Back in the Closet: A Queer-Modified Interpretive-Phenomenological Analysis of Gay Men Creating an Identity Through Clothing

Jose Arroyo

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BACK IN THE CLOSET: A QUEER-MODIFIED INTERPRETIVE-PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF GAY MEN CREATING AN IDENTITY THROUGH CLOTHING

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
José Arroyo

August 2018
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ABSTRACT

BACK IN THE CLOSET: A QUEER-MODIFIED INTERPRETIVE-PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF GAY MEN CREATING AN IDENTITY THROUGH CLOTHING

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Dissertation supervised by Eva Simms, Ph.D.

How one dresses comprises their personal style, which subsequently informs one’s orientation to the world. Clothing is a global practice that demarcates our experience of self, others, and the world; and—as we are swathed in clothing since birth—those experiences are primarily split among gendered lines. Using Merleau-Ponty (2014/1945), I reconceptualize how clothing can be understood as inseparable from our body, and I use Deleuze and Guattari (1987/1980) to illustrate how clothing augments our embodied experience to produce a process of identification with our style. I also draw from queer theorists (Ahmed, 2006; Halberstam, 2011) to illustrate how we can disrupt and redefine normal productions of gender to adopt a genderfluid style, situated between masculine and feminine. In this dissertation, I adopt a qualitative methodology to extrapolate the ways in which a genderqueer style can offer the freedom to select from a multitude of gender presentations that offer more freedom and restructure our experience of self, others, and the world. I recruited three participants who identify as out-homosexual men that dress in a genderqueer fashion. I instructed them to keep a two-week journal with photographs and interactions that were influenced by how they dressed, and I followed up with a semi-structured interview (that was transcribed verbatim) about their experiences. The journals and interviews were analyzed using a modified interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) outlined by Smith and Osborn (2008) with a queer focus to look at how clothing practices structure participants’ sense of embodiment, relationships, identity, and the world. Three to five themes emerged from the data provided by each participant with the conclusion that their style of dress becomes an aesthetic project to create a genderqueer identity. Their identity (as a creative act or art form) was informed by convergent themes of (1) struggles and fears of adopting a genderqueer style, (2) new locations and relationships, and (3) feelings of liberation from gender bifurcation. Individual divergent themes among the participants that affected the data included cultural conceptions of masculinity, transgender identity, and body type.
DEDICATION

To the 49 killed and 50-plus injured in the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting—
all of whom were living their lives and their truths as I began this project—
and to my mother

who also passed during the writing of this dissertation.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my friendships with Celeste Pietrusza, Jess Dunn, Briana Estes, and Kay Yu Yuan Chai; my colleagues Janice Collins, Robert Coufal, and Terri Dilmore; my mentors, Rebecca Suhoza, Robert Fessler, and Susan Vargo; my family, Bruno Innocenti, James Stephens, and Joanna Arroyo; my partner, Anthony Haynes; and my vices, which lost against my virtues, to allow this dissertation to be completed.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................... iv
DEDICATION ................................................................................................................................ v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT ............................................................................................................. vi
List of Figures ................................................................................................................................ ix
Chapter 1: Back in the closet: A queer-modified interpretive-phenomenological analysis of gay men creating an identity through clothing ................................................................. 1
Chapter 2: Literature Review .......................................................................................................... 6
   E Pluribus Unum: Developing an Individual Psychological Approach to Fashion and Style .... 6
   Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze: The Clothed Body, the Chiasm, and a Style of Becoming....... 10
   The Masculine, the Feminine, and the Queer: The Effects of Clothing on Personal Identity .. 15
Chapter 3: Research Question and Method of Inquiry ................................................................. 24
   Recruiting, Screening, and Selection of Participants .......................................................... 26
   Research Design, Interview Schedule, and Analysis ......................................................... 28
Chapter 4: Results ......................................................................................................................... 32
   Michelangelo ............................................................................................................................. 32
      Description of Style. .............................................................................................................. 32
      Individual themes. ................................................................................................................. 38
   Donatello ................................................................................................................................... 49
      Description of Style. .............................................................................................................. 49
      Clothing as navigating through his ambivalence with his body and relationships......... 51
      Individual themes. ................................................................................................................. 54
   Leonardo .................................................................................................................................... 66
      Description of Style. .............................................................................................................. 67
      Clothing as recovering his body and relationships....................................................... 69
      Individual themes. ................................................................................................................. 75
Chapter 5: Discussion ................................................................................................................... 90
   Style as an Aesthetic Project = Identity as Art................................................................. 90
   Significance of Results ............................................................................................................ 95
   Divergent Themes Between Participants ............................................................................ 99
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Photographs of Michelangelo's style ................................................................. 34
Figure 2. Michelangelo's outfit in which he was perceived as transgender .................... 35
Figure 3. Michelangelo's outfit the day after the election .............................................. 41
Figure 4. Michelangelo trying on his friend's heels ....................................................... 43
Figure 5. Photographs of Donatello's style ................................................................. 50
Figure 6. Additional photographs of Donatello's Style .................................................. 53
Figure 7. Other photographs of Donatello's style with the middle outfit being the subject of heckling in his style journal ................................................................. 60
Figure 8. Leonardo's accessory wall ................................................................. 68
Figure 9. Photographs of Leonardo's style ................................................................. 69
Figure 10. Photographs from Leonardo's style journal illustrating his relationships connecting to his style ................................................................. 73
Figure 11. Leonardo changing his outfit on day one of the style journal ...................... 81
Figure 12. Photographs from Leonardo's style journal showcasing his earrings at which people tend to ogle (LEO, 175-193; 199-205) ................................................................. 85
Chapter 1: Back in the closet: A queer-modified interpretive-phenomenological analysis of gay men creating an identity through clothing

_I wanted to be a writer, but I was unsure of what that required, what form to choose, or how to proceed._ ~Rhodes-Pitts, “Harlem on my Mind”, 114

In _Vogue’s_ February 2011 issue, Rhodes-Pitts (2011) documents her aspiration to become an “African-American writer.” She moves from Texas to attend Harvard University, then to New York City; and she ends up trading in her tweed blazers, chinos, and suede jacket—which she imagined to be the portrait of an academic—in favor of ten vintage dresses that she procured at a garage sale. She believed that the dresses captured the Harlem Renaissance and would help her channel her favorite writer, Lorraine Hansberry, until she found her own voice. Rhodes-Pitts writes:

> These things seem silly to me now, and even then I could not have believed they would make me into a writer. It was a strange game of dress-up, not far from what little girls do in fur stoles, high heels, and rouge, trying to approximate the thing until you actually become it. (Rhodes-Pitts, 2011, p. 118)

I open with the quote because I believe that the game of dress-up may well be much more than an amusing pastime—much more than practice and passing time until the real thing comes around, so to speak. Is it, for example, mere coincidence that when Rhodes-Pitts (2011) changes her location, career, and identity, she responds first by changing her clothes and dresses to play a role until she embodies it—until she “becomes” herself through the game of dress up? The link between aesthetic presentation and identity seems most evident during times of personal transition and uncertainty; Quinlan (2013) identifies how a dramatic haircut (not unlike how Rhodes-Pitts changes her garments) is a repeated trope in television programs to convey
psychological changes and/or distress among female characters. Even as early as birth, choices about swaddling blues or pinks or gender-neutral adornments and a range of embellishments, headgear, and fabrics assign and chart a psychological and cultural world for the infant. Adorning the body, and specifically through clothing, allows us to significantly transform the body and position with how we choose to identify ourselves to others—whether by our own volition or not. This is the power of clothing.

However, while Rhodes-Pitts (2011) is able to maneuver through her transitions and difficulties in life by identifying with the clothing she wore until she embodied a particular identity, the process is not as easily navigated by others. For instance, what of a gay male who adopts a mixed masculine-feminine comportment and believes that he should have been swathed in a color other than blue? He lives the tension of a non-binary gender in a real, felt sense for how clothing acts as restrictive reminders of heteronormative structures in society, and he lives in flux between identifying as a male or a female. Clothing, then, becomes “a weapon of the patriarchy” (Alapack, 2009, p. 985) that forcibly attempts to synchronize that experience-in-flux of gay men into cultural masculinity while eradicating any hints of femininity (McNeal, 1999).

I have experienced this tension as a gay male: of feeling as if I was living in a body that was not mine because it was already destined to the socio-historical gender divide of the culture; I could not be both male and female but had to decide which to be—although the decision was already predetermined by my sex. I was powerless in this equation, and I was fearful that patriarchal norms would crush my feminine soul at any moment it emerged during my upbringing: through my mother who spanked me when I tried on her heels when I was six years old; through my high-school classmates who called me “Michael Jackson” when I attempted to surreptitiously wear brown eyeliner; through my boyfriend in college who shied away from me
in public when I would style my hair in French twists or braids. The constant message was that in order to be a man, one had to look like a man.

However, the same weapon which oppresses gay men can also liberate them, as I remember the first time when I anxiously strayed into the women’s section at Express when I was twenty-two to peruse the necklaces that seemed more beautiful and ornate than those in the men’s section. I anxiously purchased two long strands of costume pearls, and I excused myself by saying that the necklaces were “a gift for my sister” to the cashier. I was afraid that I would be discovered, shamed, and refused the sale. I wore the jewelry in the privacy of my own apartment for a week before I felt comfortable enough to wear it in public. It seems like such a simple act to wear a woman’s necklace, but it took courage to endure the inevitable snickers, sneers, and sideways glances from random individuals—but it was my choice to do so. Today, it feels second-nature to wear such necklaces that may appear feminine (and I often wear multiple ones) even as the heckling of society continues. I regularly mix items labeled as “women’s” in the stores into my wardrobe: bracelets, scarves, black eyeliner, mascara—and I feel naked without it all—all because that choice to purchase two strands of costume pearls on that day got a little bit easier as time passed. But the biggest surprise for me came when I realized that the felt tension that I experienced of attempting to resolve the conflict of being-male/feeling-female dissipated when I consciously situated myself in between masculine and feminine—as genderqueer. My body also began to be my own once again rather than what others wanted it to be, and I felt that my body had realized its own particular agency and power to create its own space within the world. Yet that power was only able to emerge from my body when I clothed myself with my desires rather than societal expectations. Like Rhodes-Pitts (2011), the transformation of how I felt in the world occurred through clothing, and my game of dress up
gave me a new bodily identity in between the genders. As I will argue to greater detail in this dissertation, clothing ourselves affords us the freedom to destabilize supposedly fixed cultural identities—a freedom which becomes most evident when we change our style of dress to reflect the person we wish to become.¹

However, the moment of freedom that is offered through clothing is not adequately addressed in the literature, which is unfortunate, as the experience of navigating through the conflict of gender is not unique to me. Rosin (2008) and Padawer (2012) wrote articles in The Atlantic and The New York Times, respectively, about boy toddlers who do not conform to their gender, and their parents lament about the potential struggles they may face in their future when confronting gender constructs of masculinity. Raja, winner of season three of Rupaul’s Drag Race, draws upon her own experiences of being bullied for growing up as a feminine gay male. In her tearful plea for why she should be crowned America’s next drag superstar, she appeals to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, stating that she wants to act as a role model for “all the little boys who are teased, who are afraid, who don’t know how to express themselves creatively yet—and they don’t even know that they’re allowed to go against the grain. It’s ok to say, ‘Fuck you,’ and do what you love to do and express yourself thoroughly” (Murray, 2011). Subsequent winners and runner-ups in the show also expressed similar sentiments to Raja, identifying that clothing became a liberating project for them. My investment in researching how clothing can unsettle normative functions of gender mirrors

¹ There are, of course, limitations to freedom, as I am restricted to choose among what I can acquire within my physical or virtual (i.e., the Internet) space. Furthermore, the question remains as the style one adopts arises from an intrapsychic freedom and how this is guided by extrapsychic or socio-historic pressures. While I hypothesize that it emerges from the intersection between the individual and society, the decision of what to wear ultimately lies with the individual. The selection, refusal, and arrangement of garments lends us a multiplicity of identities from which to choose—even within cultural and social limitations or prohibitions.
Raja’s sentiments, for the creative and expressive use of clothing can plot the trajectories for freer, less conflicted ways of establishing oneself in the world.

In this dissertation, I trace how fashion has been conceptualized and treated in psychology and the social sciences. It is necessary to begin by discussing the fashion industry, for it has been analyzed and critiqued from post-structuralist perspectives as being an oppressive agent on the individual; however, these cultural and social approaches to the fashion industry restrict the dialogue to one side, and they limit the ways in which we can perceive the role of the individuals collectively affecting the industry. The lack of research in looking at individual treatments of style and fashion highlights the need for psychological approaches for we how to approach clothing and style. I give an overview of the existing literature pertinent to how clothing both constructs and destabilizes our notion of identity, and then I offer an explanation for why a phenomenological-psychological understanding of clothing is crucial to understanding our lived experience. Lastly, I introduce queer theory to look at how our lived experience is augmented and contributes to the task of creating an identity through clothing. The question of becoming that plagues Rhodes-Pitts (2011) is a familiar one to many. Following her project, I intend to develop an understanding of clothing and style that gives us insight into the manner in which identity is produced through identification with our clothing, further allowing anyone to transform his/her sense of self within the world and allow for new ways of identifying to unfold.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

*E Pluribus Unum*²: Developing an Individual Psychological Approach to Fashion and Style

Before developing a psychological approach to style, I first want to look at the effects of the fashion industry on the individual. In the following sections, I illustrate how the fashion industry is often presented as an oppressive force on the individual—as an industry that restricts the choices and freedoms that are offered to people by the clothing that one *could* wear to express the identity that he/she wishes to assimilate. For instance, one of the earliest psychological treatments of the modern fashion era came from Sapir (2007/1931) in an article titled “Fashion” that appeared in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*. He posits that the industry of fashion is “emphatically a historical concept” (p.41) that serves to demarcate and maintain social, cultural, and class boundaries; and he believes that a propensity for fashion emerges from an insecure sense of self that struggles to maintain its integrity by using clothing to establish a sense of belonging. He identifies that clothing lends a person a sense of individuality, for one’s personal taste in clothing are variable and necessary forms of departure from established social customs (so long as one does not tread too far from the norms of dress). Thus, the drive to be fashionable come from a conflict of mitigating individual helplessness and social pressures, for one’s identity is constantly under the threat of obscurity in this model, and fashion is used as a shield against conflict.

Sapir’s (2007/1931) article reflects the beginning of how the fashion industry is positioned as at odds with the individual, and he connotes fashion with conflict. In contrast, William James, putative founder of psychology in American, offers a different understanding of fashion that is not connoted with ego disintegration. He states that clothing is a major

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² Translation: Latin for *Out of Many, One* or *One out of Many*
component of the material self and directly influences one’s social and spiritual aspirations.

However, because of clothing’s immediacy and constancy to our perceptual experience, James assigns clothing to a crowned position in the hierarchy of the material self, for it offers the most direct route for how we choose to express our personality (as opposed to our house or belongings, for example, which are not always on our person). And while James did not explicate a comprehensive theory of clothing, he consciously dressed in a style that he believed to express his personality, writing, and thoughts (Watson, 2004).³

Since those authors, the literature on fashion has been largely silent until 1969, when Blumer called for more diligence and creativity in applying psychological and sociological methods to the fashion industry. Fashion was viewed as a superfluous condition of the human experience, as if it was something trite and not worth the attention of academic scholarship. However, Blumer believed that fashion could offer insights about the individual, social, and cultural worlds to the human-science disciplines. He had the opportunity to observe buyers at a seasonal opening of a Parisian fashion house, and he noticed a shift with how trends in fashion were selected and distributed among fashion buyers—namely that the fashion industry began to select trends to showcase the public’s desires and demands rather than the industry informing the buyers about what it thought the public should be wearing. The reigns of the fashion industry switched hands from the bourgeois to the public as people’s interest and access to contemporary

³ Watson (2004) also highlights a comical passage from Henry James’s (the brother of William James) book *The Portrait of a Lady* in which a character comments that a dress does not express herself so much as it expresses the dressmaker. Should we talk to the dressmaker, instead? While humorous, we would not need to do so, for while clothing is constructed along the material lines of the body, the selection and freedom of clothing—as with any object—is still significant and expressive of the preferences and style of the individual.
clothing increased. With this change, individuals had a choice about what they wanted the fashion industry to produce and what they wanted to wear.

The 1960s brought the public front and center to act as the decisive factor in the selection of styles of clothing, which Blumer (1969) calls collective selection; by this argument, Blumer overturns previous assumptions of fashion as a top-down, class-differentiation system. Similarly, Anna Wintour (current editor-in-chief of Vogue, USA) said that “you’d have to be walking around with Irving Penn’s sack⁴ over your head not to know that something extraordinary was happening in fashion” in London in the 1960s (Cutler, 2009). She attributed the public’s appropriation of fashion to the cultural revolutions of that era (ex., civil rights, women’s liberation, class critiques), and public interest only increased over the decades such that fashion designers and supermodels became household names, being born from the commercial pages of fashion magazines. Hebdige (1979) also refers to the 1960s as an era in which social forms of protest and struggle were reflected through clothing. He documents how various subcultures and identity categories (such as the punks, skinheads, and rockers within British culture) began as a reaction to mainstream culture with clothing used as the means to rebel against the dominant society. However, his analysis ends with a critique of style, as he deconstructs how industries commercialize and repackage the various ways in which identity politics were performed (initially as a means to rebel) back to the same consumers for a profit. While this may be an apt description of the capitalist side of fashion, this approach seems to

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⁴ Irving Penn was a prominent fashion photographer who worked at Vogue since the 1940s. Anna Wintour seems to refer to his sack as a classier way of saying, “You would have to be walking around with a bag over your head”—alluding to his prominent photo Saul Steinberg in Nose Mask.
swing back to placing most of the intention of clothing to be used as weapon in the battles of social revolutions rather than from a place of personal expressivity.

What is refreshing about Blumer’s approach (1969) is that he offers a different understanding of individual styles and tastes in fashion that is not rooted in a desperate attempt to discover an identity because it is perpetually assaulted by society; instead, he understands style and taste as structuring one’s sense of self and orientation to the world. For example, to examine the interface between the fashion industry and the public, one does not need to look further than Japanese street fashion to witness how the collective choice of the public has expelled professionally trained designers as the arbiters of taste. Kawamura (2006) documents how female teenagers have popularized radical styles of dress (ex., *ganguro*, *harajuku*, or *Ura-Hara*) that reflected the shift of cultural norms to emphasize individuality rather than uniformity to societal expectations. This is a shift in values that begins with the individuals’ intentions, and they use clothing to follow through and shape their worlds. More intentional expressions of this phenomenon occur among cross-dressing, male musicians (known as *Visual Kei*) who problematized the boundaries of sex and gender within Japanese culture through their refusal to situate themselves in the prescriptive gender roles of their sex (McLeod, 2013). The same phenomenon is observable in western societies, as Bill Cunningham has been documenting the emergence of individual street style in New York City since the 1970s for *The New York Times*. To support Blumer’s understanding, street style has been as a major collective force that drives the fashion industry rather than the other way around (Press, 2010).

Jayne and Ferencuhová (2013) further complicate notions of fashion among western populations by researching the ways in which people in Bratislava, Slovakia, refuse to acknowledge forms of class, gender, and ethnicity through how and where they wear comfort
wear (ex., pyjamas, rollers in hair, tracksuits). They analyzed how comfort wear in public spaces allowed citizens to redesign the symbolic boundaries of their cities by carving out safe spaces in neighborhoods and shopping spaces where people did not have to worry about appearance. When institutions attempted to enact social norms (such as posting signs establishing a dress code to enter their establishments), the public successfully challenged these norms. Comfort wear consequently created comfort spaces. The authors introduce the important point of looking at what clothing does to our world, for analyzing fashion from a purely cultural lens often detracts from the individual “symbolic, material, emotional and embodied relationships between fashion and the city” (p. 6), where the individuals set the rules of how to use and move through their space through their manner of dress. Like Blumer (1969), these authors delineate possible approaches to the fashion industry that begin with the individual but also account for how individuals effect collective change—that is, if the collective voice of individuals can produce a shift in the fashion industry, but it begins with respecting individuals as their own agentic force with using clothing as way of being.

**Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze: The Clothed Body, the Chiasm, and a Style of Becoming**

In beginning to extrapolate dimensions for psychological approaches to clothing, I turn to Merleau-Ponty’s (2014/1945; 1963/1942) phenomenology to understand clothing as a modification of our skin, for it informs our sensorial experience of the world (i.e., embodiment) and often shapes our exchanges within the world—much how people can feel restricted in their comportment when wearing a “bad” outfit, and the opposite holds true with a “good” outfit. Beyond the physicality of clothing, the wearer often adorns him/herself (whether or not to his/her knowledge) with style that opens some and forecloses other potential modes of being in
the world; this is also true with how clothing gathers meaning and significance with respect to our bodies, time, space, and others.

Merleau-Ponty (2014/1945) repeatedly asserts that there are no explicit thoughts or representations that are communicated through the artistic medium but that they convey a particular style of being; and style as poetry, art, music, or—in this case—clothing opens up new signification and new possibilities (pp. 151-152). Just as a painter uses paint to highlight a new way to look at the world or a musician uses a violin to evoke a particular way of listening to sound, a stylish individual arranges garments in ways that create new bodies that move and gesture in their own idiosyncratic ways. In this way, our style of dress can be defined as our consistent methods for selecting and arranging garments in our presentation to the world. Style captures a choice for how we would like to situate ourselves in the world and how we wish the world would arrange itself around us. It expresses an identity that can literally be felt on our corporeal being. However, the question remains as to where an identity, an expression, or a style of being emerges from an individual and when does it emerge.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968/1964) introduces the notion of the intertwining—the chiasm—between the sensible and the sensate, and he complicates our understanding of the perceptual world. He uses the image of the hand touching itself to highlight that the individual is part of the sensible world and can be an object to itself, but one can never grasp the moment of touching nor separate the act of being touched from touching. Returning to the task of becoming that Rhodes-Pitts (2011) contemplates, perhaps the chiasm can offer an understanding of becoming in which the person is undifferentiated from clothing; as soon as clothing touches our skin, we become our clothes expressed through the perceptual connections that are indistinguishable from our embodied experience until the clothes are removed—but is it
we who touch our clothes or do our clothes touch us? The chiasm lends a reversibility in our perceptual relationship with the world (p. 133). Clothing, itself, can be understood as having its own particular aims and ways to be touched, worn, and lived through the movement, texture, and color, and other sensorial elements of the garments. Clothing is evocative, and the immediacy of the sensory field of clothing to our own bodies lends itself to us as a second skin.

Allow me to illustrate this with how I buy a new garment. First, something inexplicable about a garment catches my eye, and I gaze upon the material, touching it with my eyes as it pulls me towards it. The clothing has a glimmer of a life of its own, already calling me to it—or perhaps I see myself in it. When I get to the garment, I never simply pick it up and throw it in to the cart; for that matter, I rarely use a cart, as I prefer to drape clothing over my arm while shopping—perhaps so they maintain a continuous communion with my skin until I purchase it. So I pick it up and hold it, and it becomes a moment of knowing; I touch the garment, it touches me, and we intimately interrogate each other in ways that cannot be explicated or learned but exist because my body is part of the tangible world of which the garment is part. This goes on for a while, as I wonder if I have other garments that will work well with it, whether it can be flexible enough to work with other garments I will buy in the future, how it feels when I put it on, where it can most expressively be worn—I wonder about all of this until the moment it convinces me that it is my style, and then I must buy it because it is me. (As extra insurance, I will even keep the tags for my clothing for an extra week after they are purchased; for on the offset that they do not withstand a day of my usual activities, I can return it as not-me.) While that may be my own idiosyncratic, ten-minute shopping excursion for buying a garment, it highlights the point at which the selection reverses the position between subject and object; at the point at which the selection is made, the garment becomes part of my body as if I am touching
myself, being touch by my own hand. It is a moment of transformation, transition, and undifferentiation between body and clothing, and thus we become what our style expresses; this is when we acquire an identity through our clothing.

In looking at how our bodies are inextricably intertwined with our clothing, our identity is given over to its consecutive moments of expression, which means that our identity is never fixed but always emerging. I am reminded of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s (1987/1980) understanding of becoming:

Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes…

That is the point to clarify: that a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself… (p. 238)

In their view, becoming cannot be isolated as a singular event, as becoming begets new becomings moment by moment. Yet it also cannot be complete, as the process of production gives rise to the process of identification, where becoming has no final resting state. Their conception of becoming (as a structure that breaks and extends beyond systems) does not seem incompatible with how Merleau-Ponty (1968/1964), in his working notes, reimagines the final form of any structure as a continuously evolving and changing form that is not precipitated by past structures (p. 205). Merleau-Ponty (2014/1945) writes how the relationships between parts establish a structure that is contingent with and in flux with the forces that act upon it (p. 90); and those structures are continuously created then shattered—whether by time, place, others, garments, ourselves—to produce something new. I interpret this to mean that we should not arrive at a fixated point of identity in examining one’s style but appreciate that an identity is always in flux.
In the case of style, it produces new bodies that orient oneself to different ways of living and being. Thus, clothing could never say something a person *per se*, and to capture a moment of expression of living in a clothed body is an impossible task; for style is flow that perpetuates itself on its own accord, as its becoming is inherent to its movement through the world. Rhodes-Pitts (2011) accounts for her own transformation and writes:

> At eighteen I’d dressed up in the garb of a writer—perhaps an unwitting admission that I didn’t have much to say. But somewhere along the way I had crossed a threshold from being an admirer of a life to a living part of it. (p. 118)

For Rhodes-Pitts, the ten dresses offered the possibility for entering the life that she would live, but it is impossible to pinpoint or catch the moment of transformation. This way of becoming emerges from the connections of the clothed body, where Merleau-Ponty (2014/1945) notes that there is no true subject given to awareness but is born from moment to moment in a milieu of generality (pp. 223-224). He goes on to describe these as moments of total being, but the total being is also still informed by one’s individual history, temperament, and milieu (p. 482), and one’s style is always beholden to this situatedness. Yet there is a freedom in his idea of becoming because it allows us to reciprocally engage with our style of existing. He aptly writes:

> It is by being what I am at present, without any restrictions and without holding anything back, that I have a chance at progressing; it is by it is by living my time that I can understand other times; it is by plunging into the present and into the world, by resolutely taking up what I am by chance, by willing what I will, and by doing what I do, that I can go farther. (pp. 482-483)

What one wears can offer freedom from what is, from the limitations of the body. Young (2005) discusses how viewing the clothed image of oneself in the mirror exposes us to a moment
of fantasy where the possibility of transformation presents itself to us. Clothing is an aesthetic playground of exploring possibilities. This is akin to how Lingis (2005) states that the body is an active agent that dreams and visualizes itself with particular aims and directions, and clothing acts as the expressive agent of those dreams. Similarly, Alapack (2009) states, “Clothing does not just drape the flesh but extends it. Clothing reveals personal ambitions, social aspirations, and the prevailing zeitgeist” (p. 977). Yet these fantasies, dreams, ambitions, and aspirations are always changing. The identity that is expressed through style exists somewhere in between the bodily and body-appearance, where it is always in flux with respect to the personal, social, and cultural aims (von Wulputte, 2004).

As we are destined to be clothed beings, the way in which clothing is arranged on the body is an aesthetic project that augments one’s experience of the world. The symbolic meanings subsume the natural meanings of the body and allow for new possibilities, and one’s style gives the body a perceptual ground that mediates his/her interaction with the world and others. Yet as we conceptualize the distinction between wearer and worn, we find that they participate in an undifferentiated relationship where the lines between body and clothing is blurred; we are our clothing and style, for our bodies are transformed by them. This transformation allows for individual expressions to emerge from moment to moment through our style of dress, which produces new ways to identify ourselves in the world and offers us a freedom to become. In this way, we can look to how the individual uses clothing to unsettle binary cultural norms of masculinity and femininity.

**The Masculine, the Feminine, and the Queer: The Effects of Clothing on Personal Identity**

Much of the recent literature on the effects of the fashion industry centers on how clothing positions individuals along gendered lines. Young’s (2005) essay “Women Recovering
Our Clothes,” provides a feminist phenomenological treatment of fashion’s effect on the individual female psyche and reveals a deep conflict between how fashion is experienced as a personal act but also as a public spectacle that objectifies the female body. The feminine experience is wrapped in the visual and tactile sensations of clothing, but feminine subjectivity is restricted and reduced to a purely visual event by the objectifying male gaze of patriarchal societies. She writes that:

Subjectivity is crucially constituted by relations of looking. Through active looking the subject acquires a sense of subject set off against objects… In the phallocratic order, however, the subject who takes pleasure in looking at objects other than himself and who takes pleasure in looking at totalized images of himself is a male subject. The phallocratic order splits looking into active and passive moments. The gaze is masculine, and that upon which it gazes is feminine. (p. 65)

Alapack (2009) argues similarly that “[f]ashion is a weapon of the patriarchy” (p. 985) that controls the ways in which the female body is veiled or unveiled for the public. Understood in this way, the identity that is offered through clothing is often given by the male gaze. While Young limits the brunt of her essay to women’s experience as a sexed being, I extend her argument to conceptualize the masculine and feminine in her essay as active and passive functions of gender, respectively—the former of which has the privilege to restrict access to the subjectivity of the latter. The freedom that is promised and offered through clothing seems as if it is cut off when one is positioned in the feminine, and the feminine position also pits the wearer into the position of observer of him/herself. In a study of how women choose what to wear, Guy and Banim (2000) noted that women experienced split identities when choosing what to wear: “‘The woman I want to be,’ ‘The woman I fear I am,’ and ‘The woman I am most of the time’”
The women did not perceive themselves as with separate, agentic selves, each exerting agency in a masculine power dynamic that attempts to overpower them.

For the purpose of my research, I use the terms *masculine* and *feminine* as Butler (2007/1990) uses them—to illustrate the performative function of the gendered positions and actions within our culture and not as essential or intrinsic qualities of a person, and this can unpack how clothing as a function of performativity but also be used to unsettle our convictions about gender identity. It is important to conceive of the masculine and feminine positions as performative so that we understand how gay men’s experiences problematize the ways that desire, sexuality, and identity are enacted through the male gaze. Following Young’s (2005) critique of the male gaze, gay men act as both the gazer and the gazed upon by other men; consequently, the gaze turns upon itself, as gay men have to teeter a fine line of adopting feminine forms of expression that incite attraction from other men but not so much that they incur the repulsion of the heteronormative structures of society. Yet as there is no identifiable position that exists in between the masculine and feminine genders, each gay man negotiates this tension in his own idiosyncratic way, and clothing is the most accessible way to signify sexual orientation (Eichler, 2012).

Conversely, heterosexual men in western societies appear to have flippant attitudes toward the fashion industry. Frith and Gleeson (2004) attempted to study men’s selection in fashionable or stylish dress. They hypothesize that advertising and marketing has led to increased pressures on men in western culture to maintain a toned or muscular body, which has resulted in negative body-image perceptions that they would attempt to rectify by their choices in clothing. However, their conclusions support that men are not as concerned about their appearance and tend to choose clothing based on the practicality or function of the garment.
Additionally, the tension of being gazed upon and objectified is still absent from their conclusions, revealing a lack in current research about how gay men can feel as objects to themselves. Blakewell, Mitchell, and Rothwell (2006) reach a similar conclusion, noting that—while male interest in clothing has slightly increased in the 21st century—men still hold attitudes that are positioned against fashion. Both articles briefly note that the men they researched adopt a fearful approach to fashion due to homophobic concerns about being feminized (Blakewell, Mitchell, & Rothwell, 2006; Frith & Gleeson, 2004), and the studies glaze over the tension arising from the interplay between the masculine and feminine positions among men who dress stylishly.

In a study about men who attend to their style of dress, Jones (1995) discusses how men sometimes open themselves to a feminized position in their self-presentation. The author surveyed the lives and self-presentation of men in creative professions (i.e., politicians, writers, and artists), and what Jones deemed feminine among men’s dress is the amount of attention that a man gives to his bodily appearance. However, her analysis stayed among heterosexual men whose treatment of fashion amplified class and gender lines rather than blurring those lines, as their style of dress was simply being well dressed for a man. Thus, I would like to offer another conceptualization of the feminine that expands upon Young’s (2005) and Alapack’s (2009) understandings. Feminine styles of dress are receptive; they allow themselves to take in and incorporate elements that are external to itself, which is how female clothing can become more masculinized (but never masculine within patriarchal power dynamics). These positions are perhaps best illustrated when Madonna, Sigsworth, and Torn (2000) write in Madonna’s single What It Feels Like For a Girl, “Girls can wear jeans, cut their hair short, wear shirts and boots ‘cause it’s ok to be a boy. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading ‘cause you think that
being a girl is degrading.” The movement between positions is in one direction, for receptivity is closed with the masculine position, and dressing becomes more about what one puts out about himself through his style of dress rather than taking in and identifying with other ways of being. In effect, a masculine style of dress serves to continue to perpetuate the normative functions of society. For instance, in Jones’s analysis, the well-dressed, heterosexual “dandy” (p. 21) does not allow his style to be influenced by externality of other races, lower classes, or different genders; it is menswear, smartly dressed, but still only masculine. Femininity can act as an antidote to the masculinized position, or—perhaps better yet—it can be like a virus that infects masculinity with openness and receptivity. As such, gay men can act as patient zero—infected with femininity and are already primed to occupy the space in-between.

Edwards (2010) aptly identifies the tension that occurs among gendered positions of dress by looking at male homosexuality, which he argues has become synonymous with effeminacy; he notes the difficulties living under the constructs of sex and gender among those that he describes as a “feminine soul in a male body” (p. 106), where the person does not experience himself as comfortably a man or woman and has tastes that emerge from both. The homosexual male is in the unique position to straddle both masculine and feminine clothing. Research has already been pointing to this phenomenon in the fashion industry and the homosexual identity. Unlike identities of race and gender, sexual orientation is not readily visible, which is why clothing and material goods are often used to signify self-identified homosexuality. In this case, homosexual men are more attentive of their appearance and clothing choices, as their use of clothing is often a conscious and intentional display (or concealment) of their self-image as a gay male. However, gay men’s penchant for clothing and adopting a style does not necessarily correlate with an interest in the larger fashion industry, for the industry does not actively produce
an in-between style between the genders (Sha, Aung, Londerville, & Ralston, 2007). Eichler (2012) notes that the selection of clothing and accessories was integral to his coming-out process, as it was a process to learn from and with other gay men about the symbolic practices that linked his sexual orientation with appearance.

Implicit in this process is the possibility of opening the masculine position to become feminized, as the gay male has to express his sexual interests through the visual medium. McNeal (1999) refers to this process as “the double-bind of gay selfhood” (p. 344) where the individual is restricted from being aligned with either masculine or feminine genders or sexual positions and is perpetually in an embodied state of conflict. He theorizes that this conflict gave birth to drag culture, where gay men created a safe avenue to express the tension between transgression and conformity that comes with the double-bind; however, he also argues that drag performance does not fully resolve the conflict of dual-gender, as the shameful feminine identity is kept in a separate drag-queen persona that stays “not me” (p. 347) in daily life. Thus, drag performance, in some ways, can also reify gender-expressive actions and behaviors instead of deconstructing them. Nevertheless, the project of discovering an equilibrium in between the genders still seems to be the aim how gay men appropriate both the masculine and feminine.

For this reason, I posit that heteronormativity and homophobia are indicative of the feminist issues that Young (2005) presents about how clothing can demarcate the genders, but I contend that clothing practices—i.e., what we can do with clothing—can offer lines of flight from gendered norms. In the postmodern era, options now exist to adequately address how gay men experience their identities as situated between the genders, much how Bovone (2006) notes that clothing is used as a way of achieving a non-exclusive identity to keep oneself free from being fixated by others. Perhaps dressing oneself in-between these positions should not be
viewed as a transgression but as a style that offers freedom to produce new bodies and new identities, even if we can never fully rid ourselves of the ambivalence that comes with negotiating the ambiguity of appearance in a postmodern era (Kaiser, Nagasawa, & Hutton, 1991). The position of gay selfhood is a microexpression of the larger, ongoing dialectic in masculine and feminine identities. Clothing remains the way in which one attempts to create, reveal, or conceal identity and intention, and a particular new style arises from masculine-feminine ambivalence that produces new phenomena in their own right (Guy & Banim, 2000). That new style is queer.

If we expand upon the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1987/1980), queer theory can be a method to disrupt the rigid and molar edifices of society (such as gender, class, heterosexuality) and offer a plethora of new ways to be in the world. Queer forms of expression begin with the individual but go beyond the person to impact the way we move through the social world, offering new lines for identity construction, ways of relating, and feelings of embodiment. Sarah Ahmed (2006) discusses in her book *Queer Phenomenology* the etymology of the word “queer” as derived from the Greek word meaning “cross, oblique [or] adverse” (p. 161), and she uses this to describe how using a queer orientation within phenomenology involves giving due consideration to perspectives that involve getting lost, going astray, or deviating from a “straight” line—in other words, the norms that are set forth by the social order. The queer, in her discussion, is that which not only goes against orthodoxy, but also “turns away” from the “right, good, and proper” (p. 78). Queer orientations, according to Ahmed, can involve critical experiences such as disorientation, giddiness, and nausea when voluntarily transgressing these norms; and she describes that these experiences act as an awakening of, citing Merleau-Ponty, “the awareness of our contingency and the horror with which it fills us” (p. 4). In other words,
approaching the world in a queer fashion opens up the possibility for the non-centrality of any particular orientation or, perhaps, even a particular conceptualization of the subject, and this process is inherently uncomfortable; but it allows for the possibility for the subject to be ever evolving in a multiplicity of becoming.

We can conceive of queerness then, in Ahmed’s (2006) line of thinking, as a failure to produce or be situated within the status quo of molar identifications, using the concept of molarization that Deleuze and Guattari (1987/1980) suggest. Deleuze and Guattari identify molar structures as those static, hierarchical structures and ideas that humans gravitate towards and join with; conversely, they invite us to think of ways of being that adopt a more horizontal and transversal style, replacing discourses of superiority and inferiority (as reflected in the top-down, vertical nature of molar structures) with difference and creativity from the norm. In this manner, they introduce the concept of the molecular to describe the horizontal and lateral styles of being and forming connections, and it is the molecular that can erode and deconstruct the foundation of the cultural binaries. A molecular identity—while seeming like a failure to edify the status quo—actually offers the movement and freedom to be different. For instance, even in its most base form, in typical queer relationships, there is some failing (either in one or both parties) to reproduce a biological family line along traditional heterosexual norms; and this failing consequently leads to historical movement that is opposite of “the direction promised as a social good” (p. 21). But—to re-purpose another idiom—one person’s failure is another person’s success, for these failures actually produce openings for different modes of orientation toward objects, bodies, and others in the world. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam (2011) looks at how these and other failures within the structures of the social order offer opportunities for the
production of different ways of knowing and living a life. Using Kathryn Bond Stockton’s explication of the “queerness” of childhood, Halberstam writes:

> If we were all already normative and heterosexual to begin with in our desires, orientations, and modes of being, then presumably we would not need such strict parental guidance to deliver us all to our common destinies of marriage, child rearing, and hetero-reproduction.  (p. 27)

Taken in this way, one wonders whether the failing of *queerness* is not falling within the binary of sexes or genders; or if it is the other way around, and heterosexuality is actually the failure with how it restricts our infinite modes of expression from the beginning.

Regardless of which failing is at fault, they both allow for new beginnings. Halberstam (2011) insists that we give due consideration to these new excluded and “undisciplined” forms of knowledge that do not fall within the confines of social binaries, molar categories, or cultural edifices. What she deems as knowledge are, in other words, new ways of orienting oneself to the world; they create new possibilities and new ways to produce identities that eschew patriarchal narratives of control, power, and mastery. Queer knowledge instead operates through the failures of the naïve and nonsensical, the temporary and the illegible. To be queer is to fail, then, and to subsequently create oneself anew. Halberstam’s description of the importance of the workings of silliness, confusion, alienation, impossibility and awkwardness can all be thought as the foundation for queer experiences and growth.
Chapter 3: Research Question and Method of Inquiry

Freedom exists in the ways that an individual adopts a personal style. Blumer (1969) aptly points out that:

[f]ashion is a very adept mechanism for enabling people to adjust in an orderly and unified way to a moving a changing world which is full of anarchic possibilities. It is suited, *par excellence*, to the demands of life in such a moving world since it facilitates detachment from a receding past, opens the doors to proposals to the future, but subjects such proposals to the test of collective selection, thus bringing them in line with the direction of awakened interest and disposition. (p. 290)

Blumer’s conceptualization of fashion offers us an understanding of how clothing and one’s style of dress produces an identity for oneself instead of for others. However, there is little research to address how clothing practices impact and shape our lived experience. Rather than focusing on how the fashion system prescribes ways of being through norms of gender, class, race, and so on, I believe a phenomenological return to clothing and style can illuminate how clothing *becomes* our bodies as a second-skin and augments our experiences. The choice to fail to reenact these norms through clothing is a queer function that offers lines of flight from the status quo and for new ways of being. Clothing remains an appropriate tool for conducting research into looking at how individuals tackle the project of identity because, as Blumer pointed out, it moves with us—step-by-step—from a past to bring us to the future that of possibilities and interests. Our clothing syncs with our sense of self (or perhaps the other way around), and the fashion industry has already demonstrated an understanding of this process of identifying with their clothing, as the Rhodes-Pitt’s (2011) opening quote in the introduction signifies. We see
that the individuals are looking to garments for the production of identities that signify who they want to become, which can allow for new expressions of gender, race, culture, class, and so on.

It is in this production of identities that I want to address the process of how people compose a style of dress that dialogues with their felt sense of being in the world, and this style can restructure our experience of relationships, movement, and self. It is my hope that this method can open up new ways to orient us to look at how one’s personal style can act as a line of flight from established and fixated norms within the cultural milieu, further heralding new approaches for a scholarly discussion on psychological approaches to style and fashion. Thus, I believe a phenomenological-psychological approach with a queer focus can provide us with an insight into how an individual uses clothing to navigate and live through the complications of identity. Furthermore, my approach on the effects of clothing focuses on the lived, embodied, and psychological effects of clothing and attempts a reading of identity that is not fixed in either gender. To best approach this task, I adopted a hermeneutic approach in my analysis so that I could interpret the processes of how we identify with our clothing in the data. In looking at clothing and style as actions, I sought to answer the following questions for study:

1) How do clothing practices comprise a person’s style?

2) How does style inform a person’s sense of embodiment and relationships with others?

3) How can a person’s style produce lines of flight from the binary positions of masculine and feminine?

4) Can style produce new possibilities for identity?

To answer these questions, I selected participants in which the phenomenon I wished to investigate appeared most intensely—specifically, with gay men who adopt a genderqueer style. The homosexual male is in the unique position to straddle both masculine and feminine clothing
within genderqueer expressions. Research has already been pointing to this phenomenon in the fashion industry and in studies of homosexual identity (notably described in McNeal, 1999).

**Recruiting, Screening, and Selection of Participants**

To select participants, I returned to Blumer’s (1969) description of the individual character of fashion—namely, to the individual who makes a concerted effort to express an identity when selecting clothing to wear. I limited my participants to a sample of three to five self-identified homosexual men that have consciously adopted a style of dress that they consider to be unique in how they negotiate between the masculine and feminine positions. I recruited the participants via e-mail and through their participation in GLBTQ events (such as Pride events in the cities), listservs (namely LGBTQ Scholars of Color and American Psychological Association [APA] Division 44: Society of Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues), and through social media (i.e., open Facebook and Instagram groups and acquaintances). I sent recruitment e-mails and posted to social-media groups to allow me to gather basic information and to ensure the participants meet the requirements of the study.

The recruitment e-mails noted the requirements of age, sex, whether the individual identifies as an out-homosexual, if he believes that he has an idiosyncratic personal style, and whether he regularly mix nonmasculine elements into his wardrobe (Appendix C). I very liberally interpreted what constituted “feminine elements of clothing,” identifying that they could range from articles of clothing and female jewelry to hairstyles, makeup, and nail polish within this study. I also inquired whether they have access to electronic photography and are available for face-to-face interviews or distance interviews via Skype, Google Chat, or other audio-visual software. Individuals who met the screening criteria were invited as a participant for the study. To define out-homosexual, I am referring to those individuals who are already public with their
sexual orientation so that the risk of consequences of revealing their sexual orientation is minimal or no higher than daily life.

Six potential participants contacted me, and I followed up with a screening phone call to gather basic information and to determine whether each participant was eligible to participate in the study. The follow-up screening inquired about name, age, biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender expression (particularly expressed through clothing or appearance; Appendix D). The screening served to ensure that the participants met the profile of subjects to be researched and to answer any questions about purpose of the study, and no other data was collected about the respondent until he consented to participation and signed the consent form. One participant did not return contact following the screening message, and I left two voicemail messages before I ceased further attempts to contact him.

Each selected participant answered each screening question in the affirmative. They were notified about informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants were given the consent form following the screening but before beginning the study and interviews. The consent forms were reviewed with them line by line to address any questions that may arise about the research (Appendix A). Four of the five participants signed the consent form and returned them to me either by mail or electronically, and a copy was returned to them. The one participant that did not return his consent form stated that time constraints were what led him to opt out of participating in the study. It was for this reason that—once two participants were in process of the study—I amended the study to include a $40 compensation for their time and participation (Appendix B). Two more individuals signed in to the study; however, one of those participant withdrew a week into the study due to obtaining a position of employment that had a dress code that restricted what he could wear shortly before starting his style journal. After
some discussion, we determined that the dress code interfered with his ability to maintain a genderqueer style, and he subsequently spent most days (due to his work schedule) in a more masculine presentation. Three participants participated in the study to completion.

**Research Design, Interview Schedule, and Analysis**

The final participants who completed the whole process of this qualitative study were three gay men over the age of eighteen who regularly mix masculine and feminine elements in their style of dress. I instructed them to take pictures of their outfits for most days over the course of two weeks and to keep a journal (written or audio) documenting how they felt wearing their outfits and significant interactions with others that they believed were influenced by their outfits (Appendix E). Throughout the fourteen days, I sent daily reminders to document for their style journals. Each participant opted to use their smart/cellular phones to send me photos and texted me either how they felt or interactions that they believed were influenced by they looked. When the two weeks were complete, I collected the pictures and messages into a single document and began an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) of their recordings as described by Smith and Osborn (2008) to address the first research question. The use and function of the style journal was to serve as a tool to facilitate recollection during the scheduled interviews, ideally to elicit more accessible and accurate recall about the issues of embodiment and relationships that were posed in the research question.

After each style journal was collected, each participant scheduled and participated in a semi-structured interview to inquire more about their photos, style journal, and experience to address the remaining three research questions. Two interviews were conducted via Skype, whereas one interview was conducted one-on-one at the participants home. For the face-to-face interviews, materials included an audio recorder, questions for the participant, a writing pad and
pen for taking notes, and relevant photos and documentation that he sent me through their style journal. For the remaining distance interviews, materials included a computer, Internet connection, the participants preferred video-chat program (i.e., Skype.), questions for participants, writing pad and pen for taking notes, an audio recorder, and relevant photos and documentation that they have sent me through their style journal. The interview sessions lasted approximately one hour.

The interviews were guided by participants’ answers to the interview questions; and as the participants responded to each question, I took notes on the interview process and probed further into significant and meaningful thematic information that emerged during the interview. To best complete this while staying true to their words, I reflected the specific statements, words, and sentiments of the participants’ responses to elicit thick, textual descriptions of the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon. While the questions were open-ended, I provided prompts for the questions if the participant had difficulty understanding the question or coming up with a response. I have also included follow-up questions to ask when they provided a rich description of their experience. The interviews were guided by questions prepared in advanced about their sense of style, how it is situated in between the genders, and how it influences their experience in the world (Appendix F). Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim as well (documented in their respective appendices). All identifying information (ex., primarily participant names) was changed, and the images were modified and altered to mask the participant and other individuals included in photos.

As a source of personal reflexivity, I documented my own thoughts, reactions, and feelings throughout the data collection and analysis phases so that I could explicate my own approach to the phenomenon. As I am an out-homosexual male who dresses with mixed
masculine and feminine objects, I already carry assumptions and expectations to the research questions that can be deconstructed during the research process, and making these prereflective attitudes explicit during research allowed me to more effectively identify when and how my views might have influenced my conclusions. In the phenomenological spirit, it is best to be made aware about how my own experiences are already in a dialogue with the phenomenon and provide a context for the interviews and findings (Walsh, 2003; Patton, 2002); in that regard and when necessary, I included how my own views impacted the interview process and analysis.

To continue with the interpretive-phenomenological analysis of the interview, Smith and Osborn (2008) describe IPA as involving a “double hermeneutic” (p. 53) wherein the participants are engaged in a process of understanding their worlds while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants’ processes of understanding. In this endeavor, the transcripts of the interviews were read at a minimum of least three times: a first reading to familiarize myself with the participants’ languages, outfits, and associations; a second reading to conduct a free textual analysis, reflexively documenting and highlighting meaning units (or significant statements) in the participants’ journals; and a third reading to identify the emergent themes from the data. I paid special attention to language that described the body and a genderqueer style or discussed how clothing became a restructuring or augmenting agent to the participants’ experiences. In my research, I present my analysis of the data on the issues of their style, embodiment, and relationships, and I isolated no more than five individual themes per participant that I believe captured the lifeworld of the participants in a genderqueer style.

To align myself with the queer literature, I chose to explicate the themes individually with each participant rather than to attempt to find a structural unity across their experiences. This aligns with Halberstam’s (2011) understanding that a queer failure is a failure in its own
right in that each individual’s failure to reproduce heteronormative structures of power and order is unique to that person. Thus, while I believe that it was important to stick with the phenomenological traditions in this research because I wanted to hone in on the immediacy of clothing to our experiences of embodiment, relationships, and sense of self; I modified the IPA method set forth by Smith and Osborn (2008) and highlighted the divergent themes between the participants—to look at how queer productions of gender identity is multivariate and kaleidoscopic in its presentation. I also chose to label the themes to highlight what the participants are doing with and through their clothing as a way of highlighting the productive, action-oriented modes of becoming set for by Deleuze and Guattari (1987/1980). So the choice to unpack each participant’s experience individually in the results section was to let each participant’s themes shine forth like a sparking gem in that kaleidoscope and admire how they have tackled the project of identity for themselves; however, I then return to utilize Smith and Osborn in the discussion section to find the convergent themes to answer my research questions about the process of how my participants utilize clothing to comprise a style and—subsequently—an identity.

I believe that these three participants provided rich descriptions of their clothing practices that were appropriate to the study. They represent an elucidating look at how the dialectic between the masculine and feminine is navigated through clothing. In looking at the participants’ results, I hope that their experiences illustrate the freedom that clothing can offer us in destabilizing cultural constructs of masculine and feminine while adopting a personal, genderqueer style that every person can claim as their own.
Chapter 4: Results

In the following sections, I present the individual results for each participant. I provide an initial biographical sketch and description of style for each participant alongside a theme that illustrates how the participant’s interactions and movement through his daily life are influenced by his manner of dress. The theme addressing embodiment and relationships were primarily extracted from entries in their style journals and subsequent interviews. Following the biographical sketch, description of style, and discussion of embodiment and relationships, I explicate themes regarding each participants’ lived experience that were extrapolated from their individual interviews, and then I present findings on how it relates to identity and freedom within the discussion section.

Michelangelo

Michelangelo is a black/African-American, single male who is in his mid-20s, has light brown-hazel eyes, and ombre dreadlocks that fall midway to his chest. He resides in a city environment and is out as a homosexual male. He is approximately 5’10” and has a thin build. We conducted the interview at his home, and he spoke softly but was thoughtful and intentional before he answered questions. We met an hour and a half, but the interview only lasted one hour.

Description of Style. Initially, Michelangelo had difficulty describing the way he comprises his style and look, but then he concluded upon his style as being “a unisex montage of boy and girl, a mashup — all of that.” (MIC, 453). When asked to reflect upon it further, he said:

Honestly, I don't really know how they would describe my look. I don't know. I'm sorry; honestly, I don't know how [others] would describe it. I never thought about it, honestly. I change my look up so much. I don't know. I don't even really think— to be honest—that
“unisex montage” that I gave, I don't even think that really classifies it. I just—I try to just be me. Again, that's all I can say, but I know it pulls from girl clothing and guy clothing. (MIC, 460-465)

In his comment, Michelangelo is acknowledging that his way of dressing captures a piece of his self that is indescribable, perhaps effervescent. It seems that the word *montage* is apt in describing how the individual components of his style form a collective identity of who he is as a person. It is almost as if the individual components that form a soup of who Michelangelo is—for instance, “a more effeminate look” (MIC, 193) with a dash of “diagonals… with the little shoulder… [because he likes] to give a little bit of drama” (MIC, 178-179), always sure to add a bit of *girlness* because “if it’s no type of girlness to it, [he] just [feels] blah” (MIC, 196). His style would definitely say that he does not like color or to be too flashy (MIC, 620-621)— subtlety is key (MIC, 746). As for the centerpiece: his legs (MIC, 156), as they are his favorite part of the body to show off and accentuate (MIC, 162-163); however, we can also classify this as the midriff or “everything below the belly button… [but] we could include the belly button” (MIC 444-446). It is as if he is giving the recipe for who he is. The main descriptor that he used to describe style is that he attempts to be limited looking boxy or boyish (MIC, 185-186), stating that “[i]f [he] can accomplish mixing the two genders… that makes [him] comfortable and happy” (MIC, 306-307).
Figure 1. Photographs of Michelangelo's style

We were able to identify many of these elements of his style—such as diagonals, an aversion to color or being too flashy, and everything below the legs—within the photos that he provided during the two-week period (and it should be noted that the middle image in Figure 1 is a home/comfort look, so this is a style of dress that presents itself when he is by himself; MIC, 620). It is true that many of his photos have subdued color palates and very striking angular patterns, which seem to be essential components to his style of dress at this time.

Clothing as contributing to insecurities with his body and relationships. In reviewing many of the interactions that Michelangelo had with others, it is as if his style lead to misunderstanding and awkward moments in many relationships and interactions.
For instance, he wrote on day twelve of his style journal: “So while wearing this look [Figure 2] in public tonight, I’ve been feeling really confined [sic] but then Straight men approach me saying, ‘Hey ma,’ and then its awkward when they realize [that I am male] and say, ‘My bad!!’” (MIC Style Journal, para. 10). While he is dressing in a way that feels comfortable in and that he believes encapsulates his sense of self, he is constantly confronted with others’ attempts to position him within the masculine-feminine binary. He discussed another interaction in which he:

went out [to a gay club], and this guy literally came up to [him] and was like, "Are you a guy?" [Michelangelo] was like, "Yes, I'm a guy." He's like, "You're gay? You're transitioning?" [Michelangelo] said, "No. I'm gay." Then he was like—he motioned in [Michelangelo’s] shape… went like this [gestures an hourglass shape]. (MIC, 25-30)
Their interaction goes on to continue with the stranger requesting to touch him, hug him, and then pick him up; while Michelangelo acknowledges that the stranger was drunk, the questioning and then subsequent touching almost seems like the process of how we begin to believe that which is unbelievable to our experiences: we question what is before us, perceive it through our sensations, and incorporate it into our prior knowledge and expectations before we embrace it as real. It is as if Michelangelo’s lived experience and way of presenting himself is something that has to be proven to others, and his comfort and his understanding of self is brought into question—primarily because others may expect him to identify as either/or within the masculine-feminine binary—which then becomes the premise that another (rather than himself) feels called to either accept or reject. In the former interaction, Michelangelo rejected the possibility of furthering their interaction when the other shut down after he realized that Michelangelo was not a “Ma” (MIC Style Journal, para. 10); in the latter, he was invited to continue the interaction because the individual accepted his genderqueer presentation.

Because of his bodily frame, style, and facial grooming, his body is put into question, and he was able to speak to how this affects his psychological makeup:

I try to be myself as much as possible and dress how I want to dress without worrying about someone responding to my character negatively. When I wear certain things, I'm self-aware of how I look, so it does kind of sometimes make me insecure, self-conscious, about who I am… (MIC, 83-86)

I find this quote very telling, as the repeated questions to prove the physicality of one’s body or one’s place in the world in accordance with cultural expectations can feel very much ontological—it can lead to the question of “Who am I?” What can feel like your body and your own can also feel as a dream that is somehow unreal. But regardless, Michelangelo presses on.
And another pivotal moment in the interview, Michelangelo became tearful when talking about how his style sometimes drives a wedge between him and his friends (MIC, 264-296). In numerous instances throughout the interview, he described interactions in which he is uncomfortable with his own body because of how it positions himself in relation to others in his life. He experiences a tension between himself and his relationships with others—even intimate platonic ones. He discussed interactions and responses that he receives from close friends when he wears something that can be revealing (as in showing off skin, particularly around his midriff or the legs):

[T]hey like to say, “The skinny bitch comes out.” That's all. Sometimes—I don't know. I don't want to be as skinny as I am, so that's my own personal issue that I have with myself. I don't like to be called “The skinny bitch.” I'd rather just wear my clothes and just be me without being a “skinny bitch” or any other type of “skinny”-something added to that. I don't know. I don't know. (MIC, 214-219)

What is interesting about this description is that it highlights how the same clothing that accentuates his most prized features also leads him to feel ostracized or ridiculed—even if inadvertently in a lighthearted way—by people who are close to him. He then goes on to say that he does not like being skinny because others believe that he is trying to flaunt himself through his stylistic choices rather than just wearing what he feels is natural to his style. He continues:

I could be a normal person and not be called “a skinny bitch.” I could just wear clothes, and people would just be like, "Oh hey," but when I wear the clothes that I want to wear, then I'm conscious because I don't want my friends to feel some type of way because of what I wear. And sometimes I think even though they don't mean it harmfully by calling
me “a skinny bitch.” I think they might have some kind of issue with me being the size that I am and them being what they are. I feel like—I don't even know. (MIC, 233-239)

Michelangelo is experiencing a dichotomy between his own lived experience and his experience-for-others, and the two experiences are misaligned at times. This split in experience appears to be the source where doubt and uncertainty emerge about how he should feel about his body or whether others can accept him. This was a part of the interview in which he appeared to withdraw to himself and became tearful, appearing more uncertain than in other parts of the interview where he spoke more confidently about his experiences.

**Individual themes.** The following sections are the individual themes that I have isolated from Michelangelo’s style journal and interview.

**Using clothing to mask the fear in the back of his mind.** Michelangelo is very conscious with how signaling his sexual orientation or alternative gender practices through his clothing can incur retribution or admonishment from the larger society. He stated, “It's like you never know who you're going to meet that might not like [gay people, cross-dressers, or transgendered individuals]. They might respond to it with bashing or something, or verbal altercations” (MIC, 90-92). After all, he already noted one interaction that was plagued with uncertainty when he was asked if he was transgndered; while that moment ended congenially, it could have easily ended in verbal or physical harassment. He acknowledged his signifying sexual orientation though clothing acts as a “stigma” (MIC, 89) that one wears, and he has to balance being conscious about real-world threats alongside dressing the way that he desires. He confirmed that he sometimes encounters negative comments from time to time, but he becomes more fearful when it goes “beyond than just a verbal name calling—maybe like threats… or actually physically assaulting [him]. That’s what [he’s] always worried about” (MIC, 101-103).
When reviewing photos in his style journal, I noticed that many of Michelangelo’s photos were cut off at the neck. I initially wondered if this were an attempt to hide his face, interpreting that he might focus his sense of self through his clothing more than his face. I followed up on this manner of taking his photos during the interview. He denied any negative emotions as being the motivator for cropping his face out, saying, “I thought you didn't want to see the face because you said you were going to blur them out, so I just didn't even put my face in the photo,” and he comically added, “Yeah. Because some of those could have easily ended up on Instagram” (MIC, 314-316, 318).

However, Michelangelo’s style of dress has led to feelings of doubt—both about himself and in the world. When reflecting on how his views of the world are affected by how he dresses, he stated:

>[A]s far as it restricting—any restrictions that I get from what I wear, the fact that I always have that negativity in the back of my mind about what other people might be thinking, I feel like that gives me this doubt that the world will ever evolve into something better. (MIC, 665-669)

The way that he describes how his clothing shapes his perception helps us to understand how a simple act of putting on clothing shapes one’s view of the future and the world. In this passage, his style offers a choice for how the world could change. While he attempts to maintain a position that he could “make people open to the idea of what [the world] can be versus what people say it should be” (MIC, 664-665), he also is confronted in a very immediate way that the world could remain in the status quo, being closed to alternative possibilities of being.

To respond to these spaces in which the world feels more closed, Michelangelo stated that he can augment the degree to which he feels safe through the machinations of clothing. “I
may kind of throw on an extra layer of my jacket or wear that around all day, or make sure that I sit down all day so no one sees what my legs look like…” he said and continues, “I will just so I can make myself more comfortable with being an uncomfortable environment” (MIC, 709-714). In effect, he knows that strangers can respond in ways that express distaste or hostility, so he can also utilize his clothing to make himself invisible in his environment by being more aligned with gender expectations of others. During times of increased discomfort, a jacket or remaining seated can act as camouflage in a binary world so that he can blend in without a second glance. Thus, he always maintains a heightened sense of awareness in his environment because of his personal style because of fears of possible retribution (MIC, 714-729).

**Using clothing to signify his mood.** In looking more at the orientation that Michelangelo uses to dictate his style, it seems that his clothing is very much aligned with his feelings on any particular day. In what I perceived to be one of his more iconic photos following a historic day (for better or for worse, the 2016 election), he wore all black. He recalls how he was dressing in a manner that was very reflective of his mood:
Maybe on a subconscious level… and in that particular case I wanted to be dramatic. I wanted to be in all black, but when it came towards picture taking and sending you this photo [Figure 3], I was like, "He's going to look at this picture and just see this black rectangle in this little bun." … I just felt frumpy, so I was like, "Let me just cock the hip out a little bit to give a little shape." That whole cape that I have on—I call it a cape, it just—it was doing nothing for that photo, but when you walk with it, it's really dramatic.

It's like Darth Vader walking around [the city]. (MIC, 677-684)

To further illustrate how his Darth Vader inspired ensemble embodied his mood, he added, “I was ready to pull out a Star Destroyer and blow up a whole planet” (MIC, 694). He was cognizant that he was dressing in a way that referenced his doubts (expressed in the former section) with how the world seems limited in its evolution.
This was a common theme that underscored Michelangelo’s answers about his outfits in his style journal: he dressed according to how he felt emotionally. But as we discussed how the body and clothing is intertwined within singular embodied state (with Merleau-Ponty’s description of the chiasm; 1968/1964), his language about how he feels is also akin to how we would describe clothes. With the same outfit, he talked about his decision with putting on the black outfit and cape when he woke up and thought, “What am I going to wear? I'll just wear black, and I'll just throw it on. It's just blah” (MIC, 366-367). His mood was the color, and he felt—as he stated—*blah*.

Michelangelo’s description of outfits on the other days mirror the same sentiment. The shirt in the left image in Figure 1 (pictured on page 34) is actually a maxi that he had to fold up and tuck within his pants to give the illusion that it was a shirt. He describes the outfit as making him feel “frumpy” and “uncomfortable” (MIC, 116-120), which is a way in which his clothing impacts his overall orientation to the world. In refer back to a previous passage, he elaborates on how he can modify how he feels with an assemblage of other clothing:

If I become too much aware, then I will say I do start feeling a little uncomfortable. I may kind of throw on an extra layer of my jacket or wear that around all day, or make sure that I sit down all day so no one sees what my legs look like depending on if I'm wearing jeans or if I'm wearing leggings. (MIC, 708-711)

So Michelangelo can either amplify or diminish particular states of being by adding or eliminating certain articles of clothing, but those feelings are informed by the clothing he puts on himself.

However, it does not seem like this interchange is always a cut-and-dry process. Michelangelo readily acknowledged that when it is a matter of feeling attractive, “I would never
say my style is sexy. I try to be sexy, but I would never say that my style sexy” (MIC, 468-469). It seems that matters of sexual desire can muddy the waters of whether he believes that what he is conveying is what he is feeling. He added, “I would not really call that sexy. I would say that I feel sexy, but I would not consider it sexy” (MIC, 471-472). Maybe this is perhaps because it would take another individual to determine whether what he is wearing a sexy or not despite his feelings about it. Dressing as a means gain attraction is complicated by the desires of others, but expressing his moods and feeling through dress became another significant theme during the interview.

**Using clothing as a way to be empathic to others.** Michelangelo is very considerate with how his style of dress may affect other people with whom he is close in his life. This consideration of others is tied to his feelings about his body discussed earlier when he talked about his aversion to being skinny (MIC, 214-219).

![Michelangelo trying on his friend's heels](image)
In Figure 4, he described an interaction in which he put on a friend’s high-heel shoes, and he became upset when everyone was making comments about him wearing the shoes better than she (MIC, 390-396). Thus he is very considerate about others’ needs and does not want them to feel as if his style of dress is a judgment about others’ bodies or what they can or cannot wear. He reflects on when they make negative comments about his personal style and how it may reveal what they feel about themselves:

I just feel like it comes from an inferior standpoint. I don't want to make anyone feel any less about themselves just because of what I like to wear. Sometimes I—even though, like I said, I don't think they mean it harmfully—I still feel like, it feels like it comes from a place of, "I wish I could be like that." I don't want that. (MIC, 243-246)

Michelangelo perceives these comments from close friends as revealing their own insecurities about themselves—such as a desire to be skinnier or to look as good in heels as he—and their feelings about themselves (as reflected through their comments about how he looks) weigh heavily on him. He is cognizant that he comes from a diverse social circle with his friends having different body types and expressing their own gender identity in idiosyncratic ways. He very simply expressed how their comments make him feel:

I feel it most impactful when I'm with my friends. If I was somebody that cared about how they looked and what they wore, I would have a completely different set of friends. I would have friends that would do the same things that I would be doing or wearing the same things that I'm wearing, but I have this eclectic group of friends. I feel like me being an individual and being with them would be okay, but sometimes I just feel like I do stand out, and not all the time it's in a good way by the comments that they say. (MIC, 346-351)
In order to combat this, he stated that he conforms his style of dress based on who he will be
with and the environment that he is in, even keeping a security jean jacket close at hand if it is
necessary to put on to help others feel more at ease through him looking more subdued (MIC,
413-415).

Having to be considerate of others’ feelings about what Michelangelo is wearing and the
comments that they make can sometimes lead him to feel like an outsider—even within his
social circle. He talked about an interaction in which he attended a festival, Gay Days, in Florida
and the difference between his swimwear attire and his friends. While his friends were wearing
traditional swimming trunks and boy shorts, Michelangelo adopted a Speedo to happily
accentuate his legs. He was nonplussed about comments that he was “going down there to be a
ho… dressing like a ho” (MIC, 262-267). Again, their words—which were probably not meant
to be malicious but made in friendly fun—served to only widen the gap that he feels between
himself and others. While I may have introduced the word outsider, it resonated with him, and
he became tearful and found it difficult to elaborate further. We decided to just leave that
interpretation as it is.

Using clothing to come out of the closet. Michelangelo identified two significant factors
that influenced his decision to begin mixing masculine and feminine elements of his clothing:
time (when he was 19) and location (when he moved away from home). He stated that at that
time, he had been feeling “more and more comfortable with wearing this or wearing that, even if
it's a girl-this or a girl-that” (MIC, 498-499). He is originally from a major east coast
metropolitan area, and he left home for college. Looking back on his life prior to leaving his
original home environment, he said, “At that time I wasn’t out. I just stuck to the norm, what was
expected of me to wear. Then when I came to college, I was free, so I started wearing how I felt I wanted to look” (MIC, 502-504).

For Michelangelo, the act of dressing in a non-binary fashion was very much tied to the coming-out process and specifically within his family of origin. He acknowledged that he was restricted to dress in a manner of fashion that was accustomed to others’ expectations (MIC, 501-504)—primarily “to wear strictly boy clothes” and nothing “too flamboyant” (MIC, 514). Being away from his family presented him with the freedom to wear clothing in different ways that signaled his sexual orientation and expression, whereas cultural and familial expectations weighed on his style of dress during his adolescent years. He recounts how growing his hair was a significant decision during this time, stating that he would grow it, cut it, grow it again, and dye it various colors “to start dressing and being who [he was]” (MIC, 544-546). Responding further to what his hair signified, he said:

[It’s an] expression of me because I always just had a short haircut. Even back in the day when all the other boys were like—with black culture you have like the waves and the skullcap and the durag—even with that, if I had waves in my hair, my mother didn't want me to be considered a pretty boy, so even then trying to do something with my hair that was unnatural because it would require me putting a texturizer in my hair, which girls do. (MIC, 550-555)

He acknowledged that it was perhaps not his mother’s intention to impose these gender restrictions, but he felt that her statement initially connoted negative feelings towards any display of femininity from Michelangelo. It is also perhaps significant that he was instructed to shy away from looks that made him appear “pretty,” as this may also reflect the first iterations of an internalized, self-conscious disposition towards clothing and being labeled a “skinny bitch”
among his friends (MIC, 219). However, the coming-out process required that his family would become aware of the stylistic changes and would make judgments about it; fortunately, in time, they accepted his style of dress. He said:

[A]t this point, my mother has seen photos of me. With her approval and her like, "I'm good," after all this time; now this whole year—like literally this has been the biggest, where I'm just like, "Okay, I wear whatever," and wear these photos that I've sent you.

(MIC, 526-529)

With his mother and family accepting his unisex-montage style, they permitted him the freedom to continue wearing that which feels comfortable for him, but their approval also carried with it the de-facto acceptance of him coming out as well.

When Michelangelo left home, he described his first forays with experimenting in mixing masculine and feminine elements of his clothing a moment of pure freedom; a new location allowed himself to “be anyone or anything” in a brand-new setting where he does not know anyone, even if he was still somewhat conscious about what other people might think about his appearance (MIC, 523-525). He was away from the expectations of close family members and adolescent connections that can sometimes be anchors to our yearning to change. He remembers the day he began experimenting:

Literally, the day that I started college here, I was ready. But it didn't rapidly happen. It slowly progressed. As soon as I knew that I was away from my mother and away from my father and away from my grandmother, I was like, "I need to change this up.” (MIC, 537-540)

Again, a different setting with a new cast of characters allowed him the freedom to play with his style.
Using clothing to express fearlessness with who he is. Whereas he may always have had an underlying (and warranted) fear that he could be assaulted or heckled (MIC, 101-103), he paradoxically also uses clothing to convey the feeling that he is fearless with who he is. I attempted to inquire about Michelangelo’s vacillating decisions to either cut his hair or grow it out when he changed his location and came out with his sexual identity, and I wondered about whether he might express an ambivalence about adopting his unisex identity. He said, “No. No, none of that. I just wanted to try something else” (MIC, 563), and I believe this quote captures what he is trying to express—that his style is always new, is always evolving, and is never set or finalized. He arrived at the description of unisex because he is attempting to ascertain what others might describe him as her what he is trying to express (MIC, 587-590). He said:

I would think as much as I do and am concerned with what others might think—especially my friends—I feel like I still want my style to convey that I feel comfortable with being who I am. I convey that I like wearing maybe a girl's shirt and you not realize that it's a girl's shirt until you ask me where I got it from. I think I want it to convey that I'm fearless, even though I'm not fearless; and that I don't have any—no boundaries, no borders to me as a person with what I'm wearing. (MIC, 629-635)

I believe this passage is very helpful in elucidating the porous manner in which he is constantly affected by his clothing and affecting others, how he can feel ostracized yet also connected and intimate relationships, how he can feel unsafe yet still make bold statements through what he wears, how he can be both vulnerable yet fearless at the same time. To not encapsulate him into one way of expressing his gender identity allows his subjectivity free reign over what he wants himself to be despite the difficulties and negative emotions.
In fact, Michelangelo noted that his understanding of molar categories of gender and sexual orientation do not latch onto his self-concept. Attempts to restrict him to a singular gender lead him to transform and mold those expectations to what he wants for himself rather than for others (MIC, 654-659). To put it simply for himself, he succinctly states:

I've been able to really express myself more in the way that I feel I should look and want to look—now more so than before—so [my style does not] really change, just climbing up that ladder, almost reaching the top now. (MIC, 645-648)

Michelangelo’s use of the word *ladder* seems to describe the steps he has taken since first moving away from home and reaching the point he is at now. He identified that it was within the past two years that he has become more comfortable purchasing feminine articles of clothing and mixing it up in manner that feels natural to him. But he still could not describe his style in manner “other than as just [being him]” (MIC, 601-606); however, his style seems to be secreting much more significance than he may be aware of—of being fearless, unisex, self-conscious, and Darth Vader ready to blow up a planet, perhaps either separately or perhaps all at once, depending on his mood.

**Donatello**

Donatello is a Latino male who is in his late-20s and is single. He identifies as an out-homosexual male, and he currently resides in a major metropolitan area. Due to geographic limitations, we conducted the interview over Skype, and the interview lasted one hour.

**Description of Style.** If Donatello were to briefly describe the style, he stated it was, “New York City chic meets lazy boy” (DON, 138). His style is very straightforward, and—as evidenced by the photos he provided in his style journal—he has a penchant for neutral colors
and nude lipsticks (DON, 148), colorblocking\(^5\) or solid colors against bold patterns and accessories (particularly floral; DON, 159), freshly painted nails (DON, 142), and a nose ring to act as the cherry on top (DON, 162). These characteristics seem to best illustrate his daily style (Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Photographs of Donatello's style](image)

He presented his style consistently as such throughout his photos, as he was cognizant of his personal taste in clothing and able to express it directly. To some degree, he connects his style to his self-esteem, noting that he is sometimes unsure about whether his insecurities or confidence is intrinsic to himself or whether it stems from what he is wearing (DON, 48-49). He noted that the pictures that he provided to exemplify his style are the result of a long journey of personal acceptance, where now blouses, skirts, dresses feel just as comfortable on his body; and he is unapologetic about it (DON, 431-434). He also confirmed that as his self-acceptance increased

\(^5\) Colorblocking is when one wears articles of clothing that are comprised of each being a bold, solid color adjacent to each other.
over the years, his style incorporated more feminine elements into it to become a truly
genderqueer style (DON, 439-441).

**Clothing as navigating through his ambivalence with his body and relationships.**

The photos that Donatello provided for his style journal were also sparse on some days, as he stated that he tends to be nude when he is at home on the weekends with no plans to go out (thus omitting four days from the two-week period, DON Style Journal, para. 2). I directly asked him about this during the interview, as I wondered whether it might elucidate general feelings about his body or how he feels within it. At first, he laughingly commented, “That’s my weekend… I can’t go out naked” (DON, 172-175), but then he elaborated further on an experience in a spa and said:

I went to a spa recently, and they required nudity in the all men's locker room, and I was so uncomfortable being naked around these men. It was mostly older men, mostly men of Asian Pacific Islander identities. Some younger boys, and I just felt so odd being naked around these strangers. As much as I like to be naked in the privacy of my own home, I don't like to be naked around strangers. (DON, 175-180)

While I suppose the same could be said that most individuals would perhaps feel uncomfortable being naked around other individuals, Donatello connected it to weight gain resulting from a side effect of prescribed medication. He is a prominent dancer with his own studio, and the weight gain changed how he feels about himself and how to feel comfortable in his body.

I felt gross… [about] all of my weight gain, so I think my weight gain has played a role. If I was still skinny I think I would be okay, but who knows, I don't know. (DON, 195-197)
Although he did not speak at length about how it impacted his psychological makeup, I did get the sense that his weight gain divorced him from the body that he was accustomed to; although he is still a successful dancer and artist, he had to adjust to accommodate the body that he now has rather than the body that he knew. For instance, consider the difference between how Donatello described his experience at the spa versus when he first experimented with mixing feminine elements of clothing into his style into his clothing (when he was slimmer):

… [T]he first time I wore skinny jeans was in February of 2009—high school. I remember putting on the skinny jeans, and it was just like life changing. I felt so comfortable, I felt so affirmed; and I was like I'm never wearing another pair of regular jeans again. (DON, 206-209)

The descriptions seem diametrically opposed to each other, with one description pointing in the direction of fulfillment whereas the other points to shame. Donatello permitted me to lift some photos from his social-media profiles to illustrate how his body has changed (Figure 6, next page), and one can immediately see the difference in his poses. In the past photos, he appears more self-assured and commands the space that he is in, which seems to contrast with his description of his current experiences of discomfort with how his body is now.

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6 His weight gain might have also affected how he perceives himself in relation to others. He commented that if maybe the men in the spa were “hot younger men of color” (DON, 184), then he might have felt differently about his body, but this line of questioning was not pursued in the interview. I hypothesize that the feelings of discomfort and being “self-conscious” (DON, 187) would have persisted into any social situation as a feeling that runs undercurrent to his experience.
Donatello noted that dressing in a more genderqueer manner has structured his expectations of how others will respond to him in his daily life, particularly feeling as if others will not accept him. During the first day of the style journal, Donatello stated that he was getting his nails done with his mother, and she noted that her Asian nail technician inquired about sexuality and subsequently began to flirt with him (DON Style Journal, para. 1). He recounted this interaction during the interview:

Yeah. I don't know. I don't know. I'm awkward at things like that… I just don't expect people to flirt with me, so I don't pick up on things like that… I just assume everyone's anti-femme, so I don't assume anyone is flirting with me in public. Plus I'm awkward.

(DON, 14-20)

Although he feels comfortable with his own gender presentation, he operates from a position in which he believes that his gender presentation limits him from being the object of sexual attraction to other men. It is as if that someone would find him attractive is foreign, unfamiliar, and outside of his experience. Thus, when he encounters a different reaction, it surprises him. He described another instance in which holding another man’s hand in public led him to a similar
surprise with how others responded to them, saying, “It was just really affirming to have people look at us and nod and smile” (DON, 28-29).

It seems that whether others would be accepting or not is prominent in navigating the spaces of being genderqueer. Donatello talked about how dressing in a genderqueer manner impacts his personal and professional life, as it can lead him to feel lonely and question whether people might respond to him more positively if he appeared more masculine:

I look at my clothing, and I'm just like, “If my clothing were different”—and not only do I mean my personal life, but also my professional life. I constantly have to navigate that... like I'm at my current job, I'm able to dress the way I want to dress, but if I get a new job I have to navigate that all over again. (DON, 100-105)

The confidence and acceptance that he can feel with himself does not always translate to relationships, and he noted that it adopting a genderqueer presentation is like continuously coming out. Repeatedly coming out introduces the fear into relationships that one could be rejected (sexually, platonically, or professionally) simply based on how one looks.

**Individual themes.** Following are the individual themes that I extracted from Donatello’s style journal and interview.

*Using clothing to do femme as a political identity.* Throughout the interview, Donatello kept referring to his personal style as being *femme*, and I asked him to elaborate further on this. He said:

*Femme* for me is a political identity, *femme* as in feminist, *femme* as in feminine—just the combination between masculine and feminine energies that I feel like we all embody... Like, you, yourself embody it; I embody it; there's many people who embody it. *Femme*
to me just means the respect and love of the feminine energy that's within us. (DON, 310-316)

He described femininity as inherently having a masculine component to it, as this seemed to relate back to how the feminine position is receptive to many ways of being on the offset—even the type of energy to which it appears (on the surface) to be diametrically opposed. But in his description, being femme is inherently a combination of the masculine and feminine forms of presentation.

Donatello also identified the feminist position as being able to deconstruct the patriarchal position and to redefine one’s own gender position. He talked about being influenced by the works of Audrey Lorde in her documentary The Cancer Journals. He recounted how Lorde gave her son the permission to define his manhood in his own way, and this resonated with Donatello’s experience. Her permission to her son permitted him to do the same with redefining his manhood rather than being prescribed it: “When she said that she gave her son permission to define his own manhood, she gave me permission to do the same. If he can do it, then I can do it” (DON, 328-330). It was a moment of empowerment for Donatello, which is very much aligned with the feminist ethos.

Later in the interview, Donatello identified that a reciprocal dialogue exists between individuals through clothing people one incorporates femme into their style:

Now, when I see other people who are femme, I'm like, "God, they're so courageous, like I wish I could be as courageous as they are." Or I feel pride. Or when a woman looks really good, I'm more inclined to give her a compliment of her outfits, like, "I really like the outfit." I'll look at something like, “Ooh, I want to wear something like that too.” I'll figure out how to make it my own—stuff like that. (DON, 486-491).
Through one’s gender presentation, a dialogue occurs that has an opportunity to influence one party or the other. When describing these interactions, he used words such as “courageous” and “authentic” to talk about people who incorporate femme into their style; perhaps because in his understanding of femme, we all carry a propensity towards a multitudes of genders inside of us, and it takes courage to actualize them. Likewise, he also acknowledged that he was also uncomfortable with others being adopting femme into their gender presentation until he took action to incorporate it into his own style as well (DON, 483-486).

Incorporating feminine elements into his style was not without consequence, as it can mislead others’ expectations and perceptions of him and his desires. He talked about how his gender presentation was often confused with assumptions about how he experiences body:

Because I'm just like, “I'm still a man. Just because I'm feminine doesn't mean I'm not a man.” There's just this like—reminding people that I'm still a man in a way that doesn’t emasculate me. Because that's really annoying [when] people try to emasculate me. Or they'll refer to [the anus] as like “boy pussy,” which I really don't like. Stuff like that… They'll call me like their “bitch” or, “You're my bitch,” or, “You're mine.” They'll say the “boy pussy” thing. Yeah, stuff like that. (DON, 585-593)

It is as if others perceive being femme as an invitation to stake claim or re-territorialize his body to map their own gender assumptions and restrictions about how femininity is enacted. Unfortunately, as this plays into his romantic pursuits, it has led to have difficulty in finding someone who can appreciate how he has situated himself in between both genders. These assumptions about Donatello’s desires and what he wants based of how he presents himself in a more feminine style may also be compounded by cultural factors as well.
Using clothing to resist machismo and invite vulnerability. Donatello was able to speak to the complexities that machismo, or the hypermasculinized pride that men adopt primarily in Latino communities, introduced into his gender presentation and comportment. Machismo also extends to appearance but in a manner refracted from the dominant American culture, were Latino men are grooming themselves in a manner that is generally expected from females within the United States; they are shaving their armpits, legs, and facial hair and shaping their eyebrows. His mother (who has since accepted Donatello’s feminine style of dress) also instructs him to take advantage of these machismo norms while accounting for his femme presentation, as he recounts, “My mom's always telling me I should shave my legs. If I'm going to wear a dress, I should shave my legs and my facial hair. I'm just like, ‘Whatever.’ That's where the lazy boy comes in” (DON, 351-353).

Donatello noted the irony of this, how Latino male culture has begun to embrace the American forms of feminine presentation that he does not. For instance, he noted that his legs were not shaved during the time of the interview (DON, 346-349), and what was normally feminine has become appropriated by machismo and thereby is now a prescription for how to be a Latino male. He discussed this cultural version of masculinity further and how it is still closed off to femininity:

I think it has to do with pop culture to be honest with you because the way that is desired is to look very groomed—even if they do have facial hair, it's very groomed. The physique is different, clean cut. It has to do with desirability, but I think they still embody all the negative things of machismo—right? They're still a womanizer; they still beat the women; they still try to control women in their lives. They're still not comfortable with vulnerability; they're not comfortable with emotions; they're not developing their
emotional intelligence. Yeah, there's still that fight-or-flight mentality, I think. (DON, 356-363)

His identification of vulnerability as a necessary component for femininity (or perhaps the incapacity to recognize vulnerability as a component for machismo) is very much is pulled into his style of being.

Donatello was influenced by the works of Bréné Brown to understand the benefits of what vulnerability can bring to how we choose to be in the world. He quoted her and saying that “[V]ulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change” (DON, 367-368); and so long as machismo rejects what is vulnerable about a person, it will be unable to effect change on the culture. But accepting vulnerability is not simply a case of presenting oneself in a more feminine style of being, but it gives the individual more space to create and more ways to be in the world. He joked but was also serious about how he believes that his recognition of his shortcomings plays into his difficulty with finding a romantic partner:

I think it is because I have emotional intelligence at a level that most boys don't have, and they're threatened by that. Most men are not comfortable with their feelings or with vulnerability. Yet here I am—Mr. Vulnerability-Expert over here—talking about it, doing research, writing about it, doing the work on myself that others can't do it on themselves. (DON, 622-626)

I should also highlight how dressing himself in a way that deconstructs the patriarchal and controlling nature of machismo can also lead him to feel physically vulnerable as well; it can open him up to be a target of malicious attack, as indicated by the counterpoint to what he felt when he was holding hands another man’s hand in public: “[I]t was also really nerve wracking because you just never know anymore what's going to happen” (DON, 29-30). He is referring to
the threats of safety and dangers of assault that come about with positioning oneself into the unfamiliar space between genders.

Donatello did not send many significant interactions that he believes were motivated by his style of dress during the two-week period that he was documenting in his style journal. This could be because he does not experience many interactions that he could tie directly to how he is dressing; however, as he indicated throughout the interview and with the submissions that he provided, I believe that he is most likely used to any stares or nonplussed looks that he receives on a daily basis. The interactions that he submitted were fruitful, and one interaction on day twelve seemed to capture an assault on his identity that he is always aware of when he walks in public:

"That's a boy!" He said as I walked past him and his group of friends. I cringe and think to myself: "Why does he feel the need to yell that aloud?"

I guess that's the norm because every time I dare to wear a dress or skirt, I get that type of reaction. Due to my geographical location, often, the remarks come from other men of color. I have found that I receive the most hostility from black men. What's interesting is that I have found more black men interested in femme-men/trans-women in a sexual way. My gender expression may make dating more difficult, but I continue to be a fantasy to others sexually. (DON Style Journal, para. 4)
Donatello was wearing the middle outfit in Figure 7. He elaborated further on his thoughts following this interaction in the interview:

… I was a little bit nervous for my safety. Because I was like, “Well, now that he's made his proclamation, I'm getting all this attention that I wasn't looking for,” while I was walking the street, walking sidewalks trying to get to my train station, so it was a little bit nerve wracking in that regard. Because I'm always thinking about my safety. (DON, 114-118)

While this seems like a prominent concern (to be fearful of one’s safety), it is also simply an everyday concern for a genderqueer individual. It is as if the undertones of daily life are wrought with fraught, and one becomes habituated to it. Donatello noted that other men can it aggressive if he stares too long at them, as they perceive him as hitting on him. Most of the time, he avoids eye contact with other men so as not to give the wrong impression but also to protect his safety (DON, 541-547). This only serves to widen the distance between him and others who adopt more restrictive, molar gender ideas.
Using clothing to love oneself and resist fear and violence. The journey for Donatello to love himself began the moment he wore skinny jeans to a high school Valentine’s Day Dance in 2009: then he adorned a white button-up shirt with a tie, a gray vest, and red converse to complete the look (DON, 220-223). While this was not a full-out excursion into femme territory, it marked the first moment of him incorporate a more feminine look into his style. He stated that it was “life changing,” that he “felt so affirmed” in those jeans that fit so well to his body that he never believed he would wear another pair of regular jeans again. However, he really began to experiment with mixing feminine articles of clothing into his masculine style in college; it was an opportunity to change his wardroom, to wear bold colors with contrasting skinny jeans in numerous different colors. He said, “[I]t was hideous. But at the time I thought it was hot shit. You couldn’t tell me anything” (DON, 206-212).

The style that Donatello started in college became more crystalized into an identity that he believes was more indicative of how he felt as a person when he moved to a major metropolitan west-coast city. The location contrasted greatly with his home environment on the east coast, and the different environment permitted him to feel freer to explore and become comfortable with his style. He states:

… [In my hometown,] people are a bit more self-concerned with self-image and how people perceive them. In the Bay area, people don't give two shits about anything. They’re just like, “This is who I am—take it or leave it.” There's a boldness in the Bay area. (DON, 274-277)

This “take it or leave it” attitude was the foundational orientation to allow Donatello to feel “unapologetic” his style, his body, his gender (fluid as it was), and he returned to his hometown feeling more “emboldened” with whom he was (DON, 279-287).
The genderfluid style that Donatello discusses is rife with struggle. “If you can't embrace yourself you turn to violence—we see it. I see it in my work: self-harm, suicide, substance abuse,” he said, talking about how limiting oneself can turn to self-hate, “[T]hese things hurt us or numb us from the fact that we can't fully embrace our truth” (DON, 535-537). However, the same fluidity offers the chance for a person to heal and to feel whole. Donatello identified that his gender expression taught him how to love himself and accept the ways in which he was different despite any ridicule or negative comments from others. Being an active participant on social media, he created a hashtag for himself to provide concise statements about the curative power of deconstructing the gender divide to find oneself. He shared a statement that he posted that seemed appropriated for this project: “If you want to heal broken man, we need to start helping them to learn to love the little boy that they have long resented” (DON, 419-420), meaning to reach the little boy who existed before the machismo to cultivate his vulnerability and femme. In this way, genderfluidity can teach a person to love themselves and to also appreciate others.

This sentiment can mitigate the self-hatred and projected hatred for others of that which we despise in ourselves. Donatello was my first participant, and—during the research process—the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016 occurred in which an assailant open-fired on the (primarily) Latino LGBTQ patrons, killing 49 people and injuring another 58. Reports later surfaced from numerous sources that the shooter had frequented gay chat rooms, gay social hookup apps, and the nightclub for approximately three years prior to the shooting. Yet he was also married, and individuals described him in his daily life as homophobic and bigoted (Perez, Prokupecz, & Yan, 2016). One wonders whether this hatred and bigotry was fueled by his own self-loathing that he kept secret and hidden for so long only to lash out and murder others as a
means to deny his own desires; he died the night of the shooting, leaving the world with the same restricted gender assumptions that limited him to live only half a life.

Following the Orlando shooting, Donatello and I reached out to each other and exchange texts of support. We followed up on how it affected him in the aftermath:

… I'm not a big nightclub person, but after Orlando, I went to the club three times in the matter of weeks of each other… It made me realize that life is too short, and I need to really enjoy and celebrate the queer community. It also made me realize that my day can come anytime. If I'm going to go out, I want to go out looking fabulous and looking great and not being afraid to live my truth. Those people who were [at the Pulse nightclub the night of the shooting were] living life to the fullest in that moment, not expecting tragedy to happen, but then it did. It also shows how when you can't accept yourself you turn to violence. There was some allegations that he was a closeted—whatever you want to call him—and that that's why he did what he did. It just means that we have a lot of work to do. (DON, 525-532)

I cannot say that he was alone with how he coped by celebrating life and queerness, as it was an approach I and many other my friends took to adopting—to dig our heels in and earnestly and steadfastly live how we wanted to live. It seems that the bigotry and hatred would subside if more individuals would accept femme as part of their gender identity, whether male or female, and it would allow for multivariate ways of being and acceptance. But until then, the journey to acceptance and self-love within the genderqueer community involves real concerns for physical safety and space.

*Using clothing to bend gender and open possibilities for connecting with others.* If we return to Donatello’s experience when he first put on skinny jeans, it gives us a sense of how it
opened up his ideas about gender—particularly, helping him to feel more affirmed and free—although he noted how it was ironic. “Because tight jeans are not necessarily considered freedom. But I felt free, yeah. I had shed off my baby fat. I was skinny, I was—I don’t know. It looks good on me” (DON, 237-239). He was able to elaborate that the freedom offered to him by moving into a space in between the genders was one of autonomy and choice for “what [he] wanted to wear, how [he] wanted to wear it” (DON, 243-244). Incorporating a femme style that inherently deconstructs patriarchal attitudes about clothing and gender allows for one to feel more embodied and at peace with themselves, and this is what he wants to convey with the style. He has a tattoo that reads To be free that serves to remind him that he is conveying freedom through his style, and he also got another tattoo of a feather imbued with a sentiment to remind him that he is worthy and enough; he continued, “[N]o matter what my body looks like, no matter what my clothes look like, no matter what job I have or don’t have… I am enough” (DON, 386-397). In this effort, he would like his style to convey authenticity (DON, 382-383).

It is the type of authenticity Donatello wants to convey that he strives to wear whatever he wants to wear with no hesitation and despite heckling or ridicule (DON, 431-434). He hopes that others take away a better understanding of how gender is fluid, how one does not need to situation oneself into binary categories of masculinity or femininity. One can be or reside in the in-between, within the multitude of displays of queerd. “I share a lot of myself with the world in hopes that it would help them,” he said, “I think about the conversations parents have with their children after they meet me” (DON, 446-448). His sentiments mirror that of Raja, the winner of RuPaul’s Drag Race, season 3, in the introduction (Murray, 2011), where he can open up others’ ideas about gender and to reach out to “the young boy who looks at [Donatello’s
social media posts] and doesn’t commit suicide because he realizes he’s not alone” (DON, 450-451).

Donatello talked specifically about how he recognized that his style of dress can help in opening up others’ perspective of gender, for he witnessed it in his own household. Early in the interview, he became tearful when he initially talked about how his mother was wary about him incorporating more feminine articles of clothing in his style (DON, 294-295). It was a complex issue, and we had to pause the discussion to explicate it later in the interview:

I think it was a journey for me to accept it, and I had to recognize that it was going to be a journey for my mother to accept it, that our journeys are going to look different, and the level of acceptance will always be different; and I've come to accept that. I think where I draw the line is at disrespect, so whenever she gets disrespectful, I always have to call her out, and say, “That's wrong. You have to respect me.” Other than that, I can't think of anything in particular to say. (DON, 559-564)

Being able to assertively request someone be respectful of his genderfluid presentation seems to go back to the authenticity that Donatello speaks of. Because when someone refutes or ridicules or negates his style of dress, it feels as if they are doing the same to his subjectivity and his body. As we teach people how to treat us, it calls them (or forces them) to recognize how a person identifies and wants to be treated; others can then choose to be more open in the understanding of how they could perceive and experience gender differently, but the onus is on them rather than on Donatello.

Fortunately, his mother felt called to expand her understanding of gender with him, and he stated that she even helped him pick out garments from the women’s section, which was a big step for her; and he stammered over his praise for her: “She had picked out good stuff—like it
was good outfits, like really good stuff. It wasn't like crappy looking stuff. So she got kudos for that” (DON, 300-302). The acceptance and expansion of gender ideas and roles also go beyond how a genderqueer style allow others to be more open; it expands our own growth edges as well, and Donatello is continuously growing as a result. He stated that his experience as femme but not conforming to a specific gender led to a shift in his sexual desires as well. He said:

I think since I've become more gender non-conforming, it opened me up to dating trans-men, because before I never thought that was possible. Because I always thought that gender and sexuality were very rigid and very confined. You have to bend gender, and you have to bend gender roles to see that the whole world of possibilities is love… That my love is not defined by genitalia… That my love is defined by intimacy that's beyond the physical. (DON, 495-503)

It seems that when one’s changes their perspective about what gender is and how to present oneself in a manner that one feels true to a genderfluid identity, their ideas about attachments and connections evolve as well. It opened up Donatello’s lines of desire to allow him to see and feel attracted to others that he did not think he would have seen before. In all, his style promises the opportunity of shared growth and evolution for how to think of gender in more fluid and queer terms, and this can allow people to more authentically connect with how they feel and to others.

**Leonardo**

Leonardo is a white, transgender male (female-to-male) who is in his early-30s and in a committed relationship with another man. He identifies as an out-homosexual male, and he currently resides in a major metropolitan area on the east coast. Due to geographic limitations, we conducted the interview over Skype, and the interview lasted one hour.
Description of Style. Leonardo was very descriptive of his sense of style. He was in a vehicle accident and suffered a brain injury in 2012, and this led him to have to relearn how to dress, piece by piece, to put his style back together during his recovery. He described that period of his life:

[I]t was really bad. Everything was clashing all the time. I don't even have any neon clothes, but I would just wear them all at once, all the time. It needed to be [laughs]. And the earrings were in total conflict with what was going on. Your eyes were trying to look at too many places, whatever. But then I had to learn how to dress myself. And, naturally, that came along as I was healing from the brain injury, but I think I had to very literally learn what are all the rules and how—I didn't learn what the fashion rules are, but I just had to figure out what's inspiring about an outfit. (LEO, 469-476)

For better or for worse, he had to relearn how to take inspiration and comprise a style of dress that is unique to him. Perhaps this helps him to be more reflective about what he wears, for the time many of us acquire a sense of style, it has been cemented after decades of pre-reflective selection and choice; for Leonardo, he had to make these conscious choices once again.

During this period of his life, Leonardo stated that he purchased women’s magazines and *GQ*. He studied and analyze them, combining both the male and the female aesthetic in what he saw between their pages, and slowly “[he] started getting a sense of having a closet and having a style and actually being able to put it together in an outfit every single day” (LEO, 479-481). Between 2012 to 2014, what started out as a clashes of neon colors turned into him being able to dress himself in his particular high-femme, masculine style (LEO, 484-488). He felt as himself once again.
During the interview, Leonardo complimented me on my necklace, and I talked with him about how it was my favorite necklace (but also how I wore it to detract attention from my shirt, which I hated). He agreed and stating that my shirt alone was “terrible” (LEO, 422), not letting me off the hook in the least, but he added that the necklace changed how the shirt looks. He left me with a quote that resonated with me: “That is the thing about accessories, you know? They can transform” (LEO, 425-426). I agree wholeheartedly, particularly as accessories are a major staple of my own style; but I believe I could say the same about Leonardo. Take a look at his accessory wall (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Leonardo's accessory wall
It seems that when accessories transform an outfit for Leonardo, and they make a strong statement; he acknowledged that earrings, nail polish, and bold colors (definitely never “pastel” colors in his view—colors that a former partner saved him from) comprise fundamentals of his style (LEO, 429-434; Figure 9).

**Clothing as recovering his body and relationships.** The issue of embodiment is at the forefront of Leonardo’s experiences throughout the transition process, and he eloquently describes how he came to feel more fully embodied not only in terms of his physical body but also in terms of clothing and how the structures his relationship with others. He remembers when his clothing, body, and relationships were all in sync around 2011. He had started taking testosterone, was given feedback and instruction on how to integrate masculine and feminine
styles of dress, and was surrounded by people and events that were generally body-positive and celebratory of genderqueer practices. He said of this time of his life:

[T]hat there were some parts of me that I had sort of just partitioned off and that these parts were being able to wake up and find themselves. I started feeling truly, fully embodied for the first time, I think. I think I had come to a kind of peace with my body…

(LEO, 373-376)

It is as if he became who he was at meant to be when he reflects upon that moment.

However, who we are is always in flux, as this was prior to Leonardo’s accident in which he would have to re-arrive at this feeling of peace with his body; also, his journey to that period of his life was also met with struggles and difficulties. He discussed how early in his transition, his world was restricted due to his body, mannerisms, and ways of dressing (particularly in the bathroom, which will become a theme to further unpack). He said:

[E]arlier in my transition… Especially before I passed, before I went on testosterone… I was kicked out of women's rooms more often than [men’s]—I think it's because I was not doing femme. I think it's because I was—in so many ways, my body was trying to find it's masculine self, so I presented fairly masculinely. I don't think my mannerisms were that different—well, maybe they were—I think they were more like “straight-butch man” because I identify them with my body in so many ways, so it was like I was having to put on a performance to help me distract myself from the dysphoria. So I think in women's rooms, in some ways, I wonder if my discomfort with my gender brought out their dysphoras with their gender. (LEO, 72-82)

It appears in these moments that the dysphoria that Leonardo speaks of his pointing to the gap between his lived-body and his body-as-perceived. The notion of “passing” in the manner
that he uses it seems to encapsulate not only the transition that his physical body is making but also his appearance as well. He was often challenged in bathroom spaces to assert a one gender (or sex), and it led to confusion and stammering as to which spaces he could claim that he belonged in. He described it as a “series of both realizations” (LEO, 90) where he was uncertain whether to say he was a woman or not.

Interestingly enough, Leonardo made an interesting observation about his experiences a men's rooms. He said:

[I]n men's rooms, it's real important to me that I be accepted, but I always was. Because men don't care. Men never look at each other, and there's no interaction in the men's room, so it's like that was no problem. It was only when I started doing femme that I started getting kicked out of men's rooms. (LEO, 91-95)

In the former bathroom experiences, it was as if Leonardo was a woman-not-yet-a-man, but now getting kicked out of men’s room signifies that his body crossed into a man-no-longer-a-woman. But perhaps in the best response to this dilemma, Leonardo is in a space now where he feels his that his body is a zone and he can make his own preference about the spaces he belongs in or what feels right for him. On describing how he has solved it, he said:

For a long time, I really cared that I passed for male when I would use the men's room. And, for a long time, I exclusively used the men's room. But now, I'm to a place where I really don't care how anyone rates me. Preferred actions make people a little uncomfortable, generally, if they're concerned with the binary. So, I use whatever bathroom. (LEO, 30-35).
While the theme of gendered space will be discussed in more depth, Leonardo’s peace and confidence with his body was originally born out of strife and confusion, like a flower that had to push through the cracks in the concrete before it could bloom.

With his transition into a more mixed feminine gender presentation, Leonardo realized that the way in which others related to him was also affected as well. Even if he feels comfortable with himself, he is repeatedly confronted with how other individuals respond to his look with an inquisitive stare, as if he is the object of curiosity (LEO, 168-183). Sometimes this has led to homo-negative experiences (compounded by his intersecting identities as a trans-male gender queer homosexual) within the various cities that he has lived in until he settled in the trans/homo/body-positive city that he is living now.

I wondered about Leonardo’s relationships, as in many of his photos unlike the other participants, there were other people present or he had a story about how various pieces of jewelry were connected to friends and individuals that he knows (such as being gifts or creations from friends Figure 10, next page).
He linked these connections to his sense of style, namely to an African concept that he learned at a young age: “ubuntu, which means, essentially, *I am because we are*” (LEO, 303-304). He talked about how he is created by his relationships of the people that he is close with, and he shows this even through the manner of his physical adornments. Relationships are very informative of how he has come to know himself; he said:

… I'm not capable of anything just entirely alone and by myself. And that so much of how I think and how I feel and what I value has been socialized and created by other people around me and what they value, et cetera. But I really, really value those relations… especially relationships with people I love. I feel very made as a femme person, as a femme boy, as a gay boy, et cetera. I feel very much created by the high femmes who taught me how to dress because I couldn't. It was bad before I came out. I'd wear clothes that were five times too big, and part of that was because it was the 90's, but part of it was because I couldn't find my body. I didn't know what to do… I had no sense
of fashion. I had no understanding of what it is to create art by the way that we dress ourselves. I was taught that by a whole group of people who became close to me. (LEO, 306-318)

So if we take it to understand how his style informs and is informed by his relationships, it becomes unclear where the boundaries lie; his style and relationships are inseparable. It seems that the two are constant dialogue with each other, and his relationships inevitably become part of his style.

In reflecting further on relationships, Leonardo is in a unique position to recognize the effects of his transition from female to male and what it means to incorporate a more feminine presentation back into his style. He noticed that heterosexual men began to check him out—that he became an object of sexual attraction and of the male gaze—when his gender presentation incorporated female articles of clothing and teetered to the genderqueer. He was able to speak to the complexity of his intersecting identities:

I think people didn't start staring at me until I started doing femme—after going on testosterone until I started doing femme as a masculine-centered person. They really paid me no heed at all when I first came out as queer, when I first came out as trans, when I first went on testosterone, even when I first came out as or understood myself to be gay. I was pretty much oblivious because I never had men—I never had straight men objectify me or check me out. I think largely because they possibly didn't even read me as female. Or if they did, I was obviously butch or so obviously lesbian or dyke or something—you know? There was the occasional—they would look a little bit longer. But never this kind of like ogling that I get now. (LEO, 208-217)
He is now in a committed relationship with another male, and it is often his boyfriend that usually notices whether other men are looking at him with sexual interest. For instance, when he expanded on an event in his style journal, he talked about walking past a couple of fraternity brothers whom he believed were looking at him with the odd expression only for his boyfriend to identify that some of them seemed genuinely attracted to him. He hypothesized that it was perhaps because he passed as more-woman, but it was more telling that he was non-cognizant of the lines of sexual desire given through the male gaze (the figure of his outfit that night is pictured on the right of Figure 11 [page 89] to be discussed at length in a later theme; LEO, 168-183).

**Individual themes.** Following are the individual themes that I extracted from Leonardo’s interview and style journal.

**Using clothing to resist others’ gender prescriptions.** In the first day of his style journal, a woman told Leonardo in the “snobbiest, most stuck up way”: “You’re not walking well in those shoes. You need some different shoes.” Leonardo responded:

> “You know thank you, I appreciate your concern, I was hit by a car a couple years ago and had a severe traumatic brain injury that destroyed my brain’s connection to my right foot. So I had to re-learn how to walk, and I know I’m still getting my heels-feet under me. But the only way to learn is to practice!” (LEO Style Journal, para. 2)

So much was packed in their interaction, and the woman just continued with a phone call, walking away. Leonardo was not even sure if she heard him, but her comments seemed to touch a deeper pain that Leonardo experienced during his recovery process. In 2012, and Leonardo was hit by a car. He was taken to hospital but was unconscious during the transportation. Due to his brain injury, they had to keep him sedated; but somewhere in the process, they cut his clothes
off of him prior to putting him in the intensive care unit (ICU). The attending surgeon wrote down in his file that he was a “post-operative, transsexual woman” (LEO, 114). Leonardo commented, “I am not sure what kind of surgeon would make a cunt the way that my looks because I am on testosterone—like, my clit’s much larger” (LEO, 114-116). This was only the beginning of the transphobia and trans-ignorance that Leonardo experienced while being treated as a medical object, but being a medical object does not capture the fear or confusion surrounding how others responded to his body. Being a medical object would imply some degree of experience or neutrality, not—to Leonardo’s surprise—the discomfort and freak-outs he would encounter when they realized that he did not have a penis. In one instance, while still learning how to walk, a nurse who was tasked with bathing him ran from the room, leaving him to catch himself on a bathroom handrail and balance himself. These are just a few of the interactions that he received during the recovery process.

One interaction that stood out in particular was when Leonardo was in physical therapy. He recounts the interaction with the practitioner:

My physical therapist was helping me realize that I need to do heel-toe. That's how you walk, right? It’s heel-toe. I had this revelation… I couldn't walk before because my foot wouldn't lift. It would just flop down. So I was like, “If I can learn how to do heel-toe, I can walk in heels again.” I was so excited. She just burst out laughing. It was like, you know: [Mimics a cackle.] … I was so hurt by that and so angry. I'm like, “What the hell you doing laughing? That it's a laughing matter that I would be walking in heels? That's actually a goal. That's actually my main goal of this. If I'm going to have a treatment goal, that's a treatment goal. You're going to teach me how to walk so I can walk in heels.” (LEO, 132-142)
What is unfortunate about this encounter is that it is representative of how others attempted to forcibly reassign Leonardo back into a masculine gender role despite his wishes. It shows that he is continuously confronted with—regardless of whether he feels in sync with his body or not—how others may not take his body seriously. Quite the contrary, these interactions exhibit that he may be responded to with scorn and negative judgments rather than openness and compassion to his own desires in relation. He is treated as foreign and alien simply because he does not match up to others’ expectations for being a male or mixing his garments with masculine and feminine elements.

So when the woman in his style journal made that comment about how he was walking awkwardly and need—perhaps—to wear shoes without a heel (“You’re not walking well in those shoes. You need different shoes” [LEO Style Journal, para. 2]), it exemplified how he is continuously confronted with how the world is structured in gender binaries. Whether it be the bathroom, medical room, or simply walking down a street; Leonardo being the person he wants to be elicits many reactions and assumptions about who can occupy, be allowed in, or can exist in particular spaces (LEO, 58-66). He stated that his explanations about how he was relearning to walk following a traumatic brain injury fell on deaf ears. “She was drunk. I don’t even think she heard me. It was like nothing was there,” he said of the encounter (LEO, 156-157). There was nothing; there was no compassion, no understanding, no positive space other than judgment. Thus, from many directions, he is cognizant that the world is bifurcated; but he still chooses to resist either option. To be a man who wears heels is a goal.

Using clothing to create spaces to share rather than control. Throughout the interview, Leonardo continuously referred to doing femme, and asked him to elaborate further on what he meant by this phrase. He said:
When I say do femme… For me, doing femme is basically celebrating femininity, which in a lot of ways means celebrating our bodies and creation and space for creativity… In a lot of ways, masculinity occupies space so that it can control it… When doing femme—to take space as a femme person—it's not actually to take space; it's to share space… The way that I interact with space when I'm wearing these earrings is that I become more aware of all the space that my head takes up. It doesn't actually physically take up more space—it perhaps takes up less space because I don't feel a need to stake out my claim so my ears can have the room. I feel more like, “Oh, this is all shared. Everyone's earrings are welcome. Everyone's ears are here.” (LEO, 265-277)

Leonardo’s description of how “everyone’s earrings are welcome” seems to align with how the feminine position is receptive to others style and ways of being. He differentiates the masculine position of taking up space in order to control it (such as in the layman’s example of manspreading) whereas the feminine position is more receptive to creating and sharing for communal occupation (LEO, 596-598). Furthermore, his description of earrings (and accessories; LEO 425-426) illustrate the transformational nature of clothing and how it alters the space around us. His quote that “[e]veryone’s earrings are welcome” (LEO, 277) illustrates how everyone participates in how gender practices structure the world around us; however, utilizing—in Leonardo’s case—earrings as a queering function welcomes new and multiple ways of being for others around. He describes a paradox in which the space that his earring occupy

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7 Manspreading is a colloquial for the practice by which a man spreads his legs, usually in a public/shared space in which space is limited (such as a crowded bus or subway) in order to make more space than is necessary for his genitalia. In a more symbolic manner, it signifies how a man may feel entitled to take more space than is necessary to complete tasks or to simply exist (for example, respectively, like when a man takes more space than others for a task at a communal table or when a man creates a mancave or room in a house for his sole use and privacy).
actually opens up more space rather than take up space because it invites the imagination to
dream of different ways of being (much like a tattoo that he adorns that says, “What do you
dream?” [LEO, 440]). In this manner, everyone is welcome to participate in queering whether
they realize it or not because “[e]veryone’s ears are here” (LEO, 277)

Leonardo further elaborates on the distinctions and categories of femme that arose during
the interview when he discusses \textit{trans-feminine} and \textit{high femme}. While he stated that all avenues
of femme lead to an awareness of gender and celebration of femininity, the result can look
different from person to person. \textit{Trans-feminine}, he defined, is a transgender individual who is
now a woman (LEO, 235-241); whereas to do \textit{high femme}, is a gender satire on patriarchal
expectations and demands that are placed on femininity, but then it usurps that power. \textit{High
dame} is an attitude that says:

“I know you want to be able to objectify my body. I'm actually going to present you a
body that's very similar to the kind of body that you like to objectify, except for I'm going
to present it to you unintelligibly so that you can't understand how to objectify it. So you
can't understand what to do with me—so that I becomes not a body but a person.” (LEO,
258-262)

Thus, high femme becomes an ethos that makes one’s gender performance or body illegible so
that an observer cannot collapse a person into categorical expectations; but the observer is forced
to acknowledge the choices, subjectivity, and personhood of the individual practices high
femme.

\textbf{Using clothing to be an ally for femininity in masculinized space.} Leonardo noticed an
acquisition of privilege when he physically transitioned from female to male that appeared to be
misaligned with responses to his gender presentation. Shortly after his vehicular accident and
during the recovery process, he noted that he had to take a cautious approach towards maneuvering the space around him. He said, “It was scary time for me… I knew that if I fell and hit my head, they told me there was actually a good chance that I could die because of swelling.” (LEO, 620-622). Moving around in public, especially crowded places, could become life-threatening activities.

Leonardo remembers walking through a drunk crowd during this period of his life with a friend who identifies as trans-feminine and disabled; being cautious yet pushing through while wearing a dress and heels, big earrings, and a face that was beat for the gods, he made it through the crowd exclaiming, “Hey, excuse me. Excuse me… I don’t really care. I’m just trying to push through” (LEO, 632-634). His friend (who is used to harassment on a regular basis) laughed and commented that she felt like the normal one, as individuals displaced their quizzical looks onto Leonardo.

I think that that’s also a major impetus for me feeling comfortable is that I understand the ways that I can be an ally and be in solidarity with other femmes because I have a get-out-of-jail free card anytime. If someone's uncomfortable with me, I just bro up, and they suddenly become totally fine with how I'm dressing or what I'm doing because I'm not trying to be a woman. And so I want to use that privilege basically to create space, to be able to celebrate and to make femme be okay and celebrated. (LEO, 643-649).

Following his transition, Leonardo is cognizant that he can use his body to gain access use space to allow more freedom for others. Paradoxically, his statements reveal that the same space that is used to control and restrict access for how to be in the world can be used to open it up.

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8 *Beat for the Gods* is colloquial expression for wearing make-up that is applied flawlessly.
However, Leonardo was able to reflect explicitly on how moving into a more feminine or genderqueer position has invited men to respond differently to him. He reflected on day one of his style journal in which he had a pleasantly surprising interaction with another occupant. The process that I can only imagine would be like Superman changing in a phone booth, Leonardo went into a bathroom wearing burgundy trousers, a pink shirt, and a matching checkered tie; and he came out wearing a single piece, over the shoulder dress with dazzles sprinkled down the shoulder (Figure 11).

While he was in the mirror putting on his earrings, a man came up behind him, stating, ‘Excuse me… I just had to do this,’ tucking a tag back into his dress, ‘I just can’t; I can’t have your tag out’ (LEO, 48-49). Leonardo noted that his initial response was to think that it was a “straight, butch move… to take care of a femme” like “that’s what makes [the other occupant] a man” (LEO, 51-52), but he realized that there was something beautiful about that interaction. Leonardo wondered if the other man was alternatively thinking, “As a human being, I can't let you go out there. I know that you're putting yourself together, and I can't let you go out there [with your tag
out]” (LEO, 52-53). I believe that Leonardo’s difficulty with discerning the intention of the action—whether sexist or altruistic—represents an ongoing struggle with how to interpret these interactions. If one remains in the in-between of genders, one is simply left to accept both intentions with equal weight and to respond to one or the other. For this interaction, it became moot, as Leonardo said, “So that was wonderful. That's exactly how interactions in close physical space, I think, should be” (LEO, 53-54).

**Using clothing to celebrate oneself anywhere.** Leonardo remembered a time when he began to mix masculine and feminine elements of clothing, and they coincided with times of transition—both with his bodily transition and also when he relocated to different cities. In that effect, there were two instances in which he had to blend masculine and feminine articles of clothing: first when he transitioned from female to male, and the second point when he realized he was a man who adopted a genderqueer style. He said bashfully that his sense of fashion was a bit limited. His remembers his first experience of incorporating masculine garments—the first thing to change was his underwear preferences. He said (during his transition, he did not identify as exclusively homosexual):

It was my first girlfriend who took me shopping to buy boys underwear when I figured out I was trans. I was like, “Okay, I need to get men's underwear.” So she took my shopping, and I remember picking up some boxers and her laughing at me for weeks afterwards, being like, "Why are you wearing boxers?" And she's making fun of me. [Laughs] I didn't understand. I was like, "Oh, I thought that's what men did. I thought they wore boxers." And she was like, "Okay, that's cute; that's sweet." But that experience is so ingrained in my mind because it’s like she loved me so much, she was
still going to love me in boxers. She's like, "It's a growing phase. You need to understand
that you can wear better, more fitting underwear. You have a nice ass." (LEO, 329-339)

He started off as attempting to form a place himself within a masculine presentation.

When Leonardo began testosterone, he remembered, "I think I was yearning after this
1970’s man, kind of straight man who is really comfortable wearing tight-fitting shirts. I bought
a lot of 70s polyester shirts” (LEO, 346-348). But he was a 70s man who was mixing and
feminine aspects, perhaps even wearing addressed to an event on campus or two; however, he
entered into another relationship with a “queer-identified but really lesbian” woman who reacted
negatively to his desire to incorporate femme into his style. She was uncomfortable with the
sexual attention that they would receive as a result of Leonardo dressing in a more effeminate
manner. As a result, her discomfort led him to refrain from fully immersing himself in to a
femme presentation. The relationship did not last, and neither did his attempt to situate his
gender identify as exclusively male.

It was when he moved to a major Midwest metropolitan city that he felt that he was
inducted into a sense of genderqueer fashion and style. He began dating another
trans/genderqueer individual who helped him actualize his style: trading in the smaller earrings
for the bigger earrings, rocking the five-inch heels, knowing when to do “boy or stud” (LEO,
361-369). His style began to feel more natural when he moved to then relocated to major east
coast cities. Whereas before, he stated that he was still learning the ropes for how to dress, it was
at these locations that his style began to feel second nature. He identified it as an east-coast
sensibility, saying “I think that [east-coast cities] have a similar, kind of like—you have to prove
yourself. You had to establish who you and prove yourself there” (LEO, 456-458). However,
even in this period of his life, he stated that he was still trying to establish himself as a gay male
but did not do a lot of femme. It was still a work in progress, and evolution, until his accident returned him to Minneapolis.

It was not until he established himself in his current city of residence that Leonardo felt comfortable with himself as a gay male who does femme. He stated that the city was really trans-positive, even in the gay community where he sometimes felt ostracized or marginalized for being transgender. He then identified that his experience of being sexually attractive also increased in his city, becoming a flourishing city for Leonardo feel more like himself:

[A]ll these men were hitting me up all the time. And lots of men were really appreciating me. I know that part of it was that I was really confident and comfortable, and healing from a near-death experience helps with that, et cetera. I think it's also just the culture here. Men are just more comfortable with themselves and also so less passive-aggressive, less scared and nervous… It's not the Midwest. So I think that really helped a lot… interacting with femme boys, just around going to parties and seeing other men doing femme and other boys doing femme and trans-women having a lot of trans-feminine friends—so, I think just being immersed in a culture where I'm celebrated and I can celebrate other people. (LEO, 499-508)

His description of the his city of residence aptly describes the reciprocal learning that occurs with incorporating more feminine forms of presentation in one sense of style; and it also beautifully describes how a space becomes more welcoming, shared, and receptive to many ways of being. It is an instance where the genderqueer participants are changing the molar, institutional structures that were intended to bind them.

**Using clothing to elicit camaraderie through vulnerability.** “What do you dream?” is a tattoo that is both literally and figuratively close to Leonardo’s heart, situated around the collar
bone of his chest. He connected with a comment that I made to him about how his tattoo seems to be the question that his personal style or fashion is asking. The question is an invitation to wonder about ourselves, who we are in relation to others, and whether we are living our dream (LEO, 439-442). Even if an unspoken, prereflective manner, this is what Leonardo believes his style presents others with: the choice to reflect on their own dreams of being.

Figure 12. Photographs from Leonardo's style journal showcasing his earrings at which people tend to ogle (LEO, 175-193; 199-205)

Leonardo sees this choice very directly with the people who—whether admiring or taken aback—cannot take their eyes off of him or stare a bit longer than they would have for any other person on the street (Figure 12). He ponders:

[S]o there's the people who ogle at me and are trying to figure that out, but—I say *ogle*, but it's like they're not really. A lot of times it’s that they're actually—sometimes the way they look at me, I feel like they're searching for themselves in me. (LEO, 568-671)

He goes on to explain what he means by people to search for themselves in him. He described it as a moment of curiosity and simultaneous discomfort. He sometimes realizes that when people look at him, they see something that they want; namely, they are looking for the freedom from
being constrained by gender roles, and but that freedom first stems from first recognizing how they are uncomfortable with their own restrictions about gender performance. At that moment, the onlooker realizes that he/she too could be freer in how they dress and express themselves. But even Leonardo does not feel fully actualized in this regard either, finishing with “There’s a piece of me who wants to be like that too” (LEO, 573-580).

It seems like in these moments, both Leonardo and the other person are questioning themselves about how their singular gender presentations fail them. This opens each person to be vulnerable. Leonardo discusses this further:

… I see people who would sometimes be vulnerable with me. Because they feel more comfortable being their full selves because they know they can bring everything to me because I'm obviously cool with whatever, you know? And so it's a kind of yeah—I don't know. It's a kind of like a camaraderie that sometimes occurs from people that I would have had no idea to understand, to expect it. (LEO, 581-586)

Leonardo seems to elicit vulnerability from his style—how it reveals the way in which our gender presentations imbue us with the feeling of lack in being able to be who what we want to be—and this affords the opportunity for individuals to meet and connect through their vulnerabilities. It seems that these vulnerabilities help to further deepen an understanding of one another rather than close off access to each other in a restrictive binary that prohibits contact with that which does not fit the mold.

Furthermore, I want to return to the earlier description in which Leonardo was pushing through a drunk crowd with a friend who had a disability. His friend jestfully remarked, “They see me as a normal friend who had to put up with this freak,” referring to Leonardo and his awkward recovery gait mixed with his genderqueer style, “That’s never happened” (LEO, 637-
Leonardo goes on to note that camaraderie in vulnerability allows for the experience of normalcy to be shared and accessed by all, for vulnerability presents us with a multitude of ways to be a human as opposed to a singular way to be perfect. His clothing and style of dress may put him out there as a target of ogling, but it also opens others’ perspectives to how they could also adopt a gender presentation more aligned with their desires and embodied feelings. As Leonardo replied to his friend who joked with how she felt normal next to him, “Yeah, that’s my job” (LEO, 641-642)

**Using clothing to create oneself.** In reviewing the comfort that he has gained over the years throughout the struggles and attempts to situate himself as his own person in a binary world, Leonardo arrived at a conclusion about how he conceptualizes gender:

No matter how I'm taken, I just leveled out of gender, basically. I don't know—leveled to a level where we can all do gender. Gender is a playground. A huge playground all the time. It felt great because now I think I'm really, really comfortable all the time but especially really inspired all the time. I inspire myself. I like to get dressed because, it's inspiring. I like to create. It's a creative enterprise, and any creative enterprise can be inspiring. (LEO, 383-388)

The way in which he describes gender and his description of the process of feeling embodied and comfortable with his style seems to intersect at the birthplace of his creativity. What started out as a struggle is now a form of play. Also, very similar to how Deleuze and Guattari (1987/1980) theorize *becoming* as a form of production that creates nothing but itself and for itself, Leonardo mirrors the same sentiments when he states, “I inspire myself” (LEO, 386-387). The moment of inspiration becomes a moment of creation for him, and he is continuously crating himself in to the person he aspires to be.
So is not that one must have a creative force driving them in order to situate themselves within a more genderqueer style. Leonardo himself stated that he does not necessarily think his style is creative—“it could be more creative” (LEO, 523)—but it is primarily in the in-between of the genders that one can discover how to celebrate queerness, creativity, and body positivity (LEO, 522-526). Within this celebration lies new openings and new lines of flight for how one could be in the world that feels more attuned with the infinite forms of expression that one could take.

Leonardo talked at length at numerous times throughout the interview that the function the feminine position serves is to create space and offer up new ways of being in the world. When asked to consider the consequences of his decision to incorporate more feminine presentations, he could only identify the strength that comes from doing femme. The fact that femininity serves to create despite being continuously assaulted or denied a proper existence, Leonardo feels that that is the cause for celebration of “nothing but overflowing, positive consequences” (LEO, 393-398). He wants everyone to experience the same byproduct of introducing femininity into one’s gender presentation, as he identified it in what he wants his style to convey. He very beautifully summarizes the femme ethos:

When I didn't do femme, it was because I felt constricted into needing to present myself a certain way so that I would receive the kind of validation that aligned with my body, with my gender identification, and how my body wanted to be understood.

So I want to challenge that notion. I want to challenge the idea that there's a gender binary, that we exist in a binary, and really provoke people to have to come to an awareness—even if it's not a conscious awareness—of the ways that they are maybe uncomfortable with the gender expectations of them and their fashion and what people
expect them to do and say and how to expect their bodies to be and allow people to feel more comfortable just existing how they naturally want to exist. (LEO, 536-546)
Chapter 5: Discussion

To conclude with the dissertation, I combined the themes gathered from each participant and identify where the themes form a confluence and where they separate and become idiosyncratic. The fact that the themes do not fit nicely together as puzzle pieces is to be expected, for adopting a genderqueer/genderfluid style allows for individual differences to become actualized as part of one’s singular identity and sense of self. However, the participants’ narratives lead us to an answer for how clothing practices comprise a persons’ style and how personal style produces new possibilities for identity. Their descriptions of style lead us to understand that clothing is an aesthetic project for each individual; therefore, the link between personal style and identity extends our understanding of identity to be an aesthetic project as well. Namely, one’s identity is a form of expression—a form of art.

Style as an Aesthetic Project = Identity as Art

In looking at the individual ways that the participants’ clothing practices comprise their personal styles and subsequently structure their lifeworlds (i.e., interactions and relationships with others, comfort with their embodied selves), we can understand style as a way of imagining oneself and gathering a worldview. While we may choose to alleviate or abstain from the choice to use clothing in a manner to acquire a form of personal style—such as an individual who unreflectively purchases whatever garment fits from the shopping rack, or the individual who leaves the choice of what to wear to their spouse—they are still making a choice for how to structure their world. Onlookers may pass them by without a second glance; others may think to themselves, “Hmm, that outfit was put together well” (or not); but in every case, the choice to adorn oneself with clothing is a choice about who one wants to be. This is the choice that
appears evident from my participants’ narrative and the narrative of others cited in this
dissertation.

For instance, returning to the opening quote by Rhodes-Pitts (2011), changing her
clothing to that vintage dresses purchased in Harlem allowed her the mental freedom to become
the writer that she imagined to be. With those dresses, her world restructured itself with
possibilities that emerged and receded according to the conscious choice she made to put it on.
The same sentiments appeared with my participants—even permanently noted on their bodies
with the tattoos of Leonardo (“What do you dream?”) and Donatello (“To be free”). However,
Michelangelo talked directly about the power of clothing as capturing a worldview about the
future along with the hopes or disillusionments about the world’s evolution. He noted that
clothing and style can “make people open to the idea of what [the world] can be versus what
people say it should be” (p. 664-665), and this is the choice that is presented to all of us.

However, the choice to step outside the norm and to restructure one’s world is also not an
easy one—particularly when we begin to step outside of the molar boundaries of culture that
limit our experiences. In this project, each participant identified some concerns about their
safety when moving to the world in a genderqueer fashion, and they indicated that there was
cognizant of the threats could be verbal harassment or physical assault. During Donatello’s
participation process, the Orlando massacre at Pulse nightclub occurred; during Michelangelo’s
participation, he expressed concerns about how the election signified that the culture could
regress in LGBTQ acceptance, and both of these reflected the real prejudices and hate that they
can occur from strangers based solely on their gender presentation and sexual orientation. All
the participants had some verbal harassment (fortunately not physical) based on their style:
Donatello was heckled for being a boy who wears clothes, Leonardo was judged for his shoes
and walk and ogled down the street, and Michelangelo was confused for a girl and was dismissed because he was not. In these situations, there was uncertainty about how the interaction would progress and whether an altercation would ensue; and even if this is not a daily occurrence, the chance that any interaction could degrade to violence is a thought that each individual participant lives with. Daily life is lived with undertones of fraught that run counterpoint to the genderqueer experience.

However, if we think about how to understand the concerns of safety and the tension that arises from daily life, we can understand it as—in the words of participant Donatello—a way of making oneself vulnerable, which subsequently is “the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change” (DON, 367-368). His words mirror Raja’s tearful plea in the introduction, where he asserts that being a drag queen involves creativity and expression that goes against the grain—a “‘Fuck you,’ and do what you love to do and express yourself thoroughly” (Murray, 2011).

When we think of artists, we understand that they transmute their pain and suffering into works of art. The choice to adorn oneself and to consciously situate one’s identity in between the genders—to continuously invite queerness alongside its struggles and strife—is to also use clothing as the medium for art. Yet as people begins to capture a style of dress of themselves that becomes interchangeable with their bodies, they are then creating their selves into a work of art. Specifically, identity becomes an art form, with the vulnerability of fraughtness becoming fertile ground for aesthetics.

It is through an understanding of style and identity as aesthetic that each participant noted that mixing masculine and feminine elements of clothing allowed them to open their understandings about gender and self. If we use Butler’s (2007/1990) concept of gender as performative, we can connect it to Halberstam’s (2011) notion that these failures to reproduce
the traditional functions of gender deconstruct its molar categories. Additionally, Ahmed (2006) points out that this process is inherently uncomfortable; but clothing, as it become our bodies and subsequent ways of identifying ourselves, is the most basic practice that we could use to create these new lines of flight for identification. Each participant spoke directly to how experimenting with queering their clothing practices opened up their ideas about genders and ways of being in the world. For Donatello, he described his gender orientation as living his truth, as a strength that comes from vulnerability. Leonardo, on the other hand, identified that he experiences his gender orientation as a celebration of all ways of performing gender. Donatello stated that he experiences his gender as being fearless with no set boundaries or style but constantly in movement. Thus, each of the participants do not experience themselves as a singular gender, and their experiences open up new ways for how their style of dress restructures their world and how they relate to others.

The reason that I continuously reiterate that people do not experience themselves as a singular gender is because the project of queerness is one of multiplicity (as opposed to heteronormatively, which tends to be bifurcating and limiting of experience; Halberstam, 2011). Additionally, this failure to recapitulate normative functions of the culture lead to a plethora of ways to become—and these becomings, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987/1980) beget nothing else but other becomings that are unfolding for itself. Thus, the production of an identity is one’s identity that is given through style in genderqueer fashion. Alternatively, in the heteronormative function, people confuse being with doing (for example, when one identifies as a profession rather than understand them as doing the profession); however, the act of doing is the way of being in queerness. This is also why I chose to return to phenomenology to understand style and identity, as we might be tempted to pathologize forms of doing—as in doing gender (i.e., as
performance)—but doing genderqueer through clothing is phenomenologically expressive if we understand it within the flux of the chiasm (Merleau-Ponty, 1968/1964). My participants’ narratives reveal that doing genderqueer does not mean that one is male or female but instead means that one always moving between, always primed to become something other than the two options.

It is between these two options that lines of flight towards freedom exist for how to understand identity. Leonardo describes it as a playground, a “huge playground all the time” to create and to inspire (LEO, 383-388). But this creative enterprise—to return to the immediacy of clothing in structure our relationships and world—is very much tied to the physicality of space and others. This is perhaps most evident with how each participant identified that major shifts in their style occurred with relocating to different cities and encountering new scenes of people. It does not seem coincidental that every participant is from a major Metropolitan area, where standards of dressing and being in the world can be interpreted liberally, but each major location brought about varying degrees of acceptance with the communities that they found themselves in. For instance, Donatello felt freer to express himself and feel embodied in the west coast and returned to the east coast with renewed confidence. Leonardo identified that moving to particular Midwest and east coast helped him to find friends who educated him on the best practices to actualize his own genderqueer style—eventually allowing him to realize that he could be an object of romantic attraction as well. As for Michelangelo, moving away from family to start college granted and him with a new playground of people and ways to experiment with a unisex montage. To return to Leonardo’s concept of clothing as ubuntu, the relationships and environment have a reciprocal dialogue with one’s style, and this also has a mediating effect
on the expression of one’s identity. It seems that relocating allowed them to ditch any anchors to their old, restrictive gender ideas and create themselves anew.

The question whether style can produce new possibilities for identity can be answered in the affirmative. However, as I noted in the beginning of the section, we can choose to absolve the choice of style and identity to others—whether it be culture or a partner or the bargain rack at a department store. But, as my participants revealed, if we have to make a choice, why not make a conscious one about who we want to be? Our clothing becomes us, so let us make a conscious and concerted effort to wear the identity that we want to create for ourselves and embody the confidence to maintain that decision.

**Significance of Results**

Merleau-Ponty (1963/1942) stated that “human acts… [such as] the act of clothing oneself… have no significance in their own right. They are understood in reference to the aims of life: clothing as an artificial skin” (p. 163). I believe that the results from the study revealed that opening up the discipline of phenomenology to look at clothing helps us to understand the process of how clothing becomes a second skin to our bodies; it moves, breathes, feels as we do and secretes significations and orientations to the world—it becomes an identity that we adopt from moment to moment in a series of becomings. However, our identity does not exist prior to the moment it is expressed through our style, for—as we can understand identity as an aesthetic project—we would not ask what is the a-priori essence of *Sistine Madonna* by Italian Renaissance artist Rafaello “Raphael” Sanzio da Urbino; nor would we wonder about the expressive agent in Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*. Artistic mediums convey no explicit thoughts or representations other than a particular style of being (Merleau-
Ponty, 2014/1945)—whether it be poetry, art, music, or identity. Art serves only to open up new significations, new possibilities, and new ways of being (pp. 151-152).

Thus, clothing and identity changes the space around us even, as Leonardo identified when he commented on my necklace (LEO, 425-426) or when he talked about how his earrings, it opens up more space for others to transform the body-field around them. I can see how this might also connect with Michelangelo’s iconic post-election day look (Figure 3) in which he felt “blah” (MIC, 367) but then—upon further reflection—likened it to feeling like Darth Vader ready to blow up a planet (MIC, 677-684). What he then perceived as a black “blah” look now extends into the space around him with the swish of the cape that he is wearing. This confirms Alapack’s (2009) notion that “clothing does not just drape the flesh but extends it” (p. 977), and with the clothing also extends our intentions and dreams to augment and change the world around us.

One of the main goals of this study was to find out how our body-field is augmented and transformed through our second skin of clothing. Looking solely at research critiquing and admonishing the fashion industry as being patriarchal or restrictive to the individual—while this may be observed as the case for fashion as an institution (Alapack, 2009; Young, 2005)—misses the freedom and the choices that individuals bring to their clothing: clothing is a lived experience for my participants. A common theme amongst all the participants was that clothing was used as a practice to open up their understanding and experiences of the world rather than close them down. But rather than opening up one’s experience of self to a singular, consistent style of being, queering clothing practices appear to open an individual up to a multiplicity of selves simultaneously. This is reminiscent of how Guy and Banim (2000) identified that women experience themselves as “‘The woman I want to be,’ ‘The woman I fear I am,’ and ‘The woman
I am most of the time”” through their clothing. In a similar manner, participants all experienced themselves as confident and determined, but also at the same time as insecure and fearful when dressing in a genderqueer style. For instance, Michelangelo looked to incorporating the ‘girliness’ to his unisex style but also felt judged as a “skinny bitch” amongst close friends (MIC, 233-239). Donatello felt secure and in charge of his femmeness and vulnerability but also believed that this limited his chances of getting a date and opened him up to heckling (DON, 14-20; DON Style Journal, para. 4). And Leonardo was able to reflect with laughter at past fashion faux pas but also revealed feeling hurt about the rejection that came from medical practitioners and romantic partners because he did not conform to a singular gender (LEO, 132-142; 469-481). Through adopting a genderqueer second skin, this multiplicity of selves is constantly on the forefront of their experiences rather than receding into the background.

The issue of how dressing in a genderqueer style affects romantic pursuits appeared to emerge in the results as well. We could already assume that an LGBTQ appearance would influence dating practices, for sexual orientation is primarily communicated through visual stimuli such as garments, symbols (such as rainbows), or gestures (as indicated in Edwards, 2010; Sha, Aung, Londerville, & Ralston, 2007; and Eichler, 2012). However, it is notable that all of my participants brought up the ways in which their genderqueer and femme presentation seemed to close them off as attractive prospects, even within their own community. This appears to contradict or at least problematize the male gaze as put forth by Young (2005) and Alapack (2009), where in parts the male gaze is used to sexualize and objectify the female body. In the case of my participants, their femme presentation seemed to close them off as individuals to be attracted to. For instance, Michelangelo found himself being catcalled on the street only to then be awkwardly turned down when the stranger saw his beard and moustache (MIC Style Journal,
para. 10), whereas Donatello anticipates that others will reject him because of his femininity just as he has experienced this before (DON, 14-20). In Leonardo’s case, it took relocating to several cities before he found himself accepted as a potential dating partner and entering into a committed romantic relationship (LEO, 450-458; 499-508). So it seems that the queer experience can widen our understanding of how the male gaze operates amongst different participants of varying gender presentations.

The complications that arise in romantic pursuits due to my participants’ femme presentation return me to the opening lines of Madonna’s single *What It Feels Like For a Girl,* “Girls can wear jeans, cut their hair short, wear shirts and boots ‘cause it’s ok to be a boy. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading ‘cause you think that being a girl is degrading” (Madonna, Sigsworth, & Torn, 2000). My participants’ dating experiences and relationships illustrate why homophobia is a feminist issue—because homophobia alludes to assumptions about the inferiority of femininity, which is the issue that my participants encounter when incorporating more femme into their style. As all my participants identified themselves as homosexual in the screening, they are attracted to other male-sexed individuals; however, they are not inherently received as attractive individuals due to the dose of femininity in their gender presentation. It is as if that dose of femininity knocks them down a peg or two in the dating game. Thus while a genderqueer presentation charts new territory for how sexuality and attraction can be navigated and expressed, it does the same for *the other*—and sometimes in a way that can be confusing or rejecting if the other holds the same prescriptive antifeminine, sexist attitudes of the dominant culture. But it also can offer the other the same opportunities for growth and freedom should they choose to accept femme as an equitable and authentic way of being.
Divergent Themes Between Participants

All the participants also presented with themes that were unique to themselves and their experiences, separate for the other two participants. Following are the particular themes that appeared to be idiosyncratic to each participant.

**Michelangelo.** It seemed that for Michelangelo, his feelings about his petite body frame was very influential in how it impacted other people’s feelings about themselves, which in turn affected him. Consequently, he noted that he constantly felt a tension between how he experiences himself and how others perceived him; this led to a dissonance with him as an embodied subject. For instance, he could feel comfortable with how he looks, but then comments from friends that he is being ostentatious or showing off could lead him to doubt his comfort and to withdraw. This theme only appeared when he discussed his relationship with close friends (not necessarily strangers), and it led him to feel ostracized and like an outsider in his own in-group a couple times. However, it reveals how Michelangelo’s style structures his feelings of self-other in the relationships around him.

**Donatello.** The most prominent theme for Donatello that informed his style but was also separate from the other participants was the issue of *machismo*. Being a Latino male, he noted that he had to contend with prominent issues of controlling and confrontive hyper-masculinity. Thus, his close relationships (primarily with family members but also romantic pursuits) have modified their cultural expectations of how they expect his gender to behave and act within the larger western systemic assumptions about gender. This created on juxtaposition about whether he was supported in being genderqueer or latino-masculine, such as when he was encouraged to be more groomed and to shave his legs (common female practices but also new practices of *machismo* expression) if he were going to wear a dress. It became an interesting way in which
patriarchal-latino attitudes about how men should be well-groomed womanizers was usurped and folded into genderqueer practices.

**Leonardo.** Leonardo as a transgender male presented with unique themes that were informed by his transition and compounded with being femme and genderqueer. Thus, he appeared to speak more directly to issues of embodiment throughout his interview, and he had to very directly resist efforts to reach gender him either as male or female (one or the other) during his recovery process. Additionally, it appeared that a lot of interactions that he experienced the strangers were informed by being transgender alongside genderqueer, and it was difficult to parse the two from each other to isolate how it was either his clothing practices or his transition that affected and restructured these relationships in the world. However, being that I approached the phenomenon using Merleau-Ponty (2014/1945; 1963/1942) to understand how his clothing supposedly becomes his body, his clothing practices created an intersecting identity with his transition that elucidated how his way of practicing genderqueer was too prismatic and variable to be reduced to simply his clothing.

**Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of the study is the selection criteria for participants, as it significantly reduced the pool of potential participants who could have been a part of the study. Numerous times throughout the recruitment process, I was asked about whether other segments of the LGBTQ population (i.e., such as butch lesbians or agender asexual individuals) were appropriate for the study and if they could be referred for participation. I believe that their stories could be just as informative and elucidating; but for the purpose of the study, I honed in on a specific segment of the population so as to reduced variance in the results and themes that emerged. These different trajectories of clothing practices amongst various subsets of the population and
how it structures their relationships and move into the world is, of course, a direction the future research could identify.

Returning to the selection criteria, I recognized through the recruitment process, many gay men recapitulate masculine and heteronormative performances of gender; and finding participants to regularly mix masculine and feminine elements of clothing (to form a genderqueer style) on a daily basis was difficult. It seems to return to the notion of how he masculine position in fashion is closed off to external influence, mirroring Jones (1995) research about a well-dressed man being very stylish and smartly dressed but not necessarily wearing feminine garb; this appeared to be the case in the gay community as well, which may highlight the importance of needing to continue researching and encouraging alternative forms of gender expression that disrupt the molar categories. Furthermore, institutions and workplaces can also account for the restrictions for genderqueer expression, for dress codes can continue to molarize and edify categories of genders that close off gender fluidity.

Directions for Future Research

In looking at directions for future research, I believe that Leonardo’s comments on how “accessories can transform” are perfect op1ening to continue looking into how clothing practices transform and augments our body-field and the space around us. This concept also seems implicit in Michelangelo’s “Darth Vader” look, for when he experienced a mood of feeling down or “blah,” he—whether conscious or not—adorned an all-black look with a cape in a manner that appeared to give his space back to him; “Don’t even come near me,” one might interpret the look to be saying. As my research looked primarily at ways in which body, identity, and relationships are structured through genderqueer clothing practices; taking up the issue of how space and experiential field are transformed through clothing practices can be just as insightful. Also, it
seems that opening up the way in which the male gaze continues to restrict or oppress individuals
of other gender presentations (as noted by Alapack [2009] and Young [2005]) can be just as
elucidating, for all of my participants experienced some form of rejection (primarily through
dating practices) because of the normative male function. Looking at how genderqueer
individuals are affected by the gaze—even within their own communities—seems like an
opportunity to validate the experiences of those who feel marginalized and to offer them a way to
empower themselves and their communities by endorsing alternative ways of being.

However, as binaries of gender continue to be reinforced and prescriptive ways of being,
they continue to limit the various modes by which we can express ourselves and subsequently
how we experience the world. Continued research into how to destabilize gender practices can
open up a multiplicity of emotional experiences, ways of relating to each other, and feelings
about ourselves that feel more situated within our personal orientations and preferences. As
clothing continues to remain one of the primary practices by which our bodies are demarcated
from birth and further educated into how to perform our gender, clothing can also resist against
the ideological functions of gender. To counter to Alapack’s (2009) point that “[f]ashion is a
weapon of the patriarchy” (p.985), fashion can also be used as a weapon against molarization of
gender because it allows people to see more ways to be in the world and be celebrated despite
their struggles and fears. In short, it is inspiring. My participants inspire me, and they invite
others to give proper reflection to how they are living or what they do. They also remind me that
there are others like me, and—to take a moment to honor the lives who were lost on the night of
the Pulse nightclub massacre—being genderqueer (or any form of LGBTQ) can be a matter of
life and death. We choose to continue with the project of liberation, and we all got this going for
us: we are choosing to celebrate life.
References


CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Clothing and becoming: A hermeneutic phenomenological study of gay men’s experience of choosing their clothing

INVESTIGATOR: José Arroyo, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
Duquesne University: Psychology Department
211 Rockwell Hall
Pittsburgh, PA 15282
412.396.6520

ADVISOR: Eva Simms, Ph.D., Professor
Duquesne University: Psychology Department
211 Rockwell Hall
Pittsburgh, PA 15282
412.396.6515

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in clinical psychology at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate clothing practices among gay men who regularly mix masculine and feminine articles of clothing in their everyday style.

In order to qualify for participation, you must be an 18-year old (or older), out-homosexual male who dresses in a gender-queer fashion and has daily access to electronic photography and communication equipment.

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES: To participate in this study, you will be asked to keep a style journal for two weeks in you will be asked to send me images of your daily outfits and any interactions that you believe might have been influenced by your appearance.

Following the two-week period, you will allow me to interview you in which I will inquire further about experiences described in your style journal. Additional interview questions will involve topics of interpersonal relationships, personal style, identity, and gender expression. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and the transcription and style journal
will be used as a research protocol. The interview will be approximately 1-2 hours in length and will take place in person at a semi-private, comfortable place of your choosing, or the interview may be conducted remotely through a video-chat program.

These are the only requests that will be made of you.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:**

There are minimal risks associated with this participation but no greater than those encountered in everyday life. A potential benefit is increased insight regarding personal style and personality, and you will be contributing to GLBTQ psychological literature.

**COMPENSATION:**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this study, and participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you. An envelope is provided for return of your response to the investigator.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Your participation in this study and any personal information that you provide will be kept confidential at all times and to every extent possible. Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments, including the transcribed protocols for the study, their interpretations, or in any part of the final dissertation. You will be referred to by a pseudonym, as will other individuals you mention by name. Images for the style journal will be altered and cropped so as to not easily identify the physical features of the participant; however, as there is a visual component to the dissertation and given the distinction of a person’s style, pure anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Audio recordings will be used by the researcher for the sole purpose of aiding transcription of verbal and nonverbal contents of the interview. All audio recordings, consent forms, images, and written material will kept secure in an encrypted external hard drive. Any study materials with personal identifying information will be maintained for three years after the completion of the research and then destroyed.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:**

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time by notifying the investigator and/or advisor of your desire to withdraw from the study. At the time of withdrawal, data already collected during the study will be destroyed and not used in the results of this research.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:**

A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.
VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call José Arroyo, M.A. (412.396.6520) and/or Eva Simms, Ph.D. (412.396.6515). Should I have questions regarding protection of human subject issues, I may call Dr. Linda Goodfellow, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board, at 412.396.1886.

_________________________________________    __________________
Participant's Signature       Date

_________________________________________    __________________
Researcher's Signature       Date
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Clothing and becoming: A hermeneutic phenomenological study of gay men’s experience of choosing their clothing

INVESTIGATOR: José Arroyo, M.A., Ph.D. Candidate
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In order to qualify for participation, you must be an 18-year old (or older), out-homosexual male who dresses in a gender-queer fashion and has daily access to electronic photography and communication equipment.

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES: To participate in this study, you will be asked to keep a style journal for two weeks in you will be asked to send me images of your daily outfits and any interactions that you believe might have been influenced by your appearance.

Following the two-week period, you will allow me to interview you in which I will inquire further about experiences described in your style journal. Additional interview questions will involve topics of interpersonal relationships, personal style, identity, and gender expression. The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed, and the transcription and style journal
will be used as a research protocol. The interview will be approximately 1-2 hours in length and will take place in person at a semi-private, comfortable place of your choosing, or the interview may be conducted remotely through a video-chat program.

These are the only requests that will be made of you.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** There are minimal risks associated with this participation but no greater than those encountered in everyday life. A potential benefit is increased insight regarding personal style and personality, and you will be contributing to GLBTQ psychological literature.

**COMPENSATION:** A $40 VISA gift card will be given to you for your time and any inconvenience in participating in the study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you. An envelope is provided for return of your response to the investigator.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your participation in this study and any personal information that you provide will be kept confidential at all times and to every extent possible. Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments, including the transcribed protocols for the study, their interpretations, or in any part of the final dissertation. You will be referred to by a pseudonym, as will other individuals you mention by name. Images for the style journal will be altered and cropped so as to not easily identify the physical features of the participant; however, as there is a visual component to the dissertation and given the distinction of a person’s style, pure anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Audio recordings will be used by the researcher for the sole purpose of aiding transcription of verbal and nonverbal contents of the interview. All audio recordings, consent forms, images, and written material will kept secure in an encrypted external hard drive. Any study materials with personal identifying information will be maintained for three years after the completion of the research and then destroyed.

**RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:** You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time by notifying the investigator and/or advisor of your desire to withdraw from the study. At the time of withdrawal, data already collected during the study will be destroyed and not used in the results of this research.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS:** A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.
VOLUNTARY CONSENT:  

I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call José Arroyo, M.A. (412.396.6520) and/or Eva Simms, Ph.D. (412.396.6515). Should I have questions regarding protection of human subject issues, I may call Dr. Linda Goodfellow, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board, at 412.396.1886.

_________________________________________    __________________
Participant's Signature       Date

_________________________________________    __________________
Researcher's Signature       Date
Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Screening e-mail to GLBTQ organizations and listservs

Subject: Seeking Research Participants for a Study on Gay Men and Genderqueer Style

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is José Arroyo, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in clinical psychology at Duquesne University. As part of my dissertation research, I am recruiting out-homosexual, adult men who regularly mix masculine and feminine articles of clothing in their everyday style. I wish to explore the implications for how genderqueer clothing practices influence our sense of self and relationships in the world. I hope that you may forward this e-mail along to any participants who meet that description and who may be willing to participate in a qualitative study.

There are no risks to participating in the study above those that are encountered in everyday life, as I am requesting that participants continue doing actions that they are already engaged in. Confidentiality will be maintained, but complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed, as there is a visual component to the study. Participants also have the right to withdraw their consent to participate at any time. Finally, this project has been approved by the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board, and it is my hope that participants will find the study interesting, insightful, and enjoyable.

I thank you for any help you may provide,
José Arroyo, M.A.
Ph.D. Candidate in Clinical Psychology
Duquesne University

Dear Potential Participant,

Are you a gay male who regularly mixes masculine and feminine articles of clothing in your everyday wardrobe? Do you have a unique way of dressing that is specific to you? Are you interested in what how your style influences your identity and your being in the world? Please consider sharing your story with me.

I am seeking adult, out, gay male participants who blur the lines between masculine and feminine with the way they dress for a qualitative study that I am completing for my dissertation research. The study will include taking pictures of your outfits for two weeks, keeping a journal of your interactions with others, and a follow-up interview that will be approximately one hour in length. Interviews can take place either in person or via video chat (ex., Skype, Google Chat, etc.)—your preference.

If you meet these criteria and are interested in gaining insight into your style, identity, and relationships, then please contact me! If you want to know more about the study or if you think you might not have time but are still interested in the study, take a moment to call or e-mail me.
so that we can talk further. I will be recruiting participants and conducting interviews over the next several months.

You may contact me at arroyoj@duq.edu or call me at 412.396.6520 and please leave a message). I look forward to meeting you and getting to know you further.

Sincerely,
José Arroyo, M.A.
Ph.D. Candidate in Clinical Psychology
Duquesne University
Appendix D: Screening Interview

Following the proposal and goals of my project, I plan to ask the following demographic and accommodation questions in the screening email.

1. Please state your name, age, and gender.
2. Are you a homosexual male?
3. Are you out with your sexual orientation in your everyday life?
4. Do you regularly mix nonmasculine elements (ex., female jewelry, makeup, etc.) into your everyday style?
5. Do you have access to electronic photography and communication equipment (ex., digital camera, cellular phone, computer, etc.)?
6. Do you have a preference as to whether we meet face-to-face or online for the follow-up interview?
7. Do you have preferred location or video-chat program (ex., Skype, Google Chat, etc.) for the interview?
Appendix E: Style Journal Instructions

When documenting what you wear, first offer the date and time of the recording. Take a picture of you in your outfit(s) that you wore throughout the day. At various times throughout the day, record in your style journal how you chose your outfit(s) and how you felt while wearing your outfit(s). Be sure to include changes in how you felt about yourself and/or any particular outfit throughout the day. Also record interactions with others that you believe to be relevant to or influenced by your outfit. Additionally, comment on how you feel about your body while wearing the outfit along with any changes in how you perceive yourself.

You may choose how to document what you wear and how to communicate it to me (ex., text, e-mail, etc.), but send me any files by the end of the each day. I may also send reminders of the style journal throughout the day at desired times upon request.
Appendix F: Interview Schedule

In the semi-structured interview, I plan to ask seven thematic questions in the order below. I will begin with broad questions but narrow the focus based on the specific circumstances of each participants. On the whole, these questions aim to tap into the following domains of my research questions: embodiment and other, style, identity, and freedom.

1) Style Journal: Embodiment and Other
   1) I will review meaningful passages and photos of a participant’s style journal with him, allowing him to clarify, reflect, and unpack the themes of relating to his relationship to his body and other that emerged from their entries.

2) Style
   1) How would you describe your style?
      Prompt: How would you describe your look?
      Follow-up: Review of outfits they photographed to document their style.
   2) What were the first instances in which you began to experiment mixing elements in your wardrobe?
      Prompt: When did you decide to mix masculine and feminine articles of clothing?
      Follow-up: Were there any consequences to your decision?
   3) When did you realize that this style was your style?
      Prompt: At what point did your style feel natural?

3) Identity
   1) What would you say your style expresses about you?
      Prompt: What conclusions might others reach about you through your style?
      Follow-up: What do you want to convey through your style?
   2) What were the changes in your style over the years?
      Follow-up: Did these changes occur with changes in your life? If so, what?
      Follow up: How did those changes also change what your style expressed about you?

4) Freedom
   3) In what ways does your style open or restrict your ideas about the world?
      Prompt: How did style change or limit how you think about gender? Sexual orientation? Others?
   4) Do you feel comfortable in the world with your style?
      Follow-up: What contributes to that feeling?
Appendix G (Cited in Dissertation as “MIC”): Michelangelo’s Style Journal and Interview

Day 1: Today’s outfit influenced by The Walking Dead. I wanted to look like I was ready for a badass zombie slaying while at the same time incorporate my Halloween costume (the cat ears)!! At first I felt uncomfortable about my style choice, but throughout the day I received compliments in regards to my cat ears, occasionally being called adorable/cute. One girl approached me saying she loved my jacket, which happens to be girl clothing. I went from feeling self-conscious to feeling assured & svelte. Especially after my work crush finally spoke to me and said he liked my ears. Haha.
Day 2: Every article of this ensemble is female clothing. Even my shoes. Lol This look is a perfect example of how I like to take female clothing and make it look unisex. This style choice makes me feel a bit body conscious because the shirt is actually a maxi button up, and I had to make sure the tucked-in portions weren’t protruding out or bulging in the private ares. My own lil secret throughout the day lol
Day 3: I took the day off. So I’ve been lounging around in comfy attire.

Day 5: Today’s outfit had no real motive. It was so cold to me, so I just threw something on. I felt frumpy in this look and didn’t want to even send you a pic. I got quite a few stares, but I mostly think that was because of hair finding my face, and people were trying to figure out if I was a boy or a girl. So I would feel a bit insecure. Even had a baby stare at me for 5 mins while I was waiting for my cheesecake lol
Day 7: Another laid back look for a lazy Sunday funday with friends. I’m always comfy in my crop tops and jeans. I feel girly haha when wearing this outfit. My friends came over and called me a skinny bitch. I hate that haha but whatever.
Day 8: “Oversized Sweater, Shorts & Tights… Oh My!!” Haha I love black with minimal color if you can’t tell by now lol. This outfit was comfy. I was very layered. I tried to get it a boyish look but I always get stares at my legs when I wear a shorts-and-tights combo. Throughout the day, I felt trendy, like I needed to be in a log cabin lol. But occasionally I felt a bit insecure from the looks in regards to my slouch socks and feminine bottom apparel choice.

Day 9: I just took a pic too hahaha. A bleak and dank look for an unhappy day lol. Again I took female clothing and butched it up. I got a lot of glances and compliments, so I felt good in my frumpy wear lol
Day 10: All black… I’ve been mourning the loss of our freedoms we fought so hard for and the failure of democracy. Hopeless.

Day 11: Hahaha best friends bday!!! I’m feeling sexy!!!
Day 12: So while wearing this look in public tonight, I’ve been feeling really confident but then straight men approach me saying, “Hey ma,” and then it’s awkward when they realize and say, “My bad!!”
Day 13: Omg I’m so late. But this was 11/11’s outfit. I went a lil bight colored for the day. I liked wearing this outfit because of the different lengths and layers. As well I always feel a bit more unique because I never see may people wearing jean jackets in Pittsburgh. I got a compliment on my jacket so that added more self appreciation for my choice of ensemble. Now time for bed lol

Day 14: Ohmygoodness today was recovery day hahahaha I’ve been in the bed in my underwear napping. It’s been terrible!! Ooohhh yes yes yes. I went to [a lesbian bar] last night. I completely forgot I took pics. Cativo was so exciting and fun.
Arroyo: Go through some of our—the text message chain that you sent me, which I already have pulled up. What I'm going to do is I'm going to pick out some significant themes that I noticed in part of it. Now, I think the first one—the first one—in several of the descriptions that you offered of interactions that you had throughout the day, you mentioned that people often would stare at you and have some confusion about—okay so you're nodding your head—they would have some confusion about whether you were a guy or a girl. That would make it awkward at times. I think one time, in particular—it was one of the last days of your style journal—you said that some guy said, "Hey babe," or "Hey honey," and then when you turned around it was a bit awkward when it was a straight man?

Participant-3: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Arroyo: Okay.

Participant-3: I don't even remember that anymore now, but that's happened a plethora of times. I will tell you that.

Arroyo: You don't remember it?

Participant-3: I do not.

Arroyo: Oh, we can pull it up.

Participant-3: What outfit was I wearing?

Arroyo: Let's see. Actually, I believe it was a birthday. There we go [shows picture]. It was the sheen outfit right here, and you said you were feeling confident. It was November 11th. You said you were feeling really confident, but then a straight man approached you saying, "Hey ma."

Participant-3: No, that wasn't even a straight guy. Was that a straight guy?

Arroyo: Straight man.

Participant-3: That's not the outfit I'm thinking of. That happened another time when I went out—this little fat guy over here [gesturing to his dog]—when I went out, and this guy literally came up to me and was like, "Are you a guy?" I was like, "Yes, I'm a guy." He's like, "You're gay? You're transitioning?" I said, "No. I'm gay." Then he was like—he motioned in my shape or whatever, went like this [gestures an hourglass shape].

Arroyo: Like an hourglass?

Participant-3: Whatever you want to call it. That's what he did, and then he was all around my hips. Then was like, "Do you mind if I touch you?" I said, "Excuse me." He's like, "Can I touch you?" I was like, "What?" He was drunk, but I just—I was like, "Okay." Then he went and he hugged me and picked me up and was like, "Damn," and went like this. We were at [an afterhours bar—redacted], and [the afterhours bar] is definitely a gay bar.

Arroyo: Well [the afterhours bar] is—yeah, I was about to say [the afterhours bar] is a gay bar, isn't it?

Participant-3: A gay bar.

Arroyo: Yeah. Did that surprise you that that happened there?

Participant-3: It surprised me. That was the first time it ever happened, something like that. I have never been approached like that before.

Arroyo: Really?

Participant-3: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Arroyo: What makes that part stick out?
Participant-3: The whole “think that I was a transgender.” Nothing’s wrong with it, but I've never been—I've never been asked that. Once, people will assume from the back that I'm a girl, but then if they see me from the front, they'll go, "Oh, sir." Like they know, but this guy still was confused looking at me head on, like beard, and—at that time—I had a mustache.

Arroyo: How did you feel?
Participant-3: I just shrugged it off really.

Arroyo: You shrugged it off.

Participant-3: Yeah, I was confused. I was confused.

Arroyo: How long ago was this?

Participant-3: This was in October.

Arroyo: This past October?

Participant-3: Mm-hmm. It was for the Halloween party that they had at [the afterhours bar].

Arroyo: It was the first that happened to you, and you say that you were confused; but since then it happened a little bit more repeatedly if it happened on November 11th as well?

Participant-3: Well, that guy, he didn't question if I was a girl or not.

Arroyo: The microphone right over there.

Participant-3: He definitely caught on to the fact that I was a guy after seeing me a little more clearly. This guy was just, "Are you sure? Are you gay, transgender? What are you? Can I touch you?"

Arroyo: That seems a little bit significant though. It was the first time that you stated that you were mistaken as transgendered.

Participant-3: For transgendered, yes, definitely.

Arroyo: And also that someone just invited themselves to touch you?

Participant-3: Yes. It just happened so fast. I didn't even have time to really give him a yes or no. I just was like, "What?" Next you know, I'm up in the air, and he's hugging me, and he puts me back down. That's as far as it went thankfully, but it was a different experience.

Arroyo: Different?

Participant-3: Yeah.

Arroyo: Not necessarily better or worse, but just different?

Participant-3: Different.

Arroyo: What about, I think there were several passages on what you mentioned that you felt a little bit insecure about how you looked, and you felt a little bit insecure in your outfit.

Participant-3: Yeah, because I try to be myself as much as possible and dress how I want to dress without worrying about someone responding to my character negatively. When I wear certain things, I'm self-aware of how I look, so it does kind of sometimes make me insecure, self-conscious, about who I am, but—it's kind of

Arroyo: Which part makes you self-conscious?

Participant-3: I'm sorry, my cat. [Cat jumps on counter.] What part about that makes me self-conscious? The stigma that people have with being gay or cross-dressers or transgendered. It's like you never know who you're going to meet that might not like that. They might respond to it with bashing, or something, or verbal
altercations; and I'm always just conscious about that, but I still try to dress to how I want to dress.

Arroyo: But that is always on the forefront of your mind?
Participant-3: Mm-hmm.

Arroyo: Have you ever encountered that?
Participant-3: Not in a really aggressive way, but yeah, you know people say the comments or things. Those I can deal with; but if it goes beyond that, then that's when I'm like “Oooh, I'm a little scared about that happening.” I count my blessings.

Arroyo: Scared about?
Participant-3: You know, it going beyond than just a verbal name calling—maybe like threats or something or actually physical assaulting me. That's what I'm always worried about.

Arroyo: That's a fear?
Participant-3: Mm-hmm.

Arroyo: I think with some of the outfits that you stated that you felt uncomfortable with, not only was it in part of where you knew that you were dressing in a somewhat genderqueer, feminine, or—I guess—a transgendered fashion; but as you say, sometimes you also said you felt uncomfortable because you felt you looked frumpy. I think those were particular days in which you'd wear jean jackets. [Participant laughs] Do you remember? I could show you the pictures.

Participant-3: [Laughs] Yeah.

Arroyo: You can revisit the trip down memory lane. [Looking through pictures] That was your Halloween outfit with the cat ears. Right—no, that's the one where you're wearing a maxi I believe.

Participant-3: Yeah, that's the one—I remember that's the one that made me feel frumpy because it was all this material that I had folded up and hidden away, so to give you the illusion that it was just like this little shirt as you see there, but it's really like this long [gestures to legs]. That shirt extends, so all of that was up in there. That made me feel a little uncomfortable. I use frumpy interchangeably.

Arroyo: Okay, uncomfortable and frumpy.
Participant-3: Yeah.

Arroyo: I see. What you wrote was—
Participant-3: Bald jean and all of that.

Arroyo: You said it makes you feel a bit body conscious because the shirt is actually a maxi button up.

Participant-3: Mm-hmm, I didn't want anybody to be like, "What's in your pants?" You know? Arroyo: Yeah, and you want to make sure it wasn't protruding.

Participant-3: Yeah. [Laughs] That's all. The only time I'd feel frumpy is if I'm wearing sweats.

Arroyo: If you're wearing sweats?
Participant-3: Mm-hmm, and like a hoodie.

Arroyo: What about this one right over here? I believe this might have been one too.
Participant-3: That was kind of frumpy too.

Arroyo: This one as well.
Participant-3: I was so dressed down.

Arroyo: Are you wearing sweats in there?
Participant-3: These are joggers.
Arroyo: Okay. What is it about those days in which you wake up? Do you feel frumpy because you wear them, or do you feel frumpy when you wake up and then you just throw it on?

Participant-3: Yeah, I feel frumpy when I just throw it on and I don't really put no thought into it. It's maybe not as tight in some places that I would like for it to be.

Arroyo: Tight in some places?

Participant-3: Mm-hmm. I don't know. It just doesn't feel sexy to me. It's not about that I want to feel sexy, but I at least want to know that I look a certain type of way, and that's not how I want to look—[points to picture] with these boy shoes and these joggers and then just throwing on this jean jacket.

Arroyo: Where were you?

Participant-3: I was in South Station Square.

Arroyo: Station Square?

Participant-3: Yeah. In their little mall. That's what I wore to work that day.

Arroyo: You felt frumpy?

Participant-3: Mm-hmm.

Arroyo: You say it wasn't tight in a lot of places. Actually—I would probably say—is that one aspect of your style, that clothes tend to be a little bit tight?

Participant-3: Yeah. I like to show off my legs. I like for that to be the centerpiece.

Arroyo: Your legs?

Participant-3: Yeah.

Arroyo: Yeah, I would probably say that actually. I think of how would I describe your style—that was something that was consistent between all pictures—was your legs.

Participant-3: Mm-hmm. That's like my favorite part of my body. Any way that I can show that off, accentuate that, I do.

Arroyo: How do you feel about it? How do you feel within your legs and showing it off as opposed to these pictures?

Participant-3: What do you mean?

Arroyo: In these pictures you say that they were frumpy, so I guess in these cases—

Participant-3: Because this little soggy crotch piece right there. It was so unshapely. It gave me no shape; it just was—look, I look so rectangular.

Arroyo: When you dress, you kind of gear yourself towards—

Participant-3: I try to get little angles.

Arroyo: A silhouette.

Participant-3: A silhouette, all of that. Something.

Arroyo: This one, you feel the same way?

Participant-3: No, it was just simply, in this outfit it was just the material bulging here. Everywhere else, you can see shapes.

Arroyo: From here, down?

Participant-3: Diagonals—and this here too with the little shoulder. I like to give a little bit of drama sometimes. That other outfit, with the jean jacket and the pants, it just looked like I got rained on. It just looked sad and frumpy.

Arroyo: Do you feel differently—let's say if you were to wear this outfit towards this one—how do you feel differently?

Participant-3: This I feel, when I'm wearing this type of outfit—
Arroyo: This is the November 4th outfit as opposed to the November 3rd or 2nd.
Participant-3: This is, I guess I feel more so box. I feel like this is just more boyish, and then this
is more like—you know?
Arroyo: This is more—?
Participant-3: I feel that's unisex. I like unisex looks. This, okay—maybe it's not the most unisex
look, but—
Arroyo: Wait, what do you mean? You just kind of double backed there a little bit. [Both
laugh.]
Participant-3: Now that I think about it—because of the little crop shirt right there—these boy
harem pants, I don't know. I guess the more I can pull off a more effeminate look, the better I feel about myself with the outfit.
Arroyo: The more you can pull it off, the better you feel.
Participant-3: Mm-hmm. So if it's no type of girliness to it, I just I feel blah.
Arroyo: You feel blah.
Participant-3: Really blah.
Arroyo: In some ways, there has to be some girliness for you to feel comfortable in your
own body and skin.
Participant-3: Mm-hmm, something tight.
Arroyo: Something tight.
Participant-3: Something curvy. Something shapely.
Arroyo: Actually, this kind of looks like—what date was this? Also kind of looks like—
the November 4th looks like the November 6th outfit right there.
Participant-3: Mm-hmm.
Arroyo: That's what you wore with your friends.
Participant-3: This is with my friends?
Arroyo: Yeah, I believe. This was actually one thing I was going to ask you about; you
said when your friends came over and they call you, “A skinny bitch,” you hate
that.
Participant-3: I remember this now. Yeah.
Arroyo: What happened that day? Can you describe the interaction a little bit more?
Participant-3: They don't mean anything harmful by it, but whenever I'm scantily clad, they like to say, “The skinny bitch comes out.” That's all. Sometimes—I don't know. I don't
want to be as skinny as I am, so that's my own personal issue that I have with
myself. I don't like to be called “The skinny bitch.” I'd rather just wear my clothes and just be me without being a “skinny bitch” or any other type of “skinny”-
something added to that. I don't know. I don't know.
Arroyo: Go on—you explained it well.
Participant-3: That's really what it is.
Arroyo: It's almost like you can't just not wear something that shows off a little skin; it
gets interpreted as scantily clad and being “a skinny bitch.”
Participant-3: I don't want it—I just want to wear what I want to wear. If you think that it's sexy, that's fine; but I'm not—I don't know. I'm not wearing clothes for anyone else's opinion, so when those come out, it kind of does just bothers me. Again, because I don't like being skinny. That's weird.
Arroyo: You don't like being skinny?
Participant-3: No, I would rather be like at least 10 more pounds.
Arroyo: At least 10 more pounds.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: What would that mean for you?
Participant-3: I could be a normal person and not be called “a skinny bitch.” I could just wear clothes, and people would just be like, "Oh hey," but when I wear the clothes that I want to wear, then I'm conscious because I don't want my friends to feel some type of way because of what I wear. And sometimes I think even though they don't mean it harmfully by calling me “a skinny bitch,” I think they might have some kind of issue with me being the size that I am and them being what they are. I feel like—I don't even know.
Arroyo: You feel as if they're—because of the size that they are and the size that you are—that they interpret it in another way. What they see versus how you see you versus how you see you is interpreted differently.
Participant-3: I just feel like it comes from an inferior standpoint. I don't want to make anyone feel any less about themselves just because of what I like to wear. Sometimes I—even though, like I said, I don't think they mean it harmfully—I still feel like, it feels like it comes from a place of, "I wish I could be like that." I don't want that.
Arroyo: Okay, I see what you're saying. It's like you feel like when they say it, it comes from a place of their own hurt.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: That's not something you want to project with what you wear.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: And you're just wearing what you want to wear.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: In a way, it's almost as if—even though you are comfortable with what you wear—there's always this tension between how other people in society might perceive you but also how people in your intimate relationships might perceive you.
Participant-3: Complex, right?
Arroyo: Mm-hmm, versus what you just want to wear.
Participant-3: Yeah. That's basically it. It really is. It really is. We went to Florida—this is completely not anything that I sent you—but we went to Florida for Gay Days. I don't know if you know about Gay Days.
Arroyo: No.
Participant-3: It's Gay Days in Florida. A lot of swimwear attire. Everyone else went down there with, what I call, frumpy little boy shorts, and the regular swimming trunks and things; but I went down there because I, again, because I like to dress where I can accentuate my legs, so I had a lot of Speedos. I might have had a thong or two. The comment was, "You're going down there to be a ho," and that's not what it was. "You're dressing like a ho." I'm just like, "Why would you say that based upon what I'm wearing?" I just wanted to feel comfortable and look good for myself. I could care less that we're going down to Gay Days. So when they make comments like that or “the skinny bitch” just based upon what I'm wearing, that kind of does affect me.
Arroyo: It affects you in what way?
Participant-3: It affects me in what way? Is that what you said?
Participant-3: I don't know, I want to say that they don't mean harm by it; but then again I'm not really sure what they mean by that. I just wish my friends that I've known for so long would just not have any sort of weird comments like that about what I wear—just accept me. You don't have to say I look good or not. You don't have to acknowledge what I'm wearing, just like this is [name redacted].

Arroyo: This is [you].

Participant-3: Without the extra.

Arroyo: This is them three?

Participant-3: Yeah.

Arroyo: I think the way you're describing it, you almost feel like an outsider in your own social group.

Participant-3: Yeah, you can say that. You can definitely say that.

Arroyo: Tell me about it a bit more.

Participant-3: [Participant appears tearful.] I don't even want to get into that [exhales].

Arroyo: No?

Participant-3: No. No.

Arroyo: Okay.

Participant-3: We're going to go on to the next question [laughs].

Arroyo: Okay. We haven't gotten into the questions yet [both laugh]. We're still looking at your outfits.

Participant-3: Oh my goodness [laughs].

Arroyo: It seems like that is something that you've probably thought about a little bit.

Participant-3: Yeah.

Arroyo: Something that we'll go to here—we move on. I know the moment's a bit thick, but if we take a step back actually and we look at this one—this one, you do describe yourself as “boyish,” but you also seem to enjoy it, and this is the outfit from November 7th. It was a mixture of boyish versus girlish. There was a bit of feminine in it.

Participant-3: Mm-hmm. They're crazy right? As long as, yeah, I'm not more boy or more girl, I feel good. If I can accomplish mixing the two genders into a—that looks unisex to me. That makes me comfortable and happy, and I feel good with what I'm wearing.

Arroyo: Yeah. Something I did notice, and I'm actually going to comment—not necessarily on the outfit—but on the way you take photos. I noticed that in a lot of the photos, you accentuate a little bit more the outfit; and, in a way, to some degree, your face in many of these photos are a bit more subdued. It's almost as if—actually in many of the photos are actually cut out, your face is cut out.

Participant-3: That was because I thought you didn't want to see the face because you said you were going to blur them out, so I just didn't even put my face in the photo. That was really the thought about that.

Arroyo: Would you have put your face in the photo otherwise?

Participant-3: Yeah. Because some of those could have easily ended up on Instagram.

Arroyo: These?

Participant-3: Those could have been Instagram moments, some of them, yeah [laughs].

Arroyo: They're not Instagram moments?
Participant-3: Not all of them.
Arroyo: No, not all of them.
Participant-3: Some of them.
Arroyo: There's actually nothing to that.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: Actually, when I think about it—I'll just push on that just a little bit more. The reason that I think about that is because, in doing this project, I was interested in the different ways in which people take their photos as well. In some cases, there may have been someone with photos where there were friends in it. They never took a photo alone.
Participant-3: I didn't know that—oh I'm sorry.
Arroyo: When I ask you, I'm wondering in—I don't know if this is a stretch or not—but I was wondering if this does tie back to the outsider quality that you may feel, where you feel, in a way, like you're in your own—I would say—probably your own lane, as in there might not be many people who might be able to empathize with that particular embodiment of clothing and this mixture between male and female right in the center and your body type as well.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: Or is that reading too much into it?
Participant-3: No. That's a very great way of stating that. That's exactly what I feel when I'm around my friends.
Arroyo: I understood that was like an intense moment that you had earlier—even just around your friends or is just in the world at large?
Participant-3: It's just around my friends. I feel it most impactful when I'm with my friends. If I was somebody that cared about how they looked and what they wore, I would have a completely different set of friends. I would have friends that would do the same things that I would be doing or wearing the same things that I'm wearing, but I have this eclectic group of friends. I feel like me being an individual and being with them would be okay, but sometimes I just feel like I do stand out, and not all the time it's in a good way by the comments that they say.
Arroyo: If I think about kind of what you just said, although that night at [the afterhours—name redacted] that guy may have approached you, may have made some assumptions; straight men may approach you, make some assumptions; it's not as impactful as it is when it's coming from your own—the people who you care about and that care about you.
Participant-3: Mm-hmm.
Arroyo: In those cases, you actually feel a little bit more when comments are made.
Participant-3: That is correct.
Arroyo: What about this outfit?
Participant-3: I didn't really like that outfit either.
Arroyo: This is the outfit on November 9th?
Participant-3: Yes.
Arroyo: You've been mourning the loss of my freedoms. This was the day of the election I believe.
Participant-3: Yeah, and that was a: wake up and, "What am I going to wear? I'll just wear black, and I'll just throw it on. It's just blah." I tried to give you a little shape there [laughs].

Arroyo: What was this? Was this a one piece?
Participant-3: It's a turtle neck, some leggings.
Arroyo: And a cardigan or a shawl?
Participant-3: It is a maxi cardigan.
Arroyo: Maxi cardigan.
Participant-3: Mm-hmm. And some UGG boots.
Arroyo: That's how you felt that day?
Participant-3: Yeah. I was comfortable, but it was so dowdy to me.
Arroyo: And this was your best friend's party or a friend's party?
Participant-3: This was her birthday party.
Arroyo: Her birthday.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: November 10th.
Participant-3: Those were her shoes.
Arroyo: You had to give the backside too in this photo series.
Participant-3: That was my first time really photographing myself in heels. I was like, "This will be perfect to show him." I didn't actually get to take those out because those were the heels that she was going to be wearing tonight.

Arroyo: That was the first time you photographed yourself in heels?
Participant-3: In heels, yeah.
Arroyo: First time you wore heels or—
Participant-3: No, it might have been the third time but the longest time because we were pre-gaming for at least two hours before we actually left, so I had those on the whole time. She's like, "You're not wearing those." Everyone was just making comments about how I looked better in the heels than she did, and I just was like, "Why would you say that when this is her birthday?" Then I felt bad for even wearing the shoes. I just wanted to wear the shoes because they were cute. [Yells at dog:] You leave those fish alone.

Arroyo: I guess heels, in some ways, would also highlight legs.
Participant-3: They did.
Arroyo: People were saying that to you—[dog interrupts]—people were saying that you looked better in the heels than her, and that actually made you feel some type of way.

Participant-3: Yeah, I mean, yeah. They were drinking. I don't drink, so they were drinking and unnecessary comments were coming out. Then I took them off, and I gave them back to her. [Talks to barking dog:] Ava, there is nobody outside, and if they are, they're across the street. Leave them alone. You're messing up the interview.

Arroyo: By the way, I parked up there—that's fine, right?
Participant-3: Oh yeah, you could have parked right in front of the driveway.
Arroyo: Anywhere on the street.
Participant-3: Mm-hmm.
Arroyo: Okay. I wasn't sure. In a way your style is somewhat considerate of other people, or you want to wear what you wear, but it's always kind of juxtaposed next to the thought of, "Does this look good with ..." or, "How would someone else feel?"

Participant-3: Yeah, especially depending on where I'm going. I still try to put me in what I'm wearing as much as possible; so if I can't do that, that brings it back to that outfit where I—with the joggers and the jean jacket.

Arroyo: Would this be one of those outfits too? This outfit on November 11th? 12th? Actually no, this was November 11th.

Participant-3: No, that one's all right.

Arroyo: Let's see. Okay—jean jacket, yeah.

Participant-3: Yeah, that one was okay.

Arroyo: This is your night at [a gay bar—name redacted].

Participant-3: Oh, that night was so much fun. My friend—she wouldn't even want to dance with me because I was like, "Why are you guys not dancing?" "Because you're showing everybody off." I just was like mmm.

Arroyo: Wait, "Why don't you want to dance with me?" "Because you're showing everybody off."

Participant-3: Yeah, by the way I'm dancing.

Arroyo: How were you dancing?

Participant-3: I don't know. I just have fun. I don't worry about what I'm looking like. I'm just dancing. I try to get them—see, he's friendly, that's why I don't understand why he's being so stank.

Arroyo: For the interview, the cat just walked up.

Participant-3: I'm sorry.

Arroyo: No, it's all good. Was it a good day, that day, in that outfit?

Participant-3: Yes, I had a very great day in that outfit.

Arroyo: That would actually be another kind of stylistic element that I noticed that you put in several of your photos.

Participant-3: [Both laugh] I can't believe I sent you that. Oh my goodness.

Arroyo: That was the last one.

Participant-3: Oh my goodness.

Arroyo: Actually, that one too I guess, but this one. The midriff component.

Participant-3: Yeah.

Arroyo: You like your legs, and your stomach as well?

Participant-3: Everything below the bellybutton.

Arroyo: Everything below the bellybutton but also including the bellybutton?

Participant-3: We could include the bellybutton, yes [laughs].

Arroyo: Okay, we can include the bellybutton. Those would be some ways in which you describe your style, stylistic elements. How would you describe your style actually? We just reviewed several of your pictures, and if I were to ask you without even seeing the pictures, how would you describe your style?

Participant-3: I would describe my style as “very unisex montage.”

Arroyo: Hmm?

Participant-3: I said, “a unisex montage of boy and girl, a mash-up—all of that.” Very dark, I don't like color. [Dog farts] I'm sorry, she just—I'm not going to let her out. I think that's—
Arroyo: I will pause this recording.
Participant-3: I'm sorry. [Both laugh.]
Arroyo: Oh my God. Okay, but yeah. How would you describe your look? How would others describe your look? I guess to continue on that question.
Participant-3: That's a great question. Honestly, I don't really know how they would describe my look. I don't know. I'm sorry; honestly I don't know how they would describe it. I never thought about it, honestly. I change my look up so much. I don't know. I don't even really think—to be honest—that “unisex montage” that I gave, I don't even think that really classifies it. I just—I try to just be me. Again, that's all I can say, but I know it pulls from girl clothing and guy clothing.
Arroyo: It pulls from girl clothing, guy clothing? You hit on a little bit: you like to showcase your legs, you don't like color, and you like a particular silhouette.
Participant-3: Mm-hmm. I would never say my style is sexy. I try to be sexy, but I would never say that my look is sexy.
Arroyo: What do you mean?
Participant-3: Even with the heels, I wouldn't really call that sexy. I would say that would feel sexy, but I wouldn't consider it sexy.
Arroyo: You would feel sexy, but—
Participant-3: I wouldn't consider the look to be a sexy look, if that makes sense?
Arroyo: I guess it could, but I don't want to make any assumptions.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: What do you mean by that?
Participant-3: I don't know. I just—I don't think I would—if I saw that on anyone else I would say, "Oh, they look sexy." But me wearing it, I felt sexy.
Arroyo: You felt sexy. Is that what made the interaction at [afterhours bar—redacted] feel like a bit of an anomaly?
Participant-3: No, that simply was the fact that I was questioned if I was transgendering or not.
Arroyo: Oh, okay.
Participant-3: That's literally what it was. Then to be approached that way and then to be picked up—that was a moment.
Arroyo: That was a moment.
Participant-3: Yeah. It sounds like real minimal; but to me, that was, "What's happening? Can you put me down now?" I wasn't expecting it. I felt like—
Arroyo: It doesn't sound that minimal. It sounds like it was probably something that was pivotal in your experience.
Participant-3: Yeah, it definitely was a first.
Arroyo: There's this dichotomy that you feel when you dress up between feeling sexy and also seeing yourself as sexy?
Participant-3: Mm-hmm.
Arroyo: What were the first instances in which you decided to begin to experiment with your wardrobe? Like mixing elements?
Participant-3: Ever since I came to Pittsburgh, so that would have been when I was 19, so ever since then. As the years progressed, I've just been feeling more and more comfortable with wearing this or wearing that, even if it's a girl-this or a girl-that.
Arroyo: Where are you from originally?
Participant-3: I'm from D.C., and being home with my mom and my siblings, I just—I didn't want to dress any type of way that would. At that time I wasn't out. I just stuck to the norm, what was expected of me to wear. Then when I came to college, I was free, so I started wearing how I felt I wanted to look.

Arroyo: In a way, was your clothing also indicative of your coming out as well? You said you weren't out back in D.C.; when in Pittsburgh, you began to experiment.

Participant-3: Yeah.

Arroyo: I don't know if this also translated back to your family. Does your family know?

Participant-3: They do now.

Arroyo: Okay.

Participant-3: It wasn't because of me coming out because when they came here I still was not out to them. It was more so—I just had that freedom to experiment with my look by being myself versus being back at home, being in that setting where I had to wear strictly boy clothes, and I couldn't wear anything too flamboyant. So when I came here, I was like, "I'm in art school. I'm an adult now. Who's going to check me?" I was able to finally take those steps, and that didn't happen too easily. Literally, it's been a progression.

Arroyo: It didn't happen too easily.

Participant-3: Mmm-hmm.

Arroyo: Were there any consequences to your decision?

Participant-3: Not that I'm aware of, no. No. I don't think so.

Arroyo: What parts weren't easy?

Participant-3: Just simply feeling okay enough to still be myself—even though I'm in this brand new setting, don't know anybody, so I can be anyone or anything—I still, at the core, was conscious of what other people would be thinking about my look. Yeah, at this point, my mother has seen photos of me. With her approval and her like, "I'm good," after all this time; now this whole year—like literally this has been the biggest, where I'm just like, "Okay, I wear whatever," and wear these photos that I've sent you.

Arroyo: This is actually your first year of really going all out?

Participant-3: Yeah.

Arroyo: Do you remember the exact moment where you decided—

Participant-3: Mmm?

Arroyo: Do you remember the exact moment in which you decided or the first moment in which you decided you were going to begin branching out or begin mixing these elements?

Participant-3: Literally, the day that I started college here, I was ready. But it didn't rapidly happen. It slowly progressed. As soon as I knew that I was away from my mother and away from my father and away from my grandmother, I was like, "I need to change this up."

Arroyo: That was kind of important, for you to be away from them.

Participant-3: Mm-hmm, and it started out with just my hair. That's how it started.

Arroyo: What do you mean?

Participant-3: I started dyeing my hair, and let it grew longer, and then I cut it. Then I grew it again, and then I would color it. Me coloring it those bright colors, that was me trying to start dressing and being who I was.
Arroyo: You first started with your hair?
Participant-3: Yeah, it was steps. I took baby steps.
Arroyo: What did the hair signify?
Participant-3: Expression of me because I always just had a short haircut. Even back in the day when all the other boys were like—with black culture you have like the waves and the skullcap and the durag—even with that, if I had waves in my hair, my mother didn't want me to be considered a pretty boy, so even then trying to do something with my hair that was unnatural because it would require me putting a texturizer in my hair, which girls do.
Arroyo: She didn't want you to be a pretty boy.
Participant-3: I won't say that, but that's what I felt like that's what the case was, yeah. That's what I felt, yeah.
Arroyo: What about the part of you cutting your hair, dyeing it, growing it back? In a way there's something about—it almost seems as if it's kind of like sticking your toe in the pool and then taking it back out and then sticking it in. Was that kind of what was going on during that time?
Participant-3: No. No, none of that. I just wanted to try something else.
Arroyo: It was more of a something new.
Participant-3: Yeah, I didn't have anyone telling me, "No, you can't do that with your hair. I'm not letting you do that. No." It was just like, "Oh, let me try this now. Let me try this."
Arroyo: To get a sense, did you come here after high school, immediately?
Participant-3: A year after high school.
Arroyo: A year after high school. Was it to go to college?
Participant-3: Mm-hmm.
Arroyo: Did you come alone?
Participant-3: Mm-hmm—No, you mean like how did I come up here? Did they help me move up here, or did I like get a taxi from the airport?
Arroyo: No, no, no, as in—oh, as in—well, did they help you move in?
Participant-3: Yes.
Arroyo: I was thinking more so, when you describe it, it seemed like you came up here and you were by yourself. It was—
Participant-3: It was the first time I've been by myself away from home. That's basically what I was trying to convey, yeah. I've always been at home. It was thought that I was never going to leave home, but I left home. I've been here in Pittsburgh.
Arroyo: Ever since.
Participant-3: Supporting myself. Yeah.
Arroyo: At what point did you realize that this was your style?
Participant-3: At what point did I realize this was my style?
Arroyo: Or that this is your style? Or do you?
Participant-3: I really—that's back to your question, where I honestly, I can only describe my style based upon what others might say. I would say it's unisex because that's what someone might say or it's “this” because that's what someone else might say. I don't try to have a set style.
Arroyo: Well, I think that's what's interesting. You're saying that that's how other people would describe it, but that's not how you would describe it.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: But you feel, do you know you feel comfortable? Or do you?
Participant-3: Mm-hmm. As long as it's not a frumpy look, I feel comfortable.
Arroyo: As long as it's not a frumpy look.
Participant-3: I don't know. I just—
Arroyo: Was there a particular point in which how you dressed felt natural to you, where it's like, "Okay, this is me. This is how I feel comfortable. I'm done, or maybe I'm still evolving, but for now I'm good"?
Participant-3: Within the last two years, and that's how I've been feeling. I've been able to—yeah, been feeling more comfortable buying girl clothing and mixing it up. Within the last two years, that's been happening; so I feel like that is a direction that I will keep going in, is mixing those pieces up. I just, I don't know. I don't think I could really describe my style, other than as just me, as just what I feel like wearing that day. It sounds stupid, but I don't know.
Arroyo: It sounds stupid?
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: It sounds like you decide your style day by day. I guess I just can't even help but wonder, but even here, between us, you're thinking about how I'm thinking about your style, which “it sounds stupid.” That's what you're anticipating it seems.
Participant-3: I just wish I had like a better answer, but I honestly ...
Arroyo: I'm wondering if that points to the fact that you always have something else or someone else in your mind—like how your style is, with how you dress—from, "Will someone attack me?" versus, "Will someone make a comment?" versus, "Will someone think I look okay?" versus, "I feel comfortable."
Participant-3: I don't know.
Arroyo: What would you say your style expresses about you? When we think about the outfits?
Participant-3: I think it definitely would express that I don't like color. I don't like to be flashy, too flashy. I do like to look a certain kind of way but not in a way that I feel can be categorized. I'm still trying to answer that question: how would you describe your style? I don't want to use—I don't know. I don't know. Can we come back to this?
Arroyo: Okay. It might come out as we go through the next questions. We're almost at the end. What do you want to convey through yourself? Versus the question of what do you think it expresses versus what is it you do want to express? “What do you want to convey,” if that thought enters your mind?
Participant-3: I would think as much as I do and am concerned with what others might think—especially my friends—I feel like I still want my style to convey that I feel comfortable with being who I am. I convey that I like wearing maybe a girl's shirt and you don't realize that it's a girl's shirt until you ask me where I got it from. I think I want it to convey that I'm fearless, even though I'm not fearless; and that I don't have any—no boundaries, no borders to me as a person with what I'm wearing.
Arroyo: When I think about the fearless part, it almost sounds like that's an aspiration, that you're trying to get to that point—trying to convey that you're fearless, even though you're not, but you're getting there.
Participant-3: Yeah, I'm not afraid to be who I am. That's—definitely, that fearless is definitely what would like that to be conveyed when I'm wearing what I wear.

Arroyo: Okay. Were there changes in your style over the years? Obviously, I know you already said one was when you came to Pittsburgh.

Participant-3: Yeah.

Arroyo: Any notable changes since then or over the years?

Participant-3: As far as changes, it just, not really any changes, just, excuse me—I've been able to really express myself more in the way that I feel I should look and want to look—now more so than before—so not really change, just climbing up that ladder, almost reaching the top now.

Arroyo: Okay. In what ways actually? Now that I'm thinking—I was like, that was fine. In what ways does your style open or restrict your ideas about the world?

Participant-3: What ways does it open or restrict my ideas about the world?

Arroyo: Does it change or limit how you think about gender, sexual orientation, other people?

Participant-3: It doesn't because me as a person, what I'm wearing, I'm not—I don't have any, you know—I don't, you don't know [laughs]. No. Based upon what other people wear, even though I know that it is, this is particular of a gender or whatever the case is—I know that, but that doesn't latch itself onto me. It's just, "This is something that people call girl's clothing, but I'm going to make it what I want to make it." I'm trying to figure out how best to say this.

Arroyo: I think you said it well. Maybe you want to elaborate on it, but I think what you said of, "people may think of something as girl clothing, but you're going to make it into you." You're going to make it into something else. It's not inherently girl's clothing.

Participant-3: It's been labeled as such, so I guess I try to, with what I'm wearing, make people open to the idea of what it can be versus what people say it should be. Then, as far as it restricting—any restrictions that I get from what I wear, the fact that I always have that negativity in the back of my mind about what other people might be thinking, I feel like that gives me this doubt that the world will ever evolve into something better. So I think I'm restricted in that aspect of moving past that doubtfulness that I have in regards to the world.

Arroyo: I think that might segway to my next thought of—I'm wondering if that, what you just said of, you think about the powers of the world—when you think about the significance of your election day outfit, where you wore all black, and you said it was frumpy. You tried to give it a little bit of shape, but I'm wondering if that is somehow connected to what you were referring to? Or if it's somehow parallel to what you were referring to?

Participant-3: Maybe on a subconscious level. I use that word, I use it so frequently, and in that particular case I wanted to be dramatic. I wanted to be in all black, but when it came towards picture taking and sending you this photo, I was like, "He's going to look at this picture and just see this black rectangle in this little bun." I felt, in that case particularly, I just felt frumpy, so I was like, "Let me just cock the hip out a little bit to give a little shape." That whole cape that I have on—I call it a cape, it just—it was doing nothing for that photo, but when you walk with it, it's really dramatic. It's like Darth Vader walking around [city of residence—redacted].
Arroyo: Darth Vader.
Participant-3: It really is.
Arroyo: Yeah. I was just thinking of you were talking about the negativity that you carry with you, that it puts doubt in the progress of the world; and here you are wearing Darth Vader on the day after election.
Participant-3: [Laughs] I wanted to make a statement definitely. If ever I wanted my clothes to convey something and to be described as something, that would have been the outfit.
Arroyo: Darth Vader: the day after election.
Participant-3: I was ready to pull out a Star Destroyer and blow up a whole planet.
Arroyo: This one.
Participant-3: Yeah.
Arroyo: Do you feel comfortable in the world with your style, with how you dress?
Participant-3: It depends on—for the most part yes. Yes. I definitely always feel comfortable with me and what I'm wearing, for the most part. Yes. It's just sometimes—depending on the area or where I'm going—I'm just aware, and I don't want to have to do that. I just want to walk through and be like, "Hi. Good morning," and not have anyone think anything or be afraid anyone's going to say something just because I'm walking around downtown looking like Darth Vader or something. That's all.
Arroyo: You feel comfortable.
Participant-3: I do.
Arroyo: But you also feel aware.
Participant-3: Yes. If I become too much aware, then I will say I do start feeling a little uncomfortable. I may kind of throw on an extra layer of my jacket or wear that around all day, or make sure that I sit down all day so no one sees what my legs look like depending on if I'm wearing jeans or if I'm wearing leggings.
Arroyo: In those cases you hide some parts of yourself.
Participant-3: I will just so I can make myself more comfortable with being in an uncomfortable environment. I do feel comfortable unless I think someone might say something; there might be that potential that I become aware of, yeah.
Arroyo: By the way, that was another aspect of your style, layers. There seem to be a lot of layers. What contributes to those feelings? Do you know?
Participant-3: What I just said about the self-awareness?
Arroyo: Is it other people or the spaces that you're in?
Participant-3: Mm-hmm.
Arroyo: That's what it sounded like from what you said.
Participant-3: It's, yeah. Yeah. If I know I'm in a place where I know I'm going to be accepted, I'm fine; but if there's always somebody that I feel I might rub the wrong way with how I look, yes.
Arroyo: That you might rub the wrong way with how you look?
Participant-3: Yes, that feeling of being self-aware of what I'm wearing takes into effect.
Arroyo: Whether it be a stranger or your friends?
Participant-3: Strangers, yes. Strangers, definitely; but when I'm around my friends, I don't feel self-aware until they say something that makes me feel—
Arroyo: Sorry, I hope it's still recording. I think it is. No, but something that makes you feel self-aware?
Participant-3: Mm-hmm. With them no, I don't feel any different until they make a comment; but when I'm out in the world, it's that immediate self-awareness that kicks in, yeah.
Arroyo: Anything else? Any final thoughts? I think I actually got all the questions I asked.
Participant-3: No final thoughts. This was a fun little experiment. I just hate talking about myself.
Arroyo: Really?
Participant-3: I do.
Arroyo: I mean I'm not saying “really” as in I expected you to.
Participant-3: No, I'm just saying I do. I really do. I don't do it often.
Arroyo: It's kind of interesting because I guess you're also conveying the same message through your clothes, where you said that you don't like to be flashy; you want to dress how you dress. You don't want to say too much about yourself, but in your own way you also want to convey something.
Participant-3: I feel like subtlety is cool. When people start asking you to talk about yourself, that's not subtle, that's getting in depth.
Arroyo: I think you do it well.
Participant-3: I hope so.
Arroyo: Not that there was a right or wrong way to answer.
Participant-3: But I hope so.
Appendix H (Cited in Dissertation as “DON”): Donatello’s Style Journal and Interview

Day 1: I was wearing a pretty basic look-- in the sense that while the pants had a printed shape on them, it didn't scream FEMME/gender nonconforming. I can't recall if folks were staring the way they usually stare at me or not to be fair but I did notice a lot more stares when I went to the nail salon. I know I am usually the only guy getting tips but I found that folks were more fascinated by my nails than they were with my outfit. After we left my mom said that the guy who did her nails, (Asian man), asked her if I were gay and she swore that he was flirting with me. I was too tired to notice if he was being flirty or just extra nice because I spent so much money there.

Day 2:
Day 3: [Via text]
Participant 1: Do I also have to do weekend? I don’t plan on leaving my house at all. Lol. Just want my bed.
Arroyo: Haha… I actually wondered about that too. Sometimes pajamas can be revealing of a person’s unconscious style, or maybe not. You never know, lol. It’s your prerogative.
Participant 1: This is going to be TMI but I don’t really wear clothes while I’m home. Haha
Arroyo: Haha! Ok, well, yeah, I guess you can omit those selfies! I’m really laughing out loud right now!
Participant 1: But if I do go out, I will take a photo. Hahaha. I’m honest :D

Day 5:

Day 6: It was the first real day of summer like warmth in New York City so folks were out and about showing skin. I was dressed conservatively (by my own standards) but my nails definitely caused people to stare at me, a woman even complimented me on my nails. What was interesting yesterday was when my friend and I walked down the street holding hands. He is an Afro-Latino who dresses preppy and it was my first time walking down a busy NYC street holding hands with another man. There were stares accompanied by a smile and a nod--it was as if strangers were excited to see two brown men showing affection so openly. I felt the most vulnerable in that moment--knowing that it's not always safe for LGBTQ folks, especially GNC folks, to outwardly express themselves.
Day 7:
Day 8:

Day 10:
Day 12: "That's a boy!" He said as I walked past him and his group of friends. I cringe and think to myself: "Why does he feel the need to yell that aloud?"

I guess that's the norm because every time I dare to wear a dress or skirt, I get that type of reaction. Due to my geographical location, often, the remarks come from other men of color. I have found that I receive the most hostility from black men. What's interesting is that I have found more black men interested in femme-men/trans-women in a sexual way. My gender expression may make dating more difficult, but I continue to be a fantasy to others sexually.
Okay. Get everything set right here. Okay, so I don't know if you remember, kind of the beginning of the interview. It's more so looking at aspects of your style journal. Looking at how you would describe your style in general. I remember there were some dates, and some significant dates that I did pick out was—I believe you and your mom were at the nail salon, and you believed the guy was flirting with you, because of how ...

Could you tell me a little bit more about the memory?

Yeah, my mom was the one that noticed it first because I didn't notice it right away, and then he was just being really friendly, more than usual. He asked my mom, according to my mother, he asked if I was gay, so that was interesting.

I guess, why wouldn't you notice that? You said your mom was the one who picked it up first.

Yeah. I don't know. I don't know. I'm awkward at things like that, so I don't expect people to—give me one second. [To mother: I'm in an interview.] I don't know. I just don't expect people to flirt with me, so I don't pick up on things like that.

You don't expect people to flirt with you? Is it attributed to your style?

I guess so. I just assume everyone's anti-femme, so I don't assume anyone is flirting with me in public. Plus I'm awkward.

Plus you're awkward. Okay. Well, what was it like after your mom informed you that he was flirting with you?

Yeah. I don't know. I don't know. I'm awkward at things like that, so I don't expect people to—

Yeah. I just laughed because I'm just like, "It's whatever." It's not a big deal.

Okay. I think I also remember that you said also on May 25th that it was also your first time holding hands with another man, and you felt really vulnerable. I'm wondering if those two experiences are connected.

Yeah. It was the first time in a long time I was holding someone's hand in public. We were walking down—we were in the village by NYU. It was just really affirming to have people look at us and nod and smile. But it was also really nerve wracking because you just never know anymore what's going to happen.

I was also holding the hand of a friend that I really like, so that was interesting.

Yeah.

You described—

No, it was just interesting. I don't know. I felt really vulnerable, just in that moment. The way he was dressed versus the way I was dressed.

How was he dressed?

Very preppy.

Very preppy.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yes.

Those two experiences really represent the opposite ends of the spectrum. Someone who's so open, and yet when you do feel open about this, there comes
this vulnerability. But then on the other end, you don't expect anyone to actually look at you as an object of attraction, I believe.

Participant-1: Yeah. Yeah, and I don't know if that has to do with my style or just my self-esteem. It could be a mixture of both. Yeah. That makes sense.

Arroyo: Yeah. Well do you think it is a little bit of a mixture of both? Did the style contribute to the self-esteem?

Participant-1: No. Because when I'm dressed really femme, and I feel really good about my outfit, I feel really good about myself. Except when you're trying to date and guys are just like, "Oh, that's gross, or I don't get it, or I don't like it." It makes it harder to appreciate it.

Arroyo: Yeah, so it's something to feel comfortable in your own skin, but then actually when you get into the object of trying to sustain or establish a relationship, that's when it gets a little bit, I guess, insecure a bit.

Participant-1: Yes. Yes.

Arroyo: How do you manage that? That dichotomy?

Participant-1: Not well. Still single.

Arroyo: Well, is that what it feels like, like it's either one or the other?

Participant-1: Yeah. Sometimes I wonder if I wasn't femme, how people would react to me?

Arroyo: Sorry I couldn't hear you. Where's the mic? You sound really low.

Participant-1: What? I can't—


Participant-1: Hold on.

Arroyo: Okay. You sound clear now. Okay. Yeah, there was something with the mic.

Participant-1: Is that better? Do you hear me?

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-1: Do you hear me now?

Arroyo: Yes. Yes.

Participant-1: Okay. We're good. Okay.


Participant-1: Sometimes I wonder like if I was just more masculine how people would perceive me.

Arroyo: Sometimes you wonder if you dress more masculine how people would perceive you?

Participant-1: Yeah.

Arroyo: I think the mic is—is it caught on your clothes?

Participant-1: Can you hear me now?

Arroyo: I think it might be caught on your clothes, or something. What's this? Let me try this. Hello.

Participant-1: It's hard to hear you.

Arroyo: Okay. Let's try this. Okay. Let's see here. Is that good?

Participant-1: Yeah, that's better.

Arroyo: Okay. I don't know if it's a mic that attach to a clothing or something, like there was a little bit of feedback. I don't know if there was some static on the clothing or something.

Participant-1: I don't know. I took the headphones off though, so you should be able to hear me.
Arroyo: Okay. I'm sorry. But you said that sometimes you feel like it is a choice that if you were to dress more masculine you might be giving up a little bit of yourself but have the possibility to date. Is that what you were saying?

Participant-1: Yeah, yeah.

Arroyo: Okay.

Participant-1: Not that I would do that, but the thought is there.

Arroyo: The thought is there. Is it difficult to manage?

Participant-1: It just gets lonely sometimes.

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-1: I look at my clothing, and I'm just like, “If my clothing were different”—and not only do I mean my personal life, but also my professional life. I constantly have to navigate that.

Arroyo: You do? How so?

Participant-1: Yeah. Just like I'm at my current job, I'm able to dress the way I want to dress, but if I get a new job I have to navigate that all over again.

Arroyo: Yeah, so it's continuously like coming out as gender-queer, or femme in some way.

Participant-1: Yeah.

Arroyo: It also kind of reminds me of like, I remember this was actually the last interaction that you sent me in your style journal up on, it was on June sixth, and you said that someone kind of took a look at you and exclaimed like, “Oh, that's a boy.” It kind of made you feel a particular type of way.

Participant-1: Yeah. It made me feel like, well there was a whole bunch of men, black men, and I was a little bit nervous for my safety. Because I was like, “Well, now that he's made his proclamation, I'm getting all this attention that I wasn't looking for,” while I was walking the street, walking sidewalks trying to get to my train station, so it was a little bit nerve wracking in that regard. Because I'm always thinking about my safety.

Arroyo: Could you describe what happened in that moment?

Participant-1: I just got really like a physiological response, so shame washed over me, fear, just insecurity, like, “Oh my gosh are they going to attack me, are they not going to attack me, are they going to say something else” —stuff like that.

Arroyo: Is that interaction representative of the stuff that you go through constantly?

Participant-1: Oh, yeah, oh yeah. On a daily basis.

Arroyo: On a daily basis, yeah. I remember there was also that part of the style journal where you also said it's also odd because while you were fearful of your safety, and while you did have this shame that kind of wash over you, it also tended to be people of color who often tend to hit you up.

Participant-1: Yeah. There's this weird thing this secret desirability that men of color have for trans women or for gender non-conforming people, or femmes sexually, but it doesn't translate romantically.

Arroyo: Or in this case socially as well, yeah.

Participant-1: You're breaking up, what happened?

Arroyo: Or in this case socially as well. It's not romantic, and it's not social, but it is sexual—sexual in some ways, right. I did notice something else, I don't know if you remember this question, but how would you describe your style?
Participant-1: It varies. I think, I can't remember what I said last time, but I think I just said it's something like New York City chic meets lazy boy. It all depends on my mood to be honest with you. I also have a stylist who helps me, so that helps.

Arroyo: Nice. Nice. It's always good to. I don't have one. What would you say are some of the staples of your style too? Some of the things that if someone—

Participant-1: My nails.

Arroyo: Your nails.

Participant-1: Yeah, I just got them redone.

Arroyo: They look nice.

Participant-1: Thank you. My nails is definitely one of them. What else? My hair.

Arroyo: Your hair.

Participant-1: Yeah. I like neutral colors, so my nude lipstick is a big part of my look.

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-1: That's my go-to lipstick.

Arroyo: It's kind of interesting because I think that was kind of the same things that I also had documented. I noticed that in a lot of your pictures there's either a lot of—there's a lot of color blocking, especially with neutral colors, a lot of black and white—at least with the photos that you sent me. But also sometimes a pop of a pattern here or there or a pop of a bold color that kind of accents it. The nails are always on fleek; they were always there.

Participant-1: Yeah.

Arroyo: There was a lot of flowers I noticed, a lot of floral patterns.

Participant-1: Yeah. Floral, the floral pattern. This little shawl thing that I like to wear. It just looks good on my skin tone, so I appreciate it.

Arroyo: I think there was also something about your nose ring too. Do you still have that?

Participant-1: Oh, yes, my nose rings.

Arroyo: Okay, I see.

Participant-1: They're still there.

Arroyo: Yeah, do you switch it out, or is it always the same one?

Participant-1: It's always the same one. Because I'm always afraid of pulling it out, so I just leave it.

Arroyo: I'm curious about the text message that you sent one time during the style journal. Where you do really get dressed up, and you do go out into the world, and you're very conscious of what you put on; but then when you're at home, and you're just by yourself, and you're naked on the weekends.

Participant-1: That's my weekend. [Laughs]

Arroyo: What's the difference between that Participant-1 and the Participant-1 that's out in the world?

Participant-1: Well, that Participant-1 can't go out naked. I went to a spa recently, and they required nudity in the all men's locker room, and I was so uncomfortable being naked around these men. It was mostly older men, mostly men of Asian Pacific Islander identities. Some younger boys, and I just felt so odd being naked around these strangers. As much as I like to be naked in the privacy of my own home, I don't like to be naked around strangers.

Arroyo: How did you feel?

Participant-1: There was at least 10 people in that locker room. Yeah, in and out, it was surreal.
Arroyo: Yeah. I guess I'm curious about that feeling uncomfortable around other people.
Participant-1: Oh, it was just like, if there were hot younger men of color, maybe it would've been a different scenario, I don't know. There were just older people, and it was just like, there was no one in my age group. It just felt really weird. Yeah, I just felt self-conscious.
Arroyo: Would you describe it as a similar feeling of what happened when the men described you as, “Oh that's a boy”?
Participant-1: Oh, no.
Arroyo: No.
Participant-1: It was a totally different feeling. It just had to do with the fact that these men were so naked; and it's like, I was like gross.
Arroyo: You looked gross?
Participant-1: I felt gross, I was just like I don't—all of my weight gain, so I think my weight gain has played a role. If I was still skinny I think I would be okay, but who knows, I don't know.
Arroyo: But maybe with your body changing, it also is getting some discomfort as well in your own body.
Participant-1: Yeah. That could be part of it.
Arroyo: Yeah.
Participant-1: I think mostly it was because they were older men. They were like men that were like really old. I was just like, "Ah!"
Arroyo: Yeah, quite a juxtaposition. What were the first instances in which you began to experiment with mixing elements of your wardrobe?
Participant-1: It started in college, but the first time I wore skinny jeans was in February of 2009—high school. I remember putting on the skinny jeans, and it was just like life changing. I felt so comfortable, I felt so affirmed; and I was like I'm never wearing another pair of regular jeans again. Then in college, I really got into changing my wardrobe, and wearing bright colors. I had skinny jeans in all different colors—it was hideous. But at the time I thought it was hot shit. You couldn't tell me anything.
Arroyo: When you reflect on it now, you think that it was hideous?
Participant-1: Oh, yeah, my style has definitely grown and gotten better, but at the time I thought it was hot shit. Yeah.
Arroyo: What was that evolution like for you? How did you feel?
Participant-1: Just working with my stylist and learning a lot more about my body type and what works for me and the colors and stuff like that.
Arroyo: Yeah. You remember the exact date with such significant.
Participant-1: Yeah, when I wore skinny jeans for the first time. I remember because it was the high school, we had a high school Valentine's Day Dance. I just remember I was wearing a tie with a white button up, a gray vest, and a pair of skinny jeans, and red converse.
Arroyo: What color were the jeans?
Participant-1: They were denim.
Arroyo: Denim, okay.
Participant-1: Denim. They were a size 0, I used to be much skinnier back then. Now you can't get me into a size 0 even if you tried.
Arroyo: Could you describe, I know—and it's a bit odd to have to think about like how we feel in our own bodies, but from that date before that day I guess you were wearing just regular jeans?

Participant-1: Yeah.

Arroyo: Then something felt different in that from that day forward, could you describe the transition or what happened in that moment that made it feel like this is me?

Participant-1: I just felt a sense of freedom.

Arroyo: Felt a sense of freedom.

Participant-1: Ironically, right. Because tight jeans are not necessarily considered freedom. But I felt free, yeah. I had shed off my baby fat. I was skinny, I was—I don't know. It looked good on me.

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-1: Yeah. Yeah.

Arroyo: I wonder how the freedom kind of correlates with the choice.

Participant-1: Yeah. Freedom came with the autonomy the choice to kind of where what I wanted to wear, how I wanted to wear it.

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-1: Yeah.

Arroyo: Were there any consequences after that?

Participant-1: No.

Arroyo: How did others react, or how was it for you? Was it uncomfortable at first?

Participant-1: Super tight. The jeans were super tight, so it was an adjustment for them.

Arroyo: It was adjustment. But for the most part everyone was fine?

Participant-1: Yeah, they're used to me trying different wild things, like at that Valentine’s Day dance.

Arroyo: At that Valentine's Day Dance I mean?

Participant-1: Yeah.

Arroyo: Okay. In a sense it didn't come as a surprise.

Participant-1: I also went to [redacted] High School where there was a lot of queer people.

Arroyo: Okay.

Participant-1: So that was a different experience.

Arroyo: Oh, okay. You were also in the environment with like a—

Participant-1: Yeah.

Arroyo: Okay. At what point did you realize that this was your style or the style that you have? I believe as you describe as femme, correct?

Participant-1: Yeah. It was really—it started in college, but it wasn't until I moved to Oakland, California, that it was solidified because gender expression in the Bay area is like a whole different world compared to New York City.

Arroyo: How's it different?

Participant-1: There's women who don't shave their legs and their armpits, and there's people who don't believe in wearing deodorant, and there's people out there who cross dress, or whatever. It was just different, it was different.

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-1: Yeah, it was different.

Arroyo: Versus New York?
Participant-1: Yeah, where New York people are a little bit more self-concerned with self-image and how people perceive them. In the Bay area, people don't give two shits about anything. They're just like, “This is who I am—take it or leave it.” There's a boldness in the Bay area.

Arroyo: There's a boldness. Can you tell me more about that?

Participant-1: I don't know it was just people are just unapologetically themselves. I can't really explain it—it's something in the air.

Arroyo: Do you miss it?

Participant-1: Oh, yeah, Oakland is where my heart is. If I can get a good job there I would move there in a heartbeat.

Arroyo: The transition back to New York, what was that like?

Participant-1: That was tough.

Arroyo: That was tough.

Participant-1: Because I came back feeling so emboldened—is that a word?

Arroyo: Yes, it is.

Participant-1: It is, right, embolden? I was like, am I making shit up?

Arroyo: You're allowed to make whatever word you want up.

Participant-1: I came back really confident, and I got some pushback from people who were like uncomfortable with my boldness.

Arroyo: Do you remember any instances of those?

Participant-1: My mother—she still struggles with it. She's gotten better now, but back then she was she really choked up a bit.

Arroyo: I remember you said that she actually helped you buy something from the women's section the last time we talked.

Participant-1: Yeah, she helped me pick out some stuff.

Arroyo: That was kind of a big step for her as well.

Participant-1: Oh, yeah, that was a huge step. She had picked out good stuff—like it was good outfits, like really good stuff. It wasn't like crappy looking stuff. So she got kudos for that.

Arroyo: What does that mean to you with the journey that you guys had?

Participant-1: It's so complicated. I don't even know. Can we come back to that?

Arroyo: Huh?

Participant-1: Can we come back to that question—I have to think about that a little bit?

Arroyo: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I guess one thing I did ask—of course because I don't want to make any assumptions about when people use particular terms—but what does femme mean to you? Because that's such a central part of your style.

Participant-1: Oh, yeah. Femme for me is a political identity, femme as in feminist, femme as in feminine—just the combination between masculine and feminine energies that I feel like we all embody.

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-1: Like, you, yourself embody it; I embody it; there's many people who embody it. Femme to me just means the respect and love of the feminine energy that's within us.

Arroyo: The respect and love of the feminine energy that's within us. I'm trying to think too, again—I remember you also said it's performative; it's about being free as well.
Participant-1: Yeah, it's about freedom, it's about breaking away from gender norms, deconstructing gender, deconstructing the patriarchy—

Arroyo: Oh, no, go on.

Participant-1: Oh, deconstructing the patriarchy, redefining my own manhood for myself, and Audrey Lorde gave me permission to do that. I was watching The Cancer Journals, not the cancer—it was a documentary about her cancer, and she talked about her son and how she said she gave her son permission to define his own manhood for himself because she didn't want to define it for him—because she was a queer, feminist, radical activist. When she said that she gave her son permission to define his own manhood, she gave me permission to do the same. If he can do it, then I can do it.

Arroyo: Yeah, yeah.

Participant-1: That's how it kind of happened for me.

Arroyo: Especially because—remember you mentioned during our screening—the issue of machismo was also such a big thing that you often had to contend with as well.

Participant-1: Yeah, yeah. Machismo culture is real, and there is this expectation of manhood, especially when you're the only boy in the family.

Arroyo: That's been your experience?

Participant-1: Yeah. I'm the only boy in my immediate family, but now it's become the new normal.

Arroyo: Go on.

Participant-1: Yeah. Now my mom, my sister, and my niece are so used to me being the way I am that nothing surprises them anymore.

Arroyo: I remember we also talked about the evolving nature of Machismo where for instance men are now, Hispanic men are now like—for instance, what was it—shaving their legs, that they're shaving their eyebrows.

Participant-1: Yeah, there's this weird switch where Latinos are shaving their legs and they're waxing their eyebrows and they're shaving their armpits and these like "feminine things" that they're embracing that I don't always embrace—like my legs are not shaved right now.

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-1: My mom's always telling me I should shave my legs. If I'm going to wear a dress, I should shave my legs and my facial hair. I'm just like, "Whatever." That's where the lazy boy comes in. But it's interesting.

Arroyo: What does that mean to you to actually see that happening, the evolution happening in the Latino community?

Participant-1: I think it has to do with pop culture to be honest with you because the way that is desired is to look very groomed—even if they do have facial hair, it's very groomed. The physique is different, clean cut. It has to do with desirability, but I think they still embody all the negative things of machismo—right? They're still a womanizer; they still beat the women; they still try to control women in their lives. They're still not comfortable with vulnerability; they're not comfortable with emotions; they're not developing their emotional intelligence. Yeah, there's still that fight-or-flight mentality, I think.
Arroyo: Yeah, that seems to be a key thing that keeps coming up through your style journal—and even in the interviews—that in a way that element of femme also brings with it an element of vulnerability.

Participant-1: Yeah. Vulnerability is to—to quote Bréné Brown—vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change. And so I'm a creative person, and so I'm always tapping into my vulnerability. I'm also a creative person when it comes to my look. I'm also a creative person when it comes to—I'm also a creator, I create things, so it's natural for me to be vulnerable, and to be in a state of vulnerability all the time. I've come to learn to embrace it and be comfortable in. But that's not the case for everyone.

Arroyo: Yeah, I think a lot of that probably comes out with your clothes as well, and how you dress, and how you—a lot of that probably also comes out with your clothes as well, and how you move through the world in them. I guess when we look at how you are in the world and how your style—what would you say your style expresses about you to others?

Participant-1: I think others perceive it as bold, courageous, confident, sexy, unapologetic. These are things that have been said to me throughout time, people pick up on.

Arroyo: Yeah, yeah. What do you want to convey through your sense of style to others?

Participant-1: I just want to convey authenticity, so if I can be authentic then I'm fine; and I get that in my style.

Arroyo: You mentioned that was also similar to the tattoo that you have.

Participant-1: The tattoo that you had—to be free.

Arroyo: To be free, yeah. Yeah.

Participant-1: It's kind of like you even got it on your body there.

Arroyo: Yeah, all my tattoos are reminders. I recently got a new tattoo since we last spoke.

Participant-1: Really?

Arroyo: Yeah, it's right here—it's a feather.

Participant-1: Yeah, and it says I am enough.

Arroyo: What does that mean?

Participant-1: Yeah, it was just a reminder that I am enough—that no matter what my body looks like, no matter what my clothes look like, no matter what job I have or don't have, that I am enough.

Arroyo: You have a lot of powerful quotes that I'm noticing them on Facebook—#What[Redacted]Speaks?

Participant-1: #What[Redacted]Speaks, yeah.


Participant-1: Are there any particular ones that you really resonate with that you share?

Arroyo: Oh, #What[Redacted]Speaks?

Participant-1: #What[Redacted]Speaks, yeah.

Arroyo: Oh, #What[Redacted]Speaks?

Participant-1: Yeah, Timehop reminded me of this thing that I wrote a year ago. I just recently re-shared it on Instagram two days ago. It says, "I asked the universe for love, and
it gave me a mirror and said, ‘You are all the love you need.’" It was a graphic of myself with—

Arroyo: I see it.
Participant-1: With a mirror, like a reflection of myself. I was like, "Oh, shit I wrote that?" I forgot I wrote it. [Laughs]
Arroyo: Wait a minute, you were surprised at what you wrote? [Laughs]
Participant-1: Yeah, I was like oh shit that's deep. [Laughs]
Arroyo: Definitely have to re-share.
Participant-1: I have to re-share it, yeah. Yeah, like today I wrote—a year ago I wrote this, but I rediscovered it today: “If we want to heal broken men, we need to start helping them learn to love the little boy that they have long resented.”
Arroyo: That is also deep.
Participant-1: Just figuring out how to love ourselves again.
Arroyo: I wonder if that's also the process of what the clothing and the journey of your style also represents as well.
Participant-1: Yeah, just learn to love myself and my gender expression and love myself regardless of the differences or the ridicule or whatever—just loving myself, and just saying it's okay to be different.
Arroyo: On that path, on that path of self-love and the path of being different—and also still loving yourself,—in what ways have you noticed your style has changed over the years? I guess from the first skinny jeans to now.
Participant-1: Yeah, I think I'm more comfortable. Excuse me. I'm more comfortable wearing skirts, and dresses and just being unapologetic about it. Before I was like, “Oh, I can wear that blouse or that top, but I have to wear pants, or I have to wear shorts.” Now, I'm just like, “Screw that—I can wear whatever I want.”
Arroyo: Yeah. Did those kind of changes—like for instance, like the transition from jeans to then wearing dresses, and skirts—were there also things going on in your life that corresponded with those changes as well, to help you actualize your style?
Participant-1: I think I was just really starting to grow into embracing myself.
Arroyo: Okay. During moments of heightened acceptance you began to—your style began to introduce more elements as well.
Participant-1: Right.
Arroyo: Including the vulnerability component.
Participant-1: Including the what moment?
Arroyo: The vulnerability component.
Participant-1: Yeah, all of that. All of it combined. It's something that people know about me, that I'm just very transparent, and I share a lot of myself with the world in hopes that it would help them. I think about the conversations parents have with their children after they meet me.
Arroyo: Yeah.
Participant-1: About gender. I think about the young boy who looks at my post and doesn't commit suicide because he realizes he's not alone.
Arroyo: Damn.
Participant-1: There's so many different people who I help just by living my truth—of all background, of all generations, of all genders, sexualities, religious beliefs—so
that's what keeps me going: knowing that by living in my truth I'm helping other people.

Arroyo: Even though it may get difficult, there's a way in which you also provide strength to others as well.

Participant-1: You broke up, what did you say?

Arroyo: Oh, and even though it gets difficult, there's a way in which you provide strength to others as well.

Participant-1: Yeah, and that recycles itself back to me, and I get energized by that.

Arroyo: Yeah. I guess with the changes in your style—let's say from transition to jeans, then to skinny jeans, and then to skirts, what did that also say about what your style expresses about you? How did that change over time as well?

Participant-1: I think it said that I was carefree about what people thought. I think that as much as sometimes people's opinions bothers me, I'm not like dictated by that. It doesn't stop me from living my truth.

Arroyo: Yeah. Yeah. As much as other people's opinions bother you.

Participant-1: Yeah, so it bothers me, but it doesn't stop me.

Arroyo: How does it bother you personally?

Participant-1: Who doesn't want to feel desired or who doesn't want to feel attracted or attractive? In those ways, it impacts me. Yeah.

Arroyo: It's an odd thing. You feel beautiful in yourself, but then to also feel that others don't perceive that same beauty at the same level sometimes.

Participant-1: Right.

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-1: It is hard.

Arroyo: It's difficult to manage.

Participant-1: Yes.

Arroyo: I guess in what ways has your style opened up or—let's say—even restricted your ideas about the world and what you can see in others? And possibilities?

Participant-1: I think I've come to really admire people because before I was femme myself I was uncomfortable with other femme people. I was uncomfortable because I was just like—I didn't understand. I was uncomfortable because they were being authentic, and I wasn't. Now, when I see other people who are femme, I'm like, "God, they're so courageous, like I wish I could be as courageous as they are." Or I feel pride. Or when a woman looks really good, I'm more inclined to give her a compliment of her outfits, like, "I really like the outfit." I'll look at something like, “Ooh, I want to wear something like that too.” I'll figure out how to make it my own—stuff like that.

Arroyo: It's really a reciprocal dialogue in a way even through clothing, yeah. How did it change or limit the ways you think about gender or sexual orientation or other people?

Participant-1: I think since I've become more gender non-conforming, it opened me up to dating trans-men, because before I never thought that was possible. Because I always thought that gender and sexuality were very rigid and very confined. You have to bend gender, and you have to bend gender roles to see that the whole world of possibilities is love.

Arroyo: Yeah. What does that mean to you to see that?
Participant-1: That my love is not defined by genitalia.
Arroyo: Yeah.
Participant-1: That my love is defined by intimacy that's beyond the physical.
Arroyo: Yeah. Do you feel comfortable in the world with your style?
Participant-1: Yeah, I'm always worried about my safety, that's always a concern; but other than that I feel very comfortable.
Arroyo: What about that contributes to those feelings—I guess feeling comfortable, but then also feeling fear for your safety?
Participant-1: It's just a reality I think for so many brown queer folks—black and brown queer folks.
Arroyo: Yeah.
Participant-1: That's a universal reality. It's not something that's unique to me or just because my gender expression. Because even before I was gender n-conforming, I still had to fear for my safety.
Arroyo: Yeah.
Participant-1: Because of my sexuality or my perceived sexuality.
Arroyo: I remember that—go on.
Participant-1: No, so it's always been there even for my gender style—it's always been there.
Arroyo: Yeah. I remember that—I believe when we first spoke, it was shortly after Orlando, and I noticed that we kind of both reached out to each other in those moments. I'm wondering just what was that like for you?
Participant-1: It made me—it's ironic because before that—I'm not a big nightclub person, but after Orlando, I went to the club three times in the matter of weeks of each other.
Arroyo: Yeah.
Participant-1: It made me realize that life is too short, and I need to really enjoy and celebrate the queer community. It also made me realize that my day can come anytime. If I'm going to go out, I want to go out looking fabulous and looking great and not being afraid to live my truth. Those people who were in there living life to the fullest in that moment, not expecting tragedy to happen, but then it did. It also shows when you can't accept yourself you turn to violence. There was some allegations that he was a closeted—whatever you want to call him, and that that's why he did what he did. It just means that we have a lot of work to do.
Arroyo: Yeah, I think you're on to something too about if you can't accept yourself you turn to violence.
Participant-1: Right. If you can't embrace yourself you turn to violence—we see it. I see it in my work: self-harm, suicide, substance abuse—these things hurt us or numb us from the fact that we can't fully embrace our truth.
Arroyo: Yeah, definitely, and then when we see it in others—I don't know if it's resentment; I don't know if it's the anger, the jealousy, or something. But it's [crosstalk] —
Participant-1: Stare at someone too long in New York City—if I stare at a guy too long he thinks I'm trying to hit on him, and he gets all aggressive.
Arroyo: Do you avoid eye contact with men [inaudible]?
Participant-1: Most of the time I do—sometimes if they're really cute, I don't. [Laughs] Yeah, but that's also another reason why I don't think anyone's flirting with me, because
I always get afraid for my safety. Like if they think I'm a woman and then they realize I'm a man, I don't know what that's going to do.

Arroyo: Yeah. I guess it also comes full circle back to when you didn't realize you were being flirted with at the nail salon.

Participant-1: Right.

Arroyo: Because it's never in your mindset or your view that this could actually be happening.

Participant-1: Right.

Arroyo: Okay. Well, I think we're done with the official questions. I do know there was that question about the relationship with the mother, and how that evolved with your course of style. But I don't know if you want to go back to it, or—

Participant-1: Yeah. I think I can answer that now.

Arroyo: Okay.

Participant-1: I think it was a journey for me to accept it, and I had to recognize that it was going to be a journey for my mother to accept it, that our journeys are going to look different, and the level of acceptance will always be different; and I've come to accept that. I think where I draw the line is at disrespect, so whenever she gets disrespectful, I always have to call her out, and say, “That's wrong. You have to respect me.” Other than that, I can't think of anything in particular to say.

Arroyo: Well, and now she's able to at least pick out some clothing for you.

Participant-1: Yes. She'll have her moments.

Arroyo: She'll have her moments, and as I'm looking back through our old notes it seems like actually we've touched on a lot of the same moments or the same actually content within the interview—which is why, thank you again for doing it again. I just needed to get the transcripts. But something that I think we did talk a little bit about last time was dating.

Participant-1: Yeah, we haven't touched on dating.

Arroyo: Yeah, and we did just briefly, but I remember you talked about Grindr, and how straight men can sexualize masculine femininity and what not, but then there's also this pushback. I believe the word that you used was—well, I'm familiar with it as well, was the *No fats, No femmes* that kind of comes along with the gay community.

Participant-1: Yeah.

Arroyo: How is that like for you?

Participant-1: Because I'm just like, “I'm still a man. Just because I'm feminine doesn't mean I'm not a man.” There's just this like—reminding people that I'm still a man in a way that doesn't emasculate me. Because that's really annoying, people try to emasculate me. Or they'll refer to it as like “boy pussy,” which I really don't like. Stuff like that.

Arroyo: Yeah. What does—when it feels emasculating part, is there anything in particular that you notice that men do sometimes that can feel emasculating?
Participant-1: They'll call me like their “bitch” or, “You're my bitch,” or, “You're mine.” They'll say the “boy pussy” thing. Yeah, stuff like that.

Arroyo: Is that what made the dates unsuccessful?

Participant-1: No, the guys were just looking for sex, and that was it. That's what made it unsuccessful. Then there's one guy who I'm really digging, and we're talking consistently for a week and a half or so, and then he just flakes out. But then we become Facebook friends, and I'm just like, "What is your problem?" But I don't want to tell him what is his problem because I don't want to seem too aggressive, but yeah.

Arroyo: Yeah. It's a hard world.

Participant-1: Since we last spoke, I put boundaries with the married man, and he's really upset about it, but I had to do it.

Arroyo: What did you do?

Participant-1: I just told him that we could only be friends and that we can't be sexual or anything like that; and that if he wants respect our friendship, he would have to follow, you know, respect that. I told him I was dating again, which hurt his feelings.

Arroyo: It did?

Participant-1: Yeah, which I'll never understand, like how are your feelings hurt when you're married? [Laughs]

Arroyo: Yeah. In a way, it almost seems like sometimes being emasculated, your own needs are diminished, you're almost sexualized or fetishized and not recognized for the person that you are—if I can summarize it that way. Does that—

Participant-1: Yeah. I feel like I'd make a great boyfriend, but no one seems to be able to get that far with me. They always say, "Oh, you're so great, you're so inspirational. You're so smart, you're so driven." If I'm all those things, then why can't we be together, why can't that happen? I'll never know.

Arroyo: Sometimes I think when we ask ourselves that question sometimes I think we come up with an answer—have you, or a reason that you think might be the reason why?

Participant-1: I think it is because I have emotional intelligence at a level that most boys don't have, and they're threatened by that. Most men are not comfortable with their feelings or with vulnerability. Yet here I am—Mr. Vulnerability-Expert over here—talking about it, doing research, writing about it, doing the work on myself that others can't do it on themselves.

Arroyo: The kind of similar vulnerability that goes with the style that you've adopted, it offers you a lot of freedom; but in relationships and what not it seems that sometimes make it a bit more difficult.

Participant-1: Right.

Arroyo: Yeah. Well, I think that was about the lot of it that we got again, so thank you so much. Is there anything else that I think you wanted to keep me updated on or that happened?

Participant-1: No. I think I gave you all the updates.

Arroyo: Okay. Yeah. Thank you, I will go ahead and stop the recording now. But let me see
Appendix I (Cited in Dissertation as “LEO”): Leonardo’s Style Journal and Interview

Day 1: Today’s pics are attached. Both taken this evening (5/20) around 8:30pm. My cohort had a dinner to celebrate finishing year 2, and then went to see my advisor’s funk band (she’s the lead singer), so I had an outfit change. I changed in the men’s room. As I was putting in a new earring in the mirror, a man came up behind me and said, “excuse me, can I do this? your tag’s out,” incredibly sweetly, and tucked in my tag. He seemed straight by mannerism and performance, and it was a truly touching moment where I felt completely validated — there was absolutely nothing about his interaction with me that suggested he thought I should be in a different bathroom; rather, everything about his actions indicated that he believed I should be wherever I wanted, and also that it was respectful for him as a butch (not that he would use that word) to care for the femme and help them get their outfit in order. This experience goes down in my book as one of the most heartwarming bathroom experiences I’ve ever had.

Later, my boyfriend and I were walking to my advisor’s show. We parked just under a mile away (free parking…#phdbudget), and I was wearing 4 inch heels. We were in Bethesda, Maryland, a majority white upper class suburb. A white woman talking on her cell phone stopped me and said “you’re not walking well in those shoes. You need some different shoes,” in the snobbiest, most stuck up way. I was so pissed but figured maybe I could get some pity or something and make her feel like the asshole she is, so I stopped and said, “You know thank you, I appreciate your concern, I was hit by a car a couple years ago and had a severe traumatic brain injury that destroyed my brain’s connection to my right foot. So I had to re-learn how to walk, and I know I’m still getting my heels-feet under me. But the only way to learn is to practice!” She just snubbed away back to her phone call; I don’t even know if she heard me. Seemed to be drunk. My boyfriend was PISSED and was reading her for blocks down the street hahaha, and he was aghast at her comment on my walk, because in his opinion I was walking just about as proficiently as anyone can ever walk in heels. We agreed that she has a problem with heels in general, or RATHER, a huge problem with a man in heels.

[My boyfriend] grew up in Bethesda, and he’s black, so he has an eye for people’s glances / looks / reads and what they mean, because he knows the type of people in town. He was laughing hysterically for a good portion of our walk at the number of men, some straight, some gay, who were making eyes at me. Just staring, shamelessly, kind of dazed in some strange fix of admiration/pleasure/desire/confusion. Apparently some bros lined up at a window to watch me walk by, and kept watching for two blocks.

OK! Haha that is probably the most I’ll ever write (expect 1-3 sentences from now on lol) but so much happened tonight I had to tell those stories
Day 2: Fun day today, hosted a house show of my band (the Rude Bois) and three other queer musicians. I wanted an outfit that was plenty genderqueer and also very mobile / easy to move in, so I picked some big earrings and a loud shirt / pants.

Very queer affirming space. One of those places where I didn't think about my outfit at all because I was busy admiring others.

Emma (one of the musicians) said she loved my earrings.
Day 3: You can't see my '80s style faded purple skinnies cuz of the lighting but this outfit is perfectly color coordinated ;-). Since I was out of the house for only an hour today and interacted only with the meat counter clerk at the grocery store, nothing to report. But I always appreciate good scarf weather. Would note that I didn't wear the scarf and hoodie together; too warm for that. Just the hoodie or the scarf depending on my mood lol

Day 4: Didn't leave the house today :-). Have a couple best friends coming over, so this outfit is for them. Love the colors, turquoise and purple is one of my favorite color combos. You can't see
my earrings all that great, but they echo the stripes of my hoodie. These earrings feel really androgynous to me, especially with this outfit. It's always fun to wear big dangly earrings that work androgynously.

Day 5: Turns out I just put on another shirt of the same color ;-) so here's the full outfit
Day 9: You could trade in this pic for one of the boring ones from when I was at the beach w my fam lol

I'm wearing pearls and heels that you can't see. The skirt is blue and black striped
Day 11: Phone won't let me send both pics for some reason, pic 2 is coming

Hot day so I'm all sweaty and will send you a pic of the next outfit later. Driving back home from Michigan
Day 12:
Day 13: First outfit of the day, was sleeping in to catch up on much needed sleep and got a call from my old college bestie, saying she's in town for a couple hours (lives in Berlin), so I threw on my Kenyan earrings cuz I knew she'd love them (she's Ghanian)

A good friend gave me these earrings, and I was going to see her today so I designed my outfit around them. Love doing that. A couple folks today complimented my shirt. It's always a fun surprise when folks compliment a part of my outfit I wasn't really thinking about - this is an old stained shirt that feels like whatever to me, but Caitlin said it's a really great color for me. Always appreciate specific comments like that :-). Late night at the clinic!
Day 14: Happy Pride!
Participant-2: Oh yeah.
Arroyo: Of course that was a while back, but your memory will be jogged as it was yesterday. Oh, good, I did start the recording. From there I'll just ask you a couple questions. I already have some of the answers from before so it will be kind of like—there will be things to jog your memory. I imagine that your answers probably won't differ too much.
Participant-2: That's good.
Arroyo: I noticed that on some of the significant dates that you wrote in your style journal and kind of looking at the interaction between you and people, the day of your completing—was it the first year or second year of your PhD? The party, with your cohort—
Participant-2: Oh. Second year, yeah.
Arroyo: Second year. You changed in the bathroom and a man very gently—you were changing into a skirt, and a man was very kind in his interaction with you, tucking your tag back in.
Participant-2: Oh yeah.
Arroyo: Could you speak a little to that?
Participant-2: Yeah. I think I said in my style journal that this is top of the charts for me in terms of positive bathroom interactions. In bathrooms, typically, I've—I think—developed in terms of how I understand the bathroom. For a long time, the bathroom, because it's like the binary gender place where people go. For a long time it was—actually bathrooms were some of the first places that I started really questioning my gender because I kept being told I was in the wrong bathroom, no matter which bathroom I went in. I started being taken aback. It was after I figured out that I liked women—that I was attracted to women that, suddenly I had a sexuality. I think something changed in my mannerisms. My roommate said, "Oh, you walk like a guy now." I was like, "What does that mean?" But then, I started getting kicked out of women's rooms and then I would go in the men's rooms, and they'd be like, "Ah?" because I didn't quite pass. So, it was like whatever. For a long time, I really cared that I passed for male when I would use the men's room. And, for a long time, I exclusively used the men's room. But now, I'm to a place where I really don't care how anyone rates me. Preferred actions make people a little uncomfortable, generally, if they're concerned with the binary.
So, I use whatever bathroom. So, anyways, I remember that night having to use the men's room because I happen to walk right by it, first. So, I went in and changed from a—I was wearing this outfit and maybe a pink shirt, having come from the clinic, business casual, and then change into a dress. To go, we were going to go to my advisor's show, so I was like, "I want to go in this fun dress I want to wear." So, I changed in with a dress and heels and then came out. When I went in, there was no one in there; and when I came out there were three men in there. So, I was like, "Okay, how's it going?" Didn't say anything but washing my hands—I think I was putting in new earrings, such as it was, or switching my earrings, maybe.
And, the guy walked up behind me and—came kind of close, but I could see him in the mirror and I was like, "This guy's straight," and I was like, "Interesting."—
like, why was he coming up behind me. And he was like, "Excuse me—" I can't remember what he said, but it was something like, "I just had to do this," and then he tucked the tag in. He said, "I just can't, I can't have your tag out". I was like, "Oh, my God." It felt like such a butch—such a straight, butch move to be like, “You know it's my job to take care of the femme. That's what makes me a man.” And also, “As a human being, I can't let you go out there. I know that you're putting yourself together, and I can't let you go out there.” So that was wonderful. That's exactly how interactions in close physical space, I think, should be.

Arroyo: You also describe it as one of the sweetest. It tops them all. It tops a lot of them because in previous experiences in bathrooms, it was like you were unwelcome in both?

Participant-2: It would really depend on the bathroom. In the women's rooms, I am almost never told. I'm usually—it's totally fine because there's sort of an assumption that if you're in the women's room, you need to be there. It's only in men's rooms, usually, they're all of a sudden uncomfortable because they're like, "Oh, no!" like they're scared that they're going to be accused of being perpetrators or something because, if they perceive me, if they read me as femme, then they're like, "Oh, hey, this is the men's room. I think you're in the wrong room." So, I usually joke and like, “Oh, yeah, I just don't know where to go,” or like, “I'm not sure—could you tell me which one I should go in?”

Arroyo: You play it off a little bit. Be a little shady. Yes.

Participant-2: [Laughs] But, it's true, I'm like, “I don't know which one should I go in. Where would I make people feel most comfortable? Oh wait, I don't actually care.” I like that.

Arroyo: So, with those experiences, before you did kind of care a bit—

Participant-2: Yeah, especially earlier in my transition, yeah. Especially before I passed, before I went on testosterone, especially, because, it was just a constant reminder about if I—interestingly actually, I was kicked out of women's rooms more often than—I think it's because I was not doing femme. I think it's because I was—in so many ways, my body was trying to find it's masculine self, so I presented fairly masculinely. I don't think my mannerisms were that different—well, maybe they were—I think they were more like “straight-butch man” because I identify them with my body in so many ways, so it was like I was having to put on a performance to help me distract myself from the dysphoria. So I think in women's rooms, in some ways, I wonder if my discomfort with my gender brought out their discomforts with their gender. Because, I was acting like someone who shouldn't be there or something—even it wasn't, this wasn't conscious—that they were like, “I thought that I was a woman, and so I should use the—” but, I wasn't aware of this at all so, I'd often be told that I was in the wrong room. And I'd be like, “Uhh, I don't know what to do.” Sometimes I didn't say anything, just didn't respond. Or I remember several times being like, "No, I'm a—[stammers] yes," and not actually answering and then realizing like, “Wait.” And I was like, “What did you mean to say?” It ends up—I don't know. Am I trying to say I'm a woman? I was like, “Maybe I am, but I'm not.” It was like a series of both realizations. That once happened, but that's why in men's rooms, it's real important to me that I be accepted, but I always was. Because men don't care. Men never look at each
other, and there's no interaction in the men's room, so it's like that was no problem. It was only when I started doing femme that I started getting kicked out of men's rooms.

Arroyo: So you experienced this on both sides?
Participant-2: Yeah.

Arroyo: I think it's interesting that you mention, in the women's room, of how that began because, later in the day, you had an interaction with a woman on the street in which you were walking in heels. And she made a comment about, "I believe you shouldn't be walking in those heels," or something.

Participant-2: She said, "You can't walk well in those heels," or something like that. She was like a judgment statement about my ability about how well I was walking in those heels.

Arroyo: And you—I think you tried to shame her by saying you just went under some surgery or something like that or, you just got—

Participant-2: No, I told her about my accident, about my brain injury. I was like—

Arroyo: Oh, wait. Oh, the brain injury, that's right. You did—

Participant-2: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was like a real—and she touched on it. She touched on a really sore spot for me. Actually, this goes—This is going to be a really long story, but since this is the second interview, I'll tell—when I was in the hospital, when I was hit by a car I was unconscious, so they cut all the clothes off me and then, put me in ICU, and they kept me sedated because of the brain injury. They wrote down on my file that I was a "post-operative, transsexual woman." I'm not sure what kind of surgeon would make a cunt the way that mine looks because I'm on testosterone—like, my clit's much larger. But, you know, I experienced a lot of transphobia in the hospital. I'm not sure if that's transphobia—that's just trans-ignorance from the nurses.

The nurses who were really uncomfortable with my body and were uncomfortable with my gender comfort in a lot of ways. Honestly, it surprised me because I didn't expect—I expected them to be nurses to not care. But I had a nurse, like when she found something, they often didn't know what my body was; but they had to take me in to pee and when I had to pull down my pants and sit to pee, sometimes they would freak out because they would expect me to have a penis. I remember when I had to wash some things, and she freaked out and ran away from me. I was like—I couldn't stand at that point. I could've fallen and hit my head, and if I hit my head, I would have died. So luckily I was able to grab a post thing on the wall and hold myself up, but I had a series of these experiences. So, yeah, that's just context for how I had to relearn how to walk because I destroyed my brain's connection to my right leg and foot.

And so—I remember I was in physical therapy walking down the—well, learning how to walk down the hospital hallway. My physical therapist was helping me realize that I need to do heel-toe. That's how you walk, right? It's heel-toe. I had this revelation, I was like, "Oh, my God. If I can learn—” But that's how I couldn't walk before because my foot wouldn't lift. It would just flop down. So I was like, "If I can learn how to do heel-toe, I can walk in heels again.” I was so excited. She just burst out laughing. It was like, you know: [Mimics a cackle.] You know, like that. And, I was so hurt by that and so angry.
I'm like, "What the hell you doing laughing? That it's a laughing matter that I would be walking in heels? That's actually a goal. That's actually my main goal of this. If I'm going to have a treatment goal, that's a treatment goal. You're going to teach me how to walk so I can walk in heels."

Arroyo: It wasn't like a generous laugh, then. It was actually a mocking?

Participant-2: No, it was awful. At least that's how I experienced it. Like, it was not like, “Oh, you're so cute.” I was laughing at myself at that stage walking in heels. I would have fallen. You know, no way in hell—I couldn't walk on anything. But it was a while. That's pretty funny to look at.

Arroyo: This is what the woman triggered on the street.

Participant-2: Yeah. So I was just like, "Yo, I'd appreciate you telling me that I need to get some different heels, but, actually, sorry I can't walk yet. This is my first real walk in heels.” I mean it was the first time I had to walk a significant distance because I had to walk a mile or something. I was like, “You know, I'm relearning, and my foot's still learning how to walk in heels, basically.” So, I explained I was hit by a car, had a traumatic brain injury, had to relearn how to walk, so I know that maybe it doesn't look that good but I'm still learning. It's going to be fine. I was so annoyed because She was just drunk. I don't think she even heard me. It was like nothing was there.

Arroyo: It seemed like your boyfriend really came to your defense because you said he read her for filth.

Participant-2: Yeah, he was just like, "You're doing fine." I know he wasn't just saying that because he would tell me. He was like, “She was just drunk, and she was freaking out because she saw you as this man in a dress and heels, you know, walking the street, so—“

Arroyo: I am mindful of the time because I know it's 6:52pm, but, on that same night, you also mentioned that you were walking by a restaurant; and a bunch of people came to the window or even came outside in order to watch you. That was quite a night for you, wasn't it?

Participant-2: I don't notice people looking at me. I think because I've just been so comfortable in myself for so many years now and just oblivious, basically. But I sometimes don't realize, I don't notice other people who are scoping me out until I started dating [redacted]. He's the first man I've ever dated, and so he's really aware because he's always objectifying and checking out men. He's really aware when they're watching somebody who he's with, right? So he was like, "Wow, you're getting scoped out tonight," or whatever. I've noticed it's usually when I'm wearing like, big flashy earrings. I'll get that sort of look of like—you know, they'll just be looking and sort of inquisitive stare. But that night, I didn't notice anything; I was just concentrating on walking. He was just telling me about all of these different—there were a whole group of frat bros who were eating pizza or something, and one of them came outside to try to watch me walk down the street. But, we were just like, “What, but why? What's going on in their heads?” He was saying some of them seemed genuinely attracted to me. They were checking me out the way that straight men check out women. Perhaps, for some of them, I passed as this woman for some of them.
Others were sort of confused, unsettled but didn't know what to do—that I wasn't on the level of a freak you can just stare at because you think they have no—I don't know; what’s it called—dignity or something.

Arroyo: No humanity or subjectivity or something, yeah?

Participant-2: Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's it. But I was like almost there in some ways for some of these people, which is interesting because I rarely got into that kind of [inaudible]. It's fun.

Arroyo: I think—maybe this could be the last thing before you have to disconnect for a bit for the phone call. Don't worry; I'm keeping an eye out.


Arroyo: You also mentioned on June the 2nd that people often do stare at you quizically, and I think that came up again in what you just said that people often give you this kind of stare. What's that like for you, or what's that experience like?

Participant-2: It's funny.

Arroyo: It's funny.

Participant-2: I don't know. I don't really even think about it. Sometimes I'm walking around campus, and I'm like, “Oh.” I often don't realize that they're looking at me, and then sometimes if we make eye contact and then they look away quickly, I'm like, “That seemed like a little bit more awkward than yesterday.” Then I'm like, "Oh, it's because I'm wearing earrings today," and so then I realize that, and then I rerun the memories of the day, and I remember all the people who had been staring at me. But it's just like—you know, it's cute.

Arroyo: So It doesn't phase you as much anymore. It doesn't phase you? Was there a time when it did?

Participant-2: I think people didn't start staring at me until I started doing femme—after going on testosterone until I started doing femme as a masculine-centered person. They really paid me no heed at all when I first came out as queer, when I first came out as trans, when I first went on testosterone, even when I first came out as or understood myself to be gay. I was pretty much oblivious because I never had men—I never had straight men objectify me or check me out. I think largely because they possibly didn't even read me as female. Or if they did, I was obviously butch or so obviously lesbian or dyke or something—you know? There was the occasional—they would look a little bit longer. But never this kind of like ogling that I get now.

Arroyo: It's until you started catching people's stares by dressing femme as a masculine person. That's when things started to become a little bit more ambiguous.

Participant-2: I think also—having a lot of friends who are trans-feminine—I really think that a lot of it has to do with the fact that I'm not doing drag, that I'm trans-feminine identified. I'm not trying to present as a woman—like, I'm actually being a boy who does femme. So it's like I'm calling into question all of their gender scripts, and they don't know where to put me. There's no box to put me in. And because I'm so unintelligible, they have to just stare to figure out what's going on.

Arroyo: I hear you. Do you want to pause for a minute, just call me back when you're done?

Participant-2: Yeah. Let's do that. It'll probably be like 10 minutes. [Participant makes a phone call.]
Arroyo: So something I was wondering about—I remember we touched on this last time—I don't like to assume what people mean when they say words. But it seems like the words femme and femininity or trans-feminine seem to encompass a certain thing about your lifeworld. Could you tell me a little bit about how you define it, or what you mean when you say femme?

Participant-2: Oh, interesting question. Well, first, I just heard you say/drop a few words, so I should differentiate. Femme—I heard you say trans-feminine, and trans-feminine indicates someone who's a trans-woman. A trans-feminine identity is sort of, essentially like a trans-woman feminist. It's an awareness of gender performance and celebration of femininity, essentially. Femme is similarly, I think, an awareness of gender and celebration of femininity. I have a poem called—did you ask me this question before?

Arroyo: Yes. [Laughs] I think the answer was very similar. Again, I don't want to put my own assumptions on there. I want to make sure I honor your meaning of the word and expression. So, I guess I'm not looking for an exact definition but just what it means to you.

Participant-2: Well, yeah. I can't believe I wrote all of this.

Arroyo: I will see what you said before. Performative—

Participant-2: I'll send this to you. It's a non-performance poet but I think this poem is really a page poem.

Arroyo: Okay.

Participant-2: But, it's called “From High-Femme, To Unconquer.” It's a persona poem, so it's written from someone who identifies as high-femme and does high-femme. And I wrote it really inspired by friends of mine who do high femme, so I say to do high femme because I believe gender is something we do. It's not just a performance. It encompasses all of who we are at that moment. But to do high femme is a satire. It's an incredibly insightful, also inquisitive awareness of gender. It's a satire of what patriarchy needs women to be. But because it's a satire, it takes back the power, eventually. So, it says well, "I know you want to be able to objectify my body. I'm actually going to present you a body that's very similar to the kind of body that you like to objectify, except for I'm going to present it to you unintelligibly so that you can't understand how to objectify it. So you can't understand what to do with me—so that I becomes not a body but a person."

Arroyo: It's a way of tearing down a concept in order to bring the person forth—or something.

Participant-2: Yeah. So when I say do femme, I think of the meaning. For me, doing femme is basically celebrating femininity, which in a lot of ways means celebrating our bodies and creation and space for creativity rather than—in a lot of ways, masculinity occupies space so that it can control it; whereas, I think femininity, when doing femme—to take space as a femme person—it's not actually to take space; it's to share space. So it's like—my earrings physically, literally take up more space. The way that I interact with space when I'm wearing these earrings is that I become more aware of all the space that my head takes up. It doesn't actually physically take up more space—it perhaps takes up less space because I don't feel a need to stake out my claim so my ears can have the room. I feel more like, “Oh, this is all shared. Everyone's earrings are welcome. Everyone's ears are
here.” I don’t know if I thought that or said that before. So I think that's what it means.

Arroyo: Yeah, I love that description. And, actually, speaking about your and something I noticed about your style journal overall was that—this is actually with all you clothes—there was often there was a story behind them. With your case in particular in your style journal, when you made your journal, there were often other people in the journal as well. It wasn't just a photo of you. I think that speaks to the stories. Can you tell me more about that? Often there's a story behind what you're wearing.

[A third person moves on screen and seems to be fiddling on the computer.]

Participant-2: Yeah, she's trying to figure out how to make you big again. I mean, you're so small. Oh well. How do you full screen? Do you know how to full screen?

Arroyo: Did you click on something else?

Participant-2: Yeah, I clicked on—I pulled up the poem.

Arroyo: You click on Skype again, and it'll bring me back.

Participant-2: But, I did, and it's not doing anything.

Arroyo: Oh, really?

Participant-2: Ok, whatever. What was the question you asked me about people? Stories?

Arroyo: Often your earrings and, actually, a lot of your clothes often have stories behind them.

Participant-2: Yeah, stories behind them. I remember. I exist in the world in an invariant, interactive way. I feel very much created by my relationships and the people I'm close to and the relationships I'm in with the people I'm close to. I remember when I was in high school I learned about—I studied, I was in some church program. I think I was a junior in high school; and we studied, we compared theologies between Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King, Jr. So I learned about—I just got to relate to a lot of various African lit and a lot of West and East African as well. I came across the concept of ubuntu, which means, essentially, I am because we are. That was really powerful for me because, I was like, "Oh, yeah. That's how I think. That's how I exist,”—just a really strong awareness of how I'm not capable of anything just entirely alone and by myself. And that so much of how I think and how I feel and what I value has been socialized and created by other people around me and what they value, et cetera. But I really, really value those relations—not all of my relationships—especially relationships with people I love. I feel very made as a femme person, as a femme boy, as a gay boy, et cetera. I feel very much created by the high femmes who taught me how to dress because I couldn't. It was bad before I came out. I'd wear clothes that were five times too big, and part of that was because it was the 90's, but part of it was because I couldn't find my body. I didn't know what to do. It was like, everything was—I had no sense of fashion. I had no understanding of what it is to create art by the way that we dress ourselves. I was taught that by a whole group of people who became close to me.

So I think that's why I tell those stories when I wear the clothing that they've inspired or the articles, the earrings that they gave me or the ways that they taught me how to do that. I think I'm always aware, especially, when I'm doing femme.
I'm always thinking of the femmes who I saw do that first or who I saw inspire that or made me think of this or whatever.

Arroyo: So, in a way it's also like the relationships also invited a way to create a sense of your body that was yours?

Participant-2: Yeah.

Arroyo: It was like, even though you were wearing baggy clothes, and you hadn't found your body; it was really a process.

Participant-2: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Entirely, it was all about the relationships. It was my first girlfriend who took me shopping to buy boys underwear when I figured out I was trans. I was like, “Okay, I need to get men's underwear.” So she took my shopping, and I remember picking up some boxers and her laughing at me for weeks afterwards, being like, "Why are you wearing boxers?" And she's making fun of me. [Laughs] I didn't understand. I was like, "Oh, I thought that's what men did. I thought they wore boxers." And she was like, "Okay, that's cute; that's sweet." But that experience is so ingrained in my mind because it’s like she loved me so much, she was still going to love me in boxers. She's like, "It's a growing phase. You need to understand that you can wear better, more fitting underwear. You have a nice ass." So, I don't know. That was a random story that just came to mind.

Arroyo: I guess that leads to one of the questions. What were the first instances in which you began to experiment mixing elements in your wardrobe: masculine and feminine?

Participant-2: I think a little bit when I was—after I started testosterone. When I started to pass for male, I would occasionally mix in feminine aspects—didn't really know, didn't really have a strong sense of fashion yet. I think I was yearning after this 1970's man, kind of straight man who was really comfortable wearing tight-fitting shirts. I bought a lot of '70s polyester shirts. On occasion, if there was an event on campus, maybe I'd wear a dress or something. But it wasn't a style yet. I was still trying to figure it out. I had a girlfriend who was petty homo-negative, I think, largely because of the way that—she was Dominican and was objectified by a lot of men—and so queer-identified but really lesbian. Didn't ever date men. I was the only man she—masculine-centered person she ever dated, in some ways dealing with some colonial bullshit and was really trying to become a straight white woman in lots of ways. Don't tell her I said that. She didn't want to be seen with me when I was doing more femme. I think largely because it made me seem more gay, which brought sexual attention to my body. She didn't like that because when she was with me, it would then be brought to her body as well. She was really uncomfortable with that. I didn't realize that I put a cap on it. I was like, "Okay, I guess I shouldn't do that. I don't want to make her uncomfortable."

It wasn't really til I moved to Minneapolis and started dating—met and started dating [a person—name is redacted], who does high femme and identifies as genderqueer, identifies as trans. Female assigned at birth, identifies as trans/genderqueer. They took out my earrings. They're like, "You need to get different earrings." I had these little tiny hoops in, little tiny hoops. They're like, "You need to put bigger earrings in." They taught me how to dress, basically. They taught me how to wear heels. They only wear five inch heels pretty much.
everywhere they go unless they're doing boy or stud. That was when I really started integrating and getting a sense of fashion and style.

Arroyo: Do you remember what year that was?
Arroyo: And what was that like for you?
Participant-2: It was great. Honestly, I think it really—it felt like I was, that there were some parts of me that I had sort of just partitioned off and that these parts were being able to wake up and find themselves. I started feeling truly, fully embodied for the first time, I think. I think I had come to a kind of peace with my body largely through sex and several other public experiences that I had—like, I was part of this generational frat, and they used to put on this lingerie show in this really, really body positive space and celebrating and appreciating my trans body. I had come into myself, and I was cool; but it was cool if I was seen-as-a-guy kind of relationship. So I think I still had a kind of discomfort, even if I wasn't aware of it, [the person I was dating—name is redacted] actually made me cool with my body no matter what. No matter how I'm taken, I just leveled out of gender, basically. I don't know—leveled to a level where we can all do gender. Gender is a playground. A huge playground all the time. It felt great because now I think I'm really, really comfortable all the time but especially really inspired all the time. I inspire myself. I like to get dressed because it's inspiring. I like to create. It's a creative enterprise, and any creative enterprise can be inspiring.

Arroyo: Yeah. Were there any consequences to your decision when you began to mix these elements?
Participant-2: No.
Arroyo: No?
Participant-2: No. I mean positive—like, everybody talked—positive consequences of celebrating. And also creating—so many more spaces were opened up of ways that I could celebrate femininity and femme and the work that women do all the time to share space, to create space for people who are constantly trying to deny our existence, et cetera. So I think nothing but overflowing, positive consequences.

Arroyo: How would you describe your style?
Participant-2: We said this was going to be shorter. [Both laugh.]
Arroyo: It's true; we did. It's funny because I'm just learning new things about you.
Participant-2: I can't help it—I'm an external processor. You know when you process something out the first time, now you have to go to the next level. What hasn't been said yet?
Arroyo: Exactly.
Participant-2: But that, totally unconsciously, I have no memory of what I said—like, no memory at all. [Both continue laughing.]
Arroyo: It is kind of funny. I'm an external processor too.
Participant-2: Yeah. It's a good life.
Arroyo: I know.
Participant-2: He gets to listen to.
Arroyo: I tried to make it shorter—[both continue laughing]
Participant-2: That's a pretty necklace, also, by the way.
Arroyo: Yeah. Oh, thank you.
Participant-2: I really see it now.
Arroyo: I really like it.
Participant-2: I love layering things like, having lines on top of lines.
Arroyo: Yeah.
Participant-2: It's like, “I don't know, should I do this?” When it works, it works.
Arroyo: I wasn't a big fan of this shirt but, I do love this necklace. I was like, “Okay, this is just a hot-day outfit.”
Participant-2: No—I agree, the shirt's terrible, but the necklace with the shirt, it's like, “Oh, that totally works. I think that's fantastic.”
Arroyo: Thank you for validating that.
Participant-2: Yeah, seriously. That's the thing about accessories, you know? They can transform.
Arroyo: I agree. I agree 100%.
Participant-2: Dubious. End quote.
Arroyo: I think, actually—because when I think about your style—what do you think about the staples of your style? Like I said, for me, it's usually some form of necklaces and bracelets. With you, it seems to be lots of earrings and nail polish. And colors—bright but yet not pastels, you know?
Participant-2: Oh, my God. I loved pastels when I met [former partner—name redacted], and they turned me away—thank goodness. They saved me from pastels. I think I loved them because I think I thought that I could be gay. There was something that felt softer or something, then, I was like, “No, actually, you just do it loud.” If what you do is so beautiful, then that's queer, you know? Also, that creates space. That's an invitation for other people. So I think that's a great sum-up of my style, I think. I think I'm an invitation to—what you said last time—you said, “Your tattoo: what do you dream?” You were like, “That seems to be the question that your fashion is asking.” I was like, “Wow, I never thought about that. That's true.”
Arroyo: Occasionally, wise words can come out of my mouth. [Both laugh.]
Arroyo: Not often. Occasionally. It's good that you remember that because I actually did have notes about your tattoo as well. At what point did you realize that—of all of that—that was your style? At what point did you realize, “This is my style, and it feels natural?” even if it's an instance or something.
Participant-2: Interesting. I think there were a few different instances, but I think it's a constant evolution. I'm thinking of when I moved to Philly in 2012—I mean, I know before I moved to Philly, I definitely had lots of time that I would go out with [my partner—name redacted] or something, and I'd be dressed in an outfit, and I'd be like, "Oh, yeah. I love this. This is it." But I didn't have a feeling of like, “I know how to do this every day.” I had a feeling of—If I put on an outfit, and usually [partner—name redacted] helped me create the outfit—Like, "Oh, okay. This is great." But then I think it was really when I moved to Philly that I had this strong—you know, it was east coast, and it's close enough to New York. I think that Philly and New York have a similar, kind of like—you have to prove yourself. You had to establish who you are and prove yourself there. And also,
being a poet, I felt that, you know? It was like, “Okay then, who are you? So what are you presenting?” Like, okay. So there, in lots of ways, I was working to prove myself as a gay man but didn't do a lot of femme largely because I was still learning how and trying to figure, still trying to figure it all out. Then I got hit by a car and moved back to Minneapolis. Then I wore nothing but man for a long time because I was really brain-injured and I didn’t—I wanted to put on everything at once [laughs], and [partner—name redacted] wouldn't go out with me. [Partner—name redacted] wouldn't be seen with me in public.

Arroyo: You wore all at once?
Participant-2: Because it was really bad. Everything was clashing all the time. I don't even have any neon clothes, but I would just wear them all at once, all the time. It needed to be [laughs]. And the earrings were in total conflict with what was going on. Your eyes were trying to look at too many places, whatever. But then I had to learn how to dress myself. And, naturally, that came along as I was healing from the brain injury, but I think I had to very literally learn what are all the rules and how—I didn't learn what the fashion rules are, but I just had to figure out what's inspiring about an outfit. I got a bunch of fashion magazines. I got five women's fashion magazines and GQ from some frequent-flyer miles or something. I would look at them all for hours a day sometime because I was brain injured and didn't have anything else to do. I think that's when I started gaining a sense of having a closet and having a style and actually being able to put it together in an outfit every single day—

Arroyo: And when was that?
Participant-2: —that felt like me. I got hit by a car in 2012: December, 2012. So we're talking February, 2013. It's when I was wearing all pastels. I mean—not pastels, neon. Through June, I think I started to understand how to wear less clashing things. Maybe in July, August—I think it was probably went til September, October—really not until probably December. My anniversary was, I think, about when I started being able to dress myself. Then over the next year or, so maybe like 2014.

Arroyo: Where you rediscovered the rules of you, in a way.
Participant-2: Yeah. Yeah. When, I started really getting a sense of style. Really even not until I started the program did I do a lot of femme. It wasn't until moving to New York city, [inaudible] moving to DC that I—You know, I never thought about this—I think it also had something to do with fact of DC is the first city that I've lived in that's really trans-positive—rather that gay men are trans-positive. Minneapolis is really trans-positive. There's all kinds of trans people, but gay men wouldn't sleep with me. It was like, maybe, on Adam4Adam, I'd message 20 men; and one man would maybe come sleep with me. And usually it wasn't a very positive experience.

But then in DC, all these men were hitting me up all the time. And lots of men were really appreciating me. I know that part of it was that I was really confident and comfortable, and healing from a near-death experience helps with that, et cetera. I think it's also just the culture here. Men are just more comfortable with themselves and also so less passive-aggressive, less scared and nervous and stuff. It's not the midwest. So I think that really helped a lot because—and also interacting with femme boys, just around going to parties and seeing other men
doing femme and other boys doing femme and trans-women having a lot of trans-feminine friends—so I think just being immersed in a culture where like I'm celebrated and I can celebrate other people. I'm learning from everybody all the time. That's when I created an Instagram because I wanted to follow my advisor's daughter, has 10,000 followers on [Instagram Name redacted] on Instagram. So like, I need to know what are the 14 year olds doing these days, right? So, I had to create an Instagram in order to follow her. Then, I was like, "Oh, well I just like, post outfits." So I started taking a selfie everyday, posting an outfit on Instagram. I was like, "This is great." I was like, "I'm so grateful for everybody else's fashion that they're always giving out," and grateful for the other high femmes who were taking selfies of themselves because I'd be like, "Oh, yeah. That's a great idea!" So I was like, "I should give, too." So I think that moment that I started feeling like I had something to give everyone in addition to something to learn, that probably didn't really start until fall of 2014.

Arroyo: Yeah. I think that leads us to the next question. Don't worry; we're half-way through. What would you say your style expresses about you?

Participant-2: Celebration of queerness. Celebration of creativity. I don't think my style's necessarily all that creative; it could be more creative. But I do think it opens space. Coupled with how I am, which is just comfortable. I think it expresses someone who loves their body and loves to—who is body-positive and celebratory.

Arroyo: Yeah. Is that what you want to convey? The totality of it? Or, do you want to convey more, also?

Participant-2: Yeah. I think, I'm sure there's more and probably said a lot more last time [laughs]. Maybe you have some notes. I think, I want to convey—

Arroyo: I'll say this—last time—actually maybe it is interesting to have a second interview. Because, last time you did speak a lot about wanting to provoke and wanting other people to think.

Participant-2: Ah, yeah. That's true, yeah. I think that now, it's like I feel like—since I've already said that except I need to say it again—that's kind of what I mean by create space, I think, to reflect to making my own life. Like when I didn't do femme, it was because I felt constricted into needing to present myself a certain way so that I would receive the kind of validation that aligned with my body, with my gender identification, and how my body wanted to be understood. So I want to challenge that notion. I want to challenge the idea that there's a gender binary, that we exist in a binary, and really provoke people to have to come to an awareness—even if it's not a conscious awareness—of the ways that they are maybe uncomfortable with the gender expectations of them and their fashion and what people expect them to do and say and how to expect their bodies to be and allow people to feel more comfortable just existing how they naturally want to exist.

Arroyo: Yeah. I was thinking—because you actually did mention something else, and I'll prompt you with it, too—one of the questions was, what are the changes in your style over the years. I think that taking me through that timeline, actually, you already answered that question. And they did occur with changes in your life. But one of the last two questions— in what ways does your style open or restrict your
ideas about the world. In the last interview—I actually do have this down because I think it's an interesting quote—you said something about how your style opens people's views, which you say it is. But you also said something about regular interactions with vulnerable people.

Participant-2: With what?
Arroyo: Vulnerable people.
Participant-2: Oh. What does that mean?
Arroyo: If I do remember this part of the interview, I think this is the part of the interview where you were discussing, in a way your style opens because regular people who don't consider—
Participant-2: Oh, like they can feel more vulnerable with me?
Arroyo: Yes.
Participant-2: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah because that's when you said that, "When you started doing femme, your therapy got better because your clients felt more comfortable with you."
Arroyo: Yeah, that was it, actually. [Both laugh.]
Participant-2: Yeah, no. That's totally it. I think that's totally true. There is a kind of—so there's the people who ogle at me and are trying to figure that out, but—I say ogle, but it's like they're not really. A lot of times it's that they're actually—sometimes the way they look at me, I feel like they're searching for themselves in me.
Arroyo: Could you speak more to that?
Participant-2: It's just a curious but also like—there's just that moment when you see something, and it's like, "Oh, I've always wanted that. I've always wanted to do that." I didn't realize it until now, but I feel like I sometimes get from people that I'm making them realize that there's a way that they're uncomfortable or feel constrained in their gender performance and what's expected of them and that they would like to be freer, I guess. And here I am being free like that. So there's a kind of, "Oh, you know. I could've had that." There's an identification with that. There's a piece of me who wants to be like that too. So I think that's what I was thinking about when I see people who would sometimes be vulnerable with me. Because they feel more comfortable being their full selves because they know they can bring everything to me because I'm obviously cool with whatever, you know? And so it's a kind of yeah—I don't know. It's a kind of like a camaraderie that sometimes occurs from people that I would have had no idea to understand, to expect it.
Arroyo: It sounds like even though our ideas about gender might be restricting that, in some ways, dressing this way or dressing in a more genderqueer style has allowed you to see openness and vulnerability in others where there's potential for change.
Participant-2: I think so.
Arroyo: I guess the final question is: do you feel comfortable in the world with your style?
Participant-2: Yeah.
Arroyo: Yeah? What contributes to that feeling?
Participant-2: Other femmes.
Arroyo: Other femmes?
Participant-2: Other people doing high femme, doing femme; solidarity; acknowledgment of celebrating, creating space and sharing space rather than controlling space or taking it. I think, yeah, that's pretty much—that is what—

Arroyo: Okay. So, I guess that was kind of—I know last time you did speak a little bit more—there was some trans things that came up. I think that actually came up when you spoke about the bathrooms earlier as well.

Participant-2: Oh.

Arroyo: We got the whole—

Participant-2: I know because last time, somehow, I told the story about when I went out with [name redacted].

Arroyo: Yeah.

Participant-2: Because that was really funny to you. Do we need that on tape?

Arroyo: Sure. Why not?

Participant-2: Because it was such a good story. I took my friend [name redacted], who has cerebral palsy and is trans-feminine. We were going to go out dancing. It was a Friday night, I think, or a Saturday—I can't remember—after, a slammer down on [street name—redacted]. That's where all the clubs are. We're trying to walk down to—maybe it was Pride—some queer dance that was happening a block and a half away from where we were. But she has cerebral palsy, so she has a scooter—what's it called, a walker?

Arroyo: Yeah, a walker.

Participant-2: And so I remember that people were bustling like crazy. She's from Baltimore, and she's totally fine, totally comfortable with it. But I started freaking out because of my accident experience, actually, because I had a walker for six months or something like that. It was a scary time for me when I had the walker because I knew that if I fell and hit my head, they told me that there was actually a good chance that I could die because of swelling. It was such a severe injury that if it swells again before you can, basically, get your skull cut off, you could die or have serious re-injury.

So anytime I went somewhere in public, I was very aware of how life-threatening it was to be walking around. That was not the case for [friend—name redacted]. It was not life-threatening for her. But it was super crowded, like drunk people pushing everywhere. So, she told me, "Oh, you can walk in front of me." So I was wearing a dress and heels and was walking in front of her. I had my face made up and wearing some big earrings. And, people were like—but I was walking like me, like I'm a guy. So people were really ridiculous. They were really put out. And if I was like, "Hey, excuse me. Excuse me," they would sometimes freak out and push me out of the way or be like, "What!" and all kinds of—I was like, "I don't really care. I'm just going to push through." I went to [university name redacted], and I know how to deal with bros and. And [friend—name redacted] just loved it because they would go past me and exchange looks with her. She was like, "They saw me as your normal friend who had to put up with this freak," you know? And she, being trans-woman and being disabled, experiences extreme levels of harassment on the street on a regular basis. She's like, "That's never happened"; she's never just been treated as a human being, but me going in front
of her allowed that to happen. So she loved it, and I was like, "Yeah, that's my job".
I think that that’s also a major impetus for me feeling comfortable is that I understand the ways that I can be an ally and be in solidarity with other femmes because I have a get-out-of-jail free card anytime. If someone's uncomfortable with me, I just bro up, and they suddenly become totally fine with how I'm dressing or what I'm doing because I'm not trying to be a woman. And so I want to use that privilege basically to create space, to be able to celebrate and to make femme be okay and celebrated.

Arroyo: I agree. So, I think I can go ahead and stop the recording. I think we got everything. Actually, it was shorter. It was 15 minutes shorter. [Both laugh.]