

The Gender Playground: Co-Creating Gender Through Play and Performance

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Abstract

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This thesis reviews the literature on theories of human development, gender identity and development, and play. I argue against prescriptive, colonial, stage-based theories of gender and development, which constrict them to binary dichotomies and activities that merely occur in childhood. I instead recast gender and development as life-span, fluid activities. This thesis adopts a sociocultural, social therapeutic, performative, “gender playground” lens, offering play and performance as activities with revolutionary potential for reimagining gender in new and liberatory ways, and outlines three interrelated areas of activity that can support gender play and exploration in people throughout the life span. These activities are a social therapeutic community, gender art, and theatrical gender play. By playing with gender in safe, co-created, social environments, we can create beyond the gender binary to liberate and connect us all in new, revolutionary ways.

Keywords: Gender, gender playground, human development, play, imaginative play, social therapeutics, queer, performativity, identity

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Note about Style

In this thesis I have made some unconventional, some would say bold, style decisions regarding language and grammar. For the avoidance of doubt, I'm explaining these decisions here.

As you have already observed, I am using "I statements" in this thesis because this work is deeply personal to me and my presence in the work is critical. To cut myself out would go against the ethos of what this thesis is trying to do and would deny the reality that no researcher is separate from their research. I will be using personal anecdotes and stories from my life to inform and ground the literature and research.

I'm also choosing to use contractions and other so-called casual language in this thesis. I have three interrelated reasons for this. The first is because the standards of academic writing are inherently colonial, white supremacist, and racist, and my work is seeking to undermine and challenge those institutions. The second is because I want to preserve my voice in the work and nobody speaks like an academic paper in real life. The third is that I want this work to be comfortable for you, the reader! I want everyone to be able to interact with this work, and I want it to be easy to read. I believe that academia should be accessible to as many people as possible, and purposefully making something verbose and difficult to understand undermines that value. The ideas that I'm putting forth in this thesis are too revolutionary and important to be trapped inside the proverbial academic ivory tower.

Glossary

Cisgender: An individual whose gender identity aligns with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Development: The process of growing or becoming.

Gender and sex: Separate but interrelated concepts. Gender describes identity and socially constructed aspects of behavior and the body, and sex describes only the way our society categorizes the material body. In Western society an individual's biological sex is usually designated male, female, or intersex by medical professionals depending on the physical and hormonal layout of their body (Zielsman, 2017). Gender, on the other hand, manifests on the body through choices and behavior such as clothing, accessories, body language, voice, inflection, names and pronouns, hairstyle, and makeup (Butler, 1993).

Heterosexual: An individual who experiences sexual attraction to those of a different gender than the gender they identify with.

Intersex: An individual whose physical sex characteristics don't align with the binary medical model of sex.

Native: People and cultures who predate Euro-American colonialism. Native people are uniquely oppressed by white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, and transphobia, and many Native groups have their own conceptualizations of gender.

Nonbinary: An individual whose gender identity isn't 100% female or 100% male.

Perisex: An individual whose physical sex characteristics align with the binary medical model of sex.

Person of Color: Any person who isn't white.

Pretend Play/Imaginative Play: Interchangeable terms to describe play that is performative, co-created, and imaginative, such as playing pretend, chess, or Dungeons and Dragons.

Queer: An umbrella term. Anyone who is not heterosexual and cisgender can and may identify as queer. Queer also refers to an area of study that constantly presses, interrogates, and reinvents the boundaries of personhood, academia, gender, and sexuality.

Sexuality: Sexual attraction or lack thereof. Everyone has their own attractions and desires, some based on gender or sex and some not. Some examples of sexualities are heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, and asexual.

They/them/theirs/themself: These pronouns will be used as the default pronoun for all people, unless the person has pronouns that are otherwise specified, or illustration of a particular gender identity is required. Switching between male and female pronouns or using conventions such as she/he or s/he reinforce the gender binary and undermine the offers made available in this thesis. By using they/them pronouns instead, we can avoid feeding into binary ideas and acknowledge the infinite diversity of the human experience. Example from the text: “This enables **them** to also see **themselves** and the world as multiple systems. **They** can understand now that **they** are a member of **their** family, **their** community, **their** town, **their** state, and **their** country all at once” (p. 18).

Transgender: An individual whose gender identity differs from the gender they were assigned at birth.

Transphobia: Prejudice against transgender people and transness.

Western: An umbrella term for white colonial, capitalist, Euro-American, hegemonic values, culture, and places.

Introduction

On May 6th, 2016, I sat down in Pierce College Puyallup's "Connection Café," a space with no actual café, that usually housed dozens of comfortable chairs, some ottomans, and students doing homework and socializing. Today, the chairs had been carefully reorganized and a stage had been set up. I, as one of the event coordinators, sat at the front. There was an anxious tension in the air as the then-president of the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) flitted between the gender-neutral bathroom downstairs and the stage above, veiling their disappointment in the early turnout with persistent smiling and chatting with the few who had shown up. When the time arrived, they stepped onstage in a suit and carefully done contouring makeup, kicking off the drag show with a passionate, exuberant, completely amateur performance. I admired their bravery, and hoped I'd be confident enough to participate someday. Their energy filled the space, and as the music echoed through the building and more people came to see what was going on, the seats filled. The show, a mix of professional and student drag performers, was fun, exciting, and creative, and in the positive, liberated atmosphere, even the most stoic of my fellow students were smiling, laughing, and applauding.

A professional drag king took the stage in the middle of the show, performing a fun, exaggerated masculinity that also had its own femininity to it. He engaged with the audience, making people laugh or blush, and they played along too. I laughed and applauded, and he grinned and winked at me. The yearning that overcame me that moment was something that I'd never allowed myself to experience openly before. Not a desire *for* the drag King, but a desire to *be* them. Or at least, to be like them. But I was twenty years old! If I was transgender, surely I would know it already! I did my best to dismiss it, but that yearning tugged at the back of my mind long after the event ended. It wasn't until almost two years later that I came out to myself

and others as nonbinary, but the energy and environment of the drag show was what pulled down my barriers and allowed me to feel and, crucially, *recognize* the possibility for the first time.

My conversations with other queer and transgender people over the years have shown me that many of us have had experiences similar to my drag show experience. Drag shows, theater productions, avatar-based video games, and playing house are all examples of activities I and my friends associated with development of our gender identities, and they're all activities that are, to varying degrees, playful and imaginative and that involve others, whether they are physical others or digital representations of others. Curious, I delved deeper into the literature, and came to some conclusions. In this thesis I make five main arguments:

1. That the above and other playful, imaginative, social activities offer spaces for people to explore and co-create their genders throughout the life span.
2. That by engaging with our genders in this way we subvert society's current understanding of gender as static, binary, biologically enforced, and universal (see Freud, 1961; Kohlberg, 1966; Risman, 2004).
3. That society's rigid understanding of gender is restrictive, harmful, and unnecessary (see Butler, 1990; Taylor, 2018).
4. That many contemporary understandings of human development and gender identity reinforce that harmful perspective (e.g, Bem, 1981; Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1961; Kohlberg, 1966; Piaget, 1962).
5. Using the previous arguments as a foundation, we can work together to co-create playful, theory-informed practices that empower us to explore and embody new concepts of gender, gender identity, and gender performance that is liberatory and empowering.

This thesis is divided into five chapters, each of which illustrates a different, interrelated facet of these arguments. Chapter 1 focuses on human development, Chapter 2 on gender identity development, Chapter 3 on play as development and queerness' relationship to development and play throughout the lifespan, Chapter 4 on why playing with gender is important and revolutionary, and Chapter 5 on some of the revolutionary possibilities that reconceptualizing gender identity presents to all of us. It took a long time for me to view my gender identity as something that could be a source of joy and transformation rather than a source of pressure and shame, and as you'll soon see, that feeling of pressure started young. It's my hope that this thesis will help empower all of us and our communities to liberate ourselves from the pressure of normative perspectives of gender, and to embrace new possibilities for who we can be and who we can become.

Chapter 1 – Overview of Developmental Theory

When I was ten years old, we moved to Puyallup, Washington and I joined a Girl Scout troop. I'd wanted desperately to join Scouts since I'd learned I was old enough, and now that we lived somewhere with an active troop, my parents had finally been able to sign me up. As the only homeschooled member of the troop, I had some difficulty fitting in with the other girls. They talked and laughed about their classes, teachers, school friends, boys they had crushes on, and shows they'd seen. My parents had pulled the plug on our cable subscription years ago, and while I had friends, I didn't see them every day. As for boys? The idea of romantic attraction of any kind was alien to me. They talked about their beauty routines and were mystified when I had no answer to the question of my own. I wondered if perhaps I was just a different kind of girl than they were. Or maybe I wasn't good enough at being a girl? I didn't have pierced ears like them, I didn't dress like them, I didn't like what they liked... it had to be a problem with me.

Every few months we went on an outing together, and I wasn't particularly looking forward to our next one. I had been in the minority who had voted to go camping instead. I chose to go because I wanted to get the patch for participating, but when my parents dropped me off at the school parking lot that Saturday morning and we loaded into my troop leader's van, I felt myself wishing I'd stayed behind. I sat by the window and watched the scenery, enjoying the experience of riding in the car as much as I was able. The girls didn't really engage with me, and I was okay with that. My thoughts were more pleasant than having to answer questions about things I had no interest in or understanding of. It was like they were speaking another language that I just couldn't parse. Maybe there was something wrong with me? After an hour of wondering and yearning for home, we arrived at a mall. We all got out and stretched our legs before heading inside.

We arrived at a storefront that had the pinkest carpet I'd ever seen. As we stepped inside unpleasant pop music filled my ears, and black, pink, zebra print, cheetah print, tiger print, and sparkles assaulted my eyes. An employee in a black dress and pink apron came to us with a smile on her face. "Hello, girls!" I joined the clamor of "hellos," but I felt that she was addressing the others, not me. "Come right this way and we'll start your makeovers!"

We were taken to the back of the store, to changing rooms, and given new clothes to wear. They had to give me the largest size available, which I desperately tried to hide from the others. In the dressing room, I stared at the garment uneasily. There was a lot less fabric on this than the clothes I'd come in with, and it looked uncomfortable. But everyone else was putting on theirs and having fun. This was fun, right? I put the clothes on and forced myself to smile in the mirror. My midriff and legs were almost fully exposed, and as I looked at myself it was both alarming and disconcerting. This didn't feel good. It felt wrong. Like a costume, or perhaps a caricature. But the others were giggling and having a good time... *there must really be something wrong with me. Maybe I'm just not mature enough?* I wondered.

I stepped out of the changing room and used my arms to cover my stomach, hovering by the edge of the group. I was itchy and uncomfortable in my costume. We were led to another part of the store and sat down on black leather stools at pink beauty stations with zebra print accents. A few employees covered our faces in sparkly eye shadow and sparkly pink lip gloss, and painted our nails in vivid, sparkly colors. They clipped fake earrings onto my earlobes, which pinched painfully. They offered me a choice of five hair accessories, and I selected orange. They stuck it in my hair, along with a second purple one, and someone told me to smile for a camera. I was itchy, uncomfortable, sticky, and sore in my costume, but I smiled anyway.

I was relieved when we had to return the clothes at the end of our visit. My \$5 of spending money was insufficient to buy anything more than my hair clips, so I browsed the gift shop to pass the time rather than to shop. When I finally got home that afternoon I rushed to take a shower, scrubbing the remains of my costume off of my face and washing it down the drain. I got out of the shower and changed into pajamas, then looked at myself in the mirror. “Why can’t you just be a normal girl?” I asked my reflection.

As time went on, I continued trying to shape myself into the girl I felt I was supposed to be. I emulated my Scout sisters to the best of my ability, wearing tight clothes and skirts and trying to get into what the other girls were into, like makeup and boy bands. It felt bad and unnatural, like the costume I’d worn during the Scout trip, but if I didn’t do it, I was sure they’d never accept me. I believed wholeheartedly that I had a deficit. Inborn or learned, it didn’t matter: I wasn’t correct. I wasn’t developing the way a young woman should, and I had to do something to fix it, or else I’d be an outcast forever. In my search for explanations and solutions to my problem, I turned to psychology.

The field of psychology has put substantial work into the study of human development, and many well-known psychologists have built theories, frameworks, and careers out of attempts to explain it. I was largely disappointed by what I found contained within those frameworks: many developmental theories take on viewpoints and make claims that perpetuate rigid, universalist, limiting, and prescriptive ideas of how human development happens that are deeply rooted in Western perspectives and capitalist ideals (Driskill, 2018; Holzman, 2018; Sandel, 2012). Psychology’s prescriptive orientation was a perfect place for a young Morgan Pasquier to deepen their insecurities: most of what I learned only reinforced my fears that I was defective. It wasn’t until many years later at the Pierce College drag show that I finally began to wonder if

maybe I didn't *have* to be a girl, and several years after that when I discovered another perspective on human development that helped to free me from my fears that I was somehow defective or broken.

We will overview the landscape of human developmental theory in psychology by exploring four of the most prominent theorists and the frameworks they built to describe development: Freud's psychosexual theory (1961), Erikson's psychosocial theory (1963), Piaget's cognitive theory (1962), and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978). Each of these theorists will be discussed in turn. At the end of the chapter, we'll bring together everything we explored and discuss some of the implications and possibilities we discovered.

Sigmund Freud – Psychosexual Theory

Sigmund Freud's psychosexual theory has five stages, which focus on sexual energy, or libido, and its expression in various places in the body (McKinney, 2010). The stages are oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital. Once a stage has been resolved an individual moves to the next one and should never go through them backwards: development is a one-way street. Movement through the stages is accompanied by different losses and challenges that the individual must reconcile to grow up healthily and normally. These challenges are between what the individual desires and what society considers acceptable behavior: for instance, a child might desire their parents' power in the household but be disallowed from or unable to acquire it. In a Freudian lens, development occurs the same way in all people: it is universal. Departures from Freud's universal norms are viewed as pathologies that need to be cured or resolved in order to live a healthy and well-adjusted life.

Oral

The oral stage occurs during early infancy, from birth up until around 1 year old. During this stage, the infant derives pleasure primarily from the mouth and lips, engaging in activities such as sucking, mouthing, tasting, swallowing food, biting, and chewing to achieve pleasure and sexual release. The process of weaning from breastfeeding is a major source of conflict in this stage, and the loss of this security and intimacy is the first real experience of loss the infant has. At the same time the infant begins to understand that they don't control their environment, and they are exposed to the idea of delayed gratification for the first time. To resolve the conflict between their desires and the environment, the infant has to receive a balance of delayed and instant gratification. If this balance isn't struck, Freud believed that it would result in the development of personality traits like materialism, sarcasm, rudeness, cruelty, and an unhealthy dependence on others and their approval (McKinney, 2010). By mastering delayed gratification, the infant forms the basis of independence and trust.

Anal

The anal stage occurs between the ages of 1-3, coinciding with toilet training. The activity of gaining bowel control and the pain and pleasure associated with moving one's bowels become the toddler's primary source of pleasure and release. This stage is also associated with the toddler's growing sense of independence and self, and Freud believed that the way that toilet training is handled by the toddler's parents would have far-reaching repercussions throughout their life. Harsh and punitive training approaches would result in selfishness, stinginess, and an unhealthy relationship to anger and its expression. This was described as "anal-retentive" (McKinney, 2010, p. 1366). Gentler and positively-oriented training approaches, on the other hand, would lead the toddler to develop more generosity and creativity, but would also lead to issues with disorganization and a disinclination towards following rules. This was described as

“anal-expulsive” (McKinney, 2010, p. 1366). If the toddler’s toilet training is supportive and balanced between permissive and punitive, the stage resolves.

Phallic

The phallic stage takes place between the ages of 3-5. As the child begins to explore their body, they discover masturbation and genital pleasure (McKinney, 2010). This is where Freud’s Oedipus and Electra complexes begin: the child experiences attraction towards their opposite-sex parent and begins to regard their same-sex parent as competition for their opposite-sex parent’s affection. Young boys fear that their fathers will castrate them in retaliation, while young girls view themselves as already castrated, for which they blame their mother, and develop what Freud (1961) termed penis envy: envy of their father’s male organ and “favored position and power” (McKinney, 2010, p. 1366). Suppression of sexual urges towards the opposite sex parent and moving from viewing their same sex parent as competition to identifying with them resolves these complexes. Failure to resolve this stage and the Oedipus/Electra complex would result in homosexuality or other abnormal gender and sexual expressions, such as ‘mama’s boys,’ ‘daddy’s girls,’ and seeking sexual partners that resemble the individual’s opposite-sex parent later in life (Freud, 1961).

Latent

The latent stage occurs from age 5 until puberty, during which no further psychosexual development occurs. This stage is viewed as the transitory period between childhood and adolescence (Freud, 1961), and sexual drives are dormant at this time. Because of this dormancy, the child can’t accomplish the same gratification that they could in the previous three stages. To compensate, they derive pleasure from external activities like school, hobbies, friends, and other extracurricular activities. According to Freud, my desire to engage with Scouts and to fit in with

my peers may have been fueled by a need for gratification because my sexual drives were dormant. My anxiety around my peers and my disconnection from femininity, like other Freudian neuroses, may have been viewed by Freud as either a failure to resolve the Oedipus/Electra complex in the phallic stage, or a failure to direct my energy towards acceptable external activities (Freud, 1961).

Genital

When the child reaches puberty they enter the final stage, termed the genital stage. They resume masturbation as a sexual outlet, and their sexual drives and attraction shifts from their opposite-sex parent to peers of roughly the same age (Freud, 1961). At first this attraction is towards individuals of the same sex, but it quickly shifts towards the opposite sex as the teen continues to develop. Once they reach adulthood, their psychosexual urges, which until now has been expressed in self-pleasuring and other narcissistic behaviors, may now manifest as “altruism, friendship, sharing, and loving of a more adult nature” (McKinney, 2010, p. 1366). The young adult is seen as a fully developed person at this point: my experience at the drag show should not have affected me the way it did in a Freudian perspective and may be viewed as a developmental aberration. Psychoanalysis left me feeling more broken than ever, but I decided to dig deeper. I moved on to one of Freud’s protégés.

Erik Erikson – Psychosocial Theory

Erik Erikson’s (1963) psychosocial theory has eight stages, named for a particular crisis or struggle that the developer must go through to advance to the next stage. Each crisis has two possible outcomes, indicating whether the individual succeeds in overcoming the struggle or not (Maier, 1969). As in Freud’s theory, development is one way. The stages are Trust vs. Mistrust, Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, Initiative vs. Guilt, Industry vs. Inferiority, Identity vs.

Confusion, Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generativity vs. Stagnation, and Integrity vs. Despair. Unlike psychosexual theory, which views development as centering around sexuality and libido (Freud, 1961), psychosocial theory views development as centered on social interactions and experiences with others. These experiences, combined with biological factors, facilitate the movement between developmental stages. Erikson's psychosocial theory breaks from Freud's theory because it views development as a lifespan activity rather than something that ceases in adulthood (Erikson, 1963). The first five stages occur during infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and closely mirror Freud's five psychosexual stages, as Erikson was a student of psychosexual theory (Erikson, 1963). The last three stages occur throughout adulthood. According to Erikson, the goal/intention of development is to achieve competence on an individual level, and to contribute positively to our communities and society throughout life (Erikson, 1963).

Trust vs. Mistrust

Erikson's first stage occurs from birth to about 1-1.5 years old (Maier, 1969). Because an infant's first social experiences are primarily based on physical contact, in order to develop trust they must be given physical comfort and as little fear or uncertainty as possible. If the infant feels confident and trusting that their physical and emotional needs are met, they can then extend that trust to new experiences. If they cannot, they may become apprehensive and fearful of new experiences and/or interactions (Maier, 1969).

Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

Once the child has achieved a sense of trust or become mistrustful, they move on to the second stage (Erikson, 1963). This stage occurs during toddlerhood and centers on the toddler's budding sense of individuality and autonomy. This stage of life often centers on toilet training

and accumulation of other skills and behaviors that allow them further self-determination, such as choosing their clothes, toys, or food preferences. If the toddler is nurtured through these experiences, they will develop a sense of autonomy and personal control. On the other hand, if they are punished or humiliated for accidents, they may develop feelings of shame, doubt, and be left without a sense of personal control (Erikson, 1963).

Initiative vs. Guilt

The third stage occurs between the ages of 3-5. Now that the child has accomplished a sense of autonomy, they begin to exert that autonomy and power on the world around them, and monitor and regulate their own behavior (Erikson, 1963). The child also begins working to create relationships with peers at this age. Successful assertion of power and control over themselves and their environment will lead to a sense of purpose, while experiences of disapproval, and failure to achieve self-regulation and responsibility in this stage will lead to feelings of guilt, paralysis, and overcompensation by way of showing off (Erikson, 1963).

Industry vs. Inferiority

The fourth stage is focused on the 5–11-year-old's budding sense of accomplishment and competence. They begin seeking approval through producing things and gain an appreciation and enjoyment of work and completing tasks. If they are encouraged and praised by parents, teachers, and peers, they will come out of this stage with a sense of competence. If they don't receive encouragement, however, they will doubt their own abilities and feel inferior and incapable, particularly relative to their peers. This can lead to social difficulties, and being unprepared for school and work (Erikson, 1963). Erikson might have viewed my ten-year-old self's struggles with my Scout siblings as the result of insufficient approval from authority

figures and peers, or insufficient accomplishments in my life: for instance, my failure to accomplish a “correct” performance of girlhood.

Identity vs. Role Confusion

Stage five takes place during puberty and the teenage years, 12-18. During this stage the teen begins to form their sense of personal identity and self, including their gender identity, and further explore and test the limits of their independence. For instance, as I became a teenager and grew more comfortable with my troop I began to identify strongly as a Girl Scout, and it became a core part of my self-image. If the teen receives encouragement and healthy reinforcement, they will complete their adolescence with a strong sense of self, a strong identity, and feelings of independence and control over their lives. If they remain uncertain about themselves and their identity, they will feel insecure, confused, and anxious about their future and themselves (Erikson, 1963). My experience at the Pierce College drag show would seem to fit into this stage.

Intimacy vs. Isolation

The sixth stage occurs during early adulthood, approximately 18-40. During this stage the young adult begins forming intimate, committed relationships with others (Erikson, 1963). If they are successful in building these relationships, they will come out of their young adulthood with the ability to form meaningful and enduring relationships with others. A sense of identity is seen as critical to the ability to form meaningful relationships, so if the young adult went through stage 5 without achieving one this goal is much more difficult to accomplish. If they fail to cultivate these relationships, they will likely struggle with emotional issues like loneliness and depression (Erikson, 1963).

Generativity vs. Stagnation

Stage seven occurs during middle adulthood, ages 40-65. During this stage the adult works to secure a legacy of some kind, whether it be through having children or having some other positive impact on the world (Erikson, 1963). Success in this stage results in a feeling of contribution to their community, and a sense of pride, connection, and unity. Failure results in a feeling of stagnation, disinvolvement with the community and the world at large, and disconnection from the self (Erikson, 1963).

Integrity vs. Despair

The final, eighth stage occurs during late life, age 65 to death, while the elder spends their time reflecting on their life and processing it (Erikson, 1963). They may look back on their life with satisfaction and happiness or regret and sadness. If they feel fulfilled and satisfied with the life that they have lived, they will gain wisdom and a sense of security in their old age. If they are regretful, they will feel bitter and despairing about a life that they feel they've wasted (Erikson, 1963).

I was pleased that this theory provided a life-span view of development that supported, to some degree, the developmental potential of my drag show experience, but its roots in psychosexual theory, and its intense level of organization and constraint made me decide to move on to a third, very different lens on psychology:

Jean Piaget – Cognitive theory

Jean Piaget had a personal preference for the study of intellectual pursuits over emotional development, which he phrased as “the tricks of the unconscious” (as cited in Maier, 1969, p. 76). Piaget was an early proponent of the idea that children’s minds work differently from adults’, and that children are active in their own learning (Maier, 1969). He believed that development was universal and transcended culture and context: a child in America develops the

same way as a child in Uganda and a child in Germany do, no matter what (Maier, 1969). His theory approached development from a different angle than Freud (1961) or Erikson (1963), focusing on the development of the individual's cognitive abilities.

Piaget's theory sees development as leading learning: as a child develops biologically, and their brain becomes more cognitively complex, they can reach new levels of learning and knowledge. Individual experiences are fundamentally subjective, rooted in the conception of the person (Maier, 1969). The individual develops through two interrelated processes known as assimilation and accommodation. Through assimilation the individual adapts the environment to themselves, and through accommodation they adapt themselves to the environment (Maier, 1969). These processes always work together, each balancing out the force of the other, and cannot occur independently.

The knowledge and understanding that we build from our activities are organized into categories called *schema/schemata*, which are defined as "A behavioral unit which can be repeated and coordinated with others" (Maier, 1969, p. 96). Schemata can vary greatly in size and complexity. Let's take a schema for a dog as an example. We understand that dogs, generally, have a series of attributes that can be reliably applied to them. They have four legs, a tail, and fur. They bark, they lick. They're usually brown, black, white, gray, or some combination of those colors. All of these attributes are organized in the brain under the schema called *dog*. If we see enough of them manifested in one animal, we recognize it as a dog, and the schema for dog evokes the attributes and experiences that we've had that also fit that schema. If we have specific memories or experiences involving dogs, they will also be attached to this schema (Maier, 1969).

We build and prune our schemas through assimilation and accommodation. For instance, if a child sees an animal with four legs and registers it as a *dog*, their schema for dog expands to add that animal: this is assimilation, because the animal is being *assimilated* to the child's existing understanding. If someone points out to the child that the animal is actually a cat, not a dog, their schema for dog shrinks to exclude that animal: this is accommodation, because the child is *accommodating* their schemas to the new information. It's worth noting that when the child accommodates the fact that the cat is not a dog to their dog schema, they also assimilate the fact that the cat is a cat to their cat schema (Maier, 1969). This is an example of how assimilation and accommodation always work together.

Piaget's (1962) cognitive theory is divided into four stages, focusing on markers of the cognitive abilities of the developing individual. These stages are sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. While the stages are generally mapped to ages, Piaget stressed that the order of succession is more important than when and how long the stages manifest (Maier, 1969).

Sensorimotor

Piaget's first stage is the sensorimotor stage, which lasts from birth to about 2 years old. The infant's primary task is to master their bodies: during this time they develop their reflexes such as crying, sucking, and controlling their breathing, gain mastery of their senses, a rudimentary understanding of patterns and order, and an understanding of their relationship with their environment. For the infant, schemata are still simple and unrefined: for example, if they see a cat, but only have a simple schema for dog, they'll probably assign the cat to the dog category. After all, cats also have four legs, a tail, ears, and fur. Later, as their cognitive faculties

develop and their schemata become more plentiful and refined, their categorizations will become more accurate (Maier, 1969).

Assimilation and accommodation begin as the infant comes to understand that they can manipulate their environment, and they grasp the concept of cause-and-effect. As the infant reaches their second year of life and they become more engaged in their ever-widening environment, new experiences put pressure on them to engage in more accommodation than they've ever had to before. They learn that there are causes and effects that are independent from them, that other people are autonomous actors in the world, and that they are an actor in the world as well. Their focus on actual physical experiences gradually shifts towards reflection about the experiences, thus advancing and deepening their cognitive processes and moving the infant into Piaget's second stage (Maier, 1969).

Preoperational

The preoperational stage occurs approximately between the ages of 2-7 years old. The toddler continues the exploration and experimentation that they have been engaging in since the beginning, but in more sophisticated ways. During this stage the child uses language in thought and reflection/projection of events, and in communication, though they do not fully comprehend the frameworks of language and meaning that adults do. According to Piaget, speech is the direct projection of thoughts into the social world (Maier, 1969). The child will also begin to imitate others with the intention of mirroring or acquiring their values or roles.

During this time the toddler is still "egocentric" (Maier, 1969, p. 109), locating themselves as the center of the world around them. Their previous experiences dictate their perception of reality, and they assume that everyone else thinks, feels, and operates in the same way that they do. Assimilation is the primary activity of the child during this phase, as they incorporate new

experiences into their view of the world and how it works. The child still only has the capacity to think about one thing at a time, which restricts their ability to think in terms of the whole: they can only focus on individual parts, or the whole, and can't consider both concurrently. Piaget termed this centration (Maier, 1969). A classic example of this is a child focusing only on the height of a vessel to determine its volume, rather than its height, depth, and breadth together, and therefore falsely identifying a tall, thin vessel as having a larger volume than a short, wide one (Maier, 1969).

The child's egocentricity decreases as they start to interact socially with other people regularly. They begin to use words in their internal thought processes and start comparing and coordinating perspectives other than their own. At this stage in development the child perceives the rest of the world in more complex terms, now recognizing multiple aspects of objects such as their color, form, and utility (Maier, 1969). These aspects are considered absolute, enduring, and universal. They understand the idea of binary absolutes like best and worst but can't consider relativity or rankings more complex than that. To the child, for example, you're either a good person or a bad person, brave or a coward, good at something or bad at something, or a boy or a girl. This devotion to binary absolutes also means that certain people and things always hold the same characteristics, like a princess is always beautiful or the sky is always blue (Maier, 1969). This static reasoning and irreversibility is described by Piaget as "immediate, illegitimate generalization" (as cited in Maier, 1969, p. 118).

Concrete operational

The third stage, concrete operational, occurs between the ages of 7-12. The child loses their egocentrism and becomes sociocentric, now able to see things from perspectives other than their own, and achieves what Piaget terms "operational thought" (Maier, 1969, p. 125).

Operational thought is the ability to order and relate their experiences to a whole, so long as the child can understand the logic of their mental operations. They will become interested in classifying the objects they encounter, organizing their classification systems hierarchically. My struggle in the beginning of the chapter might be caused by a skewed classification of “girl” to a Piagetian perspective: my conclusion that I was performing girlhood incorrectly would only be valid if my performances weren’t included in my “girl” schema. Expanding my schema for what acceptable girl behavior is may have resolved the issue. The relationships between the child’s individual pieces of knowledge are determined more by their logical connections rather than similarity or overlap in experiences, and the child understands that an object can be categorized into multiple areas simultaneously. This enables them to also see themselves and the world as multiple systems. They can understand now that they are a member of their family, their community, their town, their state, and their country all at once (Maier, 1969).

These changes happen gradually over the course of this stage, starting with things that are familiar and that they interact with frequently and slowly extending to things they’re less directly connected to. They begin to understand constancy and conservation of mass, and their style of reasoning shifts from inductive to deductive, connecting everything to a larger whole and its relationship to it (Maier, 1969). Since Piaget held that knowledge precedes and exists independently from language, the child may not be able to explain or verbalize the understandings and conclusions they come to. Similarly, while the child develops new cognitive skills, they will only manifest on the surface at first: if threatened or put under stress, they will return to inductive reasoning and egocentrism (Maier, 1969). The challenge and stress I experienced at the Scout outing, for instance, may have regressed my cognitive abilities in a Piagetian perspective: if I had been in an environment that felt comfortable to me, I may have

been able to conceptualize the idea that I could be both different from other girls and also still a girl if I wanted to.

Formal operational

Piaget's fourth and final stage occurs approximately between 11-15 years old, as the child matures into an adolescent. Their brain has now developed to a new level of complexity, and they gain the ability to consider abstract ideas completely removed from the physical world and their own internal beliefs (Maier, 1969). They become able to understand and use symbolism and ideas in their thinking, rather than relying solely on reality. Their assimilative and accommodative activities fade into their subconscious and are of little relevance in this stage (Maier, 1969). They become able to understand geometry, proportions, relativity, balance, and "equality between concepts, actions, and reactions" (Maier, 1969, p. 136). Before this stage the child's mind was cognitively inferior to an adult mind.

The youth begins forming hypotheses rather than aimlessly experimenting, and learns to deduce and bring seemingly contradictory or oppositional statements into logical relationships. According to Piaget, at this age I should have been able to understand that I was a girl no matter how I performed, since my girlness was a biological fact: it would be illogical to think otherwise (Kohlberg, 1966). The world becomes homogenous and interconnected, not only through space but through time as well, as an integrated whole (Maier, 1969).

Their language faculties continue to develop as they need more and more advanced terminology to explain the abstract ideas and thoughts they're now able to have. They come to understand that life is restricted to humanity, plants, and animals, and develop a sense of awe and inadequacy in connection to nature, which they understand as all-powerful (Maier, 1969). At around 14-15 years old, the youth's brain reaches intellectual maturity. At this point Piaget holds

that cognitive development ceases (Maier, 1969). As in Freud's (1961) psychosexual theory, my experience at the Pierce College drag show should not have been developmental in a Piagetian sense. The evidence was mounting... was there actually something wrong with me?

Lev Vygotsky – sociocultural theory

When I came across Lev Vygotsky's theory of development in undergraduate school, my hope was rekindled. Rather than the mind existing independently from its surroundings, Vygotskian theory argues that the mind is inextricable from the society it develops in and that each is constantly building, contributing to, and informing the other (Vygotsky, 1978). The local community and culture are seen as critical to human development, and development may look very different from one community to another: there is no such thing as an objective, universal developmental path, or goal. Instead, development is a natural result of the interaction between the individual and their community/society. One cannot learn or grow alone: development and learning only happen in relation to others. The idea that people could develop in different ways, at different rates, and in different directions without anyone being more or less correct than anyone else excited me greatly: it meant that maybe there was nothing wrong with me after all. My experiences could simply be my experiences, and I didn't *have* to compare them against a norm set by someone else.

According to the Vygotskian lens learning and development are not the same thing, but they are inextricably linked: one never happens without the other. For Vygotsky, learning leads development: As we learn, we stretch beyond what we've already developed into and do things we couldn't do before. This process of learning and stretching is what drives development.

Language and dialogue are particularly important in sociocultural theory: language is seen as a tool that shapes and completes thought, rather than simply being an expression of it

(Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky introduced the “Zone of Proximal Development” or ZPD as a model for explaining how development works and its connection to learning (1978, p. 102). To accurately determine a child’s learning capabilities and developmental location, it’s important to look at both what the child can do *alone*, and what the child can do *with others* (Vygotsky, 1978). Through interacting with peers and teachers the child becomes able to perform beyond their developmental abilities and accomplish more. This space that’s beyond what the child can do alone, but within their reach with support from others, is the ZPD. Within this zone, development occurs. If what the child can already do is the fruit of their development, what the child can do within the ZPD would be the bud or flower. By engaging with these fledgling activities, the child and their community can facilitate development and growth with/in each other (Vygotsky, 1978).

A prime example of the ZPD is how children learn to speak. As a baby grows, they begin to experiment with their bodies and its capabilities, and one of the first things that they discover is their vocal cords. As they hear their parents and other members of their community speaking, they start to try to emulate them. Unfettered by their inability to form sentences or even words, or the knowledge of what those things even are, they babble. Babbling, then, is the fruit of their development thus far. But when we’re faced with a babbling baby, we don’t treat their babble like babble. We have a conversation with them, responding to them with words and sentences as if they’re speaking to us with complete mastery of their native language(s). We treat babies as if they are more developed and capable than they are, and the babbling goes from the fruit of their previous development to a bud of potential that can grow further and eventually flower into mindful language use (Vygotsky, 1978).

My experience at the Scouting trip, though unpleasant, was also an example of a ZPD. Without my troop I wouldn't have been able (or inclined) to go and get made up like we did. The environment of my Scout troop, and my desire to participate in and contribute to my community, encouraged me to stretch beyond my comfort zone and perform an activity that I would have never done alone. Even if I didn't enjoy the experience very much, I learned a lot about myself because of it. I was excited to find a perspective that didn't actively pathologize my experiences, but Vygotsky's (1978) work, like Freud (1962) and Piaget's (1961), still didn't consider my experiences as an adult to be developmental. So, what now?

Bringing it together and forward

We've examined four theoretical perspectives on human development from the Western world: psychosexual (Freud, 1961), psychosocial (Erikson, 1963), cognitive (Piaget, 1962), and sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978). Each has a unique way of viewing the human psyche and development. The psychosexual, psychosocial, and cognitive theories all utilize stage-based and qualitative frameworks. According to these theories, development happens in a particular way, in a particular order, all the time or almost all the time, and when it deviates from that it's usually construed as a pathology or problem to be fixed. These frameworks reflect the way I viewed myself at the beginning of my exploration of development. Sociocultural theory, on the other hand, draws on a quantitative, fundamentally social, open model. This model enables us to explore a much wider variety of human experience and ways of existing and being in the world without judging them against some kind of objective measure of how development should happen. In a sociocultural model we are free to develop at any rate and in any direction, to no standards but our own and our communities'.

Interestingly, Erikson's (1962) psychosocial theory is the only theory of these four that considers development to be a life span activity: in psychosexual, cognitive, and sociocultural theory, development ends at some point before or around sexual maturity. According to these theories, my struggles with gender identity should have ended and solidified as my development ended, but that doesn't track with my experiences. Psychosocial theory was the first psychological theory to posit that development continues throughout life, from birth to death (Maier, 1969), which opens the possibility of my drag show experience driving development in me instead of simply being an interesting experience. Even Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which dispenses with most generalizations, doesn't support the idea of development during adulthood.

Though we will be revisiting all these theorists, this thesis will be primarily drawing from the work of Vygotsky and contemporary scholars/activists who draw upon and build with his work. Freud (1961), Erikson (1963), and Piaget's (1962) lenses are limiting, prescriptive, colonialist, universalist, and oriented towards bringing people into alignment with normative standards that they set themselves (Holzman, 2018; Taylor, 2018). Their basic attitude towards human development has infected every aspect of our lives, and they cause the kinds of anxiety, alienation, and self-loathing that I experienced in my youth and adolescence. Even those who do fit with the normative standards set for us feel the constant pressure of remaining so, and that pressure has real impacts on them (Holzman, 2018).

Vygotsky's fluid and sociocultural approach breaks with the limitations and rigidity of the stage-based models of other developmental psychologists, and centers development as a co-created activity. Vygotsky also dispenses with the idea of a separation between the self and others: instead, humans are seen as existing fundamentally in community and relation with the

other humans around them (Vygotsky, 1978). The Vygotskian lens on my Scouting experience was the only one to cast my peers as directly involved in the process of my development, rather than merely a source of aspiration or stress. Instead of making claims of universality sociocultural theory embraces the diversity of human development and experiences, and challenges even the most accepted concepts of learning such as the idea of a separate teacher and student. While its lens on development in adulthood does impose some limitations, they aren't nearly as egregious or intense as its fellow theories' limitations. Sociocultural theory is open-ended and radical, and these aspects and more give it the capacity for revolutionary approaches to human development, particularly around gender.

If I'd had a sociocultural perspective during my Scout outing that I opened this chapter with, I would have been able to understand that my development didn't necessarily have to follow the same path as my peers' development, and that there was nothing wrong with me for feeling discomfort that day. I could have built with my feelings and worked with the group to create an experience that was more comfortable for me, instead of burying them and blaming myself for not existing correctly, and that might have driven more and different development in me and the group that day. By leaving behind the limiting, oppressive, authoritarian perspectives on development and embracing other, fluid, subjective frameworks instead, all of us can co-create new and empowering ZPDs that drive our development throughout the life span, without having to feel ashamed or broken for our diversity. In the next chapter we'll build on what we've learned here to explore some contemporary views of gender identity development.

Chapter 2 – Gender Identity Development

When I was 12 years old my mother brought my little sister, Lindsey, and I to the mall. It was a beautiful sunny day outside, and as we made our way towards one of the many booths that dotted the walkways the sunlight filtered in through the skylight and illuminated the white tile floors with gold. My heart was in my throat, and it felt as if it might flutter right out of my mouth and into the air if I wasn't careful. We stepped out of the light and into the washed-out fluorescent glow of the mall, passing a Hot Topic and an Old Navy. As we arrived at the booth, it seemed as though the sunlight had followed: glittering earrings shone and sparkled under bright white lights, studded with beautiful gems and stones or engraved in shining metals. Lindsey and I admired them while my mother engaged with the woman behind the counter.

“Who's going first?” the clerk asked, and I raised my hand as my heart flipped. I was the eldest girl, and I'd be damned if I let my little sister get her ears pierced before me. At 12, I was already getting to this late: all of my female friends had gotten their ears pierced years ago, and my grandmother couldn't go a single visit without asking me when I was getting it done. I couldn't add to the humiliation by letting Lindsey beat me to it. It had already been bad enough when she'd announced wanting them pierced for her eighth birthday.

“You don't have to get your ears pierced if you don't want to,” my mother had told me many times throughout my life, but I knew she was wrong. Everyone else, from my friends and their parents to strangers at the park to my grandparents and their friends, would ask me when I was going to get it done, sometimes multiple times a visit. An elderly couple gave me a beautiful pair of dangly ruby earrings, a family heirloom, saying, “When you get your ears pierced you can wear these.” I received earrings for holidays and my birthday every year since I turned nine. They had sat, gathering dust, for years in my jewelry box. As time passed the pressure

intensified. Now, at age 12, I understood that getting them pierced was not a choice. And if Lindsey got it done first, I would never live it down. I had to.

I felt disconnected from my body as I climbed into the chair and picked out my starter earrings. These were on a spinning plexiglass display and had no spotlight, and I was disappointed in their lack of dazzle. I selected a pair of aquamarine earrings, pleased to represent my birthstone, and closed my eyes as the clerk and her coworker marked spots on my ears and placed the piercing guns over my earlobes, counting down from three, two, one... *wait, I don't know if I really want to do this--*

Click-click!

I startled and came crashing back into my body as stinging pain radiated out from my earlobes, the left a split-second earlier than the right. Knowing that Lindsey was watching me I kept my jaw clenched and stayed silent. "Alright, all done! That wasn't so bad, right?" the clerk asked. I nodded numbly, climbed out of the chair, and Lindsey took my place. Like mine, her piercing was over quickly. They gave us instructions and supplies for cleaning and aftercare and sent us on our way. My ears throbbed for the next three days.

Within two months of getting my ears pierced my left piercing became badly infected. Then I discovered that I was allergic to most metals, and even the hypoallergenic earrings would irritate my left piercing years after the infection healed. Eventually, as I got older, I stopped wearing earrings entirely because they were uncomfortable, painful, and simply not my style. And gradually over the years the gifts of earrings stopped coming. Today my ear piercings have closed, but the pockmarks of where they used to be will scar my body for the rest of my life. Lindsey, on the other hand, still has a sizable collection of earrings and wears them every day.

Developmental theory had answered many of the questions I'd been wondering about around my experiences, but I felt like there was an aspect of the equation that I was still missing. My "choice" to pierce my ears had certainly been motivated partially by the idea that I was falling behind my younger sister in terms of developmental milestones but piercing one's ears isn't the same thing as learning to speak or understanding abstract thought. It had also been motivated by a desire to affirm my gender identity and my status as an older sister specifically. I decided to look beyond psychology alone for answers and turned to the study of gender identity to start filling in some of the blanks. I was dismayed but not entirely surprised to find that this area, like developmental psychology, was laden with many of its own assumptions and limitations. On the other hand, some of the theories I found, a few of which came from disciplines outside of psychology and gender studies, held enormous revolutionary promise that excited me greatly.

In this chapter we will explore some of the popular views of gender identity and how it develops. To support this exploration, we will examine gender development in three of the developmental theories we examined in Chapter 1: Freud's (1961), Erikson's (1963), and Vygotsky's (1978). We will also explore Kohlberg's (1966) gender constancy theory which builds from Piaget's (1962) work, Bem's (1981) sex role theory, Butler's (1993) performativity theory, and the Native Two-Spirit view of gender (Barker, 2017; Driskill, 2010). Then we will form our own sociocultural, performative, liberatory, anticolonial, life span view of gender identity.

Sigmund Freud – Psychosexual Theory

Sigmund Freud's (1961) theory holds that gender identity, like everything else in the human psyche, develops universally and is intimately connected to sexuality. Gender identity

emerges during Freud's third stage, the phallic stage, when the child begins to identify with their same-sex parent rather than viewing them as competition for the opposite-sex parents' affection. A young girl must identify with and strive to mirror her mother and desire her father, while a young boy must identify with and strive to mirror his father and desire his mother (Freud, 1961). This combination of identification and attraction leads the child to develop their own sense of gender identity. The child learns that boys and girls are fundamentally different from each other, that gender identity is unchanging and solid, and that opposite-sex attraction is natural and healthy (Freud, 1961). They may struggle to accept these realizations. Homosexuality and transgender expression are seen as the result of the child failing to develop correctly. Freud points to faulty parenting during early childhood, especially on the part of the mother, as the cause of this developmental arrest (Freud, 1961). My ongoing questioning of my gender identity, for instance, may have been viewed as having its roots in how my mother chose to raise me, and/or a failure on my part to resolve the Electra complex that we discussed in Chapter 1. According to Freud if I resolved these issues I might become comfortable with a cisgender female identity.

Erik Erikson – Psychosocial Theory

Erik Erikson's views on gender identity were similar to Freud's, in that gender is seen as being directly connected to sexuality. Gender identity begins to develop during the 3rd stage, Initiative vs. Guilt. As in psychosexual theory, children's sexual attraction is directed towards their parents at first. Boys desire their mothers, and girls desire their fathers (Erikson, 1963). Boys and girls are fundamentally different and develop different interests, behaviors, and traits. This is because boys and girls experience the world in fundamentally different ways, as their minds organize themselves according to sex roles (Erikson, 1963). These sex roles are learned

during childhood, through parental training and schooling, and are retained throughout life. Once the adolescent completes Stage 5, Identity vs. Role Confusion, gender identity becomes fixed. Erikson, like Freud, might have viewed my questioning of my gender identity as the manifestation of problems related to my sexuality and my relationship with my parents. Once these were resolved, my gender identity would, presumably, normalize as feminine.

Lev Vygotsky – Sociocultural Theory

While Lev Vygotsky never addresses gender identity explicitly in his work, his stance on development would suggest that he viewed gender identity as developing the same way anything else develops: socioculturally (1978). A person becomes a boy or a girl because their community interacts with and treats them as such: the child develops their gender identity as their parents and peers, consciously or subconsciously, teach them to perform and identify with their assigned gender within a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Teaching a child to perform/identify as a certain gender will look different from culture to culture and doesn't necessarily have to happen at all: it depends on the values of the community they grow up in. Labeling people as men and woman and the associations we make therein are all phenomena that are rooted in culture: there are cultures with five genders (Fausto-Sterling, 1993) and three genders (Nanda, 1999), for instance. In many cases the process of gender identity development is viewed as natural or inevitable, and ironically this assumption of naturalness reinforces how the community engages with the child. The ZPD drives development (Vygotsky, 1978), and because boys and girls are socioculturally designated as such, the skills, traits, and interests they develop within the ZPD may be gendered as well. Vygotsky's perspective may hold that my decision to pierce my ears was influenced by the values of my culture and community.

Lawrence Kohlberg – Gender Constancy

Lawrence Kohlberg's (1966) gender constancy theory is based on Piaget's (1962) cognitive model of development. Gender is viewed as neither reflections of cultural patterns (Mischel, 1966) nor direct reflections of innate aspects of the mind (Freud, 1961) but the result of the child's active structuring of their thoughts and perceptions. This structuring is a direct interaction between the child's environment and their mind, as their experiences with their body and the people around them influence and are informed by their experiences with the environment. As they get older, their gender identity solidifies and becomes constant. For example, if someone takes a young boy and begins raising and treating them as a girl around age 4, such as by calling them by a traditionally female name, dressing them in feminine clothes, and expecting feminine behavior from them, they'll be able to live happily and be well-adjusted to their female identity later in life. But if you do the same thing with an 8-year-old boy, "real maladjustment seems to result" (Kohlberg, 1966, p. 87). This solidification of gender identity is permanent, irreversible, and unchangeable, because gender is a basic cognitive category that cannot be modified.

Sexual attitudes are seen not as being biologically or culturally created/enforced, but the natural result of the child cognitively organizing their social world along gender lines (Kohlberg, 1966). In accordance with Piaget's (1962) views, sex roles' organizational patterns are seen as universal regardless of cultural context. Kohlberg argues that there are several schemata, as we discussed in Chapter 1, that sex roles are mapped and related to. These schemata are "concepts of the body, the physical and social world, and general categories of relationship (causality, substantiality, quantity, time, space, logical identity, and inclusion)" (Kohlberg, 1966, p. 83).

As the child grows and inevitably moves through Piaget's cognitive stages of development, their perception of their and others' gender and sex roles develops as well. Kohlberg mapped these developments to stages that occur during Piaget's (1962) preoperational stage and the beginning of his concrete operational stage. There are three stages of gender development according to Kohlberg: gender identity, gender stability, and gender constancy.

Stage 1: Gender identity

The process of gender identity development according to Kohlberg begins late in the child's second year of life, when they first understand the labels of girl and boy. During this stage they begin to answer the question of whether they're a boy or a girl correctly (that is, in alignment with their assigned sex), and learn that they can also apply gender labels to other people such as their parents, siblings, and peers (Kohlberg, 1966). The gender identity stage coincides with the beginning of Piaget's (1962) preoperational stage and so precedes the ability to categorize, so they may apply gender labels indiscriminately. For instance, they may say that their mother, father, and siblings are all boys or all girls, regardless of their appearance or actual gender.

Stage 2: Gender stability

By the time the child is four years old they become able to identify boys and girls by physical traits like hairstyle and clothing. Their activities are primarily assimilative at this point. Their new ability to discern gender through physical attributes coincides with their developing understanding of physical objects and concepts in general; therefore, if their development of that skill is delayed, interrupted, or they otherwise struggle with it, they will also have difficulty identifying gender markers such as hair length, body type, or voice. They'll be unable to achieve

a stable gender identity until these cognitive processes are fully developed and resolved (Kohlberg, 1966).

Stage 3: Gender constancy

By the age of six or seven, the child's understanding of gender goes deeper than visual indicators. They learn that a girl is always a girl and a boy is always a boy regardless of how they dress, how long their hair is, or how they behave. They understand that if their older sister wears a suit and cuts her hair short, their sister hasn't turned into a boy: she is still a girl no matter what she's wearing or how she looks. This development corresponds with their entry into Piaget's (1962) concrete operational stage, as children grasp Piagetian (1962) conservation; that is, they begin to understand that objects maintain their symbolic meaning even if their physical attributes change. Kohlberg argued that this constancy applies regardless of whether the child has been informed about biological sex differences or not (Kohlberg, 1966).

Sex Roles

Kohlberg held that there are certain symbolic meanings ascribed to sex that apply universally to all humans, and states that there are general dispositions and aspects to sex that manifest naturally as a result of human cognitive development, such as sex roles (Kohlberg 1966). American children perceive their fathers as "more powerful, punitive, aggressive, fearless, instrumentally competent, and less nurturant than females" (Kohlberg, 1966, p. 99) by the age of 5-6, leading Kohlberg to conclude that power and prestige are a major attribute in children's sex role stereotypes, as well as aggression, exposure to danger, and nurturance and childcare. Children also understand that there is a division between maternal, homemaking activities and paternal activities outside the home (Kohlberg, 1966). Kohlberg argues that this understanding of

sex differences isn't due to observation of their parents and peers' behaviors and roles around gender, but because sex differences apply universally regardless of family layout and specific cultural values (Kohlberg, 1966).

Sex-role stereotypes develop due to perceived sex differences in the body's structure and abilities, awareness of differences in familial roles, and the power differences between men and women. According to Kohlberg, children understand that roles of power such as the role of president, policeman, and general, are assigned to males by the age of six or seven. Kohlberg (1966) argues that this tendency of associating power and status with males is found in all cultures. Even though gender constancy is a cognitive theory that does not utilize psychosexual perspectives, he cites the fact that young girls will engage in boy and girl activities while young boys will only engage in boy activities as possible evidence for Freud's (1961) psychosexual concept of penis envy: that young girls desire the power and prestige associated with the male gender and genitalia and resent their mothers for creating them without a penis (Kohlberg, 1966).

Gender constancy theory does have one commonality with psychosexual theory and that is the idea that young children have a hard time accepting genital differences between the sexes as natural. This uncertainty about the constancy of gender and sex is expected to lead to the child experiencing concern about the constancy and integrity of their own body. They may also experience difficulty in accepting "basic anatomical differences between himself and those to whom he is attached... such as his mother or sister" (Kohlberg, 1966, p. 107). Using a cisgender male child as an example, Kohlberg says that a young boy would experience a conflict between his natural tendency to value and identify with people and things similar to him and the fact that his female family and peers are fundamentally different from him. Kohlberg goes on to posit that on a cognitive level, both male and female children would assume the male body to be the

fundamental human form and view the female body as “the negative of the masculine, rather than as a positive entity” (Kohlberg, 1966, p. 107).

Kohlberg argues that experimental data collected from young children demonstrate desire towards being masculine or feminine that exists independently from the desire for social approval, that this desire is independent of sexual orientation, and that gender identity is independent of masculinity and femininity. He also identifies gender identity as the most stable and most enduring social identity (Kohlberg, 1966). According to gender constancy theory neither my drag show experience nor my experience in Scouts were developmental or healthy: my confusion around my gender identity and my impression of gender as something potentially changeable would both be seen as evidence of my failure to develop correctly, and as something in need of curing. It also implies that drag as an activity is fundamentally aberrant, and that the people who engage in it are somehow developmentally broken, incorrect, or otherwise unstable. I found that this theory and its limitations didn't align with my or my peers' experiences.

Sandra Bem – Gender schema theory

Sandra Bem's (1981) work delves deeper into the gender schemas that Kohlberg (1966) and others (Neisser, 1976; Nisbett & Ross, 1980) theorized. Bem, like Kohlberg, argued that all cultures and people organize their cognitive worlds along binary gender lines. Unlike Kohlberg, though, she argued that the specific content of these gender schemas will vary from culture to culture with few if any universal traits for all women and all men (Bem, 1981). According to Bem, the biggest difference between men and women isn't how masculine and/or feminine they are, but whether their self-concepts and behaviors are organized based on gender (Bem, 1981). Bem's research found that men and women organize their schemas the same way, and that cisgender individuals organized their schemas by gender almost 35% of the time in experimental

conditions (Bem, 1981). Conversely, transgender, androgynous, or gender unaffiliated subjects organized their schemas by gender between 27-31% of the time. In other words, a transgender person is less likely to associate things like colors, attributes, or concepts with masculinity or femininity than a cisgender person is, and gender in general tends to be less present in transgender peoples' perceptions than cisgender peoples' perceptions.

Bem goes on to argue that when someone organizes their schemas by gender, their gender-based schemas go beyond their cognitive organization of the outside world: it also dictates how they see themselves. Using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) to measure masculinity, femininity, and gender roles, Bem found that people who strongly identified with masculinity or femininity were faster at deciding whether or not a sex-congruent attribute applied to them than did people with androgynous BSRI scores. Conversely, people who strongly identified with masculinity or femininity were slower at making judgements about attributes that are incongruent with their gender schemas than more androgynous people (Bem, 1981). For instance, if a man who identifies strongly with masculinity is asked if he is tender, he will take longer to respond than if he is asked if he is strong, regardless of whether those attributes apply to him.

Bem argues that heterosexuality is a distinctive subschema within the gender schema, which likely fosters the development of gender-based schema in the first place by facilitating the idea that there are two sexes, which are and should be different from each other (Bem, 1981). Heterosexuality is also one of the primary ways by which people are judged to be sufficiently masculine or feminine. Bem (1981, p. 361) states that "... violation of the prescription to be exclusively heterosexual is sufficient by itself to call into question the individual's adequacy as a man or a woman." The ease with which one's gender and sexual identities can be scrutinized

encourages individuals to reinforce and assert their heterosexuality as much as possible to avoid questioning or becoming a social outcast. My choice to pierce my ears as a child to avoid further scrutiny and harassment from peers is an example: at a mere twelve years old my desire to escape the social pressure I was experiencing was great enough that I permanently altered my body against my own wishes. By piercing my ears and wearing earrings I asserted my femininity and womanhood, and it worked: I was largely left alone after that. People who assert their heterosexuality a lot may develop a tendency to view and cognitively encode everything relating to the opposite sex in sexual terms, or as Bem puts it, "... a readiness to invoke the heterosexuality subschema in social interaction" (Bem, 1981, p. 361). Bem argues that people who strongly identify with masculinity or femininity are more likely to view their interactions with members of the opposite sex through the lens of heterosexuality and to interact with and evaluate members of the opposite sex in terms of their sexual attractiveness.

Bem argues that while these gender-based schemata seem to be universal and deeply ingrained in our minds and culture, they don't necessarily have to be that way. Much of the gender-based schemata in our day-to-day lives are unnecessary or harmful, and the male-female dichotomy is gratuitously enforced on people in many ways, particularly in schools (Bem, 1981). We can remap our schemata in different ways. She argues that the gender schema should be restricted significantly in scope and apply only to biological differences in sex: gender should be irrelevant in every other area of life. Bem describes her ideal world as one in which: "Our maleness and femaleness would be self-evident and nonproblematic; rarely would we be prompted to ponder it, to assert that it is true, to fear that it might be in jeopardy, or to wish that it were otherwise" (Bem, 1981, p. 363). I found that many of my experiences were echoed in

Bem's work, and her argument for restricting gender intrigued me, but her focus on biological differences left me feeling invisible.

Judith Butler – Gender performativity

Judith Butler's approach to gender is based in psychoanalysis, social constructivist theory, critical theory, philosophy, discourse, and linguistics. She defines gender not as biological or constant, but as being performative. Butler (1990) defines performativity as discourse's ability to create the phenomena it regulates and constrains and argues that gender is created and defined by this performativity. Butler criticizes feminist theory's separation of sex and gender, arguing that this approach ignores the construction of sex. Butler treats the terms sex and gender as largely interchangeable in her work (Butler, 1993), but for consistency with the rest of this thesis and for clarity, we will continue using the term gender when describing identity and socially constructed aspects of behavior and the body, and the term sex to describe only the material body.

Butler's conceptualization of gender starts with the body. To Butler, the body isn't merely constituted by its physical existence: instead, the body is socially constructed through discourse, hegemony, and power (Butler, 1993). Butler defines gender as "...[t]he repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990, pp. 43-44). She argues that gender is not simply the expression of biological sexual differences but is socially constructed, pointing out that there is no physical aspect of sexual difference that is not marked and formed by discourse. Rather than being a naturally occurring binary with universal implications and symbolic meanings for each gender, Butler conceptualizes gender as being a regulatory ideal, which works reiteratively over time to regulate the body and forcibly

materialize gender onto it through discourse (Butler, 1993). Other examples of regulatory ideals are race and disability. Regulation and materialization work together to create a positive feedback loop, wherein the discursive concept of gender controls bodies and produces the bodies it controls. The discursive basis of gender means that gender is not a static, unmoving description of who and what a person is, but rather a norm that makes a person culturally intelligible. For instance, twelve-year-old Morgan's unpierced ears went against the norm for young women, rendering my body less culturally intelligible, and the regulatory norm of gender worked gradually over time to pressure me into piercing them and bringing my body closer to intelligibility. It also worked to encourage me to wear certain clothes and behave in certain ways, like in Chapter 1's Scout story when I felt pressure to be a "normal girl."

The repeated stylization and gradual congealment of gender on the body governs the materialization of the body. In other words, people's bodies are literally shaped over time by the social discourses and ideas about gender that are projected onto it. For example, the idea that women don't grow facial hair compels women to remove any facial hair that they do grow: their bodies are physically inscribed with femininity through the removal of body hair. Just as my body is physically inscribed by my attempts to fit it to regulatory ideas via the scars on my earlobes. Butler points out that the gendering of bodies through discourse is always in service of hegemonic powers, specifically heterosexuality. Butler states that "the regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (1993, p. 2).

The heterosexual imperative describes heterosexuality's position as the normative form of sexuality: culturally, heterosexual attitudes are centered as the normal, baseline sexuality,

while other sexualities are considered abnormal departures from heterosexuality (Butler, 1993; Rich, 1980). Discourse centered around heterosexuality acts as a filter, weeding out bodies that do not align with the heterosexual imperative by either modifying them into compliance or obliterating them (Butler, 1993). Bodies that don't fit with our culture's normative ideas of sex are what Butler terms unintelligible bodies, or "unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies" (Butler, 1993, p. xi). These bodies are not the opposite of culturally intelligible bodies; rather, they are everything that intelligible bodies aren't. In other words, unintelligible bodies are defined by their steps away from what an intelligible body is and represents. For example, a culturally intelligible body must align with the gender it was assigned at (or before) birth. A body that departs from that description in any way becomes socially unintelligible, no matter what the specific difference or differences might be. A transgender body is not the opposite of a cisgender body, but a transgender body is always culturally unintelligible according to the heterosexual imperative. This cultural unintelligibility is part of why it took me so long to acknowledge the idea that I didn't have to be a girl: I had to be able to acknowledge the possibility of being and becoming unintelligible.

There is some degree of agency in Butler's theory: once we understand that gender is performed, we can choose to perform our genders differently. Because gender has no natural or essential existence, anyone's gender expression is just as significant as anyone else's, regardless of physical sex. If someone assigned male at birth performs a female gender, they are just as much a woman as someone assigned female at birth who performs a female gender (Butler, 1990). We also have the ability to redefine what performing as a woman means in our culture. Sex as a regulatory norm is only as powerful as it is allowed to be by people who call on it and perform it as such, but it gains power through those calls and performances. Every time I was

asked why I hadn't gotten my ears pierced yet, the regulatory norm of sex was simultaneously called on and empowered to regulate me. At only 12 years old, I bowed to the pressure. Because gender is only as powerful and valid as people allow it to be, the act of rejecting normative gender roles and concepts helps to undermine and destroy hegemonic heterosexuality. The drag king's performance at Pierce College is an example of one such rejection, and it undermined and called into question the heterosexual imperative enough that it allowed me to start coming out to myself. Butler points out that agency is only actually agency if the individual is operating outside of current systems of authority; if the choices being made are the choices provided by the system, it isn't true agency (1993).

Native/Two-Spirit Perspectives

I felt relieved and empowered by Butler's theory on gender performativity, but I knew that every other theory I'd looked at before hers had overlooked someone. After discussion with my peers and professors about it, the answer became obvious: the previous theories were all put forward by white people, and all but one (i.e., Vygotsky, 1978) were white Europeans or Americans. Freud (1961), Erikson (1963), Kohlberg (1966), and Bem (1981) all argue that gender and sex are universal constants regardless of culture. Their research was overwhelmingly conducted on white, cisgender, heterosexual, Western, colonial, middle and upper-class people, and therefore their conclusions may only be reliably applied to that group. Other cultural groups have their own conceptions of gender.

Native people have been overwhelmingly excluded from discussions of gender and identity (Driskill, 2010). Quo-Li Driskill of the Cherokee tribe argues that overlooking Native perspectives on gender "unwittingly contributes to the erasure of the specificity of Native claims to land and to the particular relationships Native people and Native nations have with Euro-

American colonial governments” (Driskill, 2010, p. 76). Native cultures have their own ways of conceptualizing and dealing with sex and gender, and these perspectives are critical to an anticolonial, antiracist, and informed definition of gender.

The term Two-Spirit is an umbrella term chosen by and for Native people, “as an intertribal term to be used in English as a way to communicate numerous tribal traditions and social categories of gender outside dominant European binaries” (Driskill, 2010, p. 72). The basic meaning of the term is someone who has both a feminine and masculine spirit within them, but its full meaning is intentionally more complex than that (Driskill, 2010), and different Native groups have different ways of viewing and dealing with gender that fall under the Two-Spirit umbrella. Two-Spirit is fluid, inclusive, and ambiguous, and not all Native people identify with it. The term embraces all Native people if they choose to claim it, whether they hold land rights or not (Barker, 2017). It critiques and challenges colonial and white narratives of Native identities and experiences, claiming Native traditions as precedents for understanding gender and sexuality, and asserts that Two-Spirit people are vital to tribal communities. It also connects identity directly to land, community, history, spirituality, traditions, and medicine (Driskill, 2010). Unlike queer, which is often connected to sexualized identities and practices, Two-Spirit recenters gendered identities and experiences in the conversation: “no understanding of sexual and gender constructions on colonized and occupied land can take place without an understanding of the ways colonial projects continually police sexual and gender lines” (Driskill, 2010, p. 73).

Native perspectives of gender represent and focus on something largely ignored by the perspectives we’ve discussed so far. Native experiences are substantially different from those of other groups’ experiences in many ways, and the forms of resistance that Native perspectives and

communities engage with have a broader scope than other communities' activities. This is because Native perspectives fundamentally combat colonialism and reject the notion that the United States and Canada are somehow postcolonial. Colonialism is recognized as an ongoing and current issue that must be acknowledged and combated (Driskill, 2010). Driskill (2010) argues that Native studies and queer/gender studies should become allies: this way, colonialism can be included in the discussion of the hegemonic powers and heterosexual imperative that Butler (1990) urges us to subvert, and Native experiences and perspectives will stop being actively disappeared and erased from public discourses.

Bringing things together and forward

We've examined several different perspectives on gender identity at this point: Freud's (1961) psychosexual theory, which ties gender identity to sexuality; Erikson's (1963) psychosocial theory, which ties gender identity to sexuality and social reinforcement; Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which holds that all development occurs in relation to others and in the context of culture; Kohlberg's (1966) gender constancy theory, based in Piagetian (1962) cognitive developmental theory; Bem's (1981) sex-role theory, based in psychology and critical theory; Butler's (1990; 1993) performativity theory, based in dialectics, critical theory, philosophy, feminist theory, and queer theory; and Two-Spirit perspectives (Driskill, 2010; Barker, 2017) which questions the white colonial nature of these theories and challenges us to do better.

Freud (1961) and Erikson's (1963) views of gender identity are both deeply rooted in essentialist assumptions and universalism. Their direct connection of sexuality with gender identity is also flawed and does not encapsulate the experiences of many people, including me. Freud (1961) goes so far as to pathologize being queer or transgender, effectively obliterating

anyone who does not comply with his model. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory provides a more open conception of development. While he never addresses gender directly in his work, if all development occurs through social interaction and cultural dialogue, it holds that gender develops similarly.

Kohlberg's (1966) theory has several issues that have been pointed out by scholars of his time (Mischel, 1966), and by contemporary theorists (Butler, 1993; Ruble et al., 2007; Taylor, 2018). Two of the most prominent and relevant for our conversation are: a lack of clarity as to how much of gender development is latent and how much is socioculturally enforced, and a complete absence of the experiences of transgender and queer individuals. Even within the field of gender constancy studies there have been inconsistencies in experimental results, and researchers are unable to reach a consensus about how much of gender identity is latent, or something we are born with, and how much of it is socially reinforced (Ruble et al., 2007). If we apply a sociocultural Vygotskian (1978) lens to this theory, we can argue that no aspect of gender identity is latent. Like every other aspect of development, gender is socially constructed, occurring in relation with others as a co-created activity.

The second issue with gender constancy that I'd like to discuss is the fact that its claim of gender being something that fossilizes permanently in childhood is demonstrably untrue. Even within the field of gender constancy, contemporary studies have demonstrated that gender as a concept may become more flexible once the child reaches 9-10 years old (Ruble et al., 2007), and Piaget himself described the type of generalization and binary thinking that children engage with during Kohlberg's final stage of gender constancy as "immediate, illegitimate generalization" (as cited in Maier, 1969, p. 118). Adherence to simple binaries is viewed as oversimplification, inaccurate, and constraining by the very theory that Kohlberg's (1966) theory

uses to enforce simple binaries! My experience at the drag show that I open this thesis with is testament to a life span view of gender development, as are the experiences of other queer and transgender people that I've spoken to. Indeed, Kohlberg and others seem to ignore completely the existence of queer and transgender people, even going so far as to label children who identify their gender differently from their biological sex as incorrect (Kohlberg, 1966). Queer and transgender people come out at every age, anywhere from early childhood to late life (Brighter, 2020; Zaliznyak et al., 2020). While it is true that many transgender people report experiencing dysphoria as early as five or six years old (Zaliznyak et al., 2020), not all transgender people experience dysphoria at all, and many more who do experience dysphoria don't begin to experience it until later in their lives (Balend, 2020). It is clear that gender constancy is not an adequate model to reflect the experiences and realities of many people.

Bem's work on sex roles is also rooted in essentialist concepts, but steps away from some of the more egregiously generalizing aspects of Kohlberg's (1961) work. The brain still organizes itself along gender lines most of the time, but not always or to the same degree, and Bem argues that this organizational habit is based more in society's emphasis of gender than any naturally occurring phenomena (1981), and that that emphasis can and should be changed. She argues that gender should become limited to only the biological reality of sexual differences. Bem's focus on and reinforcement of biological essentialism makes her theory limiting and exclusionary of transgender and intersex experiences.

The work of Judith Butler provides a different, more applicable lens for us to use. According to Butler (1990), gender is at once an individual performance and a socially regulated and reified stylization applied to the body. Gender is a self-fulfilling phenomenon that is always in service of the heterosexual imperative; gender constancy and sex-role theory are both

examples of the heterosexual imperative in action. The conceptualization of gender as “neatly binary” (Ruble et al., 2007, p. 400) is a tool of colonial, patriarchal, classist, white supremacist, racist, heterosexual, capitalist, and other hegemonic powers. By contrast, Butler and other queer philosophers and theorists offer us a conception of gender as something that is fluid and contextual. While Butler does acknowledge that race is a socially constructed category, her work, like the work of nearly every theorist in this thesis, does not discuss Native experiences and perspectives on gender.

Native and Two-Spirit perspectives are critical to acknowledge in any discussion of gender, particularly because this thesis is being written in North America, on Coast Salish, S’klallam, Suquamish, and Puyallup tribal land. The systems and theories of gender and development that we’ve overviewed so far have been overwhelmingly based in white, Western, colonial perspectives, and have been used to harm and erase Native perspectives and experiences for centuries (Driskill, 2010). It’s my goal to critique and expand on these theories to create a conception of gender that includes Native voices and experiences and contributes to decolonization.

Based on the work we’ve reviewed so far, we can argue that sex and gender have a complex and subjective relationship, and that one’s gender performance may change depending on where an individual is, who they’re with, how they’re feeling, and their cultural background, to name only a few possibilities. I see my experiences and the experiences of my friends and peers reflected the most in the work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993), Lev Vygotsky (1978), and Native theorists (Barker, 2017; Driskill, 2010). If we bring these three theories together, we can construct a conception of gender that is sociocultural, performative, anticolonial, and encompasses the infinite diversity of human experiences.

Butler's conversation about dialectics and hegemonic cultural power complements Vygotsky's argument that development occurs through culture and social interaction. The heterosexual imperative manifests through culture, and the detail of how it manifests will vary depending on the context. In U.S culture children perform and develop as boys or girls through the inscription of the heterosexual imperative on their bodies and behaviors, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), as a powerful driver of all kinds of development, helps to facilitate this inscription in the Western world (Vygotsky, 1978). By getting my ears pierced I was not merely inscribing my body with femininity, but I was also performing as a girl according to my cultural upbringing and bringing myself further into alignment with the heterosexual imperative. Not only that, but my performance of the activity of piercing my ears was directly tied to my sister's performance of the same and my community's expectations of me as a girl and an older sister, and it was therefore also a sociocultural activity. The heterosexual imperative is a tool of colonialism and white supremacy, and we can combat it by engaging in new kinds of activities together and creating Zones of Proximal Development that allow us to develop and perform our genders in different ways. These activities must be anticolonial and antiracist to be truly liberatory: the heterosexual imperative can't be defeated with the same tools that created it (Butler, 1993; Driskill, 2010). A surprising and unique opportunity to engage in new kinds of activities around gender has arisen in the last two years specifically.

Twitter user roro offers evidence of socialized gender performance amid the 2020-2021 COVID-19 pandemic: "the amount of ppl coming 2 terms w gender identity over lockdown really proves how social interaction is inseparable from gender performance like ... the moment ur isolated from constant promotion of gendered behaviour u have the space to question what it even means for u" (roro, 2020). In other words, not having to go out in public and perform a

gender identity for and with other people every day has led many people to explore and question their gender identities in ways they hadn't before. At the time of writing this Tweet had 14,000 retweets, many of them from people who say that they have started to perform their genders differently because of lockdown.

If roro is correct, and people are experiencing and performing their genders differently because of lockdown, it provides a significant counterargument to gender constancy theory (Kohlberg, 1966) and other static and essentialist theories such as Freud's (1961) and Erikson's (1963). Once social pressures are removed people become free to conceptualize gender however they want to. The idea of a natural gender expression falls apart. Like the playful, open environment of the drag show at Pierce College enabled me to conceptualize my relationship with my gender differently, an extended period of quarantine may allow people to experiment and play with gender and question the lessons that society has imposed on them since before their birth in a way that they haven't been able to before.

Taken together, we can define gender as both an individual performance and a sociocultural, discursive phenomenon that is constrained, enacted, and reinforced by hegemonic ideals such as the heterosexual imperative and colonialism. Gender identity is fluid and can change based on context, and people have the agency to perform their genders differently if they have the resources and ability to defy sociocultural norms and expectations.

If I'd had a fluid, critical lens on gender the day that I went to the mall with my mom and sister all those years ago, I might have been able to understand that the pressure I was under to pierce my ears before Lindsey did was a manifestation of binary gender expectations and a stage-based, limiting perspective on development. Having that critical understanding may have made it easier for me to determine whether my desire to pierce them was a genuine desire or a defensive

reaction to external pressures. I may have decided not to sit in the piercing chair and been a supportive older sibling for Lindsey without feeling like I was falling behind her or failing at my role as the eldest daughter if I let her get her ears pierced before I did. If I'd given myself permission to examine and interrogate what being a big sister meant to me, and what being a girl and a young woman meant to me, I may have realized that I didn't have to have pierced ears to exist as those things, or that I didn't necessarily have to be those things in the first place. Or I may have decided to pierce them for genuine reasons, and my experience may have been different because of that shift in intention.

Understanding gender as something that is socially reinforced, influenced by systems of oppression and authority, fluid, and able to be questioned empowers all of us to be more mindful about our behaviors, our assumptions, and how we relate to other people. We can choose not to let the artificial divisions of man and woman rule our lives and create something else that subverts the heterosexual imperative and facilitates community. Butler (1993) and other theorists (Taylor, 2018) have pointed out that some of the primary tactics of the heterosexual imperative are shame, isolation, and fear, and so I argue that play, which can facilitate joy, interconnection, and exploration, is both an act of rebellion against hegemonic power and an act of self-love.

Vygotsky (1978) identifies play as one of the most powerful drivers of development in children, and there are many examples of children performing gender in their play, such as when they take on the role of a mother or father when playing house, so gender play throughout life seems at least possible. But play, like gender development, is largely viewed in the field of development as an activity that only occurs during childhood. The popular view is that children play to learn and develop, and once a child reaches adulthood, their need for play, and the

developmental possibilities of play, subsides. But my experiences, the experiences of my friends, and the stories of the people on roro's twitter post would suggest otherwise.

Luckily there are scholars/activists and theorists who have taken Vygotsky's work a step further and produced a base of research that argues that play is an activity that is a necessity for all people throughout the lifespan. They argue that play is a powerful driver of development, and if this is the case, it could be an activity that facilitates the development of gender throughout the lifespan. In the next chapter we will explore the existence and importance of life-span play.

Chapter 3: Play as Development

My very first day of undergraduate school at the University of Washington was both thrilling and terrifying: I was 21 years old, and after a mere three months as a community college graduate, I wasn't sure I was ready for four-year university life. I had signed up for a developmental psychology class, adult development, with a professor, Dr. Perone, who had been recommended to me by one of my coworkers back in community college. As I made my way into the classroom, I was somewhat reassured by the familiarity of the space. It seemed like a typical classroom, just like the hundreds I'd been in before. There were rows of desks and seats, with a whiteboard, projector screen, and teacher's desk in the front. I headed up the aisles of chairs and desks, taking a seat at the very front of the room, on the leftmost side of the right half of the room, where I tried to sit in every class. Little did I know that I wouldn't be sitting in my carefully selected seat for long.

When Dr. Perone stepped into the space and began class, the nervous energy typical of a day one classroom changed. "Since it's the first day of the year, and I know a lot of people are probably feeling a lot of things about it, I thought we would kick off the class with ten minutes of mindful meditation." I was shocked. No professor I had ever taken had ever facilitated meditation in the classroom before, let alone for ten entire minutes! I closed my eyes and gradually relaxed my body, and by the time the ten minutes had passed my anxiety had all but gone. It was rapidly replaced by another, different kind of anxiety as Dr. Perone announced that we would be playing improv games to get to know each other! I knew of improv activities, having been a scout in my youth and having a younger sister who was involved in the theater scene, but I had never really participated in them before. But his unique approach towards

teaching was one of the primary reasons that he had been recommended to me, so I decided that I would push myself and participate despite my reservations.

The theme of utilizing improv and other playful activities during class time was ongoing throughout the quarter, and I began to look forward to my class with him more than any other. Unlike other classes, I was absolutely confident that even if I didn't understand something about the readings it would make sense to me by the end of our class activities. Pushing the boundaries of our comfort and experiences through activities related to our class readings, assignments, and topics encouraged greater depth of learning than I would have gotten from a more traditional classroom model. To teach us about adult development, Dr. Perone pushed us to develop ourselves. I came away from that class at the end of the quarter with a deeper and more intimate understanding of adult development than I had thought possible, a whole new community of friends and classmates to support me in my ongoing academic journey, and a newfound interest in playful approaches to development. It was then that I began to realize that my experience at the Pierce College drag show had also been a playful and developmental experience! During the rest of my undergraduate career I took two more classes from Dr. Perone and then an independent study from him to further my knowledge and build more community and connections.

My experiences with the drag show and with Dr. Perone's classes would suggest that play can be a powerful driver of development, but play's importance, and how long in the human lifespan play is a developmental activity, has been a subject of debate. Freud, Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky all discussed play in their work, and we'll begin this chapter by exploring what they had to say about it. All four of our Chapter 1 theorists viewed play as being developmental for children, but disagreed on its importance, purpose, and developmental benefits. The one point

they all agreed on was that play ceases being developmental once early childhood ends. After exploring and overviewing each theorist's view on play, we will use Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as a jumping-off point to explore the work of contemporary sociocultural theorists who have reimagined play as an essential, developmental, lifespan, therapeutic, and inherently social activity (e.g., Göncü & Perone, 2005; Holzman, 1997; Holzman, 2018; Perone & Göncü, 2014). Once we've examined the theoretical landscape around pretend play as developmental and therapeutic, we'll discuss how play is connected to queer theory.

Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson

Sigmund Freud viewed play as being developmental for children, particularly in finding emotional catharsis and coping with difficulties in their lives (such as the absence of a parent) by transforming their negative feelings into positive ones (Salkind, 2004). Freud argued that while play was useful for children, it wasn't essential to a healthy, happy life (Elkind, 2008). Erik Erikson, whose work builds primarily on Freud's work, theorized that play is a developmental activity for children in his third stage, Initiative vs. Guilt. According to Erikson, play enables young children to learn about and master their environment. The child uses play to repeat, master, or negate life experiences and to "organize [their] inner world in relation to [their] outer" (Maier, 1965, p. 24). Play also enables the child to teach and heal themselves, and functions as a tool for self-expression. Unlike Freud, Erikson considered play necessary for children but argued that it becomes mostly irrelevant beyond the 3rd stage (Maier, 1965).

Both Freud and Erikson's views discount play as an activity relegated to childhood, and its usefulness is limited to coping with experiences and the world. This ideal reinforces the artificial division between childhood/play and adulthood/labor and devalues playful activities

overall. Our society's general disdain for and gradual elimination of playful activities from our day to day lives (Holzman, 2018) is one result of this devaluation.

Jean Piaget

Like Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget saw play as an essential activity for children's development. Play is a crucial part of the evolution of intelligence and is a way of engaging in assimilation in the developing child (Maier, 1965). This happens during Piaget's (1962) preoperational stage. Children's imaginative play to Piaget only consists of what the child has experienced in the past. For example, if a child goes to the doctor's office, and later they play doctor, they'll only engage in the activities that they experienced. If a child has never visited a doctor's office, they won't be able to play doctor. In other words, in a Piagetian lens, children's imaginative play is always simply a recreation of the things they've already experienced and observed: they are incapable of creating anything new in their play. Play is merely the vehicle by which children process their experiences, and a means of engaging in accommodation, thereby driving their development. Play stops being developmental as the child develops more sophisticated cognitive processes (Piaget, 1961)

Piaget's (1961) view of play as merely the reflection of their experiences, and children as incapable of creating new and unique concepts and activities in their play, is both restrictive in scope and dismissive of children's abilities. If children are only able to assimilate and recreate the things they've seen and experienced, and children are simply cognitively less capable than adults until they develop to the point where they don't need play anymore, what does that say about children and the play they engage in? It would seem to imply that children and play are lesser than or inferior to adults and work. Indeed, we can see this attitude towards children clearly in our society: if an adult plays in a way that we view as childish we may describe that

person as naive or immature, (even when my experiences at the beginning of this chapter demonstrate that behaving childishly may allow us to access types of thought and activities that we would otherwise be incapable of as adults), and if someone overextends themselves in pursuit of work it's often viewed as something to be proud of, even though it's self-injurious. These are all manifestations of Piaget's limiting perspective.

Lev Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky's conceptualization of play begins with the argument that play fulfills some of a child's needs, needs broadly defined as "everything that is a motive for action" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 92). A child's needs and motivations change as they grow and develop and the kinds of needs that play satisfies have a special character that makes play a unique activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Play develops as the child begins to experience desires that, for whatever reason, they can't achieve or gratify. For instance, a child might desire to cook a meal for their parent but be unable to operate the kitchenware necessary to do so. Below a certain age the child might throw a tantrum when faced with this paradox, but as they mature to preschool age they begin to engage in a different behavior. The child "enters an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized," (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 93). This imaginary world is play. Although Vygotsky would argue that we were too old to engage in this activity, when I was playing improv games with my classmates in adult development all those years ago, we entered an illusory world too: together we imagined and co-created a world where we could perform the adult development class in new and exciting ways and play at whatever we wanted to create, fostering connections and development in the group.

The imagination is a unique function of human consciousness, and Vygotsky argues that it, like all functions of consciousness, originates from action. Play is not the imagination in

action: rather, imagination is play without action. Unlike work and other types of human activities, the motivations behind imaginative games and play are rarely fully understood. Vygotsky (1978) argues that all play is imaginative and that there is no such thing as play without rules. Even games that may seem purely rule-based have some degree of imagination in them: adding a constraining factor will always invoke the imagination to some degree. After all, the rules of a board game are little more than imaginary constructs that the players agree on. An imaginary situation that a child creates will necessarily contain limitations and rules of behavior, although these rules may not be laid out clearly or in advance. Imaginary situations also don't need to be completely separate from reality: for example, a mother and a child can play a game of mother and child, effectively playing at reality (Vygotsky, 1978). In this type of play the child plays not as the child they are, but as what they believe a child *should be*. This belief is informed and shaped with/in their community. Aspects of the mother-child relationship that are simply a part of their day-to-day life that they may not notice or consider become rules and guidelines of behavior in the game. They can also play at different scenarios together that might be impossible or dangerous in real life, such as playing as a dragon mother and child or having an undersea adventure together, thereby realizing their unrealizable desires (Vygotsky, 1978). Children's play evolves from being overtly imaginative with covert rules to covertly imaginative with overt rules as the child develops.

Children under three can't play in an imaginary situation, because the behavior of very young children is largely constrained and determined by their environment. It is only when the child's perceptions become separate from their movements and motivations that they become able to engage in imaginative play (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, the child must become able to act independently from what they see. A two-year old who sees a ball will kick it, throw it, or

otherwise interact with it as it is—a ball. That same child at the age of three or four may see that same ball and put a hat on it and imagine it as another person or imagine it as a precious treasure to be protected, or any number of other possibilities. Their interactions with the environment lose their limiting, structured nature and become fluid and interpretive. It is this transition that enables the object/person to behave not just based on their immediate perceptions, but by the underlying meanings of the activity as well (Vygotsky, 1978). In the imaginary play environment, the child's actions become more representational than those same actions would be outside of play: taking our earlier example of a mother and child playing as a mother and child together, even if their play activities resemble their regular day-to-day lives, the activities they undertake in play have a unique symbolic and representational meaning that their day-to-day behavior lacks. Therefore, creating an imaginary situation through play is a means through which the child develops the ability to engage in abstract thought. Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky argued that children's imaginative play is not limited by the child's direct life experiences.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that we discussed in the previous chapters has special significance to Vygotsky's theory of play. In co-created imaginative play, children create a ZPD together and become able to perform "a head taller" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102) than they are without fear of failure or making mistakes. A five-year-old might be unable to literally be a doctor or a firefighter, but through play they are able to perform as a doctor or a firefighter. By performing what they could become/are becoming together, rather than only being who they are, children can facilitate development in themselves and in one another (Vygotsky, 1978).

This view of play has considerably more revolutionary potential than the other views we've explored so far: in a Vygotskian lens, children have agency and power to play at and perform as anything, regardless of their lived experiences. Children's minds aren't seen as

somehow lesser than adults, and instead contain the capacity to develop into and comprehend anything if they're given the support to do so from their community. It also leaves the details of how the play may manifest open, which allows for multiple kinds and ways of play depending on cultural and individual context. This deliberate avoidance of universalism has its roots in Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that our activities, perspectives, and perceptions are all inextricably based in and shaped by the culture in which we live. Play is no exception. This fact got many Vygotskian scholars thinking: Vygotsky himself wrote his theory from the viewpoint of his own culture and experiences. Perhaps the one generalization he does make—that play ceases being developmental outside of early childhood—is just as culturally-influenced as the generalizations his fellow developmentalists made in their own theories.

Imaginative Play Throughout the Lifespan

Our Chapter 1 ensemble (Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1961; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978) all ended their explorations of play with early childhood. The view of play as an activity that only occurs during early childhood and ceases in adulthood has been widely accepted by modern psychology, and it is extraordinarily limiting. Inspired by Kohlberg's (1966) term gender constancy, I propose play constancy to describe this view. Play constancy is what stopped me from engaging in many of the imaginative play activities that I'd enjoyed as a child, until I took Dr. Perone's class and learned that I'd been duped. Play activities are institutionally relegated only to early childhood: for instance, school recess periods become shorter and shorter as children move from kindergarten to elementary to high school, encouraging them to prioritize it less and less (Holzman, 2018). In my own experience, my Scouting activities changed from the playful outings like the one in Chapter 1 into solely community service as I got older: we planned the play activities for the younger children and didn't really get to play ourselves.

Some contemporary theorists, inspired by Vygotsky's (1978) more revolutionary approach to play and development, have taken his work a step further. Göncü and Perone (2005) explore the possibilities of pretend play as a driver of development throughout life. They argue that while other disciplines recognize adult pretend play as being necessary for individual and cultural development, contemporary psychology has egregiously neglected this area of study. For instance, philosophers (Maclean et al., 2021) have examined play as an activity that shapes and influences our performance as humans, anthropologists (Malaby, 2009) argue that play is "an attitude characterized by a readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world" (p. 206) and that cultural anthropology is well-equipped to rethink and examine play, and scholars in public health are having an ongoing debate about their own definitions of healthy play and how to promote it (Alexander et al., 2014). Play's relative absence in psychology is shocking.

The field of psychology is dominated by Western ideals and values, which determine what areas of study are deemed worthy of its attention. This is part of why it was so challenging for me to find an answer to my wonders about my gender identity and development in psychology alone: the answer required me to think beyond the system that psychology is beholden to (Butler, 1990). Western society overwhelmingly values play as a children's-only activity, and points to labor as the primary activity for the adult instead (Göncü & Perone, 2005). These values are so deeply entrenched and command such authority that it has caused Western developmentalists to ignore activities that go against this assumption, even though children may participate in labor and adults may participate in play in a broad variety of communities and cultures. Even the study of children's play is cast through the lens of socialization into their communities and preparation for formal education. Göncü & Perone (2005) point out that the modern educational system is designed to prepare children for factory work and other utilitarian,

production-focused goals. Play, therefore, is considered valuable developmentally only if it ultimately leads the child to labor. Even Vygotsky's (1978) more revolutionary approach identifies play as a children's only activity and labor as an adult activity.

Göncü and Perone (2005) argue that pretend play is far more powerful and developmental than these previous theories give it credit for. Rather than being an activity exclusively for children, pretend play exists throughout the life span. The nature of the play may change throughout life, but it is always developmental (Göncü & Perone, 2005). Improvisational theater, or improv, is one example of how pretend play may manifest in adult life. Pretend play and improv have several similarities: both are common activities in the Western world, they have similar definitions that focus on their social and fluid natures, both emphasize the interpretation of actions at the representational and symbolic level rather than their literal face values, both take on "short form" (2005, p. 140) or "long form" (2005, p. 140) structures depending on the context, and neither of them require an actual, official audience to be engaged in (Göncü & Perone, 2005). Short form improv typically consists of games that last 3-5 minutes and whose rules are explained to the audience beforehand (Spolin, 1963). This form of improv resembles pretend games in that the players' imaginations and turn-taking contribute to building their activities. Long form improv, on the other hand, consists of multiple imaginative scenes that emerge spontaneously as the audience and performers build them together (Halpern et al., 1994). This resembles the spontaneous and ever-changing nature of children's pretend play, and only differs significantly when the group sequences the scenes beforehand (Göncü & Perone, 2005). These similarities, as well as my experiences that I've shared with you throughout this thesis, lend legitimacy to the argument that improv and children's pretend play come from the same

psychological origins and satisfy the same needs, such as learning about and making sense of life experiences.

Although there is very little empirical research on the subject, Göncü and Perone (2005) identify several qualitative accounts and statements by improvisers that support the concept of pretend play and improvisation satisfying human needs throughout the lifespan. Co-creators of improvisational activities overwhelmingly report that improv has facilitated the development of deeper understandings of themselves, the world, their experiences, and other people. Adults and children both engage in play for the same reasons, but the content, context, players, and tools of the play change depending on the issues the individual is facing in their lives, whether those are issues of adult life or child life (Göncü & Perone, 2005). The social nature of pretend play and improv is crucial: while an individual may play to make sense of an experience, a group may play to work through and make sense of different but similar experiences. When a group comes together for improv or other forms of pretend play, individual offers are worked with and built on to create a play environment and experience that is meaningful to and developmental for everybody involved. For instance, during my classes with Dr. Perone, the group would come together and create the play/learning environment as a community, moving chairs and tables around as needed and facilitating an open, comfortable energy that allowed everyone to play, pretend, dialogue, develop, and learn together.

Pretending is both a personal and interpersonal activity, though most theories focus only on the individual consequences of pretend, such as understanding the symbolisms and meanings underlying experiences and general cognitive, affective, and linguistic development (Göncü & Perone, 2005). Through pretend play the individual mind and private inner life of the individual becomes public. Pretending with others enables children to learn that there are kinds of

experiences that aren't specific to individuals but are shared in many ways despite small differences in individual experiences. This externalizing of players' inside worlds brings them closer, facilitating the development of community and a shared group culture. While the developmental potential of co-created pretend play has been studied in the context of groups of children, Göncü and Perone argue that the personal, interpersonal, and developmental benefits of pretend play are practiced beyond childhood and are in fact lifespan (2005). These arguments are corroborated by my own experiences: I've always felt a unique closeness with my classmates from Dr. Perone's classes, even years after the classes stopped meeting officially, because the play we engaged in together bonded us.

In Perone and Göncü's (2014) work they expand on their conceptualization of imaginative play as a lifespan activity and lay out a specific definition for lifespan imaginative play as "[a]ny open-ended, voluntary, and agentic transformation that is stimulated by modifications of the features of activities that are culturally-historically situated" (2014, p. 2). There are three aspects of this definition that are especially important: the emphasis of possibility in imaginative play, such as the possibility that a stick can undergo a symbolic transformation into a noble steed or a colander into a helmet or a person into a knight; the fact that imaginative play is empowering and agentic, enabling people to co-create worlds and experiences that fit the needs of every player; and the fact that imaginative play is developmental and transformative to the players (Perone & Göncü, 2014). The specifics of how pretend play looks will vary wildly interculturally and throughout the life span. A child may play house, while a teenager might play video games, and an adult might play fantasy football; while these are very different activities, they are all variations of pretend play. At the same time, other activities may transform over time but remain essentially the same, and some activities may stay consistent throughout the lifespan.

For instance, when I was young, I would play pretend with my friends: that pretend play eventually transformed into written role play activities as I entered my early teenage years, and I've stayed engaged in that activity throughout my young adulthood. (In fact, it's been one of my main play activities while I've been writing this thesis). When I was in Dr. Perone's classes and doing improv activities it also felt very much like a version of the pretend play I'd engaged in as a child.

Perone and Göncü (2014) interviewed adult improvisers and graduate students to learn their meanings of the words "play" and "imagination," if they engaged in imaginative play during and after their early childhood and, if so, what developmental and educational benefits have emerged from their playful activities. The improvisers and graduate students both overwhelmingly described their pretend play as being therapeutic, developmental, and crucial throughout their lives, particularly in the areas of social and emotional development. My experience at the opening of this chapter also demonstrates that pretend play has therapeutic and developmental benefits. Perone and Göncü argue that "it appears that there is a life-span need for participants to engage in pretense to make meaning of their lives, to (re)present their experiences, and to shape their current and future activities with(in) communities of practice" (2014, p. 18). Taken together, Göncü and Perone (2005) and Perone and Göncü (2014) offer a powerful argument for the importance and developmental power of play for people of all ages.

The mindful application of co-created pretend play in a safe, therapeutic environment clearly has potential for driving development in all people, and with this potential comes the potential for healing through co-created play. Traditional therapeutic approaches don't typically bear much resemblance to play (Holzman, 2018), but we've already seen the limitations and damaging assumptions of many traditional viewpoints so far in this thesis. What if there's a way

to support one another to grow and heal in a therapeutic environment, using sociocultural theory and playful praxis as a guide? In our next section we'll discuss a movement that's doing just that: social therapeutics.

Social Therapeutics

Fred Newman and his mentee Lois Holzman began the practice of social therapeutics in the 1970s as a new and revolutionary form of therapy that takes a sociocultural approach to learning and development (Holzman, 2018). Social therapeutics works to build community and relate to people as who/what they are and who/what they are becoming, facilitating the development of the group through play, performance, and other collective processes (Holzman, 2018). The people who build the community define what they want the community to do and look like, and the group works together to perform their development as a cohesive unit. People aren't seen only as individuals, but as existing in relation to their communities and the world at large. By playing, pretending, improvising, and performing, people become able to relate to themselves and each other on a new and deeper level, which empowers them to both be what/who they are and to perform what/who they are becoming at the same time (Holzman, 2018). It is this process of both being and becoming that drives the development of the group and creates revolutionary possibilities. Once again, my time in Dr. Perone's classes comes to mind: when the community came together in the classroom, we became able to understand ourselves both as individuals and as interrelated people, co-creating new and exciting versions of who we were and who we were becoming while we learned from and taught each other about human development.

Holzman criticizes conventional psychotherapy's problem-solving orientation, arguing that this perspective problematizes our emotional lives and significantly limits our potential for

development (Holzman, 2018). In the conventional view a person who goes to a therapist does so because they have some kind of “presenting problem” (Holzman, 2018, p. 42) that the therapist identifies and treats based on *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or the DSM. Holzman points out that if someone’s so-called presenting problem doesn’t fit within the current DSM’s definition of a mental disorder, they can be denied treatment. Current definitions of mental disorders in the *DSM-5*, the most recent edition of the DSM released in 2013, have also been the subject of criticism (Holzman, 2018). There have been calls to define therapy as more of an art than a science and abandon the medical model of mental health altogether, but these arguments miss the core issue of the problem-solving paradigm underlying psychotherapy (Holzman, 2018).

A problem-oriented perspective will always be focused on the outcome of the therapy. Traditional therapeutics often utilizes surveys and other instruments to measure and track patient’s progress towards a DSM-defined healthy mind. By orienting itself towards outcomes, psychotherapy neglects the process of healing and development. Holzman describes this orientation as a tool-for-result methodology (Holzman, 2018). Tool-for-result methodology views the process of problem-solving as being secondary to the outcome: that is, how someone approaches a problem is relatively unimportant, so long as the problem is solved. By contrast, social therapeutics takes a tool-and-result approach. Tool-and-result methodology takes a “unified, emergent, and continuous process approach” (Holzman, 2018, p. 42), working to support people to create with where they’re at rather than trying to solve their problems. The focus is on the process of healing, rather than on the outcomes of the therapy. This type of therapy takes a collaborative approach between the therapist and the client rather than a doctor-

patient approach, focusing on co-creating a meaningful relationship that embraces emotions as relational and dialectical (Holzman, 2018).

Social therapeutics takes a uniquely Vygotskian approach to its methods and its view of how learning and development work. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is critical to a social therapeutic approach: by empowering the group to perform a “head taller” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102), participants facilitate and perform the group’s development. In a Vygotskian model, as we discussed in Chapter 1, learning leads development. Performing as what/who we are becoming rather than what/who we are is what expands our abilities and drives our development. Within social therapeutics performance is defined as “a form of Vygotskian play through which human beings collectively perform their development” (Holzman, 2018, p. 44). This definition is markedly different from Butler’s (1990) definition of performativity as cultural discourse’s ability to create the things it constrains, such as gender and sex. While discursive performativity and sociocultural performativity are different, they aren’t mutually exclusive. Butler’s (1993) performativity focuses on broad-scale hegemonic power and discursive influences, while Holzman’s (2018) performativity focuses on the collective performances of a community or group. Both are significant and important in our lives. The drag performance at Pierce College engaged with both these types of performativity in different ways: we were subverting the discursive influences that compel Butler’s (1990) gender performance by engaging in a collective community performance, similar to the performances we find in social therapeutic environments (Holzman, 2018).

Holzman argues that we can look to children as a prime example of performative development. Children “are not yet socialized into the cultural norm that one *must know*... They learn by doing with others what they do not know how to do because the group... supports such

active, creative risk-taking” (Holzman, 2018, p. 43). Holzman holds that this kind of development happens in group situations, because participants have to create and interact with people with a variety of identities, skills, knowledge, abilities, and personalities.

Play and performance are crucial aspects of social therapeutic practice. We’ve established that performing as what/who they are becoming is how children grow, but Holzman (2018) points out that stage actors also do this, regardless of age. Most people forget how to perform their development this way as they enter adulthood because of societal pressures. Our society tells us that play and development are things that adults may only participate in if they do it in private, and/or in very particular ways, such as through the traditional theater stage. For people to keep developing and performing their development throughout their lives they have to relearn how to play like children do, but in ways that are relevant to adult life. Social therapeutics works to relate to people as performers and developers who are capable of performing what they don’t yet know how to do (Holzman, 2018). The Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is where this being and becoming can occur: the ZPD is created as the group works together to perform their development.

Vygotsky’s concept of language as the completion of thought is also critical to social therapeutics. Speech is not the expression of thought, but the means through which thought is transformed and completed. Language and thought are dialectical, unified activities, and this unification has significant implications: “... the psychological divide between inner and outer disappear. There are no longer two separate worlds, the private one of thinking and the social one of speaking. There is, instead, the complex dialectical unity, speaking/thinking, in which speaking completes thinking” (Holzman, 2018, p. 45). In other words, the idea that the private inner world and the public outer world are separate cannot persist in a social therapeutic

perspective. Instead, the inner and outer worlds are engaged in a complex, symbiotic, dialectical relationship, where thought can be completed by people other than the originator of the thought. In much the same way adults complete the babbling of their babies by treating and responding to it as cohesive and sensible speech, which the baby then imitates to learn how to speak, adults can babble and complete each other's thoughts to learn and develop new things. For instance, in my classes with Dr. Perone we often performed as babblers: we were encouraged to communicate in new and creative ways during our improv activities, and in doing so we were forced to approach our development in a different way. Babbling about our ideas and thoughts allowed my classmates and I to spontaneously construct our individual and group understandings of those ideas together, ultimately leading to more nuanced perspectives on the part of all of us because our conversation enabled us to create together in ways that would be impossible alone.

This understanding of language as something that is completed socially raises interesting questions about the concept of objective truth. If the divide between the individual and the social is gone, then so is the division of subjective and objective, and objective truth vanishes with it. Social therapeutics does not seek to find some mythical objective and unquestionable Truth at the core of someone's issues: instead, the group works together to construct subjective truths that serve the group's needs, simultaneously co-creating their activities and practices to fit those emergent/developing truths. An interesting side effect of the abandonment of Truth is that its counterpart and opposite, Falsity, also ceases to be a viable concept. By abandoning the idea of the True and False, social therapeutics becomes free to explore and perform new and different kinds of 'lowercase t,' local, subjective truths.

When True and False don't exist, and reality is subjective and collectively performed, what happens to knowledge? Holzman (2018) argues that the institutionalization of knowledge,

such as the institutions of school and the workplace, is a structure of oppression and limitation in the modern world. The scientific revolution of the mid-16th century heralded an age of incredible accomplishment, but as with everything else in the world, this accomplishment has come with its drawbacks. In this case, it was the transformation of knowledge into an ideology. Holzman says “The knowing ideology that we are socialized to today is simply this: human life and growth, solutions to social problems and world progress *require and depend on knowing*” (2018, p. 2). Holzman offers a radical alternative to this concept: what if we *don't* have to know?

We've learned from Vygotsky (1978) and Holzman (2018) that people develop by performing what they don't yet know how to do. If knowing is unnecessary for development, then why should we have to know at all? After all, my obsession with knowing what was wrong with me only paralyzed me and led me to self-loathing: I was able to accept myself only when I understood that I didn't necessarily have to be intelligible, not even to myself. The modern world has become incredibly efficient at outsourcing the kinds of “brainwork” (Holzman, 2018, p. 4) that we need to do for our daily lives. The Internet and the proliferation of Internet-connected devices means that many of us have all the knowledge we could ever need at our fingertips at any hour of the day and night. Our society has freed ourselves from the tyranny of having to know things.

Except one only has to take a look around at the world to see that we haven't done that. Holzman points out that nearly every social institution is organized around knowledge and knowing, from schools to the health and legal systems to politics to media. Our obsession with knowing is largely responsible for “the developmental dead-end civilization has reached” (Holzman, 2018, p. 5). There is a trap in knowing, one that everyone has experienced in some way or another as they've grown up: *once we know how to do something, we become less willing*

and able to try doing things differently. Our knowledge structures the way that we view and think about the world and our options, limiting the kinds of performances we can engage in and therefore constraining our development. Holzman (2018) uses how we engage in art as an example of this trap.

When we're children, we simply make art. We don't know about aesthetics or perspective or how art is 'supposed' to look, and we don't care: we just make whatever is in our hearts and minds, limited only by our own imaginations and the medium(s) of our choice. Children's art is wild, raw, and fearless because they perform as artists without the constraints of knowledge of art or the limitations and burdens of identifying as or being/not being an artist. But as we get older and our society's obsession with knowledge and knowing begins to take hold, something changes. We become concerned with the quality of our work relative to rules of what art (or its "accurate representation") should be, and this concern suppresses our imaginations and limits the kinds of art that we can create. Many of us have sat in front of a blank page with a pencil in our hand, paralyzed with fears of getting it wrong and therefore wasting our energy and time, not to mention the paper, and then set the pencil down and walked away. Or if we do draw anything, it's with extreme care to adhere to whatever rules and lessons around drawing we've been taught. To remain a dynamic and free artist as an adult, one must take care not to allow the weight of artistic knowledge to suffocate their creativity and willingness to try things in new ways. In other words, we have to retain our ability to play with art. Holzman (2018) argues that this idea can and should be practiced in other areas of human activity, such as education (Holzman, 1997; Reaney & Whateley, 1927), work (Holzman, 2008; Sørensen & Spoelstra, 2012), and therapeutics (Holzman, 2014; Kottman, 2014).

When I was first asked to engage in improv games in Dr. Perone's classroom I became overwhelmed with fear that I would do it incorrectly. I worried that I didn't know enough about theater to perform adequately, that the class would judge my ineptitude, and that I would humiliate myself. If I had let my obsession with knowing win that day, I may have walked out of the classroom and closed the door on the infinite possibilities that opened to me. When I let go of my need to know and allowed myself to play with and perform what I didn't know how to do, I became free to develop with the group in new and exciting ways. Similarly, at the drag show at Pierce College Puyallup two years prior, letting go of my assumption that I knew what my gender was enabled me to consider alternative gender performances and to begin embracing my queerness. In fact, queer theory, play as development, and social therapeutics have complementary and interrelated goals and ways of viewing the world.

Queerness, Social Therapeutics, and Play

Social therapeutics' emphasis on co-creation, tool-and-result methodology, subjective realities, holism, community orientation, and interrogation of Truth and knowledge challenges mainstream society's problematization of social issues, such as those reflecting queer and transgender experiences, and turns instead towards building, creating, and performing with our lives and our experiences. The problem-solving orientation, while useful, is only one of many ways to approach the world, and turning towards an emergent, continuous process of co-creation and performance allows us to ask different kinds of questions and to make different kinds of discoveries than problem-solving can.

Social therapeutics' challenge of the institution of knowledge is especially relevant to queer theory as it relates to gender identity and performance. The approaches of Freud (1961), Piaget (1962), Kohlberg (1966), Bem (1981), and even Vygotsky (1978) to some degree, are all

based in universalist assumptions like play constancy (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978), the heterosexual imperative (Bem, 1981; Freud, 1961; Kohlberg, 1966; Piaget, 1962), and the knowledge trap (Bem, 1981; Freud, 1961; Kohlberg, 1966; Piaget, 1962). These assumptions are interrelated and work together to reinforce the status quo and hegemonic power. For instance, Kohlberg's (1966) work on gender constancy is fraught with universalist ideals surrounding gender, sex, and development: gender develops in exactly one way, for all people, and if someone's gender develops in a different way that person is incorrect and must be fixed (Kohlberg, 1966). By perpetuating his binary, universalist, static view of gender, Kohlberg reinforces and contributes to the heterosexual imperative. In the same vein, Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that play loses its developmental capacity after early childhood contributes to the capitalist, colonialist idea that adulthood is not for play, but for labor. The heterosexual imperative and the idea that adult play is not developmental are two of many manifestations of capitalist (Sandel, 2012) and colonialist (Driskill, 2010) hegemonic powers such as white supremacy (Bireda, 2021) and are intimately interrelated and interlinked with other tools of oppression: when a theory contributes to one, the rest are also strengthened.

Queer theory, social therapeutics, and play theory all illuminate and interrogate our universalist and hegemonic assumptions, questioning whether they serve us and our development and wondering about and co-creating the possibilities that exist without and beyond them (Holzman, 2018; Jagose, 1996). Queer theory's emphasis on the interconnectedness of different axes of oppression complements social therapeutics' focus on honoring and building with the intersections of identity and experiences within the social therapy group, and queer people within and outside of the academy point to play and games as powerful areas for the exploration of gender, sexuality, and identity (Harper et al., 2018).

Queer theory is at its core a realm of possibility and potential, looking beyond what is and into what could be. This space of possibility allows us to reconceptualize concepts like sex, gender, sexuality, identity and authority in new and liberatory ways (Harper et al., 2018). Or, perhaps we could say, allows us to *play* with those ideas. Queerness is inherently playful: therefore, play is inherently queer. Like social therapeutics, Vygotskian theory, and play theory, queer theory emphasizes *becoming*. Queerness is not something that you *are*, but something that you *do* and *perform*. Just as there is no play without rules (Vygotsky, 1978), there is no such thing as boundless freedom in queerness (Harper et al., 2018); there will always be limitations to what queerness can become, but just like in play “there is meaning in exploring the possibilities that occur *within* the boundaries, especially when that exploration allows us to see the ways in which those boundaries can be tested, expanded, or reconfigured” (Harper et al., 2018, p. 5). This description of queerness is remarkably reminiscent of Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development and conception of head tallerness that we discussed in Chapter 1 and complements social therapeutics and play theory’s expansion of Vygotsky’s ideas. Queerness embraces being and becoming, emphasizes a tool-and-result methodology similar to the one Holzman (2018) discusses, and the network of mutual support and deliberate subversion of hegemonic ideals that the queer community has collectively created enables the performance of new and different ways of being, just like the Zone of Proximal Development enables the performance of new and different activities (Vygotsky, 1978).

Bringing Things Together and Forward

If queerness is inherently playful and play and performance are drivers of development, then it stands to reason that queerness and queer play are also developmental. My experience at the Pierce College Puyallup drag show is a powerful example of developmental queer play, and

studies of drag have found that drag performances have a lot of benefits for both the performers and the audience (Rupp, 2003). Drag encouraged self-expression and self-acceptance among the performers, and the environment of the drag show led the cisgender, heterosexual individuals in the audience towards a more accepting and open view of queer and transgender people (Rupp, 2003). Many queer and transgender people also point to video and role-playing games as being especially meaningful mediums for exploring and playing with their gender identities, *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* being a prime example (Codega, 2020). In fact, in Perone and Göncü's (2014) research that we discussed earlier, some participants cited video games as a form of life span imaginative play that they engaged in.

D&D has substantive rulebooks, but these are regarded more as guidelines than hard and fast laws of the land: the actual rules of the world are amorphous, and even if the game facilitator or Dungeon Master has the final say over the rules, they're still determined, built, and enforced collectively by the group (Codega, 2020). In *D&D* there are no substantive differences between gender, sexuality, or ability level, and differences between playable races can be adjusted or eliminated to the taste of the group. The malleability of *D&D* to fit the needs of any player and group is especially enchanting to queer and transgender people: "The inherent play encouraged by tabletop roleplaying games is... a tacit liberation from societal norms and expectations, allowing a freedom in gameplay that is not often allowed in the world at large" (Codega, 2020, np). Having the freedom to embody and perform as a character of any gender identity, sexuality, gender performance, ability, species, and other identity markers or labels with a group of supportive peers lets people expand beyond the limitations of what they are and stretch into what they could become, trying on different ways of being for size and seeing how they feel in a safe and fun environment. For instance, one of my roommates uses *D&D* to express and embody

characters that exemplify different facets of his identity, and to explore what masculinity means or could mean to him as a transgender man.

Other areas of play and performance also have this potential. My younger sister played several male characters in theatrical productions in community college, which she attributes to having been a significant factor in her coming to terms with and better understanding her own relationship to masculinity and femininity. In my childhood play I often played the “daddy” in the family unit, or if I played a female character, she was typically unorthodox in her femininity. Beyond the personal experiences of my loved ones and me, there are queer *Minecraft* servers, queer trivia nights, queer kink and sexual play, queer theater such as the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and infinitely many other possibilities for developmental queer and gender play (Harper et al., 2018; Ruberg, 2019; Rupp, 2003).

We’ve established that co-created play and performance are necessary and developmental throughout life (Göncü & Perone, 2005; Holzman, 2018; Perone & Göncü, 2014), that knowledge is unnecessary for and even inhibits learning and development, that play is doing without the burden of knowing (Holzman, 2018), that queerness is inherently playful (Harper et al., 2018), and that play and performance with identity has liberatory and developmental possibilities for queer and transgender people (Codega, 2020). In the next chapter we’ll explore the possibility that playing with and performing gender in new and different ways is liberatory, developmental, and crucial for all people, regardless of gender and orientation.

Chapter 4: Why Play with Gender?

I was fifteen years old when my parents dropped me off at our local library for my first comic convention, and I could hardly contain my excitement. I had been waiting for an opportunity to go to a convention for years, and not only was this one in my hometown, but it was free! I had friends who were veterans of the convention scene, and one thing that I'd learnt from their stories was that if you wanted to be cool, you did cosplay. I had never done one before, but I understood the basic concept: choose a character from a piece of media, and dress as them (McKay, 2021). I'd spent the weeks leading up to the convention scouring secondhand stores and my family's home for components for my outfit, and the result was an inexpensive, humanoid interpretation of *Portal 2*'s Rick the Adventure Sphere.

In the video game Rick is an Artificial Intelligence (AI) contained in a spherical casing, but despite his relatively simple physical description, he has a big personality. I did my best to adopt it as my parents pulled away, sauntering into the library with what I hoped was the panache and style of a young, flamboyant Indiana Jones. I kept my shoulders square, my chest puffed, and my chin up. When I spoke it was with the best Australian accent I could muster, and I jokingly flirted with every "pretty lady" I came across. It was a stark contrast to my usual quiet, shy, polite self, and while it was difficult and a little bit scary to perform this way, I also found it strangely exhilarating. I liked the swagger. I liked having people laugh at my jokes, and I especially liked feeling confident enough to make those jokes. When the night ended and I went home, I found myself reluctant to remove the costume. I loved how powerful my Rick cosplay made me feel, and I lamented the fact that I couldn't be like him in real life. I changed into a nightgown and went to bed.

I participated in several more conventions and cosplay events during my teenage years. The characters I dressed as and portrayed varied in style, source material, and medium, but they had one unifying factor: they were all masculine characters. I didn't have anything against feminine characters, but I rarely found myself wanting to embody them. I took every opportunity I could get to perform as confident, masculine, and charismatic, and the more I did it, the more comfortable I became with it. But the only place I could do it safely was at conventions: surely if I dressed and acted masculine and confident outside of that specific, open-minded space, it wouldn't be accepted. Besides, it wasn't who I was. I was Morgan, and Morgan was quiet, unobtrusive, and feminine. Right? I stuck with the safer, more familiar option of continuing to perform femininity, quashing my desires until several years later when the Pierce College drag show allowed me to acknowledge them again.

The constriction that I felt around the types of performances I could engage in and the kinds of traits I could identify with is one of many examples of how current binary interpretations of gender identity have real impacts on our lives. In this chapter we'll explore this and other ways that the performances of gender that our society has naturalized and enforced have oppressed and limited all of us, including and perhaps especially cisgender, heterosexual people. Then we'll discuss the idea that there is liberatory potential in playing with those socially naturalized performances and co-creating new, never-before-done performances of gender that reframe and reinvent what having and doing one's gender or genders can mean, and why all people can and should engage in these playful new performances.

Oppressive Lenses

The lenses on gender that society has inscribed on us, the constant, limited, biologically essential, binary lens, has shaped and is continuing to shape some of the most fundamental

aspects of how our culture is organized and run (Butler, 1990). For instance, the ideology of separate spheres, which holds that the human world is divided into two separate, binary, and gendered areas: the private world, which was managed by women and centered around the home and homemaking; and the public world, which was managed by men and centered around work, politics, and breadwinning (Davies & Frink, 2014). This model not only divides humanity into two separate groups and men and women into separate worlds, but it also creates a gendered separation of labor: men engage in labor outside of the home, in the public world, while women engage in labor within the home, in the private world. Unlike the men's labor, the women's labor is not defined as work (Davies & Frink, 2014). Davies and Frink point out that the separate spheres ideology "describes a cultural ideal, one that never fully accounted for reality. Women have always played a part in public life, and public and private spheres have often overlapped" (2014, p. 20). It also overlooks the experiences of working-class people and people of color (Davies & Frink, 2014). Despite how inapplicable the ideology of separate spheres is to the real world, it is still a widely held perspective that reinforces cultural gender norms, the heterosexual imperative, and capitalist ideals around labor (Butler, 1990; Davies & Fink, 2014).

The field of human development has perpetuated and reinforced a limiting and binary view of gender and gender identity development. For instance, Erik Erikson's (1963) psychosocial theory, which we discussed in Chapter 1, limits gender identity development to his 5th developmental stage, *Identity vs. Role Confusion*, which occurs around 12-18 years old. During this time the adolescent is beginning to explore and understand themselves as an independent person, and coming into and claiming strong personal identities, including gender identity, is the core achievement of this stage. Settling on one, constant, permanent gender identity is seen as a necessary step before they can successfully complete Erikson's 6th stage,

Intimacy vs. Isolation (Erikson, 1963). If the adolescent fails to settle on either a male or female identity, they may struggle to develop intimate relationships with others and may never be able to move on to the last three psychosocial stages (Erikson, 1963). Erikson's stage-based, limited view of gender identity development has been embraced, perpetuated, and normalized by developmental psychologists (Steensma et al., 2013), such that any deviation from it is problematized, medicalized, and diagnosed. Rather than being embraced and seen as a natural expression of the beauty of human diversity, many developmental psychologists strive to locate external factors and causes for nontraditional or atypical gender identity expressions, such as chemical exposure in utero, genetics, and psychosocial reinforcement (Steensma et al., 2013), so that they can be accounted for and, presumably, avoided by parents.

Even beyond the field of developmental psychology, subverting or going against the binary, rigid view of society and gender, deliberately or not, can have significant negative consequences. For instance, queer and transgender adolescents are exposed to more bullying, economic stress, substance abuse, discrimination, and victimization than their heterosexual, cisgender peers, and are much more likely to suffer from depression and suicidality than heterosexual, cisgender youths (Gambadauro et al., 2020; Marshal et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2021), with possible solutions being explored in the areas of clinical therapy (Marshal et al., 2011), education (Gambadauro et al., 2020), and other disciplines (Williams et al., 2021).

Queer and transgender people are sexually assaulted more often than cisgender, heterosexual people, and transgender women, especially black transgender women, are murdered at alarmingly high rates compared to the general population (Grant et al., 2011). In 2020 the Human Rights Campaign recorded the murders of 44 transgender people in the United States, making it the deadliest year for transgender people on record (HRC, 2020), and as of early

December 2021, there have been at least 50 recorded murders of transgender people in the United States, setting the record for the second year in a row (HRC, 2021). The actual number of murders is likely much higher than this: many transgender people aren't out, are misgendered by law enforcement, or their deaths aren't recognized as homicides (HRC, 2021). The murder of transgender women is a global issue: activists in Latin America have been fighting against "transfemicide" (Human Rights Watch, 2020, n.p) for many years now, and have begun seeing success in their fights for justice for victims in court (Venis, 2021). Researchers in Hong Kong found that nearly half of the transgender people they interviewed had experienced violence against them, mostly committed by family members and/or intimate partners (Wong & Cheung, 2018), and data collected in the United Kingdom found that queer and transgender people are much more likely to be the victims of violence and harassment, and that victimization has serious negative effects on people's mental health, physical health, and wellbeing (Walters et al., 2020).

Intersex people (people with "atypical" physical sex characteristics, such as enlarged labia/clitoris, internal gonads, a penis and vagina, and a uterus and no vagina) are also intensely victimized by binary ideologies of gender and sex. In an especially heinous example of the inscription of binary sex onto our bodies (Butler, 1993), intersex babies are all too frequently given surgeries shortly or immediately after birth, sometimes even without the knowledge or consent of the parents (Garland & Slokenberga, 2019; Lowry, 2019; Reis, 2019). Not only that, but many people are kept in the dark about their status as intersex, and the surgeries performed on them when they were too young to consent or contest, until adulthood or for their entire lives. Kimberly Zieselman (2017) is one such individual. Zieselman was born with XY chromosomes and internal testes, but her body developed to appear female. Her status as intersex was invisible until puberty when she didn't menstruate like other girls. "On the advice of doctors at a major

hospital, my parents agreed that I should have surgery to remove my healthy gonads, without my knowledge or consent” (Zieselman, 2017, n.p). She stopped producing hormones naturally and was made to go on hormone replacement therapy, which she remains on to this day. This surgery was performed when she was only 15 years old.

Zielsman and other intersex people point out that these surgeries are dangerous and rarely if ever medically necessary: they can always be safely deferred until the intersex person can participate in the decision of whether to operate. Performing genital-altering surgeries on intersex people without their informed consent has long-term negative effects on their physical and mental health. Zielsman says: “I know firsthand the devastating impact they can have, not just on our bodies but on our souls. We are erased before we can even tell our doctors who we are. Every human rights organization that has considered this practice has condemned it, some even to the point of recognizing it as akin to torture” (Zielsman, 2017, n.p.).

The forcible and violent assertion of the heterosexual imperative (Butler, 1993) is most clearly seen in and discussed regarding communities that actively subvert it such as the queer, transgender, and intersex communities, but they’re far from the only people who are victimized by it. Heterosexual, cisgender, and perisex (someone who is not intersex) people are oppressed by the heterosexual imperative and other hegemonic, binary ideologies around gender, too. Even when I still identified as a cisgender, heterosexual woman, I rarely performed traditional femininity. I embodied the aspects of femininity that I felt protected me, such as shyness, absolute agreeability, and quietness, but my fashion choice was typically simple and not especially masculine or feminine. The femininity I was pushed towards felt like a façade or a costume, and masculinity felt comfortable, but in an ironic twist I could only engage with it

safely as a costume. So instead, I performed a more acceptable tomboyish (King, 2017) femininity, generally favoring loose jeans, t shirts, flannels, short hair, and no makeup.

I've known many women who perform a tomboyish femininity similarly (and in their case genuinely), and they've experienced significant social repercussions for it. For instance, one friend of mine who identified as a tomboy for much of their adolescence told me that they were pressured to perform as more feminine *and* more masculine depending on the context. Their choice in dress was especially critiqued: their grandmother dismissed their fashion choice as "unladylike" or "too boyish." Meanwhile, friends at school would shun them for something as simple as wearing nail polish, citing it as "too girly" for a tomboy to wear. When they took off the nail polish later the same day, they were welcomed back into the friend circle. Trapped between a proverbial rock and a hard place, they chose to flee traditional femininity to make their peers happy. They didn't wear nail polish again for many years.

Men are equally oppressed by rigid, constant, binary gender ideologies (Butler, 1993). One of my friends, a cisgender, heterosexual man with long hair whose gender expression is unique, has been the victim of multiple aggressions and slights because of it. In public school, girls chased him with scissors to try to cut his hair short; college classmates made secretive bets about his sexual orientation; and he's been frequently stereotyped as a "dirty hippie," in one case being made to wear a hairnet while the female staff members with long hair weren't. A recurring experience that especially puzzled him was that many people, upon discovering his status as a straight man, would begin treating him worse than they had when they'd assumed he was gay. I believe that this is an example of how subversion of traditional gender expressions and performances are considered somewhat more acceptable if it's done by a person in a minority group. Performing a nontraditional masculinity as a straight, cisgender male may be viewed as an

especially egregious betrayal of the status quo: someone in a minority group already subverts the status quo simply by virtue of their existence, while my cisgender, heterosexual friend's nontraditional gender expression is viewed by many people as more of an active decision than a queer or transgender man's gender expression is. In fact, he expressed guilt over his perceived privileged position, and while he told me that he'd rather *die* than perform traditional masculinity and reap the benefits therein, he *still* viewed his gender expression to be an active choice that he could take back or alter more easily than a transgender person could, simply because he's cisgender and heterosexual.

The Unique Oppression of Cisgender and Heterosexual People

I argue that cisgender and heterosexual people experience a unique pressure to conform to binary ideals around gender. Bem (1981) addressed an aspect of this idea briefly when she talked about the pressure to assert one's heterosexuality that we discussed in Chapter 2, but it goes deeper than questioning a person's sexual orientation. Indeed, we can see from my friend's experience as a nontraditional cisgender heterosexual man that the assertion of heterosexuality can sometimes lead to *more* social stigma, not less. When an openly cisgender and heterosexual person performs gender in a different way, it illuminates how artificial the division between cisgender, heterosexual people and queer, transgender people is, demonstrating that absolutely anybody can engage with gender in new and different ways without necessarily having to stop identifying as cisgender and heterosexual, and it's my theory that this demonstration is especially threatening to cisgender and heterosexual people who strongly base their sense of self on gendered standards (Bem, 1981). Even less traditional cisgender and heterosexual gender expressions such as the tomboy have numerous standards that are socially policed: my tomboy friend's experience with their peers demonstrates that even minor transgressions can be harshly

punished. By contrast, being queer or transgender often comes with the freedom to experiment with different kinds of gender expression that cisgender, heterosexual people aren't typically given. In my own experience, I didn't feel safe performing masculinity outside of the context of cosplay until I came out as nonbinary. The popular perspective seems to be that if someone is queer or transgender they can't help having a nontraditional gender expression, but cisgender, heterosexual people can. In this way, cisgender and heterosexual people are put under more pressure to conform to traditional gender expressions and roles than queer and transgender people are, and therefore may actually stand to benefit the most from the tools and perspectives I'm providing.

Changing Lenses

Throughout this thesis we've seen how the traditional, constant, binary, cisgender, heterosexual gender ideology has infiltrated our lives and become naturalized. It affects how we view human development, education, economics, labor, and global affairs; it alters our bodies, forcing them to adhere to binary standards that we created ourselves; and when we subvert or question it, we're ostracized, punished, or murdered. Infants are labeled as male or female sometimes even before birth, and that label dictates almost every aspect of our lives from its application until the very last time anyone thinks of us, long after our deaths. It tells us who we are, what we can be, and how we can and should perform. It determines what jobs are acceptable for us, which clothes we can wear, how we interact with and contribute to our communities, how we raise our children, and when we fail to live up to its impossible standards, we see it as a personal failing. Even at the tender age of ten years, I blamed myself for not fitting in with my Scout troop. As a teenager I spent hours upon hours searching for diagnoses and psychological explanations for my perceived deficit. For my entire young life, I held myself in contempt for

something that I couldn't control, and that I could have been loving myself for, because I'd internalized a rigid, binary gender ideology.

The gender binary also serves to divide us between who society defines as male and who society defines as female: men and women are separated as such before they even understand what man and woman mean and are placed in opposition to one another almost immediately. We're encouraged to view people designated "opposite" us in terms of their attractiveness and the potentiality for heterosexual coupling and recreation, and people designated "the same" as us as competition for that goal. Even before I reached sexual maturity, I felt a rift between myself and my male peers: we were discouraged from talking and interacting, and when I did become friends with boys we were both pushed forcefully towards heterosexuality. Despite being barely ten years old, one of my male friends was often jokingly referred to as my boyfriend by my grandmother and his parents. This made both of us uncomfortable, and when we did grow into teenagers, we drifted apart partially due to that pressure. Our relationship didn't resemble a heterosexual romance, and we didn't have the support to conceptualize or perform a different one as our social positions changed with our bodies, so we gave up on having any sort of relationship at all. This mindset, that male and female people necessarily experience attraction to each other, and that attraction sets the precedent for all interactions between them, stems from incredibly damaging, reductive theories like Freud's (1961) psychosexual theory, which is a product of and tool for hegemonic, oppressive systems (Butler, 1990; Holzman, 2018).

When the people like us are competitors, and the people unlike us are targets for heterosexual consumption, it leaves very little room for building community and relationships that don't align with the few allowed by the heterosexual imperative (Butler, 1993). When we're bound up by this competitive, self-centered, divisive ideology it keeps us from joining together

against the systems that oppress and divide us. Almost half of all Americans can be classified as lonely, and one in five reports rarely or never feeling close to other people (Polack, 2018). A survey by Harvard found that almost half of young adults have reported feeling lonelier since the start of the pandemic, and an astounding 63% of young adults are suffering significant symptoms of anxiety or depression (*Loneliness in America*, 2021). People are more separated than ever, and it's having significant impacts on our health in both the long and short term. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has found that social isolation significantly increases the risk of dementia, heart disease, stroke, depression, anxiety, suicide, *and death from all causes*. Not only that, but queer, transgender, and immigrant populations are at a higher risk for loneliness and the resulting health complications than the general population (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020).

With our world larger and more divided and isolated than ever, and the violent, oppressive repercussions of compulsory heterosexuality laid out before us, the gender binary seems to be causing more trouble than it's worth.

Why do we maintain it?

What are we gaining from the constant, binary institution of gender? What are the benefits of locking human beings into two artificial boxes? What does a child gain from being told, "No, you can't wear a dress, that's for girls," or, "Little girls don't play in the mud," or perhaps worst of them all, "Don't be a sissy, boys don't cry"? How are our lives improved by the division of toys, clothing, shoes, hygiene products, cosmetics, bathrooms, sports, tools, food, hobbies, media, and innumerable other things into two arbitrary categories? What did ten-year-old Morgan gain from their self-hatred and fear? What did my friends gain from being chased down hallways with scissors, and being ostracized from their communities? What does our

society gain when transgender people like Tyianna Alexander, Samuel Edmund Damián Valentín, Jeffrey “JJ” Bright, Jasmine Cannady, Jenna Franks, and Diamond Kyree Sanders are murdered in cold blood for the crime of simply existing (Human Rights Campaign, 2021)? The binary gender system is restricting us, terrorizing us, and killing us. It’s time we moved beyond it and embraced new, liberatory ways of being. Our lives and happiness depend on it.

Endless Possibilities

We’re already beginning to see evidence of people turning away from the traditional notions of gender that have constricted us for so long. Gender neutral parenting is becoming more and more popular (Dumas, 2014), children are playing less and less with gender-typical toys (Barry & Todd, 2021), and according to the Trevor Project (2021), fully one quarter of LGBTQ+ youth self-identify as nonbinary, while another 20% reported questioning whether they were nonbinary (*The Trevor Project National Survey, 2021*). Though Gallup and most other surveys don’t ask about nonbinary identities, the percentage of people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Transgender (LGBT) in the United States has risen by over one percent in the last five years to 5.6% (Jones, 2021), and the number rises to one in six among Generation Z adults. Another survey by the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) estimates that 9.5% of American youth identify as LGBT (Conron, 2020). People are coming out as queer and trans more than ever before, and they’re starting to fight for legal recognition and protections all over the United States and the rest of the world. In June 2021 the United States government started allowing people to change the gender marker on their passports even if it doesn’t match their birth certificate and other documents, and they’re currently in the process of adding a third gender option to passports (*Selecting Your Gender Marker, n.d.*). Several countries in Europe

also recognize third genders, and others are beginning to follow suit (*M/F/X/Other: 6 Countries Pushing for Non-Binary Registration in Europe*, 2020).

There are currently no globally applicable legal protections for transgender and nonbinary people, nor anything to encourage or incentivize nations and states to adopt their own (Bosia et al., 2020), but progress is being made despite this. For instance, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled in June 2021 that the state of Honduras was responsible for the murder of Vicky Hernández, a transgender woman of color, on the first night of their 2009 coup d'état (Venis, 2021). This sets a precedent for other cases like Vicky's in the future: governments are finally starting to be held responsible for protecting the lives of their transgender citizens.

The abolition of static, binary gendered ideologies will benefit transgender, queer, cisgender, heterosexual, intersex, and perisex people alike. When we remove the idea of an inherent masculinity or femininity from bodies and body parts we become free to shape our bodies into anything we desire, regardless of gender identity and assigned sex. One Tumblr user phrased it as “You can just *want a body* and *have it*... not only does your gender not have to ‘match’ your assigned body, your *chosen* gender doesn’t have to ‘match’ your *chosen* body because all that really matters, on any of it, is what feels right to you” (mycroftrh, Tumblr, 2021). For example, there’s no reason that a cisgender woman shouldn’t be able to have a phalloplasty operation to get a penis, just because she wants a penis; or that a cisgender man shouldn’t be able to go on estrogen simply because he desires the physical changes of Hormone Replacement Therapy while still identifying as a man. In other words, just like a transgender person doesn’t have to desire a different body to be transgender, a person doesn’t have to be transgender to desire a different body.

Taking away the heterosexual imperative's (Butler, 1990) authority over us frees our behaviors and interests as well. My cisgender male friend would feel free to perform his masculinity in whatever way feels most natural to him without fear of repercussions or judgement, and my tomboy friend would be able to explore different kinds of expression without losing friends or respect. Hobbies like sewing, cooking, and knitting would become accessible to men and masculine people without risk of judgement. My friend's six-year-old son who told me that "only girls can like unicorns" wouldn't feel disallowed from appreciating a mythical creature. Eliminating the constant, binary gender system allows us to perform our gender identities freely and mindfully, rather than for the sake of self-protection or reinforcing the heterosexual imperative. People can be men, women, and/or anything else they want to be with intent, pride, and agency, rather than because of some inborn essential femaleness or maleness that they're powerless to challenge or change (Kohlberg, 1966), and they can choose independently what being their gender means to them. Systems of oppression and authority will no longer be able to dictate to us what our lives must be based on our genitalia and hormonal makeup. Five different cisgender women all have different ideas of what being a woman entails, looks like, and feels like: in a world without the heterosexual imperative, those five different conceptions of "woman" can exist openly together comfortably. We can leave the oppression of gender roles and expectations behind, picking and choosing what we want from the remainder. If a baby is born with 'atypical' sex characteristics they and their parents would no longer need to fear medical judgement and unnecessary, harmful surgeries; if a minor wants to socially transition to a gender or sexual expression that feels right to them, they'd be allowed to without worrying about becoming one of the 40% of homeless youth who identify as queer or trans (True Colors United - Our Issue, 2021); and a cisgender woman who feels trapped by the patriarchal

standards of womanhood would become free to create and claim a female gender identity and expression that empowers her.

Not only will this liberate all of us regardless of gender and sexual identity, it will also be a significant step in dismantling colonialism and white supremacy. This thesis is being written from the perspective of a white, Western, American person, so it's especially important to discuss the fact that Native communities and other communities of color are especially and uniquely oppressed by the gender binary, as gender norms are deeply steeped in white, colonial ideals (Driskill, 2010; hooks, 2014). In freeing ourselves from the binary gender system, we also free gender identities of color and Native conceptualizations of gender from the pressures and constriction of white, colonial gender expectations.

What of Identity?

Turning away from the way that we've done things for as long as many of us can remember is a terrifying prospect to many. It's all well and good to talk about not performing the binary, rigid gender system anymore, but what will we perform instead? What becomes of the labels of man and woman? How do we raise children outside of the limiting frameworks of identity development that have dominated parenting and teaching practices for decades (Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1961; Steensma et al., 2013)? What happens to the idea of a transgender identity if there is no assigned gender to transition from in the first place? If there is no binary to begin with, can one even be nonbinary? Do we abolish identity entirely, as some advocates have suggested (Womanity Project, 2021)? Or is a reframing of the system enough?

I argue that there's a lot of value, culturally and for individuals, in gender identity despite the damage its current form has done and continues to do. If gender identity labels didn't serve

us, we wouldn't see so many of them manifesting as more and more people explore and play with gender: the LGBTQA Wiki, which catalogues a large variety of gender and sexual identities, contains over 6,500 pages at the time this thesis is being written (*LGBTQA Wiki*, n.d.). Rather than abolishing gender identity, approaching gender identity with a playful, open, improvisational, lens will allow us to engage with gender labels as tools or toys that we can play with, rather than fixed states of being that we must be. When gender is playful, we can take, leave, modify, throw away, rip up, reinvent, co-create, improvise, and transform gender labels. We can layer them on top of one another, choose one and stay with it, switch them out, stick them together, create new ones, or walk away from the table entirely.

Rather than identities being in-groups and out-groups that don't interact or interrelate, they can be the toys and games on the playground. We can play as a woman one day, as a man another day, as androgynous one minute, gendered the next, or choose not to play the gender game at all, in the same way that at the playground we could choose to play on the swings, the seesaw, the climbing wall, play pretend with friends, play with potato bugs, run around in circles, sit and daydream, or do whatever else we felt like without having to worry about whether what we did that day lined up with what we'd done before or would do in the future. If I choose to label my gender identity as agender when I'm talking to one person, queer when I'm talking to another, and transgender when I'm talking to a third, I'm free to do so, just like I'm free to continue identifying as nonbinary, queer, and transgender (or not!) for the entire day even if I wear a dress and high heels in the morning and a suit in the afternoon. When gender is a playground the possibilities become limitless.

It's also important for us to remember that this conversation around identity is rooted entirely in a Western perspective. This thesis can't go very far in depth on other conceptions of

identity, but to throw out identity entirely also risks perpetuating and reinforcing erasure and oppressive systems of authority on our non-Western friends and comrades, even if it seems to be in the interest of breaking down barriers. Instead, we can reevaluate and co-create a fluid and liberatory conception of identity that throws out the oppressive, violent heart of our current system without also throwing out the beauty, diversity, and empowerment that identity can bring to us and our communities.

Bringing Things Together and Forward

The day I dressed up as Rick the Adventure Sphere for the library's convention, I was playing with gender. My identity as a cisgender woman was suspended for the duration of the play, allowing me to experiment with, embody, and become a gender that I'd never performed before. I picked masculinity apart and decided which aspects of it best fit the character I was trying to emulate, creating my own version of a man to play during the convention. When I created the cosplay, I also created a gender! It was a fleeting, ephemeral gender, lasting only as long as I wore the costume and embodied the character, but it was a one-of-a-kind, co-created gender identity. Now whenever I go out in public I go through a similar process of picking apart and examining which aspects of gender identity, presentation, and performance I want to embrace and embody. These decisions have big implications in my day-to-day life, from my body language to how I interact with others to how I view myself. The days when I give myself permission to play with it, like I did when I made that cosplay all those years ago, are often the days that lead to me discovering something new about myself in the process (for instance, did you know that I love wedge heels? I didn't before, but I do now!) or making connections with other people that I may not have made otherwise.

The fluid, playful framework around gender and development that we've been building together in this thesis can help all of us to engage with ourselves and with one another differently. You can use the gender playground lens in your own life, to process and understand your experiences, relationships, and perceptions in a new light. You can get to know yourself and your communities in different ways, and help build a gender revolution in the process. There are infinitely many ways that we could go about engaging with our gender identities in a revolutionary light, and, as we discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, co-created, playful, imaginative activities are particularly likely to be helpful in this area. In the next chapter we'll explore three interrelated activities that I'd like to engage in with/in my communities to explore, play with, and co-create gender together.

Chapter 5: Where Do We Go from Here?

May 16th, 2018 was a busy day for me. I was finishing my first year as an undergraduate student, and I had only recently come out as nonbinary at school and work. Having my identity embraced and accepted by my coworkers and peers was an affirming and uplifting experience, and I felt energized and empowered to get involved and make a difference in my community. I was the Vice President of the school's Gender and Sexuality Alliance, and so I was recruited by a couple of other students and on campus organizations to join a committee planning UW Tacoma Pride. The list of events we planned was extensive, and included a resource fair, a keynote speech, a discussion panel, and a drag show. After my experience in helping to plan the drag show at Pierce College Puyallup, I happily volunteered to head up that aspect of the project. After several weeks of phone calls, emails, negotiations, and planning, I could hardly believe that the day was actually here.

I ducked out of Dr. Perone's class early and ran across campus to the event hall, disappointed to be missing the unit on humanitarian clowning but excited to see our planning come to fruition. As the moment approached, I roamed between the event hall and the classrooms we'd set up as dressing rooms on the floor above, checking in on the performers and making sure the stage and chairs were set up and ready. When I finally took my position outside the rear doors, adjusting my tie, I thought back to the Pierce College drag show from three years prior. In that time, I'd earned a degree, started at a new university, started a new job, and founded a student club, but none of those measurable, definite, resume-worthy accomplishments compared to the feeling I got that moment. No, I wasn't ready to perform my own drag performance yet—my hands had been full planning the show—but as I stood there with my bulletpoints on my phone, I understood that this was important all the same. When I walked

through the doors and into the crowded event hall with my heart in my throat, it was with a confidence that I'd lacked back then.

It was surreal as I made my way onto the stage, in front of an audience much bigger than the one at Pierce. Or maybe it wasn't: crowds look very different from the stage than they do from within them. All eyes were on me as I took the podium and began my opening remarks, wondering at the fact that I'd come this far: at Pierce, no amount of convincing could have gotten me onto a stage, let alone speaking on it. I kept it short and sweet, but I didn't feel self-conscious about whether the audience thought I sounded okay, liked my outfit, or thought I looked too masculine in my button-up, chest binder, and tie. The self-assurance I felt in that moment was something I'd never thought myself capable of before. After all... I was Morgan, and Morgan was quiet, unassuming, and shy, even if I wasn't necessarily feminine anymore. Right?

Maybe. But I was *also* confident, and I was *also* decisive, and I was *also* a leader. My gait wasn't the exaggerated, swaggering, confident masculinity I'd adopted for my Rick the Adventure Sphere cosplay that I discussed in the last chapter, but I wasn't embodying the same meekness that had used to punctuate my being. I'd stopped fussing about whether how I performed my gender was correct, and just let myself *be*. I didn't perform in the drag show that night, but I did perform as a version of myself that I'd never experienced before. I was charismatic and confident, I dealt with the inevitable hiccups with more grace under pressure than I had thought myself capable of, and none of it felt forced, the way it had at my Scout outing over a decade previously, or deliberately emulating someone other than myself like I'd done when I cosplayed at the convention in my teen years.

The DJ kicked off the drag show with a bang, and the crowd cheered and clapped as I exited the stage. I grinned and did a little victory dance as I ran for the elevator to go back up to

the dressing rooms and make sure the upcoming performers were ready to go. I missed most of the show itself, busy with backstage work and directing other volunteers, but I came away from the event with a deeper connection to my community at UW Tacoma, new friendships and relationships with the drag performers in my area, and a new understanding of myself and my gender performance.

Throughout this thesis I've demonstrated that co-created, imaginative, playful activities like drag shows are both developmental and necessary (Göncü & Perone, 2005), and that playing with gender has the potential to drive gender identity development in people of all ages (Perone & Göncü, 2014). My own experiences at the Pierce and UW Tacoma drag shows support these interpretations of gender and development, which I've termed the gender playground lens. There are innumerable possibilities for developmental activities that can be explored with this lens, but for the sake of this thesis I've identified three interrelated activities that are especially promising to me and my communities. A social therapeutic community that works together to interrogate ideas around gender, gender identity, and gender performance; creating art that explores gender and gender identity; and theatrical gender play such as drag and the traditional theater stage. As we've learned from Vygotsky (1978) and contemporary Vygotskians (Göncü & Perone, 2005; Holzman, 2018; Perone & Göncü, 2014), people are inseparable from their cultural contexts, so the activities that I come up with and engage in may not have the same impact in all communities. With this in mind I'd like to invite everyone who's stuck with me thus far to spend some time thinking about how you might play with your gender with/in your communities. What can you do to foster an environment where the people you love can engage with their genders playfully together? What will your gender playground look like? Diversity in experience,

context, and group is incredibly important to one of the core practices that I'll be engaging in as I continue this work, social therapeutics (Holzman, 2018).

Social therapeutic community

Drawing from Holzman's social therapeutics methodology (Holzman, 2018), I would like to build a community of people interested in exploring gender through play and performance. In the spirit of emergent tool-and-result co-creative activities, the group will work together to come up with imaginative, improvisational, creative activities that question and challenge the cisgender, heteronormative, patriarchal system of gender, as well as the systems of race, class, religion, ability, sex, nationality, and others, while building connections, community, and (I hope!) lasting friendships. Social therapeutics' emphasis on dismantling objective 'Truth' in favor of multiple subjective 'truths' is a perfect fit for helping the group dismantle the idea of an objective 'Truth' about gender and discover/co-create new and liberatory gender truths that empower us instead of constraining us.

Social therapeutics also embraces a tool-and-result, process-oriented approach that rejects the idea that one must know to grow (Holzman, 2018). By dispensing with the necessity of knowledge and understanding, social therapeutics empowers us to leap headfirst and fearlessly into the unknown. In a social therapeutic space we can bar what we've been taught about gender from influencing how we're allowed to perform, freeing ourselves to perform gender in brand new, previously unknown ways. Because gender is something that emerges socially (Butler, 1993), the co-created, interactive aspect of social therapeutics is especially critical: the combination of the open, safe environment, the reconceptualization of knowledge as unnecessary, and the zone of proximal development created when people come together (Holzman, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978) creates the perfect conditions for playing with and developing

gender identity. In fact in 2021, the East Side Institute's annual conference, *Performing the World* (*Performing the World*, 2021), which brings together people from all over the world who are interested in engaging in play and performance to transform one another and the world, had a special social therapeutic workshop dedicated to playing with gender identity and interrogating whether such things are even necessary.

One question that I and other queer and transgender community builders have struggled with is whether and to what extent to include cisgender and heterosexual people in queer and transgender spaces. For instance, Power's (2009) performance art piece *Through a Glass Darkly*, which explored their gender identity and relationship with it and their body, had a mixed response: "Many academics interpreted the performance as 'obscene', 'disconnected', 'lacking narrative', 'offensive' and even 'exhibitionist'. My queer-identified audience, however, described the performance as 'engaging', 'intelligent', 'thought provoking', and even reflecting of their own personal experiences" (Power, 2009, p. 39). One heterosexual woman who identified with the performance piece had a gender performance that "was deemed queer by others" (2009, p. 40). This led Power to wonder if their performance piece, and by extension queer theory and practice generally, could only be understood and appreciated by a queer audience. While I agree that some cisgender, heterosexual people may struggle to engage with queer thought and activities, I argue that they should still be included in them.

There are three primary reasons that I think it's important for the gender playground to include cisgender and heterosexual people without reservation or restriction. First: while it's generally true that cisgender and heterosexual people tend to have difficulty understanding and embracing queer experiences, ideas, and activities (Power, 2009), we know from sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) that the best way to learn and develop is to perform with what we don't

yet understand (Holzman, 2018). Cisgender and heterosexual people desperately need spaces and opportunities to play with, examine, and develop their relationship to gender with others. Not only are their perspectives and experiences just as influenced by systems of oppression as the perspectives and experiences of queer and transgender people, but they also often don't have the benefit of recognizing that influence. Because of this there may actually be *more* revolutionary and liberatory potential for cisgender and heterosexual people who play with their gender identities, especially because, as I pointed out in Chapter 4, when cisgender and heterosexual people perform their genders differently it shows that you don't have to be queer or transgender to challenge and reconceptualize gender.

The second reason that I'm advocating for including cisgender and heterosexual people in gender-focused social therapeutic communities and the gender playground more generally is that the idea that they are the only people who may struggle with participating in queer activities is demonstrably false. In general queer people tend to be more open-minded than cisgender, heterosexual people (Power, 2009), but this doesn't mean that all queer people are open-minded or that all cisgender, heterosexual people are close-minded, and to claim so is a grossly inaccurate simplification. Individual differences in personality are much more likely to influence the group's cohesion than differences in gender or sexual identity.

Third and finally, drawing any line in the sand will always exclude someone who shouldn't be excluded. Many queer and transgender people are in the closet or are otherwise not open about their identities (*The Trevor project national survey*, 2021), and asking someone to prove their identity to someone else before they're allowed to participate in something is just another manifestation of gender as a tool of oppression and control (Butler, 1993) and imposes the kind of artificial divisions we're striving to avoid. To be truly liberatory and communal, the

entire community must be welcome to participate in the gender playground fully. Additionally, social therapeutics often questions the very concept of identity in the first place, arguing that identity labels create artificial divisions and hampers interconnection and the creation of a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Lobman & Perone, 2018). The more diverse a group is, the more possibilities there are for new and unique overlapping ZPDs. While the details of the group's activities will remain unknown until it begins its work/play, one that I know I want to explore is drag performance.

My experience at the Pierce College drag show that I opened this thesis with speaks to the developmental possibilities of drag performances, and I'm not the only person to wonder about that concept. Rupp (2003), in their exploration of a group of drag queens who perform at the 801 Cabaret in Key West, argued that drag is not merely a performance, but also a political event that uses identity to challenge traditional ideas of gender and sexuality. Rupp argued that the performance of "ambiguity and betweenness" (2003, p. 212) invites the audience to think about and consider the idea that what it means to be a certain gender, and what it means to desire someone of a certain gender/sex, may be more complicated than people are encouraged to believe. Rupp argues that drag is a "collective boundary-crossing strategy aimed deliberately at changing gender and sexual systems" (p. 216). My experience at the Pierce College drag show certainly lends credence to this interpretation: seeing the drag king cross gender boundaries with pride and exuberance helped me learn that I could do the same in my own life. I'd love to continue exploring and playing with these ideas with a social therapeutic community.

I'd especially like to explore how drag performance can affect the performer's self-concept and view of the world in this work. It is likely that at least some of the participants will have never done a drag performance before, and I can say that I will be one of them. The

experience of putting together a drag character and doing a performance with other supportive people in a safe environment will likely encourage and facilitate thinking differently about gender just as much as, if not more than, the experience of viewing a drag performance. Even if there are people in the group who aren't able to perform drag, they can still help the group with the process by participating as audience members and supporting performers in creating and designing their characters, for instance.

Gender art

From the ancient Greek Hermaphroditos to Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore in the 1920s to the more than 40 artists who contributed to the 2017-2018 art exhibition *Trigger: Gender as a tool and a weapon* (Trigger, 2017), artists have been exploring the concept of gender identity for centuries (*The art of gender fluidity*, 2015). Art provides a means for people to explore and interpret their experiences, and has been utilized in education (Holzman, 1997), therapy (Gilroy, 2006), and community development (Lowe, 2000) with success. Art has both instrumental and intrinsic value to everyone (McCarthy et al., 2005). In other words, it produces benefits in instrumental, measurable areas such as cognitive functioning, hand-eye coordination, community building, health, and economic growth, and it also produces benefits in areas that are less measurable such as communication, aesthetic experience, expansion of one's own abilities and faith in those abilities, and the conveyance of a message or idea (McCarthy et al., 2005). Art is also playful, and engaging in it and other creative activities can drive development (Russ, 2003; Wood & Hall, 2011).

I've experienced some of these benefits myself in my own forays into creating art. During my first quarter of graduate school I was given the opportunity to create an installation art piece. We were given free choice of topic, so I chose the subject of my gender identity. The

piece was an exploration of my relationship with my gender, my body, and my father. It was the first time I had allowed myself to explore and consider the ways that those three things interacted and affected me, and to try to represent them in a way that was meaningful to me. I explored the class building to find a suitable location for my piece and found myself drawn to the main stairwell. The symbolism of the stairwell as a transitory place between spaces appealed to me, as well as the typical ephemerality of our interactions with stairs. Unless you're disabled like myself, people rarely stop to think about it when they climb or descend steps. Placing my art piece in the stairwell forced my audience, and myself, to spend much more time there than they might have otherwise, interacting with the space in new and different ways.

I placed a wheelbarrow at the top of the stairs, out of the walkway, and filled it with paper grass. I set up a human silhouette out of wire at the handles of the wheelbarrow, and put a baby doll in the grass. The wheelbarrow base with the wire silhouette and baby doll sitting on grass clippings is a reference to my earliest memory: sitting on top of the wheelbarrow grass clippings as my father wheeled us over to the compost pile after mowing the lawn. The doll had her hair removed, and a pink mask with the sign of Venus painted on the forehead was nailed over her face. The mouth was covered by nails that protruded from the mask, spelling out the word "GIRL" in red. The doll struggles to remove the mask with her left hand, to no avail. A pink feather boa was tied around her waist, binding her, while the other end was tied around the handle of the hammer used to nail the mask to her face. Blonde hair was stapled to her head and to the mask. These objects represented the limiting, constraining, and violent aspects of being forced into identifying and presenting as a woman. Her other hand clings desperately to an agender pride flag and a chest binder, reaching towards liberation and alternative gender identities and expressions. At the end of the wheelbarrow green streamers fell down the stairs

with the flag, representing my father's desire to throw out the transgender and queer aspects of my identity. A sign reading "Hello! My pronouns are they/them/theirs" was displayed at the front of the wheelbarrow. On either side of the hammer, there were two greeting cards. One was a stereotypical birth announcement for a baby girl, and the other was a condolence card for someone grieving a lost loved one. On the condolence card was a "Daddy's Girl" sticker. They sat in front of the wire silhouette representing my father, referencing my father's feeling that he's somehow "lost a daughter." The wire silhouette had a sheet of paper hanging from it with a poem about fatherhood written on it that I had given my father for Father's Day over a decade previously: a poem that, now, seems alien when I compare it to my father and my current relationship with him.

Exploring my gender identity in this way enabled me to process several feelings that I had been dealing with related to coming out and beginning my transition. My father had been an important figure throughout my life, but his attitude towards queer and transgender individuals made it clear to me that our relationship would not last long when I embraced my authentic self, and I'd been struggling with the burden of that rapidly approaching loss. The piece was painful to put together and present, but it helped significantly to drive me towards further self-acceptance and letting go of my relationship with my father in favor of my well-being and health. It also helped me to process and further understand my rocky relationship with femininity. By engaging in the process of trying to express my gender identity and my experiences around it to others, I grew to understand them better myself.

I'd like to facilitate art workshops or groups where participants can create art about their gender identities or their experiences with/around gender. They could be connected to the activities of a social therapeutic community, or they could be conducted independently, or both.

Any artistic medium or space could be used: the group could decide together ahead of time what kinds of art they want to make, bring art supplies from their homes and work with what they end up with, make art with whatever is in the environment around them, or go to a local art workshop or gallery, for instance. But of course, traditional art is far from the only avenue with potential for revolutionary activities around gender identity.

Theatrical Gender Play

Performance, performativity, and their relationship to development and gender identity have been central themes throughout this thesis (Butler, 1993; Holzman, 2018; Perone & Göncü, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978), and the stage is a perfect place to explore those themes. For example, Terri Power's (2009) theatrical performance art piece, *Through a Glass Darkly*, was a developmental experience for them. The process taught them about themselves, their body, their identity, and their community. Power engaged in an ethos that embraces transition, change, and 'becoming' throughout the process of creating the work, which strongly influenced the final product. In the process of creating a performance to represent a character caught 'between' genders, the division between artist and creation became increasingly blurred and broken down. The destruction of boundaries became a key focus of the work.

Destroying and crossing boundaries is also the focus of another queer performance artist, Jo Michael Rezes. In Rezes' 2020 TED Talk, *A playful exploration of gender performance*, they advocate for a recasting of gender as not performative but 'rehearsative.' The key difference between Rezes' interpretation of performativity and rehearsativity is that in a performance, failure is a bad thing: performance implies a serious, high-stakes situation where there is a right and wrong way to perform, and performing the wrong way is punished. This interpretation of performativity echoes Butler's (1991) performative theory of gender, where transgressing gender

norms is socially punished. Rezes' rehearsativity, by contrast, embraces the concept of failure. In a rehearsal we're allowed to stumble, trip up, forget our lines, or lose our place. These activities aren't seen as negative things, but simply part of the process of rehearsing. Rezes argues that "no one is ever actually ready (for a performance). I mean, we're never actually done rehearsing, we're just put in front of an audience" (Rezes, 2020). Rehearsing has the potential to go on indefinitely, without the requirement of an ultimate, failure-free performance. Rezes' rehearsativity is similar to Holzman's interpretation of performance as an ongoing, co-created activity that allows people to perform in ways that they wouldn't have on their own or in a less open, playful environment (Lobman & Perone, 2018).

Abandoning a fear of failure will be critical to building a social therapeutic community in general (Holzman, 2018), and to building a gender playground where everyone feels safe experimenting with their gender expressions and identities, especially people who haven't engaged with their genders in this way before. It will also be critical to engaging in any kind of theatrical performance, since stage fright is a common fear (Rezes, 2020). Experimenting with the kinds of theatrical activities we engage in and playing with the concept of audience could also help with this. Improvisational theater activities could be a great place to start, since improv has a unique capacity to drive co-created development and foster interpersonal connections (Göncü & Perone, 2005). Improv, like play, is powerful in that it enables us to act at the representational level, instead of at the face value of our activity (Göncü & Perone, 2005). By digging into the symbolisms and representations of our improv (Spolin, 1963) and theatrical (Rezes, 2020) activities, we have the opportunity to reimagine, reinterpret, and reinvent ourselves and our gender identities, with no performance being 'wrong.' The day I got up in front of the crowd at UW Tacoma Pride and improvised an opening speech I reinvented my

gender identity and myself, embracing a new and different way of performing who Morgan was with the audience, performers, and other event staff. I wasn't afraid that my performance of Morganness would be inadequate: I just did it.

Another theatrical activity that we discussed briefly at the beginning of Chapter 4, cosplay, has been examined by queer scholars as an activity that challenges the idea of essential differences of the gendered body, and a cosplayer who cosplays a different gender effectively 'simulates' that gender identity (Gn, 2011). Nichols (2019) argues that cosplay is a place where women are empowered and given the agency to experiment with new ways to represent and perform gendered identities. The idea of a gender identity that one can wear and remove like an outfit, which Judith Butler (1993) has disparaged in her work, suddenly becomes viable. My performance as 'Rick the Adventure Sphere' from *Portal 2* at the convention was also a performance of my interpretation of Rick's gender identity: I put it on when I put on the appearance and mannerisms of his character, and reluctantly removed it when I removed the rest of the costume. Similarly, when an actor takes on the persona of a character on the stage, that persona necessarily includes the character's gender identity. Actors transition from one gender to another constantly, even if it's between two different interpretations of 'the same' gender. Cosplay also enables participants to escape reality and enter an imaginative world with others (Rahman et al., 2012), which strongly resembles Vygotskian developmental theory (Holzman, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). By embodying and acting as different characters with gender identities and expressions that are different from our own, we can perform in ways that we wouldn't in our day to day lives, developing, discovering, and co-creating ourselves and each other in the process (Holzman, 2018). Drag can also be easily incorporated into cosplay activities: it might be fun for

a social therapeutic group to exaggerate the aspects of the gender identity of a character they enjoy and create a drag character and performance out of it, for instance!

Bringing things together and forward

In this chapter we've explored a few possibilities for revolutionary, co-created activities with gender that I intend to explore with/in my communities, including and perhaps especially cisgender, heterosexual community members. It's my hope that by playing with gender in a social therapeutic environment in ways that experiment with identity, art, expression, performance, and audience, we can build a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) where gender becomes a fluid, malleable, and subjective concept, subverting the oppressive and limiting system of gender and freeing us from its shackles at least temporarily. Practicing shifting our perspective on gender to a gender playground lens rather than a gender binary lens in a ZPD gender playground with our communities will help us to apply that lens elsewhere as well.

Building a group that feels comfortable engaging in such "head taller"ness (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102) will take time and care. Gender identity is one of the most culturally salient identities (Butler, 1993), and many people, myself included, have had traumatic or distressing experiences in relation to gender. Cultivating a co-created, supportive space where everyone can develop together requires many sessions so that everyone can get to know one another and themselves as and in relation to the group. Social therapeutics avoids having a single "authority" figure in charge of the group, so I will be just as much a participant and co-creator as anyone else. Learning to let go of my desire for control will be something that I'll need to give significant attention to during this process: I can't co-create anything if I'm the only one holding the reins. By utilizing a flat, egalitarian approach, every member of the group will be empowered to suggest, create, collaborate, teach, learn, lead, follow, and everything in between as they like

without a fear of undermining my or someone else's 'authority.' The ideas that a five-year-old girl puts forth will be given just as much attention and consideration as my ideas, or the ideas of a sixty-year-old man. We'll build with the offers of our cisgender, transgender, intersex, and other community members regardless of the separations we're so accustomed to. We'll learn from and teach one another as we reinvent and reclaim our genders for ourselves with/in the gender playground.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have demonstrated that rather than occurring in discrete, universal, and measurable stages as many popular theories hold (Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1961; Piaget, 1962), development actually happens differently depending on cultural context, and always occurs in relation to others (Vygotsky, 1978). Development is a life-span, co-created activity (Göncü & Perone, 2005) that can be facilitated through play, regardless of age or ability (Perone & Göncü, 2014). Life-span imaginative play is not only developmental, but essential to all people as a means to process and understand experiences, connect with others, and relax (Perone & Göncü, 2014). Gender development is also viewed as a limited, constant, binary process (Bem, 1981; Kohlberg, 1966), but this view is inaccurate and rooted in essentialist, hegemonic systems of authority and oppression (Butler, 1993). The limiting, universalist, Western lenses that our society has enforced on gender has oppressed and damaged all of us. People are more divided and alone than ever before (*Loneliness in America*, 2021), and the gender binary has only deepened those divisions and enacted violence on the most vulnerable people in our communities (Human Rights Campaign, 2021). It's becoming increasingly clear that a rigid and binary lens on gender identity doesn't serve us anymore, and perhaps never did. I argue that gender, like the rest of development, is sociocultural, co-created, and life span, and gender identity development can be catalyzed with co-created imaginative play in anybody regardless of assigned sex, age, race, or other division. I've named this perspective the gender playground lens.

The life span, sociocultural, playful interpretation of gender that the gender playground puts forth has far-reaching implications that have the potential to undermine structural systems of authority and oppression such as the patriarchy (Butler, 1993; hooks, 2014), white colonialism (Barker, 2017; Bireda, 2021; Driskill, 2010), and capitalism (Barker, 2017; Butler, 1993;

Driskill, 2010; Taylor, 2018). The current rigid, limiting perspectives of gender and development have had major repercussions on all of our health and wellbeing, making us lonelier (*Loneliness in America*, 2021), unnecessarily altering and policing our bodies and behaviors (Butler, 1990; Garland & Slokenberga, 2019; Lowry, 2019; Reis, 2019; Taylor, 2018), and exploiting or murdering us (HRC, 2021; Murray, 2017). Many of the most important experiences in my own life, positive, negative, and in between, have been centered around my gender identity, gender expression, and the reception of that expression by the people around me. Looking back, reflecting on, and playing with those experiences with you as I've written this thesis has been illuminating, and it's helped me to process some of the trauma and fear that I've carried and avoided acknowledging related to my gender. I didn't realize how heavy those burdens were until I got the opportunity to put them down. I hope that the tools I've given you and the gender playground lens I've laid out over the last hundred or so pages have inspired you to do the same with your experiences and perceptions, with me and with the other people in your communities.

When we allow ourselves to play with and reimagine gender together, we also liberate ourselves and our communities from the constraints of gender roles and expectations, becoming free to sculpt gender identities and performances that are meaningful and fun for us without fear of repercussion. Queer communities would greatly benefit from playful, co-created activities around gender, especially because queerness is inherently playful (Harper et al., 2018) but playing with gender may have the most liberatory potential for cisgender and heterosexual community members, as they experience a unique pressure to assert and reinforce sexual and gendered stereotypes (Bem, 1981). This pressure makes it more difficult for them to consider alternative gender expressions as viable options for them without giving up their identities as cisgender and heterosexual and risking ostracization. Queer, transgender, cisgender, and

heterosexual people alike can and should play with their genders together: it will empower all of us to move beyond the oppressive, binary lenses on gender and sexuality that's ruled, controlled, and, in some cases, ended, our lives for so long (HRC, 2021; Taylor, 2018), and embrace new, interconnected, diverse ways of being and doing, such as the gender playground. It's also important to note that social therapeutics emphasizes bringing together as diverse a group as possible: the more diversity there is within the gender playground, the more potential there is for new and unique ZPDs and experiences (Holzman, 2018).

A social therapeutic approach (Holzman, 2018) has the potential to be an especially rich area of exploration for co-created, imaginative, playful, revolutionary activities around gender and the gender playground. Social therapeutics' tool-and-result, subjective, positive approach will allow communities to come together as they are and perform with what everyone brings without fear of failure or "getting it wrong." The group can work together to perform their development, playing with how they relate to each other, themselves, and their gender identities and co-creating new conceptualizations, interpretations, and performances of gender that are liberatory, empowering, fun, and revolutionary. Artistic (*The art of gender fluidity*, 2015; Power, 2009) and theatrical (Rezes, 2020) activities such as painting (Modern Transgender Art, 2020), performance (Power, 2009) or installation art (Garg, 2019), improv (Perone & Göncü, 2014), stage plays (Shapiro, 1996), drag (Rupp, 2009), and cosplay (Gn, 2011) are all potential activities that the group could engage in, but in the spirit of co-creation and social therapeutics' process-oriented methodology, I won't come to the playground with specific activities planned. Instead, we will work to build the activities together, spontaneously, practicing tool-and-result methods (Holzman, 2018).

As this chapter of our journey together comes to a close, it is my sincere hope that this thesis has inspired and equipped you to interrogate how gender and its related institutions influence your life, self-concept, and performances, and to challenge and play with your lens on gender and your gender identities with your community. New, liberatory, empowering conceptualizations of gender are possible, and many of us are already working to live and perform with them (Conron, 2020; Dumas, 2014; *The Trevor project national survey*, 2021). If you've made it this far, I'd like to formally invite you to take a deep breath and plunge into the unknown with me, like I did when the drag king winked at me onstage at Pierce college all those years ago. I can't do this on my own, and I would love to build a community of practice that can work together to further explore and expand on the ideas I've put forth here. Embrace the gender playground! Play with your gender, challenge your assumptions, and stretch beyond your comfort zone to perform and embody what you don't know how to do! Join the gender revolution! Together we can free ourselves and our communities from the tyranny of the rigid gender ideologies that have been forced upon us, and create new, empowering, revolutionary, playful possibilities for who we are and who we are becoming.

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