Non-Binary Embodiment, Queer Knowledge Production, and Disrupting the Cisnormative Field: Notes From a Trans Ethnographer

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Abstract
In this article, I show how my non-binary embodiment, along with regularly being misgendered, shapes the questions I ask, the research I conduct, the data I can gather, how I understand my research and data, and the knowledge I produce. Through this interrogation of my body in relation to research methods and epistemologies, I illuminate how trans and non-binary scholars disrupt the cisnormative assumptions of ethnographic fieldwork, of sociology, and of academia. These disruptions generate queer forms of knowledge production that center trans and non-binary experiences and perspectives and that move us toward thinking anew about researchers, embodiment, and methods, and their epistemological effects.

Keywords
queer, transgender, non-binary, epistemology, methodology, embodiment

I was assigned male at birth, without my consent. My parents proceeded to raise me as a boy, as they probably didn’t know any other way. And although they saw, treated, and called me a boy and a son, my family did allow moments for my gender expansiveness.

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as a child—such as letting me get the “girl” Happy Meal at McDonald’s, buying me Polly Pocket and My Little Pony toys, and indulging my love of the Spice Girls. They were not the only people, though, shaping my gender. Teachers, religious leaders, peers, and other people in my life also policed my gender and tried to remind me that I was supposedly a boy. Perhaps, the wrong kind of boy—a gay boy, a queer boy, a sissy boy—as the word faggot being lobbed at me would often remind me. But nonetheless, a boy.

I am a white non-binary queer person. But this lifetime of being seen and treated as a boy and eventually as a man (specifically, as a white gay man) extends into my life within the academy and with the people with whom I interact while conducting research. One constant reminder of the gender binary and its effects on my life is the quotidian experience of being misgendered—or having my gender misidentified—often through someone using the wrong pronoun or a form of address that does not reflect my gender identity. This process shapes how I understand myself within the world, within the academy, and as a researcher. That is, a lifetime of embodying gender expansiveness, being queer and non-binary, and regularly experiencing misgendering acts shape how I see and experience the world, and hence, these gendered experiences and misgendering processes shape the questions I ask, the research I conduct, the data I can gather, how I understand my research and data, and the knowledge I produce.

For this article, I use my experiences as a white non-binary queer researcher to disrupt how cisnormativity shapes ethnographic fieldwork, the field of sociology, and academia. Cisnormativity is the assumption that people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth are natural and normal and the concurrent privileging of people who embody and enact gender expressions aligned with their assigned birth gender. Building on Compton et al.’s (2018) argument on doing queer work in a straight discipline and on how cisnormativity’s cousin heteronormativity—the privileging of heterosexuality as natural and normal—is embedded in sociological theory, practice, and knowledge production, I examine the meanings and consequences around being non-binary and doing trans and queer work in a cisnormative discipline. In doing so, I interrogate cisnormative knowledge production (Sumerau & Mathers, 2019).

In the tradition of feminist theorizing (e.g., Collins, 2000; Smith, 1987), I situate the self within the context of academia to think about the socio-political implications of knowledge production. The intent is to stimulate further dialogue about methodologies and epistemologies, with the goal of continuing to open possibilities for trans and non-binary scholars to be centered in academic knowledge production and to challenge the cisnormative and masculinist assumptions within doing ethnographic fieldwork, within epistemological canons, and within the academy. While I mainly talk about the field of sociology, as my training and experiences lie in this discipline, I use sociology as a microcosm to think about these processes more broadly within academia and in doing research. I show how trans and non-binary scholars and research disrupt the cisnormative assumptions of ethnographic fieldwork, of sociology, and of the academy. These disruptions generate forms of knowledge production that center trans and non-binary
experiences and perspectives and that move us toward thinking anew about researchers, bodies, and methods and their epistemological effects.

Notably, women, people of color, and queer and trans scholars have written extensively about being “Othered” in doing fieldwork and within academia (Adjepong, 2019; Berry et al., 2017; Compton et al., 2018; Pirtle, 2021; Villenas, 2010). I build on this work to continue the call for acknowledging embodied experiences in research and centering queer, trans, and feminist epistemologies. I add to this literature by thinking about processes of misgendering in relation to non-binary embodiment as a critique of cisnormative methodologies. I also proffer non-binary knowledge production as a queer disruption that challenges the white, heteronormative, and cisnormative ways of being a scholar and doing research. As I will show, I bring pleasure into the conversation as a path forward in subverting dominant epistemologies and in providing liberation for marginalized people, including marginalized scholars.

The sections ahead all work to expose and question cisnormative and heteronormative methods, ways of knowing, and academic norms. I discuss challenges in doing fieldwork and qualitative research, but I also take some queer detours to think about my experiences in the academy as well. While, at times, the leaping to different topics might seem a bit incoherent or without a smooth transition, I want to use the jumping to various experiences and critiques as its own mode of queer and trans knowledge production. When writing about marginalization, discrimination, microaggressions, and trauma, we might become a bit undone. Academic writing and knowledge production often try to clean up these moments of becoming undone or being incoherent to present a “logical” argument. Instead, I follow the queer routes that my mind and life take me. In going on this alternative journey, I offer a different way of thinking about writing and knowledge production—a way that captures my state of thinking about my own experiences of marginalization and discrimination and a way that exposes and disrupts cisnormative and heteronormative ways of knowing and writing.

We Always Need a Note on Terminology When Writing About Queer and Trans People

When I was on the job market, I gave job talks on my ethnographic research about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth experiencing homelessness. Because of the marginality of LGBTQ research within sociology, I knew I had to begin my talks with a LGBTQ 101 lesson, defining and describing each letter. Five to 10 minutes of my job talk time gone to explaining basic terminology because LGBTQ people and LGBTQ research are marginalized in the field. Notably, for most audiences, if I use the terms man or woman, I do not have to define them, but as soon as I say trans man or trans woman, I do. What terms we have to define and explain—and which ones we don’t—exposes the cisnormative, heteronormative, and other dominant logics operating within our fields. We can work, though, to disrupt dominant logics around language and definitions to intervene in moving our fields forward.
As an act of queer refusal, I will not define or explain every queer and trans term I use in this piece. I do not want to continue to uphold cisnormative knowledge production. I do, however, focus on cisnormativity, not on cisgender people. The category of cisgender often reifies a trans/cis binary (Robinson, 2020), while upholding a static notion of a natural, essentialized gender and erasing the gender diversity of all different types of people (Enke, 2012). Likewise, class, race, ability, and other intersections of power and privilege shape who benefits from cisnormativity and how, whereby many marginalized people such as people of color are positioned outside of gender normativity, which is constructed in and through middle-class whiteness (Enke, 2012). This article uses, then, experiences of embodying expansive expressions of gender and their epistemological effects to challenge cisnormativity and cisnormative knowledge production. In doing so, this intervention is about giving us a better tomorrow, where LGBTQ terms will not need to be constantly defined, as queer, trans, and non-binary scholars, lives, and ideas enter the center of knowledge production.

On the Silences of Doing Dirty Work

Can I suck your dick while you interview me? I stare at this message I received from a man whom I was trying to recruit for my study. If I agree to be interviewed, will you suck my dick in exchange for my time? another man asked me. I didn’t know how to respond. I asked these men to be in my study. And I was studying sex and a hookup website. So why was I not prepared to get sexually propositioned? And how does one deal with these moments in doing research? Do I disclose them in my writing? Do I ignore them and move on? What’s a non-binary queer sexualities researcher to do?

In this section, I use my experiences as a queer non-binary researcher doing sexualities work to enter discussions around stigmatized researchers and their bodies and the relation that stigma has to methods and knowledge production. I show how stigmas can lead to silences and how as researchers we need to take both stigma and silence seriously in shaping what we know and what we don’t know.

In graduate school, I conducted my master’s thesis research on gay men’s online dating and hookup lives. I knew that men were mainly on the site looking for sex (and friendship, as I later learned in conducting interviews). Yet here I was messaging them, not to meet for sex or a date, but to interview them for a research project. The site—like most field sites—was not meant for researchers, and people can find the presence of a researcher as a violation of their lives. Marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ people, who have a history of being exoticized and misrepresented by social scientists may notably find a researcher’s presence as an intrusion (Valentine, 2007). During this project, men probably reported me for violating the hookup sexual norms of the site, as my accounts often got deleted and eventually my IP address got blocked.

Outside of my researcher role though, I was used to being solicited for sex in my personal life. But being solicited while in the role of researcher generated different feelings and anxieties—partly because the researcher is supposed to take on a de-sexualized role. (Indeed, researchers who take on sexualized roles such as strippers or
erotic dancers are often deeply stigmatized). I also hadn’t been trained in responding to sexual solicitations, as my sociological methodological classes were also desexualized. In academia and in our methods training, researchers often treat erotic and sexualized moments in fieldwork as non-existent or as inappropriate. These moments are seen as not legitimate within research, and disclosing these moments can call the researcher’s credibility and ethics into question (Cupple, 2003; Newton, 1993). We know, though, that attraction happens in research (Grauerholz et al., 2013) and that sexuality and the erotic subjectivity of the researcher impact the research process (Cupple, 2003). The silence around these issues means we are not equipping researchers, including students, with the right tools to navigate the sexual terrain of ethnographic and qualitative research (Grauerholz et al., 2013). Nonetheless, the stigma and illegitimacy within the academy around sex, the erotic, and conducting research shaped this unnerving pressure that I felt from being solicited for sex as a non-binary queer researcher studying sexualities. The stakes seemed high, as I and my work—which are already both stigmatized—could be further called into question, especially as sexualities research is seen as “dirty work” (Irvine, 2014, 2015).

This stigma has consequences. Training opportunities, funding sources, publishing, job prospects, Institutional Review Boards, and other structures all push people away from doing certain sexualities research and shape what we actually know about sex and sexualities (Irvine, 2014). Moreover, researchers, including ethnographers, often leave out mentions of issues around sexual harassment and sexually uncomfortable moments from our work, furthering silences around sex and sexuality, what we know about it, and how it shapes how we conduct research (Hanson & Richards, 2019). Work on LGBTQ people is also often stigmatized as well, seen as not representative, and often questioned as to why studying queer and trans people even matters (Compton et al., 2018).

We try to mitigate these stigmas in various ways, including not writing about the sexually uncomfortable parts, linking our work to more reputable fields such as health, being silent about sexual harassment while doing research, trying to publish in top generalist journals in the field, and desexualizing sexualities research itself. (Most work in sexualities has moved to focusing on identity and away from studying actual sex, see Jones, 2018). In turn, these sexualized methodological dilemmas become “awkward surplus”—something researchers never write about in our publications or integrate into our analysis (Hanson & Richards, 2019).

But there are gaps in the knowledge I produced based on my methodological choices in how to deal with sexual propositions. The men who asked me for sex, I immediately stopped interacting with. I never interviewed any of them, so their voices and the knowledge they could have provided to my study never got captured. My silences around my experiences of recruiting within a sexual space also didn’t help other sexualities researchers to prepare for doing this type of work. I furthered the desexualization of methodological training. I also didn’t integrate these sexual propositions into thinking about myself and the space. Was I propositioned a lot because I am white, and whiteness is most desirable in this space? Also, femininity is often devalued in this
space, so what are the meanings of these sexual propositions in relation to desiring my femininity in a masculine space? Many questions I never asked or explored as the propositions got relegated to being awkward surplus.

We need to not desexualize our methods training. Instead, we need to explore what to do when sexual propositions and other sexualized encounters are a part of conducting research, such as how to handle the discomfort of it, the at times harassment of it, and the perhaps pleasure of it. The *whys* and *hows* in which researchers quit conducting research need to continue to be explored as well, as these findings can inform where we need to change the discipline and our training. We also need to not relegate our bodies, including our sexual bodies and desires, out of the ethnographic narrative. Instead, we can use the awkward surplus and put it into the narrative. One approach is an embodied ethnography, whereby we write about the disorientation and destabilization that occurs around the researcher’s body within the field sites and use it to produce analytical insights about gender, sexuality, race, and power (Hanson & Richards, 2019).

However, decisions, including disclosing the awkward surplus and doing embodied ethnography, are made within larger structures. I am already a non-binary queer femme trying to make it within academia, doing sexualities work and work on LGBTQ people. The taboo surrounding sexualities and LGBTQ research, as well as the marginalization of LGBTQ people within the cisnormative and heteronormative field of sociology and within the academy, already creates contexts of not wanting to expose things deemed dirty or could further stigmatize the already marginalized researcher. These cisnormative and heteronormative structures and their stigmatizing effects shape how and what we know and shape how queer, non-binary, and trans researchers decide what to research and write about as well. Embodied ethnography might be how ethnographers on an individual level work to not relegate awkward surplus out of the narrative, but larger structural changes need to happen that call for and value embodied ethnography, that do not continue the perpetuation of obfuscating how gender, sexuality, race, and embodiment shape fieldwork and the construction of knowledge, and that centers marginalized scholars and work on marginalized populations (Hanson & Richards, 2019).

The bigger question, however, is: is this awkward surplus—the things we don’t disclose, often because they are uncomfortable or don’t fit the dominant ways of doing methods and knowledge production—an act of silencing or an act of silence? Silencing is a product of oppression—the dominant group silencing the marginalized group (Roberts, 2000). Silence, however, can be a mode of resistance, a way to escape surveillance, and hence, silence is not inherently bad. Of course, language and speaking back are important in resistance as well and in challenging dominant structures and knowledge production; therefore, determining silencing versus silence is complicated and tricky (Roberts, 2000). Nonetheless, a trouble with qualitative inquiry and knowledge production more broadly is that silence becomes an impediment to analysis (MacLure et al., 2010). Silence draws power from its ambivalent status—of a refusal to say, to withhold meaning, but also by what remains in and through the silence. Silence also troubles the notion of voice or spoken word as the narrative authority (MacLure
et al., 2010). Indeed, part of the problem with knowledge production is its reliance on disclosure.

Nonetheless, even if we keep certain things silent, we can still use the silence as an analytical lens. For instance, if we do not write about sexual harassment, we can still use our experiences of sexual harassment to think about power and patriarchy within our field sites. And while we may not write about the harassment, we might use the idea of power and patriarchy to look for other examples of this sexism occurring and write about those examples to make our point. Silence, then, can help us to sharpen our analytical insights, even if the awkward surplus is never disclosed, and this type of silence can help challenge the notion of disclosure as the only way of producing knowledge, as our silence may always still be lurking underneath, shaping what we write and what we produce.

**Misgendering and Its Epistemological Effects**

March 23, 2015: A youth at the youth homelessness drop-in center in Austin said, “Thank you, sir” to me, which took me somewhat by surprise only because at the LGBTQ youth homelessness shelter in San Antonio, I am called “ma’am,” “she,” and other feminine pronouns and names. But here I was called sir—an interesting way to think about these two different spaces/sites.

I get misgendered all the time. Read as a woman and called ma’am. Read as a man and called sir. Asked if I am a boy or a girl, as if those are the only two options. And during my study on LGBTQ youth homelessness, these misgendering processes weren’t very different from my everyday life. But these misgendering moments told me something about gender, sexuality, and race among the people and within the places that I was studying. In this section, I use my experiences of misgendering within the field to push scholars to think about how all gendering processes shape the data we can gather and the knowledge we can produce. Indeed, researchers who are not misgendered should not leave their bodies as unmarked in their writing and analysis, as this invisibility can uphold the cisnormative body as the natural, privileged body. Researchers can instead use getting misgendered or recognized correctly as one’s gender to theorize about social processes in relation to their research.

I conducted research at two field sites—a drop-in center for youth experiencing homelessness in Austin, Texas, and a specific LGBTQ youth shelter in San Antonio, Texas. The drop-in center in Austin was not LGBTQ specific, meaning I also interacted with youth experiencing homelessness who did not identify as LGBTQ as well. The LGBTQ youth at the drop-in center were also mainly lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth who did not identify as transgender. As I often recorded in my fieldnotes, many youth at this field site called me sir, perhaps because some saw me as another white social worker (almost all the staff there were white) or another type of white authority figure and used sir as a way to show respect. I was also often asked if I was a boy or a girl, though staff told me I didn’t have to answer the question. At the LGBTQ shelter in San Antonio, where everyone was LGBTQ and most were transgender, I don’t think I was
ever called *sir*. Instead, I was often called *ma’am* and accrued feminine nicknames such as “Mary Alice” and “Miss Travis County.” I recorded in my fieldnotes a lot that youth called me flamboyant and “fish”—sexist slang for looking like a woman—and often referred to me as she/her. Notably, as dominant notions of femininity are tied to whiteness (Bettie, 2014; Collins, 2005), my white femininity could have shaped me being more easily seen and read as femme and as a woman.

The people we study turn their gaze back on us, whereby we do not control the meanings they assign to our bodies and identities. We never really know what they think either; we can only infer from how they act and from what they say. But how people interpret our gender, race, and sexuality could render us suspect or an ally—with both renderings serving as data in understanding how these social categories and processes shape the social world we are examining (Meadow, 2018). The gendered moments within my fieldwork reveal something about the different sites. At the LGBTQ shelter, where the youth who resided there were mostly trans, there were disruptions of cisnormativity and heteronormativity. In a designated queer and trans place, I did not take offense to being called a woman. Indeed, I took being called *ma’am* and *she* not as misgendering but as queer joking, playfulness, and connection.

At the drop-in center, though, youth asked me if I was a boy or a girl and called me *sir*. This queer disorientation at this site reveals the heteronormativity and cisnormativity within the space (Ahmed, 2006). It can also reveal how race and class can shape adopting a non-binary or queer identity. At neither field site did anyone use the term queer or non-binary. Many youth explicitly told me that they found the word queer to be offensive. Similar to Valentine’s (2007) work showing that a lot of poor and/or people of color did not adopt the term transgender during the late nineties, queer and non-binary were not part of the language used among the youth in my study. The incoherency or lack of language around non-binary and queer can reveal the heteronormativity and cisnormativity of a space, but it can also reveal how these terms may be linked to middle-class whiteness.

Importantly, the body one feels one’s self to have is not wholly available just to us but our bodies have exterior contours that are shaped in and by other people (Salamon, 2010). I may feel trans or non-binary, but my body is also by and for others, who will read and interpellate my body in various ways. There is no “real” trans body or non-trans body, but all bodies are produced in relation to normative power structures, contexts, relations with others, and our own subjectivities (Salamon, 2010). Queer, trans, and non-binary researchers’ bodies can tell us a lot, then, about the heteronormativity and cisnormativity of spaces, in ways that other researchers who do not get misgendered often do not critically analyze or call into question. Indeed, while belonging in a social setting and fitting in are often seen as goals of ethnography and as granting legibility and legitimacy, this fitting in is often only afforded to certain kinds of bodies (Adjepong, 2019). Gender-conforming researchers, especially white, gender-conforming researchers who are men, may never think about or realize how their bodies typically fit into the gender and sexuality norms of their field sites. Hence, they never theorize about how their bodies fitting in also reveals something about gender,
sexuality, and race within their field site (Adjepong, 2019). For me, being misgendered shapes the research and the knowledge I produce. If my body disrupts a space, such as the drop-in center, then one can assume that heteronormativity and the gender binary are working strongly there. If my non-binary embodiment can move with ease, such as at the LGBTQ shelter, then something more queer is occurring within that space, though this easy movement is likely also tied to my whiteness, as race also shapes which bodies can move with ease within varying queer and trans spaces.

Trans and non-binary people are not a monolith and experience the field and misgendering differently, partly based on their own gender embodiments, their race, and how other people in the field recognize them. Trans researchers who are not recognized as trans or non-binary are often going to experience the field differently than gender expansive researchers who are seen as trans, non-binary, and/or queer, no matter how they feel or identify. Likewise, as dominant notions of masculinity and femininity are linked to whiteness (Bettie, 2014; Collins, 2005), white trans scholars may be more able to be recognized as their gender than trans scholars of color. But as Hughes (2018) writes, in not being “out” as a trans man in the field, his non-disclosure still shaped how he understood the operations of gender and sexuality among the people in his study. His non-disclosure of his trans identity also helped him to see the non-reciprocal or unequal dynamics of fieldwork. He expected people in his study to disclose things to him—the researcher—but he did not disclose things in return. Regardless, then, of whether one’s trans identity is revealed, Hughes shows that thinking about being trans in relation to the people in his study can reveal things about knowledge production in ways that many researchers often do not think about.

All researchers, including those who are not misgendered, need to think more critically about how their gendered bodies do and do not disrupt spaces and how this fitting in or disrupting is linked to gender, race, and sexuality. We must understand how our bodies fit into spaces (or not), as this fitting in reveals something about the logics of the spaces; when wrong kinds of bodies try to take up spaces, they can produce queer effects (Adjepong, 2019; Ahmed, 2006). Most researchers move freely, at least when it comes to their gender conformity, in most field sites but never interrogate why. Queer, trans, and non-binary people, especially queer, trans, and non-binary scholars of color, often disrupt spaces and fieldwork, and in turn, can expose normative operations of gender, sexuality, and race within the places and among the people they study.

Expanding Embodiment, Diffracting Positionality

March 13, 2015: A youth tonight asked me, “What is your name?” I said, “Brandon.” She said, “Oh, is that your chosen name?” And I replied again, “My name is Brandon.” “Oh, so you’re not trans?”

Brandon is a name coded as masculine. And in my study on LGBTQ youth homelessness, some youth read me as a trans woman—given my feminine appearance and behaviors. Some of them, especially the trans youth, seemed surprised when I introduced myself as Brandon. A non-binary femme, such as myself, is assumed to not
have a masculine name. This section calls on scholars to expand notions of embodiment to include things, such as names, that might not typically be seen as embodiment but that can shape interactions in the field, the data we collect, and the knowledge we produce. Through this expansion of thinking about embodiment, our engagement with positionality can shift, especially beyond essentialist, static, and reductionist notions of identity.

Along with names, voices are also gendered, racialized, and sexualized. As Vidal-Ortiz (2004) shows in his autoethnography, racialization doesn’t just happen through skin color, but other markers such as voices and accents racialize people as well. Voices are gendered too. And for some trans people, especially trans men, having one’s voice recognized as the incorrect gender can have negative health consequences (Lagos, 2019). Likewise, people believe that voices can tell us something about one’s sexual orientation, and many gay men fear the stigma that often accompanies “sounding gay” (Fasoli et al., 2021). I have a voice that people often gender, sexualize, and racialize as being a white gay man’s. People often read my name and voice onto my body in ways that uphold cisnormative and heteronormative ideas about gender, sexuality, and race and misgender me.

We need to think within our fieldwork and our writing about expanding ideas of embodiment to other, less commonly thought about modes that are gendered, sexualized, and racialized. These other embodied processes can shape access, interactions, and hence, the data we collect and the knowledge we produce. Will someone named Jamal get access to the same site as someone named Emily? It obviously depends on the site and the gatekeepers there. We often, though, do not think about names as part of embodiment, even as they invoke a certain type of gendered and racialized body. Indeed, researchers rarely write about how their name might shape access and interactions, even though we know gendered and racialized names shape experiences of discrimination (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). We need to expand, then, our analytical thinking about embodied modes of being in the world and doing research.

A place to improve reductionist writing about race, gender, and sexuality is in how we do positionality and reflexivity. Sociologists often write about positionality in static ways that essentialize categories of gender, race, and sexuality. They say, because I am white, my interactions probably did this. Or because I am a woman, being a woman probably did that. This cisnormative logic upholds categories such as being a man or woman as static, erasing the structural, contextual, and interactional processes that continually shape how one’s gender, race, and sexuality are playing out in the field. We can turn to embodiment to write positionality in a more nuanced manner, away from static, essentialist notions of identity.

In my own work, the meaning a youth assigned to my whiteness when first meeting me could be different 18 months later. I was perhaps seen as a white social worker or staff member at first, but then was seen differently after the youth learned more about me. Or the meaning people assign to my effeminacy can also change over time, depending on whom I am interacting with, or on what we are doing together that day. I’m sure my white femininity was often read differently at the Austin drop-in center.
versus the LGBTQ youth homelessness, and that different youth at the drop-in center read my white femininity differently as well. The static style of writing about positionality (and often just relegating it to a paragraph of an article or section of a book) erases the fluidity and complexities of these categories and how interactions and contexts shape their meanings.

Adjepong’s (2019) concept of “invading ethnography” is an important step in thinking about how we write about the researcher’s embodiment within our work, beyond relegating it to the methods section or appendix, and how to capture the dynamics of social categories and power. Invading ethnography is a mode of knowledge production, whereby ethnographers write their embodiment into the ethnographic narratives. Invading ethnography challenges the unmarked researcher’s positionality and centers embodiment as a main mode of production of ethnographic insights (Adjepong, 2019). An embodied ethnography realizes that all data, and hence all knowledge, comes from the body and our bodies tell us something about the social world we are studying (Hanson & Richards, 2019). This invading ethnography or embodied ethnography moves us to a diffractive analysis or methodology (Davies, 2014, 2017). Reflexivity often documents categories of difference, whereby diffraction illuminates the processes of how “difference is made and made to matter” (Davies, 2014, p. 734). A diffractive approach analyzes the space of encounter not to try to reveal some representational “truth” that exists independent of the researcher interacting with the people they study but to analyze how our encounters produce our epistemological findings (Davies, 2014, 2017).

However, I also feel quite ambivalent about disclosing certain things, given the racism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity of academia at large. Who is able to be vulnerable in their writing? And get praised for being vulnerable? (Often heterosexual men.) And who gets judged negatively for their vulnerability? Many critical ethnographers argue that disclosing things around positionality and reflexivity gives us more validity and is best practices. A paradox of positionality, though, is that when engaging in feminist practices of positionality, others might deride the work as “research” (even though white men’s research is almost never perceived this way) (Davis & Khonach, 2020). And I do fear that disclosing our positionalities and reflexive analysis in relation to the people in our study—which marginalized scholars often are more apt to do—also continues to put us under more surveillance. Moreover, dominant academia might assume that marginalized researchers, such as queer scholars studying queer people, cannot be as objective. However, critical scholars might assume that queer people studying queer people might do the work better than heterosexual people studying queer people. Both views often ignore intersectionality and construct identity as one-dimensional and static (Ferguson, 2003).

We need to challenge, then, the larger cisnormative, patriarchal, heteronormative, and racists structures of academia, as these structures currently put the labor of reflexivity and positionality on already marginalized scholars and often delegitimize them as well. And we need better ways to write about reflexivity and positionality beyond
identity in order to grapple with the nuances of embodiment, power, and interactions in conducting research.

**How Sociology Stays Cisnormative and What Kind of Cisnormative It Stays**

I have an amazing job in a gender and sexuality studies department. But I am not in a sociology department. While there are plenty of reasons why that might be, I find it notable, as pushing marginalized scholars out of sociology departments reifies the cisnormativity and other normative modes of knowledge production within those departments and within the discipline. In this section, I want to think about how pushing certain marginalized scholars out of disciplinary departments such as sociology departments and into interdisciplinary departments (or even out of academia) allows disciplines to continue reproducing dominant modes of knowing and doing research.

As Ward (2018) states, sociologists—as methodological gatekeepers—often push out women, queer scholars, trans scholars, and scholars of color. And these marginalized scholars often get pushed into interdisciplinary departments that the university is more divested from (Maldonado & Guenther, 2019). This sociological gatekeeping works to keep research that disrupts the center of the discipline at bay (Schilt, 2018). Likewise, debates around methods are debates around gender, sexuality, and race, where positivist methods are often valued more than critical race, feminist, and queer approaches. Sociologists, though, use the term “methods” (read: positivist methods) to appear neutral and objective and to mask these anxieties around race, gender, and sexuality (Ward, 2018).

These debates, then, are about marginalized scholars producing different ways of doing and knowing that often challenge white supremacy, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, and the patriarchy. White sociologists have been studying people of color and their sex lives (often in pathologizing ways) since the beginning of the discipline, from the history of Robert Park and the Chicago School of Ethnography to the Moynihan Report (Ferguson, 2003). But when people of color study their own, in often a more humane and community-centered way, they get accused of “me-search” or pushed out of the canon or history of sociology, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and the Atlanta School (Morris, 2015). Furthermore, from Garfinkel to West and Zimmerman’s famous theory of “doing gender” to most work on trans people and their lives, social science research is dominated by cisnormative narratives on and about trans people (Lombardi, 2018). When trans and non-binary people enter the field as knowledge producers themselves, they too can get pushed out.

Of course, being pushed out can create openings and opportunities for critical scholars to produce more radical work that interdisciplinary departments may give more leeway and support to. For instance, my next project will draw from a host of sources—internet posts, archival work, interviews, autoethnography, and television shows—to think about trans people’s dating and sex lives. I cannot imagine I would be this promiscuous with my methods if I were in a sociology department.
But what happens to the field of sociology and to other disciplines as these fields push marginalized scholars out? Pushing marginalized scholars and their methods and knowledge out ossifies dominant power structures and leaves disciplinary methodologies and epistemologies unchallenged. The consequences of these processes can be seen in very material ways. While trans people and communities are diverse, most trans academics tend to be white, middle-class, and/or trans men or masculine-identified (Pearce, 2020). And most of what we know about trans and non-binary people still comes from cisnormative perspectives and scholars who do not identify as trans, including the work produced in this journal (Gardiner, 2013; Tewksbury & Gagné, 1996). These exclusions, then, have material consequences in the lives of trans scholars, especially trans scholars of color, as well as epistemological and methodological consequences, as white cisnormative perspectives and ways of knowing still frame most of what we know about the social world.

**Queer Pleasures and Trans Connections**

November 5–6, 2015: Jenelle was doing my hair in different styles. She was touchy, feely again. Touching my face, sides, nipples, and hair. Jenelle also used some Dove dry shampoo to get the oil out of my hair. Everyone thought the dry shampoo smelled lovely.

In this section, I bring pleasure and connection to the discussion of fieldwork and knowledge production. As pleasure is a measure of freedom, a pleasure politic pursues ending oppressive structures and creating social structures that give humans the pleasure they need and deserve (Brown, 2019). Our research should examine how structures block pleasure for certain groups and how we can change conditions to maximize people’s pleasure potential. Moreover, we need more pleasure in research to guide, shape, and sustain the work we do. Fieldwork itself can be seductive and bring pleasure (Cupples, 2003). Researchers get turned on by their work, by some of the people in their studies, and by other erotic moments, and these erotic moments and pleasures can be creative energies that drive the work scholars produce (Newton, 1993). Research devoted to a pleasure politic will look for how pleasure is unfolding in the research process, how pleasure operates in the field site, and how we can locate systems of oppression through seeing where pleasure is being stymied. Pleasure can also connect us and help us build collectively a different tomorrow.

I never disclosed my gender and/or sexuality during fieldwork. But I was often already assumed to be queer and/or trans, partly because of my embodiment, and I’m sure partly because of my research topic. The youth also seemed to find trans and queer connections with me: we often joked about queer and trans topics and culture, they were constantly styling my hair, we watched together LGBTQ movies such as The Birdcage, we engaged in gay diva worship as we sang along to Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston, and the youth often said during interviews when discussing anti-LGBTQ discrimination, “you know what I mean, Brandon,” implying that we had some shared queer and/or trans experience. These queer and trans connections and my queer cultural capital are part of the invisible tools that help researchers build rapport (Reyes, 2020).
And this rapport and building intimacy are often seen as key to doing good ethnography (Hanson & Richards, 2019).

My own experience of pleasure, especially around my queer and non-binary embodiment, recognition, and connection, can be interrogated as saying something larger about the field site and how gender and sexuality operate there. And when we don’t experience pleasure in our field sites, those moments can reveal something too. Indeed, the jokes, the hair styling, the pleasures of singing together to Mariah and Whitney, and the queer and trans intimacy helped in developing relationships with the youth and showed how queerness, transness, and its connections shaped relationships at the shelter. As I noted in my fieldnotes, *When I first got to the shelter tonight, two youth gave me a hug, so it seems like I’m building decent rapport.* As trans people are often skeptical of scientific research, given the history of mistreatment toward trans people, being trans can help in recruiting and building rapport with trans participants (Sumeruau & Mathers, 2019). I took the intimacies of hugs, touch, doing our hair, singing together, and other queer pleasurable moments as positive signs. This pleasure, connection, and queer and trans recognition deeply shaped my experiences with the youth, the data I gathered, and the care I took to write and produce knowledge about them.

Pleasure and connection are crucial to queer and trans knowledge production. Queer and trans intimacy and relationship building can help us to move away from pathologizing LGBTQ people toward centering them, their lived experiences, and their knowledge. Pleasure itself can be a critique of dominant modes of ethnography that try to hide or mask the pleasures we experience in doing our work. Pleasure, then, can reshape knowledge production, as pleasure has its own epistemological effects, shaping the knowledge I produced (indeed, the youth I discuss the most in my book were the ones I built more pleasurable moments with). The memory of pleasure also made me take care in writing my book and not constructing the youth as just oppressed victims, as I thought of all our moments of queer and trans joy. We need to further explore how pleasure shapes knowledge production, how pleasure is operating in our field sites and shaping the lives of the people in our studies, and how pleasure’s queer effects challenge dominant modes of conducting and producing research.

**Toward Non-Binary Knowledge Production**

The erasure of transgender and non-binary people, lives, and voices, including the voices of trans and non-binary scholars, and the marginalization of their experiences within academia, work to uphold cisnormative perspectives, experiences, and identities as the default and reconstructs the social world in and through cisnormativity (Johnson, 2015). As queerness disrupts and reorders dominant relations (Ahmed, 2006), queer, non-binary, and trans researchers and bodies can disrupt, challenge, and subvert the cisnormativity of methods and knowledge production. What happens when we center trans and non-binary perspectives and see the world from those perspectives and produce knowledge from those views? How can that help us imagine radically different worlds and do the work of making a better tomorrow?
I pose these questions as an intervention to move academia forward in thinking about power, oppression, embodiment, methods, and knowledge production. Trans studies was born out of trans scholars entering academia not as objects of study but as speaking subjects (Stryker, 1996). Partly, this speaking back was to the medical and social scientific fields that had constructed trans people as monsters, freaks, unnatural, and non-normative. But in speaking back, trans scholars and the field of trans studies has challenged dominant modes of knowledge production, disrupted dominant notions of embodiment such as the assumption that there are “natural” bodies, and centered benefitting trans people and their lives (Namaste, 2000; Serano, 2016; Stryker, 1996). Trans of color critique has shown, as well, how race, class, and other intersections shape trans people’s material realities and how the category of transgender is part of racial formations in society (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Snorton, 2017).

I stand on the shoulders of trans studies and trans scholars, entering as a speaking subject myself, to expand conversations about embodiment, fieldwork, methods, positionality, and knowledge production. I build on this trans knowledge production to think about non-binary embodiment and subjectivity in relation to doing research. And I proffer non-binary knowledge production as a new epistemology that continues the work of queer and trans knowledge production and challenging normative ways of knowing within the academy.

Many non-binary people, including myself, have a felt sense of not being a man or a woman, but our bodies are always in relation to the larger cisnormative world that often does not recognize our sense of being (Salamon, 2010). Non-binary knowledge production can use these moments of misrecognition to theorize about gender, sexuality, race, and other social processes within one’s field sites and within the academy. This misalignment of my felt sense and how I experience the social world is a type of non-binary knowledge production as it shapes me, my data, and hence, the knowledge I produce. Moreover, all scholars can utilize this tool; if they experience gender recognition, they too can theorize what this recognition means in relation to their field sites, methods, and the people in their study. Non-binary knowledge production adds to queer and trans knowledge production by centering bodies and embodiment in doing research, disrupting dominant modes of methods and knowledge production, and destabilizing stable and coherent notions of identity and race, gender, and sexuality.

This non-binary knowledge production is a type of trans feminist epistemology that resists cisnormativity and its privileges within knowledge production and methodological practices and that engages with trans and non-binary lived experiences to capture more diverse experiences of gender and the social world without reproducing cissexist authority and without relegating transgender people as peripheral (Johnson, 2015). We need to move to not treat trans and non-binary people as perpetual outsiders or as objects of study, and instead address trans and non-binary people in their own right, on their own terms, and in ways that are grounded in their perspectives and material realities (Johnson, 2015; Namaste, 2000). Trans and non-binary epistemologies challenge cisnormative erasure and help us understand gender and the world in more expansive ways (Kean, 2021).
One way all researchers can be called to account is through recognizing that all knowledge comes from bodies, including our gendered bodies, and then exposing the cisnormativity of ethnography. The idealized ethnographer, through the often disembodied knowledge produced by ethnography, is not only white and a man, but a masculine straight man. Disembodied ethnography leaves the white heterosexual masculine man’s body as the norm (Hanson & Richards, 2019). The gender conforming ethnographer is upheld as the best and right ethnographer.

A more nuanced understanding of embodiment and positionality can complicate not only our understandings of power, methods, and knowledge production, but also how people are positioned differently in relation to dominant relations of gender in society. Challenging cisnormativity in knowledge production would benefit not only trans and non-binary scholars but also a host of other marginalized people who may identify as their assigned birth gender but still are positioned outside of the dominant relations of gender in society because of their marginalized positions in relation to other markers of social difference. Race, class, disability, and other markers complicate people’s relations to cisnormativity (Enke, 2012). For instance, Black women, other women of color, and many poor and working-class women have always been positioned outside dominant notions of white, middle-class femininity, have been seen as less than a woman, and do not benefit from cisnormativity in the same ways as other people (Bettie, 2014; Collins, 2005). A non-binary mode of knowledge production would capture these processes in more nuanced ways through centering embodiment, positionality, and reflexivity, thereby challenging the cisnormativity of knowledge production.

An important step for all researchers is to turn toward invading ethnography. Invading ethnography challenges this disembodied knowledge. This approach turns to how bodies fit in (or not) in order to disrupt the racialized heteropatriarchal lens of ethnography. It does so through thinking of bodies as in or out of place as a way to analyze the operations of gender, sexuality, and race within one’s field site (Adjepong, 2019). Researchers can become aware of how their bodies do or do not disrupt space and use that to think about and theorize about their field sites and positionality. Researchers should also center trans and non-binary methods and knowledge production in their work and actively work to decenter cisnormative perspectives, especially cisnormative perspectives about trans and non-binary people and about gender, sexuality, and race.

Moreover, if we want to challenge the colonialist legacy of ethnography, then we must challenge cisnormativity and the gender binary, as the two are intimately intertwined. Part of the colonial legacy of ethnography might be the taken for granted assumption of the gender binary and the gender normativity of the ethnographer that needs to be disrupted. Ethnographers have a long history of pathologizing gender expansiveness, especially people of color’s gender expansiveness (Ferguson, 2003). Indeed, white, presumably heterosexual, sociologists and ethnographers have often studied sexuality precisely in order to pathologize people of color (Ferguson, 2003; Hartman, 2019), while actual marginalized scholars who study gender and sexuality
humanely get pushed out. This colonial gaze and its link to seeing anything that deviates from the Eurocentric gender binary as non-normative can be disrupted through centering trans and non-binary perspectives, methods, and knowledge.

Ultimately, we need new ways of doing research and of producing knowledge—ways that center marginalized scholars’ methods and epistemologies. An emancipatory path forward would be to center pleasure in our work. The pleasure of being trans and non-binary, the pleasure of doing trans and non-binary work, the pleasure of conducting research, the pleasure within our field sites—the multiplicities of pleasure can work to continue to disrupt dominant ways of producing knowledge while also sustaining us in doing this work. As pleasure is related to freedom (Brown, Adrienne Maree, 2019), centering a pleasure politic in our work can be crucial in liberating methods and knowledge production from cisnormative and other dominant ways of doing research. A non-binary knowledge production values and centers pleasure, as this pleasure sustains non-binary people to continue to exist despite a world that says there are only men and women. We need to continue to call into question the field of sociology and its long and continued history of upholding white cisnormative straight ways of doing and being. We also need to call researchers to account for the ways their own bodies can tell us something about the work they do, the questions they ask, the data they gather, and the knowledge they produce. And yes, we need to work to center trans and non-binary ways of doing and producing. In doing so, we can produce knowledge that disrupts normative ways of knowing, and hence, give us a better understanding of our social world.

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