflation of butch and transman (female-to-male transgendered and/or transsexual) gender. Furthermore, many of these commenters felt that the list further perpetuated negative stereotypes about the gender confusion of these individuals. I will examine the multiple definitions of gender in this communicative event, as well as the interactions between the blogger and the blog commenters.

Finally, I will address my research question by studying the three most recent images located in the photo blog Queer Eye Candy. In so doing, I will examine the ways that bodily markers of butch gender identity are expressed through language and image.

To measure characteristics of butch identity in *Queer Eye Candy*, I will access the three most recent entries to examine bodily markers of female masculinity, as listed by Lucal and Sexsmith. Short or cropped hair is the most frequently mentioned characteristic of female masculinity; other indicators include clothing (ranging from not wearing skirts or dresses to wearing men's clothing, depending on the degree of butchness), the presence of body hair on legs and natural, non-plucked eyebrows, and minimal or no makeup or other feminine adornments. For both photo blogs, I will search for evidence on how the medium either supports or complicates these identities.

I will use a queer theoretical lens to conduct this analysis. I chose queer theory as the lens through which to conduct this project for its views on language. The queer theoretical assertion that understand language as non-transparent—not innocent or neutral, as we often believe—is central to this project. Queer theorists such as Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler argue that language values sameness over homogeneity; it is neither innocent or neutral, as we often believe. In considering gender identities, language offers us few options to define ourselves, and privileges what is easily categorized over what is not. Butler's seminal text *Gender Trouble* informs my work in looking at the online representation of female masculinity and butch identity. Specifically, Butler's idea of gender as an unstable identity is of particular usefulness to this project. Michel Foucault's theories on the relationship between sexuality, knowledge, and discourse as presented in *The History of Sexuality* also inform this thesis. In considering words that define our gendered and sexual identities, this understanding of language is particularly relevant in terms of the

construction of “reality” and identity. The theories and scholars that have influenced this project will be discussed at length in Chapter Two.

This analysis will utilize previous research on online gender presentation, identity construction, and computers and composition. Drawing on Halberstam’s call to recognize gender variances such as female masculinities in academe, I will expound on the ways that these specific electronic mediums aid the construction and complication of gender identity, and argue that the recognition of these gender variances will lead us to a new body of knowledge about gender that is lacking at present.

In making specific the parameters of my research, I aim to mitigate any concerns regarding any possible biases that my membership in this community might suggest. Rather, I hope that through the analysis of blog entries, images and comment threads, and through the methodologies that I implement, I will demonstrate the construction and complication of online female masculinity as it occurs in these spaces, and facilitate an awareness of a gendered literacy.

## CHAPTER II

### JOINING THE CONVERSATION: GENDER, SEXUALITY, TECHNOLOGY, AND LITERACY

In the previous chapter, I began by situating my interest in this subject, precipitated by personal experiences from my childhood and adolescence, and developing into a scholarly interest at the collegiate level. I also reviewed the methods I employed in collecting my data. In this chapter, I will review the existing literature regarding gender identity, sexuality, computers, blogs, technology, and literacy. Scholarly conversations about these subjects often overlaps, despite the apparent differences in subject. Especially when discussing issues related to identity, language, discourse, and gender, this overlap is apparent; the literature about these subjects ranges from sociology to rhetoric and composition. As I discuss in this thesis, one of the benefits of the electronic medium is its insistence on connectivity through sharing links on webpages. Through linking and tags, the ability to link to others' works, and utilize tags for easier access of that information exists. Tagging, particularly, is helpful when locating information about subjects that may overlap, as these do. The ability to write a thesis in hypertext would enable readers to better understand the connectedness of these topics, despite their seemingly apparent differences. However, because I am limited to a more static form of print, I will discuss

the literature under the somewhat more rigid categories under which I feel they best fit. Finally, I conclude this chapter by examining the intersections of queer theory, female sexuality, computer writing and literacy, and gender identity to locate, and make a case for, my argument.

### **THE EMERGENCE OF QUEER THEORY**

Since the emergence of queer theory two decades ago, academics from many fields have begun to incorporate analyses of gender and sexuality into their other fields of study. In rhetoric and composition, the study of gender has largely been limited to examining the differences between men and women. This narrow definition of gender as little more than the differences between men and women reflects a simplistic and reductive understanding of gender as a natural, stable, and binary. Contrastively, queer theory challenges this popular narrative, and posits that gender is a social construct, and that the gender binary is a false one. The study of gender and sexuality via queer theory and sexuality studies is evident in other academic fields, such as sociology, as well as rhetoric and composition, although there is significant overlap in these fields, as illustrated by the literature.

One of the most integral texts in the queer theory is Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*. In it, Foucault traces sexuality in Western culture, arguing against the popular notion that it had been repressed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, he believed that Western societies had enjoyed an elaborate web of knowledge about sexuality, leaning more toward Eastern societies' understanding of sex as an art. However, the church understood sex as potentially dangerous, and attempted to police sexual behaviors by tying sex with morality. Foucault ties the creation of a discourse around sexuality

around a specific theological occurrence: the confession. He believed that the act of speaking on a subject—the incitement to discourse—is rooted in the desire to know the truth, but that the discourse itself propagates a relinquishing of power from subject to state. Of the steady increase in both number and frequency the discourses on sex, he writes that there existed “an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies in power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit accumulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (18). Consequently, these speech acts led to a discourse on sexuality, which, in turn, led to the social construction of sexual identity as a truth of the self. *The History of Sexuality* is a seminal text in queer theory that has foregrounded the conversation on gender and sexual identities and their relationships to language.

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* is another seminal text in queer theory. Butler utilizes the Foucauldian perspective on gender and sexual identities as unstable, socially constructed categories. Her famous quote that “gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (“Performative” 278) extends Foucault’s idea of these identities as constructed while introducing the idea of performativity. She also articulates the relationships between sex, gender and desire—an articulation that has informed the work of gender scholars, and that informs this thesis. Butler posited that to assume that sex and gender are natural, and correlate in fixed categories, is to incite “the heterosexual matrix.” She introduced this term to describe the cultural “logic” of heterosexuality as “normal” and natural. Butler argues, instead, that sex, gender, and desire are not intertwined in any logical manner, nor are these categories fixed throughout one’s lifetime. Rather, our gender identities are informed by the social

world, and are constructed in accordance with these strict social and cultural strict parameters. Instead of viewing gender as a biological category with a set of predetermined, “natural” behaviors, Butler asserts that we instead perform these identities, and that the very act of performing gender constitutes who we are. These theories about gender performativity and construction, like Foucault’s, inform the work of many current scholars researching gender identity, especially gendered minorities.

Finally, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* helped inaugurate the study of sexuality as a valid academic pursuit, and her discussion of sexuality and language provided a platform for my own research. Sedgwick posited that the very words we choose to construct and articulate our identities are both bringing those identities into being, and at the same time foreclosing those identities from the possibilities of change. Sedgwick opens by locating the relationship between sexuality, identity, and language with the introduction of the word “homosexual” in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to illustrate, as Foucault did, the creation of an identity around a set of behaviors (2). Sedgwick asserts that all variants of homosexuality are rooted in speech. Like Butler, she queers Searle’s concept of the speech act to examine the view that homosexual *identities* are impossible, and that only homosexual *acts* exist. She understands sexuality and language as parallel and metaphoric, writing that “it becomes truer and truer that the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know” (3). It seems here that she implicitly links sexuality with ideological understandings of identity and truth, providing a foundation for other scholars to further discuss the role of language in gender and sexual identity construction.

## FEMALE MASCULINITY

One of the more recent texts in gender studies, *Female Masculinity*, examines female masculinity in American culture. Author Judith Halberstam positions her text by opening it with a denunciation of biological male embodiment as the *sin qua non* of masculinity. Dismissing the essentialist view of gender, she regrets that the study of masculinity often focuses on men, and ignores other variants of masculinity, such as masculine women, altogether. Rather than continue the trend of studying masculinity by studying men (and neglecting the social power and privilege of that masculinity), Halberstam instead treats male masculinity as “a hermeneutic, and as a counterexample to the kinds of masculinity that seem most informative about gender relations and most generative of social change” (3). Writing from this perspective, Halberstam argues that the study of masculinity can be most productive when it is freed from the straight, white male body. She demonstrates that in granting these men sole ownership of masculinity has stifled alternative versions of the masculine, such as female masculinity, and has enabled the condemnation of female masculinity by both straight and lesbian feminists. Her research traces female masculinity from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onward to situate its history into the Western cultural narrative.

Halberstam’s research has implications for my study, as it foregrounds the study of female masculinity. Sugarbutch Chronicles supports Halberstam’s argument, as the blog author identifies as a butch, a variant of female masculinity. Rather than pathologizing female masculinity, she argues that we should acknowledge and validate it as autonomous from male masculinity. Instead, she views female masculinity as its own gender with its own cultural history, rather than merely a derivative of male masculinity

In making this case, Halberstam simultaneously validates the study of female masculinity, and opens the door to further inquiry on the subject.

Betsy Lucal is one scholar who uses Halberstam as a starting point for her research on female masculinity as a gender identity. Examining marginalized gender identities from a sociological perspective in “What It Means to be Gendered Me: Life on the Boundaries of a Dichotomous Gender System,” Lucal discusses gender as a social construct, rooted in sociologist Erving Goffman’s analysis of the presentation of the self in everyday life (1959). She writes that in determining the gender of another person, we seek certain cues, behaviors, appearances, and mannerisms that our society has deemed appropriate for a given sex. Lucal also importantly differentiates between gender and gender identity: “Because gender is a social construction, there may be differences among one’s sex, gender self-identity (the gender the individual identifies as), presented identity (the gender the person is presenting), and perceived identity (the gender others attribute to the person)” (784). It is necessary, then, to begin to understand and distinguish the differences that gendered and sexual nonconformists experience in these identities.

To illustrate her case, Lucal presents information from own experiences. She writes, “My gender display—what others interpret as my presented identity—regularly leads to the misattribution of my gender” (787). In other words, she is likely to be read as masculine (and male) by her peers, and that because of our society’s binary gender structure, she must accept the consequences of her gender deviance. Because gender is pervasive in our society, she says, we cannot choose to exempt ourselves from it: “even if I try not to do gender, other people will do it for me. That is, given our two-and-only-two

rule, they must attribute one of two genders on me” (791). This attribution is inescapable, and occurs online as well. However, members of online communities have a unique opportunity to craft their gendered and sexual identities to their specificity, due to a lack of physical embodiment and reliance on language to construct their online presence.

Lucal makes another important contribution for gender theorists: she also argues for the expansion of gender to include gendered differences. She expands on the traditional feminist definition of patriarchy in discussing gender to a more accurate term: heteropatriarchy. “Indeed, is it not patriarchal—or, even more specifically, heteropatriarchal—constructions of gender that are actually the problem?” (794). Lucal cleverly incorporates patriarchy into heteronormativity. Because both heterosexuality and patriarchy are made to seem natural, reflecting the essentialist view, Lucal’s integration of the heteropatriarchal concept is successful. Individuals with marginalized genders and sexual identities, then, are viewed as social deviants by mainstream society. It is likely, then, that these individuals would seek a space to connect with one another, and blogs have provided a niche for many communities for this purpose.

### **THE QUEER SEX/GENDER SYSTEM**

Laine Dozier also examines gender from a sociological perspective, but she integrates sexual orientation and desire into the sex/gender schema. In her article “Beards, Breasts, and Bodies: Doing Sex in a Gendered World,” she challenges the assumption that gender is dependent on sex, and that sex, gender, and sexual orientation align in stable categories that reflect gender as binary. Her research attempts to shed light on the relationships between these identity categories by interviewing individuals who are at the borders of gendered and sexual norms. A footnote indicates these gendered

minorities as “transmen, female-to-male transsexual and transgendered people, trannyboys, boydykes, butches, gender benders, and queers” (297). Of her interviewees, she writes, “They challenge the underlying assumption in much of gender literature that sex, gender, and sexual orientation align in highly correlated, relatively fixed, binary categories. Instead, these categories are a process of differentiation and constructed meaning that are bound in social context” (298). Dozier maintains that not only is gender a social construct, but so, too, are biological sex and sexuality; she demonstrates this by presenting her findings from a set of interviews she conducted with female-to-male trans-identified people.

A brief glance of the sample characteristics of her interviewees reveals that though she limits the gender category of her interviewees to FTM trans individuals, their sexual preferences are diverse, ranging from biological women to male-to-female transsexuals to unknown. These responses successfully illustrate the differences between sexual identity and sexual orientation, referring back to Butler’s sex/gender/desire matrix. As Dozier writes, “After transitioning, defining sexual orientation becomes more complicated since sex, and sometimes sexual preference, changes” (303). The findings from her research focus largely on bodily markers to indicate the individual’s gender attribution, and she suggests that as they transition, these bodily markers allow for greater freedom in expressing their gendered identities, whether they be feminine, masculine, or other.

While Dozier’s research focuses more on the diverse sexual orientations of a fixed gender group, Lori Rifkin examines the performativity of gender in lesbian communities in her article “The Suit Suits Whom? Lesbian Gender, Female Masculinity, and Women-

in-Suits.” She suggests that lesbians “do” gender in ways that are distinctive to their community, and that their genders should be referred to as lesbian genders. Rifkin argues that lesbian genders can be unique because they often disrupt traditional gender categories, and therefore, challenge heteronormativity. However, in discussing female masculinity, Rifkin points out that Halberstam precludes the discussion of sexuality in female masculinity with the assumption that lesbianism (or queer identity) is a necessary in female masculinity. Though she does make a cursory mention of the possibility of heterosexuality in masculine women, she largely dismisses the idea in her text, preferring to focus on female masculinity as it occurs in lesbians. She writes that other gender scholars (Inness and Lloyd) are more outright about their “rules” in determining butch identity, the first of which is that a masculine female must be a lesbian to identify as butch. It is clear from Rifkin’s article, however, that gender identities are particularly diverse in some lesbian or queer communities—a particularly useful point in examining gender as it is represented in *Sugarbutch Chronicles*.

These articles do not represent the entire pool of scholarship on the study of gender, sexuality, and identity. Rather, they were selected for this project due to their relevance, and indicate that this area of study has developed in multiple academic fields. However, studying sexuality and gender is merely one of many recent relevant to my study. As they did in my personal experiences, the interest in the study of gender and sexuality intersected with the technological advances of the digital age.

#### **COMPUTERS, COMPOSITION AND LITERACY**

While many language theorists focus on the social construction of gender identity, this thread of research has coincided with another scholarly conversation: theorizing on

the uses of technology and the role between computers and writing. This field posits that digital spaces are new avenues for composing, and are changing the ways that we write—and understand the world—in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age*, Stuart Selber addresses the role of computers in literacy acquisition, and argues that the current model for teaching computer literacy fails students in numerous ways. Merely teaching the mechanics of how to use a computer is surely useful—computers are a fact of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and this knowledge is useful, if only on a surface level. It does not, however, address the ways in which computers have changed the way we think critically about the outside world. He writes, “A new round in the old debate over computer literacy has begun, or at least the grounds of this debate have shifted in substantial ways. For better or worse, computer environments have become primary spaces where much education happens. . . . In English studies, computers are implicated in a wide range of crucial literacy issues no matter the view of any particular teacher or program” (3). Selber urges writing instructors and students to think “postcritically” about computer literacy, pushing past the more pragmatic component of functionality and usage to understand computer literacy from a more critical point of view. He defines “postcritical” in the following way:

This stance acknowledges the growing presence of all things digital, assumes that such things have implications for English studies, and encourages applications that align with—and productively challenge—the values of the profession. Moreover, a postcritical stance does not minimize the effects of various forces on the design and use of computer technologies, recognizing that they are social in every respect.

For this project, Employing a postcritical perspective means an awareness of gender identity; an awareness of sexual identities, orientation, and desire; an awareness of the medium through which these identities are constructed and reconstructed; how it might assist this construction, and how it might limit it.

Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola draw similar conclusions about the implications of traditional literacies in their article “Blinded by the Letter.” They write that the term *literacy* has acquired much baggage recently; citing that “when we speak of ‘literacy’ as though it were a basic, neutral, context-less set of skills, the words keep us hoping--in the face of lives and arguments to the contrary—that only a lack of literacy keeps people poor or oppressed’ (355). In other words, they believe that the term has become metonymic, and evokes a solution to multiple problems across multiple populations and multiple contexts. Instead of clinging to this traditional definition, Wysocki and Johndon-Eilola assert that literacy “then becomes the ability to move in the new-technology spaces of information, the ability to make the instantaneous connections between informational objects that allow us to see them all at once” (363). This reading, and ability to “make instantaneous connections,” highly correlates with Selber’s call to understand computer literacies from a postcritical perspective.

As Selber, Wysocki, and Johnson-Eilola have indicated, the study of computers and various technologies, and their effects on writing and literacies, has revealed new opportunities and avenues of study that have emerged as a result of these developments. Some use computers as a medium through which to examine gender and sexuality. In his article “Promiscuous Fictions,” Tyler Curtain acknowledges the parameters of the values of blogging set forth by academe. He contends that anxiety is “a subspecies of the

reaction to the thick of information that pours out of Google's search space, and ultimately the Internet itself" (2). In other words, blogs induce anxiety in many scholars due to their deviation from the proper sites of knowledge production. Curtain believes this view to be misguided. He writes, "It is the contention of this essay that blogs are a vibrant space of knowledge production, certainly outside of those protocols, such as peer review, that universities have come to use to ensure the standards of knowledge, but not outside of standards as such, as is often claimed." Curtain points to queer blogs as one example of the ways in which knowledge production can occur outside the ivory spires of the university. Examining one popular site, *jonno.com*, Curtain identifies that the blog author questions the traditional site of knowledge production—the university—and also that it is the interactive nature of blogs that, in this case, lead to a new, dynamic knowledge production that includes "intellection and theory-making."

In particular, Curtain finds that both queer identity and desire are configured in these blogs. Furthermore, he aligns the construction/deconstruction/reconstruction of gender specifically with queer knowledge production in blogs. "Strikingly, queer knowledge making has always been a strategy of remaking and remarking: it is not simply recycling images and ideas, but rather *reconstruction*." It is this aspect—the aspect of reconstruction—that I will focus on in *Sugarbutch Chronicles*. Reconstruction occurs in this blog in multiple ways: in gender identity, certainly, but also in knowledge production, as well as the format and characteristics of the blog itself.

#### **INTERSECTIONS: TECHNOLOGIES, SEXUALITIES, LITERACIES**

Jonathan Alexander's scholarship has primarily focused on the integration of sexuality as a focus of study in rhetoric and composition. Much of his earlier work

considers how technology can facilitate an understanding of sexuality as a socially constructed aspect of identity that is relevant in the field. In "Sexualities, Technologies, and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Overview," he and co-author William Banks draw parallels between sexuality and technology, arguing that both "are concerned with the intertwined issues of space and identity" (274). Both technology studies and sexuality, they write, work to disrupt easy categories of representation and identity. The authors identify four issues that scholars grapple with in discussions of sexuality, technology, and composition studies: "introducing LGBT/queer texts and issues; investigating safe(r) spaces in our classrooms and on the networks; creating and problematizing identity as a stable trope for narration, discussion, and argumentation; and using the notion of sexual literacy as a lens for teaching and research" (276). I am primarily interested in the third and fourth issues posed by Alexander and Banks; Sugarbutch Chronicles is merely one blog in the subgenre of queer blogs that indicate a problematizing—a construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction—of identity, and the result of such purposeful complications is a greater understanding, a literacy, about gender and sexuality, that is lacking at present.

Alexander's most recent text, *Sexuality, Literacy, Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies*, further extrapolates the connections between gender, sexuality, and literacy. Just as Selber argues for the recognition of alternative literacies, in this text, Alexander argues that the assumption that literacy as an apolitical tool is incorrect; rather, literacy is already inextricably bound with cultural ideologies. Early in his introduction, he defines sexual literacy as "the knowledge complex that recognizes the significance of sexuality to self-and communal definition and that critically engages the stories we tell

about sex and sexuality to probe them for controlling values and for ways to resist, when necessary, constraining norms" (5). He argues that sexuality and literacy are already intertwined, and that focusing on sexual literacy as a component of literacy is necessary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Alexander is correct to identify how our language and ways of meaning-making are already sexualized, and he urges composition instructors to bring these issues to bear in writing classrooms.

The influence of queer theory is palpable in Alexander's text. Of the power of language and naming in identity construction, and on the connection between sexuality and literacy, he writes, "In other words, in being called to identify myself, I choose labels—or more likely, have labels chosen for me—that situate me in the social matrix and hierarchy. These labels, though, are not just social roles; as they often are connected to issues of gender and sexuality—labels such as male, female, heterosexual, homosexual—they are deep signifiers that I have taken as expressing some of the most personal elements of my being" (43). This passage is significant as it locates his text within the larger queer theoretical conversation. While he references the work of Foucault, Sedgwick, and others by illustrating the inescapable role of language in identity construction, he also joins the conversation by adding the component of a sexual literacy.

Angela Crow also addresses the implications of sexuality, literacy, and technology in her article "Reading Queer." Crow's article appears in *Kairos*, a popular online journal that examines the intersections of rhetoric, technology, and pedagogy. Early in her article, Crow makes the connection between computer-related literacies and sexual literacies. Citing Wysocki's and Johnsan-Eilola's call in "Blinded by the Letter" to "unpack our (literacies) and make your own," Crow responds by queering their choice

of the verbs “to pack” and “to unpack.” She discusses the memories that these phrases evoke for her, writing of a memory at a drag king show (a show in which women dress in drag and perform acts of masculinity.) She writes that she was with a friend who was not familiar with this kind of gender performance, and shared with her the meaning of “packing” dildoes. Says Crow: “I tell her... about the verb, to pack, and its meaning in the lesbian world...and she looks at me in disbelief until one performer whips out said dildo in the midst of a highly erotic dance with a drag queen, the spoof, the parody, the spoof of the heterosexual paradigm, amazingly entertaining.”

Crow’s article addresses aspects of both butch and queer identities; she references gender by mentioning the drag king, with queerness also being referenced by mention of the dildo. Furthermore, because the medium of this article is electronic, and thus the text hypertext, she is able to link ideas together. This anecdote about packing is linked to a page on computer literacies. In this section of her article, she cites Wysocki’s and Johnson-Eilola’s call to reconfigure our understanding of literacy, and asks the reader: “what happens if someone outside the dominant asks the dominant to acquire a new literacy? What precludes that literacy? What role denial? What role resistance? What implications of empathy, of new activations?”

I read Crow’s linking of two webpages, one on gender kings and packing; the other on re-thinking literacy, as an implicit suggestion that there is a correlation between these ideas. Her article is helpful in highlighting these connections, and the questions she asks about power and literacy, are helpful in imagining the development in a gendered literacy.

### THE CASE FOR FURTHER ANALYSIS

Foucault and Butler provided the foundation in queer theory, foregrounding the conversation about the intricate relationships between identity, discourse, and language, and illuminating gender as socially constructed. In gender and sexuality studies, Halberstam, Lucal, and Dozier further examine female masculinity and gender identity. Selber, Alexander, and Curtain's research each addresses the role and importance of computers in writing and literacy. Each of the aforementioned scholars have made important academic contributions in their discussions of computers, social networking, gender, and sexuality. However, each argument contains an oversight about the importance of other subjects in the subject of gender and technology.

Selber, for example, argues for an expansion of literacy in computers and technology by employing a postcritical perspective. While his text is not concerned with discussions of gender and sexuality in computer literacy, the connection between the two categories persists, and necessitates the acknowledgement of the importance of a literacy about gender and sexuality. Alexander acknowledges the ways that identity categories intersect with literacy, and addresses the need for a sexual literacy. This is a significant contribution, but unfortunately, his discussion of gender is reductive, and relies on the male/female binary. He mentions the complex ways that compositionists study gender, but describes the study of gender as "telling the story of women's experience" (9). He does acknowledge on several occasions that he understands the ways in which gendered identities are bound with sexual identities, which makes this omission all the more glaring, especially since Alexander is himself a gendered minority as a self-identified queer individual, and despite his own persistent claim about the importance of a sexual

literacy. Crow's research examines the intersections of language, sexuality, and technology, and implicitly links literacy to these intersections. Unfortunately, she does not make these connections explicit or pursue the idea further.

Lucal's and Dozier's research addresses the construction of gender identity from a sociological perspective, and makes a case for an expansion in our discussions of gender to include gendered and sexual variances. However, Lucal's research omits any direct discussion of sexuality in configuring gender identity, and Dozier's article focuses on the sexual orientations of FTM trans individuals; therefore, the population of study falls outside the scope of this project. Curtain's article does examine queer blogs as a means of gender identity construction, but unfortunately, his research is limited to queer male bloggers only. Indeed, very little scholarship exists on the connections between queer women, blogs, and gender identity. Furthermore, nearly all of the scholarship that exists addresses queer blogs from an androcentric perspective, such as Alexander's and Curtain's. While Halberstam's work makes a case for female masculinity as a valid avenue of study, the influence of electronic media, such as blogs, in the construction of gender identity is not considered.

However, queer female bloggers *also* utilize blogs in multiple ways that have not been acknowledged academically. As indicated in Curtain's article, queer bloggers utilize this medium to explore their gendered identities (in relation to, or independent from, their sexual identities), create knowledge, meet like-minded people, and build community; whether or not this holds true for queer female bloggers has not been examined. Within the parameters of "queer," "women," and "bloggers," however, degrees of gender variance in this community's online sphere are vast; variances of female masculinity in

particular proliferate. Sugarbutch Chronicles is merely one example of a female-authored queer blog that actively includes theory-making on issues of female genders and sexualities. Therefore, in addressing this variant of female masculinity as it is represented online in Sugarbutch Chronicles, it is important to consider the tactics that are employed in such a construction. Language and image are both used heavily in the blogging medium to convey variances in gender. However, both of these tactics can cause tensions between the gender identity to which one ascribes and the gender identity that one may be read as.

As I have argued in this chapter, studying butch identity as a variant of gender is in accordance with the goals of new literacy studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; our ways of writing and meaning-making already are situated within specific discourses. However, after reviewing much of the literature in relevant academic fields, it is clear that gender variances as they are expressed in online forums have not been studied as sites of research. I argue that studying the discourse of this subset of the blogging community can serve as a concrete example of the ways that context is created in a space by a certain discourse community. In this study, three main themes can be traced throughout each blog, thereby shaping its own ideologies: butch gender identity, language and communication, and meta references to the blog as a medium. In the following chapter, I will expound on the theme of butch gender identity as it occurs in the Sugarbutch websites.

## CHAPTER III

### ONE LOOK AT QUEERNESS: BUTCH IDENTITY IN TOP HOT BUTCHES AND SUGARBUTCH CHRONICLES

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the existing literature regarding gender identity, its relationship to sexuality and sexual identity, technology, and literacy and writing, and presented the case for further research on online gender construction. In this chapter, I will examine the predominant theme of all of the websites in the Sugarbutch Chronicles brand: butch identity. Butch identity is one strand of female masculinity that is often associated with lesbianism and/or queer sexuality, and is the variant of female masculinity that is most discussed in Sugarbutch. As Sinclair discusses in “definitions of butch/femme,” butch is an “intentional reclamation and recreation of gender.” It is this particular gender reconstruction that is most discussed in this blog. Therefore, in this chapter, I will trace the construction and complication of butch identity across Top Hot Butches, Sugarbutch Chronicles, and Queer Eye Candy, focusing on the role of bodily markers in this construction. I find that language plays a crucial role in constructing a butch gender in the absence of such physical markers.

## THE TOP HOT BUTCHES CONTROVERSY

To illustrate the precariousness of gender identity and labels, I would like to begin by describing a chain of events that began in June 2009. Following the success of another image-based website, *Queer Eye Candy* (which I will discuss later), Sinclair developed another visual aid to female masculinity, entitled *Top Hot Butches*. This website was also in response to an event in the lesbian blogosphere—the *AfterEllen.com* annual Hot 100, a user-generated list of the most popular (sexiest) lesbian or queer women in the media and pop culture. *AfterEllen.com* wanted “to give lesbian/bi women a way to express what, or who, we find attractive, since our voice is largely missing from mainstream, heterocentric pop culture.” However, Sinclair (and many readers) noticed, the list comprises mostly traditionally feminine women in accordance with cultural gender and beauty standards.

Sinclair’s *Top Hot Butches* list was an attempt to remedy the neglect of masculine women in popular culture: “I was frustrated with the lack of butch, masculine, andro, AG, stud, and trans visibility in mainstream lesbian culture... These are real dykes and trans men who are out, and whom visibly reject compulsory femininity in some way, meaning they present in a way that is intentionally androgynous, masculine, transmasculine, AG, stud, genderqueer, transgender, or butch” (THB, “About”). She initiated the process by soliciting reader responses in her both blog and her Twitter feed; she also garnered suggestions for the list via word of mouth. She assembled a panel of judges comprised of other sex and gender bloggers to help in the ranking process. On June 22, she officially launched the list to the public, complete with a press statement (SBC, “*Top Hot Butches 2009- Official Launch*”).

The list begins with the most popular top ten and as evidenced by citation links in the descriptive paragraphs that accompany each image, most of these individuals either presently identify as butch, or have in the past. A disclaimer is posted, however, on the Top Hot Butches site entitled “The Name.” In it, Sinclair acknowledges that “very few people on this list self-identify as butch.” She writes that in this project, she aims to increase butch visibility and representation, and that “butch” is used here “in the broadest sense, as an adjective descriptor, meaning an intentional display of masculinity” (“The Name”). Rather than choosing another term, such as transmasculine or genderqueer, she chose butch because it is “most accessible and recognizable word representing some sort of female masculinity.”

Much praise was lauded in the comments section for this celebration of butch gender identity, from self-identified femmes, butches, genderqueers, and transpeople. One comment from DeviantDyke mentions the site crashing as a result of web traffic overflow. Other readers expressed their happiness over certain people’s inclusion on the list. (Predictably, in the year that saw Rachel Maddow rise from a relatively unknown radio commentator to the host of her eponymous television show on MSNBC, she earned the top place on the list, to many people’s satisfaction.) All in all, the majority of the reaction to the list was positive.

#### **“TRANSMEN ARE NOT BUTCHES”**

However, the positive reaction was not universal. Skepticism, disappointment, and sometimes even anger could be evidenced in many comments. The issue at stake was one of labels, names, and language. Many of the transgendered and transsexual individuals and their allies and advocates felt that the inclusion of trans people in a list of

“butch” individuals (which they assumed to mean butch *women*) further perpetuated negative stereotypes about the gender confusion of these individuals. One commenter, trooper6, writes, “Transmen aren’t just extra butch women, and that is a misconception that is out there, and this list just furthers it “(THB, “Comments”). This comment articulates a common stereotype: because transmen originated as biological women, they must have ascribed to masculinity in that body as well. In other words, transmasculine gender is often assumed to have originated out of a masculine female or butch gender. Implicit in this misconception is that trans men are “really” women, and that the gender to which they transitioned (or to which they are transitioning) is not valid. Other criticisms of the list include the lack of diversity in ethnicity and age.

Other comments to the initial launch echoes similar refrains. Another commenter, ephraim, responds:

Yeah, ditto to those who find the inclusion of trans men on this list problematic (to say the least). Men don’t “resist compulsory femininity” – they don’t have to; they’re men... Some of the men you’ve unfortunately decided to include aren’t even particularly masculine gendered men, highlighting the ridiculousness of calling them “butch”. As a guy who happens to be trans, i’m really, really tired of butch women, butches (as a noun/as a gender), and other female-assigned, female-presenting, gender-variant people who live as women, appropriating trans men’s experiences and language.

It is evident that both of these commenters understand that the conflation of these identities is problematic. Ephraim discloses personal information about his own trans

identity, and although trooper6 does not disclose a gender identity, it seems that these personal experiences led to a heightened awareness about gender variances and the importance of an accurate language to describe these variances, as well as the importance of understanding these variances and speaking about them to others. However, this kind of label policing begs the question: ought we not the “right” to read the bodily markers that act to define gender?

Clearly, a tension between the gender self identity and gender perceived identity exists. Gender is both private and public—it has to do with how one is read as well as how one subjectively identifies. In this event, we can see that, despite Sinclair’s assertion that no one has the “right” to presuppose a label onto someone else, our gendered identities *are* “read” by others in a real and powerful way that cannot be discounted. Lucal’s article is notable for her distinguishing between these two identities. She writes, “Because gender is a social construction, there may be differences among one’s sex, gender self-identity (the gender the individual identifies as), presented identity (the gender the person is presenting), and perceived identity (the gender others attribute to the person). For example, a person can be female without being socially identified as a woman, and a male person can appear socially as a woman. Using a feminine gender display, a man can present the identity of a woman and, if the display is successful, be perceived as a woman” (784).

The result from this controversy is quite telling. Sinclair began by responding to many of the comments in the comments section itself, citing an honest error and sincerely apologizing. Over the next twenty-four hours, she took further action by significantly revising the list, and linking to a new blog entry on Sugarbutch that addresses this

controversy and explains the revisions. She begins by admitting that although she expected some controversy about this issue, she included the transmen on the list for personal reasons. She admits that she identifies with them to some extent for their own gender constructions, and although she is not part of that community, she writes that “trans men have been some of the greatest influences on my own gender, masculinity, my own butchness, my personal history, and chivalry. . . Beyond that, the alliance of butches and trans men feels important to me, in a community way. And of course some trans men do identify as butch” (SBC, “on removing transmen from the top hot butches list”). Clearly, there are many gendered variances at work here; untangling these identities requires an appropriate language with which to discuss them.

This quote illustrates that gender construction *is* complicated, especially online. It relies on language perhaps even more than offline, since we do not have the benefit of bodily markers to convey a sense of our own gender identities. It is crucial, then, that we have an adequate language for describing the multitude of genders that exist, it is crucial that we recognize the disparities that may arise between gender self-identity and the gender identity that is somewhat codified on the body, and it is crucial that we privilege neither. This quote also addresses both the concerns of her readers and her reaction to their criticisms. The malleability of gender is evidenced in her explanation—butches and other masculine females can, and sometimes do, though not necessarily, bond over similar experiences and/or personal identifications. However, in the gender galaxy, these bonds do not always exist.

To maintain the alliances and sense of community that she hopes to foster, Sinclair made significant amendments to this list, and acknowledged in her blog entry

that she understood that trans men were not butches. In a humorous comparison she draws, she explains that this is a list of butches and transmen, not butches exclusively, but that she understands the root of the insult. She writes, “I think a better equivalent is more like, ‘I’m making a Top Assholes List, and you’re on it. But don’t worry, I made a note and said you aren’t an asshole.’ That would still be insulting to most (unless you self-identify as an asshole, I guess).” This comparison is not entirely accurate—*trans* and *asshole* are two very different identities, and two different sets of contexts. Nonetheless, it does help illustrate that she understands how her perspective may have been limited, and that she has given the issue some consideration.

A total of thirteen transmen were removed from the Top Hot Butches list. Interestingly, the example that trooper6 cited—Buck Angel, cited in the list as “the world’s first transman porn star”—does identify as a butch transman, and was left on the list, as were two other transmen. A brief paragraph explaining these two updates remains visible on the Top Hot Butches main page. The act of revising this list is significant because it illustrates Sinclair’s management of her readership, the precarious nature of labeling, whether it be self-labeling or labeling of others. These modifications remain visible; the list remains incomplete.

In a follow-up entry Sinclair posted on Sugarbutch a few days later, entitled “consider it ‘the Sugarbutch Hot 100,’” she revisits the subject of the title of this project. She writes that her intention was not to push “butch” as an identity label onto each of the individuals on the list, and that she specifically included the subtitle “androgynous, genderqueer, transmasculine, studs, AGs, dykes, and transguys” to alleviate that misconception. Again, she addresses her firm belief that “nobody else should have the

right to pin a particular gender identity on anyone” (SBC, “consider it the ‘Sugarbutch Hot 100”). She clarifies her intentions again by saying that she was using the term in a more “mainstream” way, to highlight and celebrate the visibility of female masculinities, and to reiterate that the feminine cultural standards of beauty still remains the standard for attractiveness.

She writes that, despite her initial feelings about the inclusion of transmen on the list, she had reached an epiphany regarding the name of the website that caused her to reconsider it. Her original intention behind titling the site Top Hot Butches was to create a brand name that she surmised would have more impact than “The Sugarbutch Hot 100” or a similar title. Again, she reiterates that she is not attempting to claim that each individual on this list is butch, and shares that she is thinking of changing the title to something more neutral like “The Sugarbutch Hot 100.” Nonetheless, that entry is nearly four months old as of the time of this writing, and the name remains Top Hot Butches.

I wanted to open by examining this controversial event because it serves as a clear example for the very issues I analyze in this thesis: the fragile nature of gender identity, the role that language and labels play in their construction and maintenance, and the role that blogs and comments play in this construction. Like all other gender identities, butch identity relies heavily on bodily markers to make its presence felt. More importantly, however, this sequence of events enables us to understand the differences between the gender identity of the self and the gender identity that may be read by others by the aforementioned bodily markers and other signifiers.

#### **GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN SUGARBUTCH CHRONICLES**

For example, in an entry entitled “the red tie night, six years ago,” Sinclair recalls

an evening outing with her friends, in the beginning phases of her butch identity. She remembers the ritualized activities she performed to enact this identity, including “slacks, button-downs, binding our breasts, ties,” as well as “hair slicked back.” Sinclair identifies these acts as masculine rituals, and performs them with a purpose—to become masculine. Of this gender transitioning, she writes, “Interesting how, then, it was drag, it was rare, it was deliberate performance. . . .” I found this quote to be evocative of Butler’s previous assertion that the performative aspect gender is the type of performance that occurs subconsciously—own our bodily markers of our gender—so frequently that it becomes commonplace. (“Performative” 278). In contrast, Sinclair’s gender performance was deliberate and intentional—hers is a reconstructed gender, a butch identity. She speculates that we must forge for ourselves our own places in the “gender galaxy,” to borrow one of her terms. I take this to mean that her gender construction was purposeful and significant to her. However, though she initiated her butch identity first as a literal performance that she compared to doing drag, she eventually came to identify with that masculinity: “Looking at these photographs from six years ago, though, I catch a glimpse of the gender I grew into – I don’t always recognize myself in photos from that time, but in those . . . yeah, I think, that’s me” (SBC, “the red tie night six years ago”).

This entry is helpful in reconceptualizing gender identity because it not only illustrates the ways in which gender itself is a social construct, but also illustrates variances of a masculine identity in various stages of its construction. In accordance with Lucal’s argument, we seek certain cues, behaviors, and appearances to suggest gender identity; it is with these cues that one can begin to assert that identity. These bodily markers no doubt suggest a performative aspect of gender. But without these bodily

markers, how can gender be presented—and felt—online? As the Top Hot Butches controversy suggests, language becomes the sole arbiter of meaning for online gender construction.

**BUTCH BODILY MARKERS: ‘A CELEBRATION OF THE BUTCH AESTHETIC’**

Judith Butler famously claimed that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body” (33). Indeed, butches in particular rely on identifiable bodily markers of their masculinity. Another project in the “Sugarbutch Empire” is second photo blog, Queer Eye Candy, which preceded the launch of Top Hot Butches and initiated the interest in visual representations of butch identity in Sugarbutch Chronicles. In March 2008, this feature was added to Sugarbutch Chronicles in response to a Craigslist posting about butches and masculine women that Sinclair found offensive. The message, entitled “lesbian does not = bois, studs, butch, soft butch,” was a declamation against lesbian female masculinity:

Why would I want an imitation of a man when I can get a real man if I was straight. It defeats the purpose of being with another woman if I’m with a “female” who looks, acts and wants to be a boy. It’s such a turn off. Why do you all act like you’re all that when you’re not? I realize the ones who act the most cocky and over confident ones are usually the ugliest too- go figure. You make the rest of the population think we as lesbians are freaks when the majority of us are not. Be born to be who you are, if you are born a male be one, if you are born a female then be one, but if you’re unhappy with your gender then get a sex change but stop looking like adolescent 15 yr boy girls.

Xenophobic language, such as the above passage, demonstrates assumptions about gender that are based in essentialism, and aim to diminish non-normative gender expressions. As I discussed in Chapter One, an essentialist understanding of gender promotes a sense of natural order where none exists. This is merely one result of a gender illiteracy, and as Alexander posited, indicates an illiteracy of the self (15).

In response to this ad, Sinclair posted an image of a masculine woman the next day, as a “momentary celebration of the butch aesthetic” (QEC, “About”). Two of the tags she used to mark this photo are “butch” and “eye candy.” These features became increasingly popular, generating much discussion and praise in the comments section. This section of the blog became so popular that it eventually expanded to its own domain, [queereyecandy.com](http://queereyecandy.com), complete with a new set of curators for maintenance. Queer Eye Candy remains a popular site whose purpose is to increase visibility in all forms of queer gendered identities.

The most recent photo on Queer Eye Candy, “Ain’t No Half-Steppin’,” depicts an African-American woman named Blaze Martin. She has shoulder-length straight hair which she wears down. She is wearing a cream colored suit with a matching tie. Her accessories include a cross necklace, pocket handkerchief, silver bracelet, and chunky diamond stud earrings. She is sitting on a white sofa and looks seriously into the camera. Below the image is a quote from the 1992 film *Boomerang*: “This is my mack daddy vibe i’m giving you, in all its splendor!... Check it! It’s like JET magazine” (QEC). In this image, the bodily markers of butch identity include her attire, gaze, and the linguistic style used in her introduction.

The most second recent photo, entitled “The Reverend,” is a black and white headshot that depicts a large-framed drag king in aviator sunglasses and a priest’s collar, cigar in mouth. She writes, “My favorite pic from my drag days. Retired now, but still hear Barry White calling me back on stage sometimes. . .” Beyond the admission of the purposefully performative butch identity as a former drag king, I read the elements of masculinity evident in this photo to be the cigar (a traditionally masculine prop), facial hair in the form of handlebar mustache and “soul patch,” short, spiky, dark hair, and a semi-serious demeanor (although the satisfied smirk on her face could also be read as masculine).

The third most recent photo, “Haircut,” addresses one of the foremost bodily markers of butch gender identity: hair. This photo, like “The Reverend,” is also a headshot, but this photo reveals a Caucasian woman, with short, spiky, light brown hair. She is looking directly into the camera, and although most of her clothing is beyond the parameters of the frame, her white collared shirt is visible. The collar is embroidered with a pattern in dark thread. The woman wears small hoop earrings. Interestingly, the quote that accompanies this image directly addresses these bodily markers. It reads, “So this is me, fresh after a hair cut, which is one of my favorite things in the world. It’s one thing I can count on to match my emotional identity and my physical appearance.”

In all three of these images, some of the visual cues discussed by Lucal and Sexsmith can be seen. Sexsmith discusses these bodily cues in several entries. One entry, “on butch breasts,” discusses just that—the myriad ways that butches feel about such a particularly feminine body marker. She discusses her own gendered evolution in the context of the types of bras she has owned. As a butch, she wears minimizing sports

bras, and discusses how in the past, she previously did not wear this type of bra because she hated “the uniboob problem.” However, now that she identifies as butch, she prefers the sports bras, and the way she views her chest has changed as a result: “it looks like a chest” now. She discusses a recent occasion when she wore a “regular” bra because her sports bras were being laundered, and how foreign she felt in her own body due to the difference in her breasts’ appearance. She wondered, “why do I even have this in my closet anymore? Why do I own this? My exploration of my own masculine/butch/boy/male embodiment is young – I’ve been calling myself butch since 2001, but only in the last three years have I really embraced it and actively, consciously developed it” (SBC, “on butch breasts”).

One can surmise that, since Sinclair admits to being butch since 2001, she does not feel a sense of insecurity about acquiring this gender identity. However, as I discussed in Chapter One, being connected and online brings forth a powerful surge of information that may not be accessible to individuals who don’t live, for example, in New York City. Making this information accessible in this medium is helpful in supporting an understanding of gender construction.

Sinclair discusses other aspects of butch identity under the sub-category “on butches.” Another entry that can be found under this categorization also traces butch identity to a bodily marker of gender: hair. In this entry, appropriately titled “on butches: hair,” she admits, “I am a butch who shaves.” It may seem to some like a common admission, until a few lines down, she clarifies: “Not my legs, inner thighs, stomach, underarms (though I’ll get to those in a moment), but my face. Chin, mustache, sideburns. Every day.” She writes that she has always had a bit of facial hair, and recalls

that during her high school years, her boyfriend (she had not yet come out) sometimes made her feel shameful about it. She says that it was not until that moment that she even considered the option of removing it, and that it has taken her “years to admit this, to celebrate this” about herself (SBC, “on butches: hair”). However, now she considers it a characteristic of a butch aesthetic. I find this entry particularly interesting, as talking about body hair (especially facial body hair) is not considered a popular topic of discussion in most circles. However, hair is considered one of the primary markers of butch identity, and female facial hair is frowned upon; this admission reveals much about the ways that modifying this aspect of our appearance can significantly alter the way we perceive ourselves, and the ways that we are perceived. For example, in Sinclair’s instance, removal of her facial hair signified a shame about its existence, whereas leaving it intact signals her acceptance of it, and may function as a bodily marker of butch identity.

In terms of queer butch identity in the three electronic mediums of Sugarbutch Chronicles, Top Hot Butches, and Queer Eye Candy, this chapter, I have examined the theme of female butch identity in three electronic mediums: one blog, Sugarbutch Chronicles, and two photo blogs, Top Hot Butches and Queer Eye Candy, language is the key thread that facilitates this butch gender identity construction. However, as evidenced by the Top Hot Butches controversy, language does not always work to support our gender identities. In this event, language complicated gender identities, and highlighted the differences between the ways that we perceive ourselves and the ways that we are perceived by others. As evidenced by the Top Hot Butches controversy, Slight variations of the names or labels we use can alter the identity we intend to represent. Not

distinguishing between these variations has ramifications on a personal level as well as a community level. However, other discursive practices are evident in Sugarbutch Chronicles that also serve to complicate online gender presentation. In examining the comment threads of blog entries in Sugarbutch Chronicles, it is evident that these communication exchanges, as well, serve as sites of knowledge production and community-building that also contribute to a literacy about gender.



Figure 1. "Ain't No Half-Steppin'."



Figure 2. "The Reverend."



Figure 3. "Haircut."

## CHAPTER IV

### LANGUAGE AND LABELS: THE DISCURSIVE NATURE OF THE SUGARBUTCH BRAND

The review of butch identity in Sugarbutch Chronicles, Top Hot Butches, and Queer Eye Candy led to the conclusion that language was a primary tool in these gender constructions. Indeed, language has the potential to support *and* disrupt these identities. The events following the launch of the Top Hot Butches website serves to illustrate the importance of language and labels in these constructions, as well as the ways that it complicates gender by attempting to define and classify gender into appropriate categories that may not be congruent with an individual's self-definition. In this chapter, I will expound on the theme of language in the Sugarbutch brand by examining the trial-and-error usage of new vocabulary words and labels (as well as the reactions these usages elicited), as well as the ways that the dialogue between blog writer and blog reader facilitates a kind of knowledge production—a gendered literacy—that supports the goals of new literacy studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **LANGUAGE, LABELS AND GENDER IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

Sugarbutch Chronicles is one blog in the subgenre of lesbian blogs that focuses explicitly on gender. Sinclair Sexsmith, the chosen pseudonym for the blogger, defines herself as a “kinky queer butch top,” and uses her blog as a space to explore “sex, gender, and relationships” and to “celebrate queer theory, sexuality, gender, culture, and identity in ways that are expansive rather than restrictive, liberating rather than limiting” (SBC,

“About”). In the “About” section of the website, Sinclair comments on her reasoning behind creating a category for semantics. She writes:

Semantics is the category for exploring language, words, and definitions. We are not necessarily taught the language of marginalized sexualities, so a lot of language we have to either make up for ourselves, appropriate, or reclaim through linguistic techniques and word explorations. Using a common language is a huge way to build community, too, by creating a common dialect. I love exploring this stuff.

Evident in this brief synopsis is an understanding of Sinclair’s emphasis on the importance of language, as well as her attempts to reconcile her multiplicitous identities—offline, online, gendered, sexual, intellectual—through and with language. Though she does not specify that she is writing about language’s role in identity formation, it is evident in her posts and in this synopsis that she understands the relationship.

It is clear that language is a key component in all computer-mediated communication, and the majority of electronic mediums rely on language to convey a sense of identity. In *Sugarbutch Chronicles*, where discussions of a myriad of gender identities occur, language is even more crucial. The entries examined in this chapter indicate the necessity for having a diverse vocabulary to describe our gender identities. Ironically, however, while the tag for language exists in *Sugarbutch Chronicles*, it is not a frequently used tag, and is not displayed on the tag cloud at all.

Her understanding of the language and identity formation relationship—and the importance of speaking about it—is also evident in her insistence upon the masculine

honorific “Mr.” In a blog entry “on pronouns, mine”, she acknowledges the instability of her multiple identities, as well as the ways that the act of blogging even further complicates them. Her online persona is a masculine one, purposely crafted to protect anonymity:

When referring to me as Sinclair Sexsmith, I go by the masculine honorific - by Mr. Sexsmith... Pronouns have generally then followed, so I am often referred to as ‘he’ and ‘him’ ... the masculine character that I have cultivated here as my alter-ego fits quite well with masculine pronouns (SBC, “on pronouns, mine”).

It is interesting that this entry acknowledges Sinclair’s purposeful re-crafting of her gender identities, both offline and online. She reports that in person, she does *not* use masculine pronouns, but disputes having to use one or the other, as she “firmly occupies” both spaces. In other words, she is writing about her gender as fluid, so the words she uses to describe her gender change. It is also worth noting that the medium directly affects her identity: Sinclair Sexsmith is, after all, a pseudonymous blogging identity, and she has admitted she performs this identity differently than her real-life identity. Pronouns change, as it is likely that personality does as well.

However, in multiple entries, Sinclair also writes that the language that currently exists to describe gender variances is limited, and pathologizes these gender deviances rather than validating them. To remedy this problem, Sinclair uses her blog as a space to try new words and language about gender. One such example is the term “transmasculine.”

She discusses her usage of the term in the entry appropriately titled “the term

‘transmasculine.’” she discusses how she arrived at the new term: “I’ve been adopting the word “transmasculine” to use to describe, generally, female-bodied folks who are male-identified, masculine, masculinely presenting, in some way.” Definitions vary, however; the Transmasculine Community Network chooses to define the term as “any person who was assigned female at birth but feels this is an incomplete or incorrect description of their gender” (SBC, “the term transmasculine”). But how does this differ from using another word like “butch”? Sinclair writes that she believes transmasculine to be an umbrella term, under which “butch” falls as a very specific subset of a transmasculine identity. Interestingly, Halberstam asserts that butch identity is “master signifier of lesbian masculinity,” and uses the label as a “receptacle” for all lesbian masculinity (120).

Halberstam’s definition, however, does not correlate with her definition of butch in the Top Hot Butches explanation. Secondly, as much as Sinclair claims to privilege self-gender identity over perceived gender identity, for all the importance she places on self-labeling before others read an identity that does not exist—she does exactly this in the Top Hot Butches list. Being a part of this and other queer communities gives me some familiarity with many of the individuals who were listed; many of them do not or have not identified as butch. Sinclair is no doubt aware of this fact—she wrote a blog entry discussing this very issue—but still could not escape from categorizing these women as butch.

This event surely highlights the importance of language in online gender identity construction. Without bodily signifiers, the role of language is central to the ways that online gender is read. It is important, then, that we have an expansive language about

gender that accommodates variances such as female masculinity. As indicated above, it is difficult to reach a consensus about a new vocabulary without a solid community; however, is a consensus important? (It certainly doesn't seem very queer.)

Finally, yet another example of the effects of irresponsible language use can be evidenced in the Cragislist ad that spawned the Queer Eye Candy column.

#### **COMMENTS AND THEIR DISCURSIVE PRACTICES**

It is clear from the previous discussions that language is essential to online gender construction. Certainly, expanding our vocabulary to accommodate the gender variances that exist would facilitate representation of non-normative genders. However it is evident that the discursive practices of the comments—the dialogic relationship between blogger and readers—also plays a pivotal role in this series of events. Sinclair writes that she expected some resistance when she launched the site, but that the “level of discourse, discussion, openness, and productivity” exceeded her expectations (SBC, “On Removing Transmen from the Top Hot Butches List”). She links to comment sections in four different avenues (two Sugarbutch threads, Feministing.com, and the Top Hot Butches site) to help her case. Indeed, a combined total of 223 comments are posted among the four websites, many of which voiced concerns over the mislabeling and its ramifications. Reactions like these are necessary in advancing an understanding about gender on a community, grassroots level. What is unique to this particular theme, however, is that Sinclair does not identify the importance of the discursive nature of the comments in any of these mediums, unlike the more prominent theme of butch identity, or her occasional self-referencing of her pseudonymous blogging identity or the blogging medium. We

have already seen, however, the role that discourse plays in the medium—the discursive act of commenting has the potential to change the subject matter of the blog itself.

### **GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND LANGUAGE**

I opened my analysis of Sugarbutch Chronicles with the Top Hot Butches controversy for multiple reasons. I felt it provided a useful example in discussing the construction of butch identity, the fragility of labels and the necessity for a more diverse language, and the role of the medium. Deborah Cameron addresses the need to study gender identity and sexuality when examining language practices in her article “Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions.” She focuses on language differences in gender and gender diversity, rather than reducing gender to the binary, by reconceptualizing gender with a “postmodern turn,” with “modern” signifying an emphasis on biological sex and essentialism, and “postmodern” representing a questioning of both sex and gender as stable categories of identity, and variance and diversity in gender identities (484).

In *Language and Sexuality*, co-written by Don Kulick, Cameron and Kulick extrapolate on the relationship between gender identity, sexual identity, and language. They identify that there is much to be gleaned from the intersections of language and sexuality, but distinguish between studying language and sexuality from language and sexual identity. They write:

All kinds of erotic desires and practices fall into the scope of the term, and to the extent that those desires and practices fall within the scope of the term, and to the extent that those desires and practices depend on language

for their conceptualization and expression, they should also fall within the scope of an inquiry into language and sexuality.

Alexander also identifies the necessity for further research at the intersections of language and sexuality: “Language functions to discipline social subject positions and knowledge about sexuality within the social matrix. Analyzing how tells us much about both sexuality and language” (55). Using Cameron and Kulick as a starting point, he acknowledges the discursive turn in sexuality studies and furthers it by adding literacy as a component. Two particular words come to mind that help illustrate the differences in modern and postmodern language that Cameron discusses with regard to this project: “lesbian” and “queer.” One indicates a stable identity category, while the other indicates a disruption of that stability. Their meanings, though often conflated, are not the same.

In an entry titled “queer butch does not equal lesbian,” Sinclair writes about being asked to judge a high school poetry competition. After submitting a biography describing herself as a “queer butch writer,” she was contacted by one of the event’s coordinators asking her to “tone down” the language as it might be read as potentially offensive by some attendants. Sinclair was offended by this request for multiple reasons—the request was clearly oppressive, and also implies that anyone who would be offended would have reason to be. Nonetheless, she agreed to remove the word “queer,” but not “butch,” so that her biography read “self-identified butch lesbian writer.” Still, she was contacted a second time with a similar concern that the word “butch” might be “misunderstood” by parents or school administrators.

The irony of this request is not lost on Sinclair: “It’s a POETRY competition. This entire event is all about words, and they are asking (telling?) me to change mine”

(SBC, “queer butch does not equal lesbian”). As with the bodily markers that act as indicators of her gender identity, language is another necessary tool in the expression of that gender. Without it, identities shift, and can lose their significance. As the title indicates, queer butch does not “equal” lesbian. While the development of new words that better represent the gender galaxy have begun to emerge, unfortunately, these words are policed by society. Because language values sameness and homogeneity, these gender subtleties are marginalized again and again.

Examining the role of language in online gender identity construction further confirms my belief that developing a literacy about gender is crucial for composition and new literacy scholars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As we have seen in examining the various genders that are represented in Sugarbutch Chronicles, there are a multitude of genders whose existence are overlooked without an adequate vocabulary. It is crucial to develop new ways to talk about gender that allows space for recognition and validation of these genders. The discursive nature of the blogging medium lends itself to new knowledge production about gender-related issues. I believe that this is an important step in the process of non-normative gender recognition.

## CHAPTER V

### THE BLOG AS A MEDIUM IN CONSTRUCTING GENDER IDENTITY

In this thesis, I have already discussed the predominant themes of queer butch identity and language in the online construction of gender identity. We have witnessed the ways that language and discourse aid in the construction of online butch gender identity, as well as the importance of bodily markers in this reconstructions. The tension between language and image also signifies the ways that these constructions can sometimes be complicated. However, I believe that another reconstruction is occurring in the Sugarbutch space: a reconstruction of the blogging medium itself. In this chapter, I will expound on the role of the medium of the blog, and the ways that specific blog features, such as tags, categories, and comments, are complicated in Sugarbutch Chronicles. Though the Sugarbutch community is an active, lively one, the moderation of certain blogging features may limit the ways that the community can interact with the blog.

#### **BLOGGING AS A FORM OF COMMUNITY-BUILDING**

One powerful result of Sugarbutch Chronicles and other blogs in the sex/gender blogging community is that they have acted as sites for connecting and community-building. They are spaces in which members of the various GLBTQ communities and their allies can connect with one another, but they also act as spaces where these

gendered minorities can speak, and not be spoken for. The medium enables them to become participants in, rather than objects of, discourse. As Foucault theorized, the act of speaking about something names it into existence. Of course, it is possible to speak about these issues in the “real” world, offline, but the medium enables a “safe space” for such speech. Unfortunately, just as negative speech has permeated the “real world,” the online medium is not immune to negative or hateful language. The offensive Craigslist ad that denounces queer female masculinity is merely one example of that. However, in blogs, the blogger holds the power—though this is a space designed to incite discourse, negative or hateful speech can be moderated online by the blogger.

Sugarbutch Chronicles also facilitates a sense of community. Sexsmith creates this sense of shared space in several ways. She links to her Google reader (an RSS feed aggregator of all the websites to which she subscribes), thereby sharing what she reads with her own audience, resulting in a wider, yet more unified, audience. Furthermore, she also has a “community” tab on her blog that acts as a blogroll, linking to other blogs that explore gender and sexuality. Because Sexsmith has enabled the comments feature on this section, bloggers who are not listed can request to be, again expanding both the queer community and access to it through blogs.

Sugarbutch Chronicles is becoming more of a brand in recent months—the website has expanded to include supplementary websites that are linked from the main blog. The development of Queer Eye Candy and Top Hot Butches indicate a reaching out to other media and a growth in web presence. Interestingly, the readers have also migrated to the new sites; the community, then, becomes interconnected. One of the most recent posts, dated October 12, introduces her new column on another sex blog, Carnal

Nation. Fittingly, her first entry is titled “A Manifesto for Radical Masculinity.”

### **COMMUNITY AND THE FLUIDITY OF THE BLOGGING MEDIUM**

In the aftermath of the Top Hot Butches controversy, Sinclair mentions the opportunities the electronic medium affords her in this circumstance. She prefaces her explanation with, “So here’s the thing about the internet: the critical feedback is immediate, and publications are, unlike print, not static. Things do not have to stay the same” (SBC, “On Removing Transmen from the Top Hot Butches List”). Sinclair’s actions following this debacle illustrate the role of the medium in gender construction, but also the role of community. Different communities in the gender and sexual galaxies (to borrow one of her terms) comprise a majority of her audience, after all, and this event helps solidify the importance of distinguishing these identities. As a self-identified butch, Sinclair explains that though some trans men identify as butch men, others do not, and their inclusion on such a list is incorrect and hurtful.

That she obliged the concerns that this faction of her readers voiced illustrates the importance of community-building in Sugarbutch Chronicles and its supplementary websites. The electronic medium afforded her the ability to engage her readers, to garner feedback about the list, and to respond to their concerns by making appropriate modifications. These changes were made possible because of the medium, not despite it. Because she made these changes, however, I read these modifications to directly address the Sugarbutch community.

### **LINKS AS A COMMUNITY BUILDING STRATEGY**

Sharing links is also a popular strategy for community-building in blogs. Links serve an important function in building community and sharing the work of others, and

are unique to online mediums. In “Expressing Social Relationships on the Blog through Links and Comments,” Noor Al-Hasan and Lada A. Adamic identify trends among the blog communities they surveyed (based on three geographical locations: Kuwait, Dallas/Fort Worth, and the United Arab Emirates). Their research differentiates kinds of linking that occur in blogs: blogroll links are usually located in a blog’s sidebar, and illustrate the community or communities with which that blogger identifies; citation links occur within their blog posts, and are sometimes, though not necessarily, indicative of community. Al-Hasan and Adamic require “reciprocal, group interaction” to be defined as a community (3). There is much evidence in this reciprocal interaction in Sugarbutch Chronicles; its discursive power can be witnessed in the comments section, as well as in the entries themselves, where she sometimes addresses her readers’ concerns and questions.

#### **GENDER LITERACY ACQUISITION**

I found that the medium acts as a space for gender literacy acquisition. It acts as a meaning-making space, a space for trial-and-error, non-punitive learning. The events that unfolded after the Top Hot Butches launch illustrate an occurrence of this kind of learning. Upon the launch of the website, many readers reacted to the inclusion of trans-identified individuals on the list. They felt that it was inaccurate to include individuals who did not identify as women, and that this inclusion perpetuated stereotypes about gendered minorities. These kinds of stereotypes, in turn, perpetuate a lack of literacy about gender. Therefore, some members of the community stated these feelings in the comments section—an integral component of any blog—and Sinclair, the blogger,

responded, and eventually changed the medium (fluid, not static) to satisfy her readers' criticisms.

Though the medium of weblog provides a space for gender literacy acquisition, the posts themselves are also about gender literacy. It is both the medium as well as the content that facilitates this kind of learning. Sinclair reiterates her purposeful occupation of a butch identity, and acknowledges the role of process in her identity construction, in several other entries. However, she often references the blog itself, and the role of the electronic medium, in her discussions on gender. In "My Evolving Masculinity: Part One, Introduction," she writes, "I've identified as butch for nearly ten years, though it's only in the last five or so that I have been adopting and exploring a much more intentional identity around that term. And it has, in many ways, culminated here, **in this medium**" (emphasis mine). In this entry, Sinclair identifies that the reconstruction of her gender identity is intentional, as she does in other entries, but she also acknowledges that the medium has a role in shaping her gender identity. It does so in several ways, though Sinclair does not discuss it: the safety of the Internet and the anonymity that it provides affords individuals a space to muse on their identities, to challenge heteronormativity both offline and online, and allows a space for a natural learning process—one by trial and error, that allows for new ideas to be tested, and one that accounts for mistakes to be made along the way. Again, the events following the Top Hot Butches controversy illustrate this point well. Members of this community, including the blogger herself, learned something about gender identity, language and representation.

However, in looking at the two photo-based websites, Queer Eye Candy and Top Hot Butches, Sinclair sometimes provided a perspective that deviated from the

perspectives given in her blog. One such occurrence can be evidenced in comparison of a blog entry, “creating conscious gender,” and the Top Hot Butches list. The significance of labels has already been examined from the viewpoint of the commenters; however, the blog entry specifies the importance of an individual identifying with a certain label. If that individual does not, for example, identify as “butch,” Sinclair writes that she feels it is wrong for her to push that label onto that individual. However, when examining the Top Hot Butches list, it becomes evident that not all of *those* individuals identify as such. This occurs upon examination of photographs posted on Queer Eye Candy as well.

I read this conflict as evidence for the impossibility to extrapolate our gendered reading of others, and points to the impossibility of abstracting or removing oneself from the language and categories of the oppressed. Despite her privileging of self-labeling over labeling of others, Sinclair is guilty of reading the powerful visual cues that signal gender identity. Whether or not any of these individuals identify as butch or not, she interprets their gender that way based on the visual codes present.

#### **ORGANIZING INFORMATION WITH TAGGING AND CATEGORIES**

In his book *Tagging: People-Powered Metadata for the Social Web*, Gene Smith defines tagging as “an emerging approach to organizing information that uses keywords contributed by ordinary users” (3). He writes that tagging enables that information to be organized and tagged for multiple characteristics rather than the rigidity of organizing by one category. Because it is open-ended, any one resource can be tagged in a practical way, or a humorous one, or using words only the user who created it can understand. This results in a widening of the categories a resource falls into, enabling information to

be accessed and shared more readily. By making information more accessible, it enables us to identify patterns and trends of a specific website.

In Sugarbutch Chronicles, however, tags still serve the same function, but the action of creating tags is limited to the blogger only—readers are not enabled to do so. A brief glance at the “tags” box of the blog reveals, by the existence of the tags, that it is indeed a blog focused on sex, gender, and sexuality. It is evident to the reader that although many aspects of gender identity are tagged prominently (“butch,” “femme,” and “gender,” for example), there are other themes at work here: “community,” “desire,” “music,” and even her geographic location, “new york city.”

I read Sinclair’s moderation of the tagging feature as yet another reconstruction occurring on this blog—a reconstruction of tagging. The function changes in multiple ways; it affords her total control over which tags appear in any given post. This allows her to use personal tags that may only benefit her, as well as unique and humorous tags. Tags for her entry “consider it ‘The Sugarbutch Hot 100,’” range from more functional and helpful tags, like “definitions,” “top hot butches,” and “words,” to more personal, idiosyncratic tags such as “have i mentioned that pride is this weekend? hello that’s kind of a big deal,” and “smut is way less controversial.” These tags offer a kind of behind-the-scenes look at other thoughts that Sinclair has, both relevant and irrelevant. The variety in these tags also suggests another kind of reconstruction of the medium of blog—personal tags exist alongside the more traditional social tag that functions to share information with readers.

However, this reconstruction may have some negative consequences. For example, when conducting my research, many entries that I felt were about butch identity

or presentation were not tagged with any of the tags I am using for this project. Because Sinclair has power over the tagging feature, no one else can add these tags, which I believe to be relevant, to these entries. Therefore, these entries are more difficult to locate for a potential reader seeking information about a given topic. I also noticed that the tags for content relating to the butch/femme dynamic was sometimes tagged as “butch/femme,” but sometimes tagged using “butch” and “femme” separately, as evidenced in “nostalgia for the butch/femme dynamic.” These entries were about butches insofar as butches are a necessary component of the butch/femme dynamic, but did not discuss butch identity independently from femme identity. The singular tag, then, is misleading; using the “butch/femme” tag for entries like these would be more accurate. Furthermore, on rare occasions, spelling errors in tags are also evident. In “gender identity vs. sexual identity,” the “identity” tag is incorrectly spelled as “ideneity.” Enabling users to tag entries would perhaps minimize these small errors.

Additionally, I found posts that *were* categorized under “theory--ssu” that I did not find to be explicitly theoretical (for example, one entry consists primarily of a YouTube video of sex educator Betty Dodson drawing the female reproductive anatomy). In comparison, categories, while sharing some of the same characteristics as tags, and serve similar functions, help users locate information in different ways. Tags do not organize information hierarchically, and can be cross referenced in ways that categories cannot. Whereas tags can be specific in terms of describing the ideas they represent, tags comprise categories—the category represents the tag from a distance. Categories, then, can encompass many tags, helping to organize the information that tags signify from a

broader perspective. However, in the case of Sugarbutch Chronicles, I believe that the medium of the blog is reconstructed by Sinclair's moderation of the tagging feature.

In examining the blogging medium, it is clear that the Sugarbutch community benefits from many of the features of the blog. The blogroll and community tabs have led me personally to discover other blogs that also examine the multitude of genders that are represented online. We have seen that the fluid nature of the blogging medium also lends itself well to a gender literacy development—it is malleable, not fixed, and can be modified to better represent the community. The utilization of tags and categories, however, illustrated one way that the medium is complicated and reconstructed. I believe that tags may better represent the blog as a “queer” site of knowledge production, rather than the hierarchical and taxonomical categories feature. On the whole, however, the blogging medium, as well as the content of the entries in Sugarbutch, both make important contributions about the development of a gendered literacy.

## CHAPTER VI

### IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In consideration of the gap in literature regarding the construction of female masculinities and masculine gender identities, I chose to examine gender identity and presentation as it occurs in one popular blog in the queer female community, Sugarbutch Chronicles, and two photo blogs in the Sugarbutch brand, Top Hot Butches and Queer Eye Candy. This popularity of these blogs illustrates that its audience is hungry for the sharing and production of knowledge on gender and queer sexualities. I read this hunger as necessitating an inquiry on the role of this electronic medium in constructing and complicating gender identity. In the last two chapters of this thesis, I traced the themes that I found to dominate various components of the Sugarbutch brand. In Chapter Three, I examined the construction of butch gender identity. In Chapter Four, I examined the discursive nature of the blog and comments to illustrate not only the ways in which gender identity construction relies on language, but also how the discursive nature of the blog influences the medium. I also analyzed the ways that medium of the blog complicated these identity constructions. Here, I will present the implications of this study, argue for the recognition of gendered literacy as a component of new literacy studies, and identify directions for future research.

In Chapter One, I shared a personal anecdote regarding my own “coming out,”

and a memory in which I conflated same-sex attraction with a more masculine gender presentation (the person who came to my mind being Melissa Etheridge). In the early drafts of this thesis, this personal story was not included, because my intention was to examine gender identity, and I stubbornly believed that I could ignore much of the sexual content in *Sugarbutch Chronicles* by keeping my focus on gender. I did not want to deviate from this focus, and furthermore, I did not feel comfortable including such personal information about my own sexual identity. However, in conducting these analyses, I began to understand that gender and sexuality are intersecting identities, rather than parallel ones; a discussion of gender necessitates discussion of sexuality. Therefore, as a result of writing this thesis, I have come to a fuller understanding of gender as interrelated with sexuality, which led to my incorporation of examining the *queer* butch identity.

#### **TOWARD A GENDERED LITERACY**

Gender itself can be understood as a language. For example, gender activist Riki Wilkins aptly writes of this metaphor that “gender is a system of meanings and symbols, along with the rules, privileges, and punishments pertaining to their use—for power and sexuality (masculinity and femininity, strength and vulnerability, action and passivity, dominance and weakness)” (35). Wilkins’ assessment of gender demonstrates the ways in which gender is both inextricably bound with language, but also can function as a metaphor for it: they are parallel constructions. In other words, these identities are mired within one another, and to assume that they can be “unpacked” neatly, to borrow the metaphor, brings with it a host of implications about normalcy and binary gender. I realized that my personal admission about the evolution of my own sexuality, though

putting me in a vulnerable position, was a necessary narrative and could serve as a helpful precursor to the following discussion by illustrating this very point.

In conducting my research, I found that not only does Sugarbutch Chronicles facilitate a gendered literacy through the content of the posts, but the medium of the weblog actually facilitates this literacy in another way. Because the crux of all computer-mediated communication is language, we rely heavily on it to express our gendered identities. In other words, without the presence of bodily markers to indicate our gender, language is all we have. I believe that a fuller understanding of the ways that language reiterates our identities can be useful to all of us, whether academics, bloggers, advocates of technology, writers, or members of other communities. Alexander wrote that to be sexually illiterate is to be “disempowered,” in their understanding of themselves, their relations with others, and their avenues for meaningful self-expression (63).

Because this goal is not limited to any particular community or subset of individuals, it follows that to be sexually literate is to benefit the self in meaningful ways. However, after conducting this research, I must argue that our gendered and sexual identities are intertwined in powerful way that we cannot ignore. Therefore, it is wise to expand Alexander’s notion of sexual literacy to include gendered literacy. To be literate about gender begins with the acknowledgement that there are a multitude of genders that exist, but it also encompasses an understanding of the way that our society polices these genders, and a willingness to defy these standards whether they are in accordance with one’s gender identity or not. Gendered literacy means acknowledging these variations in the ivory spires of the university, and outside of them.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The intersections of the study of gender construction and online presence and identity have only recently emerged. It is evident from my analysis that the members that comprise the Sugarbutch community create a unique discourse community. Several times throughout this writing, I felt compelled to investigate the community as such, but of course, since the central theme of this project is female masculinity and online gender identity construction, it fell beyond the scope of the project. Nonetheless, I believe that the study of queer blogging communities is a rich site for analysis that has yet to be fully tapped. Studying this community as a discourse community is only one avenue for further research.

Furthermore, the issue of diversity is another component that arose several times during the completion of this project. In examining the various pages that comprise the Top Hot Butches site, I found that despite Sinclair's insistence that diversity was important to her, in both the judging panel and the individuals on the list, it is not apparent in looking at the site or the panel members. Another thread for future research, then, could research the diversity (or lack thereof) of this blogging population.

Finally, there are a multitude of genders portrayed online that, to my knowledge, have not been addressed academically. Although the study of female masculinity is still underdeveloped, Halberstam has provided a foundation several scholars have utilized about female masculinity and butch identity. However, other gender identities such as genderqueer and trans identities have emerged socially, but remain untapped as an avenue of study in the academy.

After conducting this research, I can conclude that Sugarbutch Chronicles has provided an excellent platform from which to study the issue of online gender identity construction. However, it is not by any means representative of the blogosphere, nor can it represent the smaller subgenre of blogs that study sex, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, in consideration of future research, I would like to see this study expanded to incorporate other forms of research. While the method of rhetorical analysis yielded interesting results which I believe to be telling of the medium of the blog, I believe that the study of this issue could benefit from more qualitative research methods. Particularly, I believe that interviews could be useful in terms of offering self-perceptions of their identity as bloggers, as well as for distinguishing gender self-identity, presented gender identity, and perceived gender identity.

In this thesis, I have inquired into the ways that female masculinity manifests itself in online butch gender identities. This particular subset of the blogging community is a rich site for exploration on the ways that gender is perceived in our society, and the ways that we can individually reclaim and negotiate these identities. This study has led me to better understand the ways in which language affects both gendered and sexual identities as well as the cultural ideologies behind these identities indicates the significance of such research. Studying the intersections of gender, sexuality, blogs, and language is a rich avenue of study that accurately reflects our multiplicitous identities and our postmodern culture.

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