# CHALLENGING THE CISGENDER/ TRANSGENDER BINARY

## Nonbinary People and the Transgender Label

HELANA DARWIN (iD)
*Stony Brook University, USA*

*Interviews with 41 nonbinary individuals reveal a considerable amount of ambivalence among nonbinary people regarding transgender identification. There is also disagreement about which model of transgender legitimacy determines group membership: the binary and medicalized model or the umbrella model. Those who do not identify as transgender either do not consider themselves to be "trans enough" to claim group membership alongside trans men and trans women or otherwise consider their gender experience to be qualitatively different from the transgender experience. Meanwhile, those who do identify as transgender credit the umbrella model as authoritative while acknowledging that their claims to group membership are often resisted by those who uphold the binary transgender model. Finally, those who defy an easy yes/no transgender categorization schema qualify their transgender identification with admissions of doubt that they are really "trans enough" to claim the label or through linguistic practices that position themselves as tangentially transgender or as distinctly nonbinary transgender. This range of responses illuminates the diverse gender identities that coexist among nonbinary people that cannot be neatly sorted into a man/ woman or cisgender/transgender binary. Research on the sociology of gender must expand beyond both of these binary frameworks to reflect the reality of gender diversity.*

**Keywords:** *transgender; non-binary; nonbinary; transnormativity; gender binary*

Research about trans women and trans men has been prominent within the field of sociology since West and Zimmerman's (1987) famous article "Doing Gender," but research about nonbinary genders has historically remained sparse. This trend has begun to shift over the last few years, as evidenced by *Gender & Society*'s recent publications that analyze nonbinary particularities (Garrison 2018; Rogers 2018; shuster 2017). Indeed, the sociology of gender has made strides more broadly toward acknowledging the gender diversity that exists beyond binary categories such as cis men, cis women, trans men, and trans women (Schilt and Lagos 2017). However, such studies remain the exceptions that prove the rule of nonbinary gender's ongoing obfuscation.

The belief that two and only two genders exist is not natural, inevitable, or universal; rather, this was white colonial settlers' belief that they forced upon indigenous people as they expanded their empires (Stryker and Currah 2014). This binary gender ideology has had a diffuse and long-lasting cultural impact. As a result, sociologists of gender know very little about the experiences of contemporary nonbinary people—people who are neither simply men nor women. The ongoing academic erasure of nonbinary people is further compounded by the tendency to conflate "nonbinary" with "transgender." Although some nonbinary people certainly identify as transgender, others do not (Darwin 2017). Nevertheless, when academics (rarely) include nonbinary people in their research, they often construct them as transgender as a matter of fact (Davidson 2007). Comparative analyses between binary and nonbinary transgender people has helpfully highlighted key differences between these two groups (see Garrison 2018; Sumerau and Mathers 2019); however, it is crucial to note that such research is limited by design to those nonbinary people who also identify as transgender. The diversity that exists among nonbinary people as a distinct group remains underexplored and undertheorized.

This article illuminates the limitations of the cisgender/transgender binary categorical system by asking nonbinary people whether they identify as transgender—and why/why not. This line of questioning illustrates the diverse thought processes and politics that determine nonbinary people's self-labeling practices, the various constructions of transgender that persist, and the ways in which nonbinary people negotiate their accountability to binary gender—and transgender—models. The voices of these nonbinary people indicate that the sociology of gender must expand. As the discipline evolves beyond man/woman binary analyses in recognition of gender diversity, it must also critically interrogate its investment in the cisgender/transgender binary. Gender is far more complex than these binary frameworks acknowledge.

## (TRANS)GENDER DIVERSITY

Since the 1990s, transgender has become a "central cultural site where meanings about gender and sexuality are being worked out" (Valentine 2007, 14). Virginia Prince introduced the term "transgender" in the 1970s as an alternative to "transsexual" to describe people like her, who lived full time as a different gender without medical assistance (Ekins and King 2006). Then in the early 1990s, Kate Bornstein began to advocate for the usage of transgender as an anti-identity category, in the interest of disrupting gender binaries (Bornstein 1994). Invoking this latter usage of transgender, Leslie Feinberg (1996) called for a transgender movement that would include everyone who felt excluded by the gender binary; at this time, "transgender" began to operate as an umbrella term for all gender variance. Around this same time, Susan Stryker (1998) began to use "trans" as an umbrella term in her writings.

This history of the transgender label reveals that there have always been "rips in the transgender umbrella" (Davidson 2007), or rifts between those who understand "transgender" to be an umbrella term and those who operationalize it as a label for people who transition from man to woman or from woman to man. Indeed, when David Valentine (2007) set out to conduct an ethnography of the transgender community in the 1990s, he discovered that no such unified "transgender community" even existed. Instead, he found that many individuals who are considered transgender by academics and medical professionals do not understand themselves as such, whereas others who do identify as transgender struggle to achieve recognition through transgender-serving institutions. Valentine (2007) concluded his study by emphasizing that although "transgender" can bring people together into a sense of community, it can also have an exclusionary impact. Trans men, trans women, and nonbinary people alike have all reported feelings of marginalization within the so-called "transgender community" due to these conflicting definitions of transgender legitimacy (Namaste 2000; Roen 2002).

It is clear that people hold themselves and others accountable to different narratives of transgender legitimacy. Yet the binary transgender narrative, as opposed to the "transgender umbrella" narrative, is the one that has become institutionalized. Moon, Tobin, and Sumerau (2019) recently noted that such narratives are a central yet overlooked component of the interactional "doing" of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987, 2009). Socially dominant narratives shape the systems of accountability that determine people's experiences and opportunities in life (Moon, Tobin, and Sumerau 2019). For example, those who do not "do transgender"

(Connell 2010) such as trans men and trans women often struggle to access legal and medical resources during their gender transitions (Johnson 2015). Johnson (2016) elaborates that these institutionalized generalizations about transgender identities and experiences constitute "transnormativity," or "the specific ideological accountability structure to which transgender people's presentations and experiences of gender are held accountable" (Johnson 2016, 466).

Johnson (2016) concludes with a call for more research on how nonbinary transgender individuals experience instances of transnormativity in their everyday lives. Johnson is not alone in issuing this call; Schilt and Lagos's (2017) recent review of transgender studies within the sociological discipline also concluded with a call for more research that emphasizes transgender diversity. Since these calls were issued, research has begun to emerge that highlights the particular obstacles that nonbinary transgender people encounter as they negotiate their accountability to transnormativity. For example, while analyzing narratives of transgender authenticity, Garrison (2018) found that nonbinary transgender interviewees worried that they were somehow "not trans enough" to claim the transgender label. Sumerau and Mathers (2019) further observed that their nonbinary transgender survey respondents reported resistance from cisgender people as well as from the LGBTQIA+ community when they laid claim to the transgender label. The authors conceptualize this finding as evidence of how people engage in a gatekeeping practice that shuster (2019) calls "othering the other." Evidently, nonbinary transgender people are held accountable to the binary transgender model by others and even internalize a sense of accountability to this dominant narrative about transgender legitimacy.

Beyond this research on nonbinary transgender people, few qualitative sociological studies have focused explicitly on how nonbinary people as a diverse group negotiate binary accountability. However, a small body of such literature has begun to emerge (Barbee and Schrock 2019; Darwin 2017, 2020; Risman 2018; shuster 2017). In my earlier (Darwin 2017) virtual ethnography of a genderqueer social media community, I demonstrated that nonbinary people are held accountable to binary gender ideology at all three levels of interest to the "doing gender" model: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional. Strategies for negotiating these accountability structures vary widely because of the vast array of gender ideologies, expressions, and experiences that coexist within the same gender category. shuster (2017) further illustrated how cisgender and transgender people alike hold nonbinary people accountable to binary gender models

through discursive aggressions such as misgendering. shuster demonstrated that nonbinary people ultimately have little control over the pronouns and gender labels that people use for them.

The present study advances this small but growing body of literature by analyzing nonbinary people's complicated and diverse relationships with transgender group membership when asked whether they identify as transgender. This "identity work" (Snow and Anderson 1987) reveals a range of gender constellations that coexist under the nonbinary label, that includes—but is not limited to—transgender. This study illustrates how the practice of sorting people into cisgender or transgender categories reproduces a faulty gender binary system, a system that erases the experiences and existence of those between and beyond this binary framework.

## METHODS

I conducted a total of 47 semistructured interviews with nonbinary people about the various ways in which they feel the effects of the gender binary system in their daily lives. I used video conferencing software such as Skype and Google Hangouts for my interviews with people who lived beyond the geographic confines of New York City as well as some who lived in New York City but preferred the video conference arrangement. I did not observe substantive differences in the quantity or quality of my interviews or the depth of my field notes when I conducted them in person. The average in-person interview transcript was 9,557 words in length, and the average video conference interview was 10,848 words in length.

Informed by my previously published virtual ethnographic findings (Darwin 2017), I asked respondents to elaborate in depth about their encounters with the gender binary in their identities, relationships, social experiences, and institutional settings. In this article, I focus on their varied responses when asked at the beginning of the interview to clarify whether they identify with the transgender label. Participants' mixed responses illuminate nonbinary people's diverse reasons for identifying or disidentifying from the label. These responses also lend insight into how some nonbinary people "do transgender" (Connell 2010)—or even "redo transgender" (Darwin 2017)—beyond transnormative confines.

I conducted these interviews over the course of one and a half years between 2015 and 2017, using "snowball sampling" methods. I initiated sampling through preexisting nonbinary contacts in San Francisco and

New York City, informed by evidence that nonbinary people tend to gravitate toward the West and East coasts in the United States (Harrison, Grant, and Herman 2012). Once eligible participants completed their interviews with me, I asked them to share the following advertisement with others in their social networks:

> Do you identify as nonbinary or genderqueer? Do you have a spare hour to talk about your experiences with this identity? Helana Darwin, a graduate student in the Sociology Department at Stony Brook University would like to interview you for a research study via Skype. All respondents' identities will be confidential within the final publication. Please email her for more information.

I included both "genderqueer" and "nonbinary" in my call for respondents, due to evidence of overlap between these categories within previous social scientific studies (Harrison, Grant, and Herman 2012; Harrison-Quintana, Grant, and Rivera 2015). This snowball sampling technique yielded a geographically disparate sample, including nine from countries outside the United States (four of whom moved to the United States later in life). Interviewees from within the United States were distributed across the country's regions. In recognition of cultural differences regarding transgender experiences and constructions, I exclude the five respondents who are neither from nor currently live in the United States from this analysis.

Table 1 presents the demographics of my sample. After I removed these five cultural outliers and one age outlier, this analysis draws upon interview data from 41 total respondents. All identify as either genderqueer or nonbinary (which they operationalize in a similar manner), though most use other gender labels as well. The majority ($n = 33$) identify as non-Hispanic white, though 12 of these clarify that their Jewishness complicates their identification with the white category. Eight respondents identify with races and ethnicities including Romani, Bengali, Native American, Asian American, Filipinx, Latinx, Arabic, Yemenite, and mixed (black and white). Ages range from 19 to 35 years, with an average age of 26. The majority ($n = 27$) were assigned female at birth. Because of a dearth of large-scale research on nonbinary people, I cannot say for certain whether those assigned female at birth are more likely to identify as nonbinary than those assigned male at birth; however, limited evidence indicates that this might be the case (Factor and Rothblum 2008; Harrison, Grant, and Herman 2012; Harrison-Quintana, Grant, and Rivera 2015). All respondents are college educated, and nearly all use the gender-neutral

**TABLE 1: Demographics**

| Pseudonym | Age | Race/ethnicity | Pronoun | Gender identity label | Trans |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Addison | 26 | White | Ze/they | Genderqueer/nonbinary | Yes/No |
| Alex | 26 | White | They | Nonbinary/genderqueer | Yes |
| Ashton | 23 | White | They | Nonbinary | Yes/No |
| Avery | 28 | White | He/they | Genderqueer/nonbinary | No |
| Carter | 20 | White | They | Nonbinary/genderqueer/agender | Yes |
| Casey | 27 | White | She/hen | Nonbinary/genderqueer/agender | Yes/No |
| Corey | 28 | White Jewish | They | Nonbinary | Yes |
| Dakota | 31 | White | They | Nonbinary/genderqueer | Yes |
| Devin | 24 | Romani | They | Nonbinary | Yes |
| Donna | 28 | White | They | Genderfluid/no label | Yes |
| Drew | 23 | White Jewish | They | Gender questioning | No |
| Emerson | 19 | White | They/she | Nonbinary/genderfluid | Yes/No |
| Harley | 30 | White | She/her | Genderqueer/nonbinary/androgynous | No |
| Hayden | 21 | White | They | Genderfluid | Yes/No |
| Hunter | 19 | Mixed– Black, White, and Native American | His/their | Genderfluid | Yes |
| Jack | 26 | White | They | Nonbinary/genderqueer/transmasculine (ish) | Yes/No |
| Jayden | 23 | White | They | Genderfluid | Yes |
| Jaylen | 25 | White | She/her | Genderqueer | Yes/No |
| Jesse | 26 | White Jewish | They | Nonbinary | Yes |
| Justice | 26 | Native American, Latinx (Guatemalan) | Themme | Two-spirited | No |
| K | 30 | White | They/she | Nonbinary/genderqueer | Yes/No |

*(continued)*

**TABLE 1: (continued)**

| Pseudonym | Age | Race/ethnicity | Pronoun | Gender identity label | Trans |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kai | 25 | White | They | Genderqueer/nonbinary | No |
| Kazi | 20 | Bengali | They/him | Genderqueer/nonbinary/androgynous | Yes |
| Kennedy | 21 | White | They | Agender/nonbinary/genderqueer | Yes/No |
| Logan | 35 | White/Scottish | They | Nonbinary | Yes/No |
| Marley | 24 | White | They | Genderqueer/gender nonconforming | Yes/No |
| Marlowe | 28 | Asian-American | They | Genderqueer | No |
| Morgan | 22 | White | They | Nonbinary | Yes |
| Parker | 29 | Filipino | Any | Nonbinary/genderqueer/gender nonconforming | No |
| Peyton | 29 | White | Any | Genderqueer/genderfuck/gender nonconforming | Yes |
| Phoenix | 29 | White | They | Nonbinary femme, queer/nonbinary/genderqueer/transfeminine | No |
| Piper | 22 | Arabic | They | Nonbinary/genderqueer | Yes |
| Quinn | 23 | Yemenite | They | Genderfluid/nonbinary/questioning | Yes |
| Reagan | 32 | White | They | Nonbinary/genderqueer | Yes |
| Reese | 21 | White | They/he | Genderqueer/masc of center/queer man | Yes/No |
| Rhiannon | 24 | White | They/she | Grey-gender/nonbinary | No |
| Riley | 27 | White | They | Genderqueer/nonbinary/Two-spirit/no label | No |
| River | 34 | White | Unclear | Genderqueer/nonbinary | Yes/No |
| Rowan | 22 | Mixed- Black and Filipinx | They | nonbinary/genderqueer | Unclear |
| Sam | 35 | White | Any | Nonbinary/genderqueer/Two-spirit | Yes/No |
| Sydney | 32 | White | They | Nonbinary | Unclear |

pronouns "they/them/theirs." I use respondents' specified pronouns when quoting them in "Results."

I audio recorded these interviews (which lasted anywhere from 1 to 3 hours), while manually recording analytical memos for myself. My team of research assistants later transcribed and edited these audio recordings. My data consist of these interview transcripts (approximately 1,000 pages), my analytical memos, and the notes that I transcribed about emergent themes during bimonthly meetings with my research team. I read each transcript four times throughout my manual coding and analytical processes, checking for transcription errors and thematic content before conducting line-by-line open coding to identify topics and themes that emerged (Charmaz 2006). I then checked these results against the analytical memos that my research assistants recorded and my notes from our bimonthly team meetings. Finally, I performed a round of closed coding that condensed open codes into broader thematic and processual categories (Charmaz 2006).

Of course, there are several limitations to this study that future research might address. Most glaringly, the disproportionate whiteness of my sample precludes the possibility of drawing distinctions between people's experiences in different racial groups. Future studies on nonbinary people should purposively sample across racial categories and across education levels. It would also be interesting to compare and contrast nonbinary people's relationships with the transgender label in different countries and cultural contexts. My positionality is another limitation of this study, because I am an outsider to the nonbinary community and driven by a particular set of guiding interests (Charmaz 2006). However, this admitted limitation is not necessarily a weakness, because my outsider status also led me to ask for clarifications and explanations that insiders might have found pointless (Sprague 2016). To ensure that I do not misunderstand or misrepresent the experiences of my interviewees as an outsider, I invite them to provide me with feedback on working manuscripts before I submit them for publication.

In "Results," I analyze the three dominant types of responses that emerged from these interview transcripts, including *Yes Transgender* (*n* = 14), *Not Transgender* (*n* = 9), and *Ambivalent* (*n* = 18). Those who answered in the affirmative uphold Feinberg's umbrella model as the authoritative measure of transgender legitimacy, though they contend with transnormative gatekeeping from some members of the transgender community. In contrast, many who answered in the negative or with ambivalence uphold the binary transgender model as authoritative; because they do not identify or present as trans men or trans women, this

group does not consider themselves "trans enough" to claim the label. Additionally, some simply experience their gender in a way that feels incompatible with the transgender label because they do not feel as though they have changed genders, as opposed to accepting the nonbinary gender that they always possessed. Although some of these logics and explanations draw upon binary gender frameworks, it is clear that the gendered and transgendered experiences of nonbinary people vary too widely to be automatically assigned to the transgender category within gender scholarship. Not only does this practice invalidate the self-labeling rights and experiences of many nonbinary people, but it also obscures the diversity that exists under the so-called transgender umbrella.

## RESULTS

### "I Do Identify as Transgender"

Most interviewees identify to some extent with the transgender label, but responses were split between those who unequivocally affirmed their identification ($n = 14$) and those who voiced considerably more ambivalence ($n = 18$). This section focuses on the responses of the former contingent. Nonbinary people who identify unequivocally with the transgender label reject the notion that one must be either a trans man or a trans woman to be transgender. However, the alternative constructions of transgender legitimacy that they espouse vary.

Four of my interviewees provided blunt responses to my question, indicating that they understand their transgender identification as a default fact. As Morgan (white, 22 years old) explains, "I do, just because I don't identify as cis." Carter (white, 20) echoes this sentiment: "I do identify as transgender because I don't fit my gender that I was assigned at birth." This logic constructs a new binary gender system, divided between those who are cis and everyone else; simultaneously, this cis/trans binary challenges transnormative conceptions of transgender. Within this system, nonbinary people are not more or less trans than trans men or trans women—they are simply all trans.

Seven others explain that they consider themselves transgender because they understand nonbinary to fall under the "trans umbrella" or along the "trans spectrum." This contingent upholds Feinberg's (1996) definition of trans as authoritative: "It's an umbrella and everyone's on their own journey" (Quinn, Yemenite, 23). Piper (Arabic, 22) elaborates: "I consider

myself to be trans as well because I do want to transition in some way." These interviewees challenge the delegitimization of nonbinary as some- how not "trans enough" when they claim transgender through this umbrella formulation. Devin (Romani, 24, intersex) further hopes to edu- cate the public about transgender diversity by claiming the label: "I also feel like the trans label is a very broad one. And there's a lot of binary trans people—and there's a lot of people who support binary trans peo- ple—who don't think that nonbinary people can be trans, so I like to also disperse the truth about the fact that we can be trans." Devin strategically uses the transgender label to challenge the binary transgender model's authoritative status and thereby effect social change to the benefit of all gender-diverse people.

This contingent of nonbinary people understands nonbinary to qualify as legitimately transgender; nevertheless, they find themselves held accountable to the transgender binary by others, reflecting findings by Sumerau and Mathers (2019). For example, Devin encounters frequent challenges to their transgender identification on the grounds that they do not intend to transition according to the binary medicalized model: "Mostly people just say that because I have very feminine features and I have long hair and I'm not on a specific hormone dose, that I'm not really trans. Which is a thing that a lot of nonbinary people face." Similarly, when Quinn (Yemenite, 23) tried to network with a local transgender community, they found themselves excluded by a trans woman who used the medical- ized model of transgender as the definitive criterion for group membership:

> There's an Orthodox woman who is a trans woman in my neighborhood who I tried to seek support for a long time. And she was part of this group for people who are formerly Orthodox or Orthodox that are trans and I looked interested in gaining support and she's like, "Oh, you're not trans," you know.

Quinn desired the company and support of other trans people, especially those who could identify with the intersectional experience of being trans in an Orthodox Jewish culture. However, this woman insisted that Quinn did not qualify for inclusion, despite their significantly overlapping expe- riences with trans men and trans women in this community. Although Quinn has performed the necessary "identity work" to liberate themselves from the (trans)gender binary, they remain accountable to others' invest- ment within it.

Even if and when nonbinary people are not explicitly excluded from trans support groups, they sometimes find themselves implicitly marginalized

within these groups by discussions that focus on binary transitioning. Such was the experience of Logan (white, 35):

> I went to a support group twice, only twice, because the second time was just so anxiety provoking. Definitely the first time it was for all trans people. And I was very much obviously the only nonbinary person in there, and it seemed that nonbinary people came not that often. Most of the conversation focused on surgery and transition. And the second time I went, the same thing. Like, very much, "If you're transgender, you're going to get surgery and transition."

Logan assumed that everyone under the "transgender umbrella" would be welcome within this transgender support group; however, they quickly discovered that "transgender" was operationalized according to the binary medicalized model in these spaces. Even if nonbinary people were technically invited, their needs were not addressed and certainly not central to the discussions.

Repeated experiences with such rejection and marginalization have made some nonbinary people disillusioned with the very idea of transgender community. For example, Kennedy (white, 21) identifies as transgender, but expresses a lack of desire to claim group membership with other people who use the transgender label:

> I mean, the trans community doesn't exist. It's like, a false community. I mean, there are so many horrible fucking people in the quote "trans community" and there's no solidarity. And there's no real community. You'll get called horrendous names and misgendered by other trans people 'cause they hate you.

Kennedy and Logan share sentiments that reflect the exclusionary impact of the transgender category, as noted by Valentine (2007). When people have such different understandings of the meaning of "transgender," who gets to determine transgender legitimacy?

It is important to emphasize that all of these 14 people identify with the transgender label, despite their encounters with rigid transnormative accountability structures that invalidate their claims to inclusion. Some of these interviewees yearn for a sense of group membership within the transgender community, whereas others question whether such a community even exists. Regardless of the interpersonal dynamics with which they contend, all have performed the necessary "identity work" to reject any internalized sense of accountability to the binary transgender model. These

interviewees claim identities that are both nonbinary and transgender, with or without others' approval.

### "I Do Not Consider Myself Transgender"

Meanwhile, nine of my interviewees clarified that although they identify as nonbinary, they do not identify as transgender. Five construct the differences between nonbinary and transgender through quantitative rhetoric, such as the notion that they are not "trans enough" (Catalano 2015; Garrison 2018) or have not suffered "enough." Four others clarify that there is a qualitative difference between how they experience their gender and how they interpret "transgender." The voices of this contingent problematize the default categorization of nonbinary as under the "transgender umbrella"; such a binary cisgender/transgender schema invalidates the gender experiences and self-labeling practices of this not-transgender group.

Those who construct themselves as not "trans enough" to claim the label associate transgender legitimacy with conspicuous and consistent gender expression, as well as attendant social consequences. Avery (white, 28) explains:

> I don't view myself on the level of Caitlyn Jenner or the level of my friends who are "dressing for the part" consistently . . . doing it in every capacity of your daily life, which I know so many of my trans friends do. Inside the house, outside the house, in the club, on streets, on public transport, wherever. In their jobs . . . they dress to their gender identity and express that they are female-identified.

Here Avery operationalizes transgender as a consistent expression of "man" or "woman," whichever they were not assigned at birth. Because Avery does not identify or present as a woman, they do not consider themselves transgender. Following this same logic, Marlowe (Asian-American, 28) explains that they do not identify as transgender *yet* because they have not acquired a female wardrobe; however, Marlowe implies that once they can afford a new feminine wardrobe, they will begin "dressing the part" and claiming the transgender label. The third member of this contingent, Riley (white, 27), also abstains from the transgender label because of their lack of a feminine wardrobe. However, Riley attributes their lack of feminine clothing to their fear of workplace discrimination, more so than to finances: "I don't feel that comfortable presenting myself in a way that is non-masculine at school and in my

department." Avery and Marlowe voiced similar concerns, noting the "power of the suit" within such settings. If it were not for their fear of discrimination, these three interviewees would visually express their femininity more often and contingently feel more comfortable claiming the transgender label. As it stands, however, they do not "dress the part" and therefore do not claim inclusion within the transgender category. According to this contingent, the performance of "identity work" is insufficient; one has to visually and interactively challenge binary gender norms as well in order to qualify as transgender.

Beyond wardrobe transitions, some believe that they would have to physically transition through hormones or surgery, to qualify as transgender. This type of response generally invokes the understanding of transgender as synonymous with transsexual, and the corresponding belief that legitimately transgender people are trans women or trans men. As Marlowe explains: "I don't know if I feel quite comfortable sort of calling myself transgender, at least at this point, because I'm not interested in sort of fully transitioning all the way to female. And I'm not on HRT quite yet." Marlowe hints in this passage that they might call themselves transgender once they begin hormone replacement therapy (HRT), a process that they are already considering. Marlowe is not alone in espousing this sentiment, as Rhiannon (white, 24) echoes Marlowe's concerns:

> I don't wanna be on T, on testosterone, or anything like that. And I don't want top surgery or anything like that. So, I would feel weird calling myself transgender when there are people who do need those things and don't have the access to them, that they should rightfully have. That go through certain problems . . .

Rhiannon conditions the claim to a transgender identity upon a certain type of struggle that transgender people experience while navigating medicalized transitions. Because they have not experienced this particular set of challenges, they do not consider themselves legitimately transgender.

Parker (Filipinx, 29) also believes that they have not experienced sufficient hardship to lay claim to the transgender label; however, they understand social discrimination, instead of medical transitioning, to be the central experiential criterion for transgender inclusion:

> I do not consider myself transgender. They have a much harder time with their identities than I do with society. They get way more pushback because people have a really hard time accepting that somebody who looks male or looks female identifies as the opposite. Or that somebody would want to

even undergo surgery—or something like that—to actually transform their body to match their identity. People have a really hard time with that. And with mine, it's just like a "Well, you're just being difficult," you know. Or like, "Ok, well, I'll just ignore it" kind of thing. It's like my identity is much easier for society to ignore than somebody who is trans.

Parker does not believe that the discrimination they have encountered is on the same level as that of their trans man and trans woman counterparts—and indeed, it is not the same. According to the 2008 National Transgender Discrimination Survey, nonbinary people actually reported *greater* vulnerability toward harassment, violence, and poverty than their binary transgender counterparts (Harrison, Grant, and Herman 2012). Nevertheless, Parker maintains that trans men and trans women encounter more difficult challenges within daily life than they do.

The "trans enough" concerns that Garrison (2018) noted among his interviewees are echoed by this contingent. They rationalize transgender legitimacy through a binary transgender model and worry that by claiming the label they will appropriate the experiences of trans men and trans women. However, it is important to note that this "trans enough" trepidation does not account for everyone's disidentification from the transgender label: Four interviewees describe their nonbinary gendered experience and identity as qualitatively different from the transgender experience and identity. As River (white, 34) explains, "I don't usually identify as transgender, but also not cisgender. Kind of in the middle. . . . I just feel that the gender that I was assigned was very narrow . . . not really that my gender needed to change specifically. Just that . . . it was sort of inaccurately applied." Similarly, Harley (white, 30) does not identify as transgender because "it's not necessarily me changing my gender. It's coming to a balance of something that I felt for a long time." Harley is aware that some might consider her to be transgender, but she is wary of this categorical tendency as well as the growing popularity of the transgender label: "I see some people identifying as trans and coming out as 'they' for more political reasons than actual personal reasons and I'm trying to avoid that. I'm trying to be as authentic to who I feel I am." To avoid becoming what she calls a "transtrender," Harley doesn't use the pronoun "they" or the transgender label.

Transnormativity wields a different influence over this contingent's disidentification from the transgender label than it did in the previous section. This contingent does not necessarily believe that trans men and trans women are more legitimately transgender than nonbinary people; rather, they are uncomfortably aware that the general public projects

transnormative narratives, such as those noted by Johnson (2016), upon those who use the transgender label. As Avery explains, "There is nothing wrong with being transgender—it's the mainstream perception of it." When people interact with Avery as though they are a trans man or a trans woman, it complicates their ability to "do" their nonbinary gender in a manner that feels authentic. People such as Avery avoid using the transgender label altogether in order to minimize their externally enforced accountability to the binary transgender model.

Meanwhile, some other not-transgender nonbinary people in this sample reported experiencing externally enforced accountability to the transgender *umbrella* model. As River explains:

> I've had other binary-identified trans people or nonbinary-identified trans umbrella people kind of, almost trans-explained to me, "No, no, no, you're trans! It's fine!" And I was like, "Nooo." . . . Yeah, not so much a policing situation. Just more of, like—how I interpreted it—almost an opposite. Like, a door open, "No, no, you can come into the trans room! It's fine! That's cool!"

Although River understands that such transgender people are trying to include them in order to resist the exclusionary impact of transnormativity, these interactions undermine the "identity work" that River had to perform before arriving at the conclusion that they are not transgender. This finding reinforces David Valentine's (2007) argument that there is no uncontested "transgender" category. Depending on which model of transgender people hold themselves—and others—accountable to, "transgender" can be operationalized in contradictory ways. Some nonbinary people yearn fruitlessly for inclusion within the transgender community; meanwhile, others find themselves automatically assigned to the transgender category despite their protests. Given this ambiguity, it is not surprising that nearly half of my respondents qualified their responses to my transgender identification question, instead of providing a simple yes or no answer.

As this section has illustrated, there are various reasons why nonbinary people might not identify as transgender. Echoing Garrison's (2018) findings, some of my interviewees report that they do not feel "trans enough" to claim the label, either because of their inconsistent gender expression, lack of interest in medical transitioning, or social privilege. It would seem that some nonbinary people have internalized a sense of accountability to the binary transgender model that positions trans men and trans women as more legitimately trans than others—a model that ultimately reinforces transnormativity (Johnson 2016). Meanwhile,

another contingent explains that they simply do not feel as though they have changed their gender; therefore, they disagree with the labeling of their gender as "trans." The automatic assignment of such nonbinary people to the transgender category—despite their self-labeling practices—obscures the differences that some people perceive and experience between transgender and nonbinary as distinct gender categories.

### "I Have a Lot of Baggage with That Term"

When coding responses for "yes transgender" or "not transgender," I also had to create a third ambivalent category to encompass all of the responses that defied the binary yes–no coding system. Indeed, nearly half of the people in my sample ($n = 18$) voiced some sort of ambivalence about claiming transgender, while not going so far as to disidentify from the label altogether. The dominant reasons for people's ambivalence include lingering concerns about whether they are really "trans enough" to claim the transgender label; preferences for alternative labels or hybrid labels (but a pragmatic acceptance of the transgender label for the sake of intelligibility); and discomfort with transnormative projections that the transgender label invites. These responses further problematize the notion of a neat cisgender/transgender binary.

Again, six respondents invoked "trans enough" anxieties while explaining their reluctance to claim the transgender label. However, this contingent differs from those in the previous section who disidentify from the transgender label entirely; this group questions the transnormative messages that they receive, while also acknowledging the social effects of transnormativity. One concrete example concerns the matter of whether one is recognized by others as transgender, or whether one benefits from "passing privilege." As Kai (white, 25) explains:

> If the option is "Do you identify as transgender?" I have a hard time checking that box. And I have a hard time checking it because I feel like . . . it's hard, because I'm not perceived as transgender. I feel like I don't do enough to earn that title. . . . I don't know, it feels very strange and that's something that I'm still really thinking through and trying to get over because I don't like thinking like that or feeling like that.

Kai worries that by claiming the transgender label, despite the fact that people do not recognize them as trans, they effectively appropriate the experiences of "legitimately" (i.e., recognizably) transgender people. Addison (white, 26) voiced similar reasons for their ambivalence toward

claiming the label: "I do for the most part because it has become a little bit easier to tell people now that it [transgender] has so much more visibility. On the other hand, I don't particularly wish to appropriate a trans experience because I have so much passing privilege." Widespread transnormative (mis)understandings of transgender render these nonbinary people invisible as transgender to others in society. In acknowledgement of this very real difference between their experiences in society, and those of recognizably trans people, this contingent qualifies their transgender identity with marked ambivalence.

To linguistically signify this ambivalence, ten specify their gender as "nonbinary transgender," "under the transgender umbrella," "on the trans spectrum," "trans but not transgender," "trans*," or "transgender-ish." Jaylen (white, 25) explained, "I don't say I'm cisgendered, you know. I would say I'm somewhere in the trans umbrella." Meanwhile, Jesse (white Jewish, 26) rationalized, "I identify more as trans, as opposed to transgender." Jack (white, 26) elaborated upon the significance of this type of distinction:

> It took a while to get comfortable with that [the transgender label]. I think the discourse around it . . . there used to be the asterisk, so it's like, you know, "If you're transgender or transgender-ish" and I felt like I was more of the "ish." But I don't think that's where we're at in the conversation anymore and I think that's like probably for the best.

While Jack appreciates the visibility that the trans* label afforded people like them, they also understand how such a distinction effectively reifies the notion that trans men and trans women are more legitimately trans than others. Jack is in the process of adjusting to calling themselves trans without such a qualifier, though their ambivalence remains.

Six of these ten respondents specify their gender as "nonbinary transgender." Logan (white, 35) engages in this act of hybrid self-labeling in a self-conscious effort to resist transnormativity and spread awareness of gender diversity:

> I think I identify with it [transgender] in terms of it being this umbrella term. But I definitely identify more as nonbinary. And I think it's such an interesting thing because I explain myself—to people who don't really know about trans stuff or nonbinary stuff—as transgender, but I always worry that people are going to interpret that as, like . . . trans men or trans women. Like, for instance, my boss thought that by nonbinary I meant that I was in the process of transitioning from one bio-binary to the other. Like, I identify as trans, but I find it a little funky.

As this passage illustrates, Logan is uncomfortable with the erasure of their nonbinary gender when they discuss transitioning or use the transgender label; therefore, they try to specify their identity as nonbinary transgender whenever they use the transgender label. Corey (white Jewish, 28) is also wary of transnormative projections that accompany the transgender label:

> I have a lot of baggage with that [transgender] term. If we had this interview a couple weeks ago, I would have said "Hell no!" but, like—I'm sort of starting to unravel whatever that is and I'm more comfortable with it. I think one of my problems is that I've always seen it as a very binary thing. Because it was a very binary thing and I'm not looking to be a dude in the ways that I wanted to be a dude when I came out originally. And I'm actually really happy that I shelved it and let it mature a little bit because I'm not a binary person and to be in that space of almost feeling like that term has been taken by the binary . . . the binary trans folk . . . I definitely think some people use it as an umbrella term. But usually I feel like it's, for folks who end up in the shades of gray, like a secondary term. I'm thinking of a friend of mine, he identifies as a genderqueer trans man and so I'm not really exactly sure how it works for him, but it's almost like that's the secondary identity if that makes sense.

Corey identifies with transgender, but only secondarily, following their primary identification as nonbinary. This distinction is important to them as a way to reclaim transgender legitimacy for nonbinary people, while resisting transnormativity.

Like Corey, Peyton and Kazi also defaulted from cisgender to binary transgender categories, before discovering nonbinary gender as an option. The hybrid "nonbinary transgender" label helps such individuals resist the transnormative pressures that they worked so hard to overcome. Kazi (Bengali, 20) explains:

> As I started getting more comfortable with who I was, how I identified, I actually started getting more and more comfortable with the idea of feminine things . . . and I started getting confused. Like, "Well, I can't be a trans man if I'm comfortable with my genitals or if I don't react when people call me 'she.'" I got very confused. Like, what am I if I'm not a trans man? And I started looking up. . . . While I was following other trans men and other transpeople's blogs, I found someone who identifies as either. It was someone nonbinary. They didn't use "he/his" pronouns. They didn't use "she/hers." They only went by "them." And I was like, "This is really interesting." They gave me a much broader idea of what gender is, and something about that just clicked for me, you know? It's like, "That's it!"

Peyton (white, 29) experienced a similar gender journey from cis man to trans woman to nonbinary trans, all without the help of the Internet:

> I did do hormone replacement therapy and I have lived as a woman. And I did that in part because I felt pressured to do so. I felt like if I wanted to express my gender identity, it would be easier if everyone just assumed I was a woman. But, doing all of that—spending all that money and all of that pain and all of that effort in trying to appear one way—It didn't fulfill me anymore. It just gave me permission to be more of myself openly, according to social roles. And then I eventually said, "Fuck that!" And I quit.

Peyton undertook hormone therapy in an effort to "pass" as a woman because they didn't know they had any other options besides binary cisgender and binary transgender. However, their discomfort within this binary gender category quickly became intolerable. Ultimately, Peyton and Kazi rejected their self-enforced accountability to the transgender binary, while maintaining their claim to membership within the transgender identity category—but specifically as "nonbinary transgender."

This ambivalent contingent is possibly the most significant finding in this effort to interrogate the validity (and effect) of the cisgender/transgender binary. It is clear that many of these nonbinary people feel or felt pressure to identify as transgender—and sometimes specifically as trans men and trans women—when they realized that they were not cisgender. Yet, for a range of reasons, a default identification with transgender did not feel quite right. This contingent maintains some degree of identification with the transgender label on the basis of technicalities (invoking Feinberg's umbrella) and/or in the interest of representing transgender diversity; however, this identification requires clarification. Problematically, people are not given the option to provide such clarification on surveys and forms that ask them to indicate whether they are cisgender or transgender (see Westbrook and Saperstein 2015).

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was two-fold: (1) to demonstrate the diversity that exists among nonbinary people regarding their relationships with the transgender label, and (2) to analyze how nonbinary people negotiate their accountability to the (trans)gender binary system. Interviews with 41 nonbinary people reveal a considerable amount of variance and ambivalence regarding transgender identification, largely depending on which model

of transgender legitimacy the individual credits as authoritative or expects others to enforce: the binary medicalized model or Feinberg's umbrella model. People position themselves differently under the imagined transgender umbrella depending on which transgender model they uphold as authoritative. Some are completely covered by the transgender umbrella, whereas others prefer a position along the periphery. Even this latter peripheral contingent is split among those who believe that they have not earned a position in the center; those who have been pushed to the outskirts by others; and those who aren't sure whether they want to be under the umbrella at all. It is clear that there is no one way to define or operationalize transgender or nonbinary gender; depending on the individual's understanding of their gender in relation to transgender, their self-labeling practices and sentiments regarding group membership vary.

This article responds to Schilt and Lagos's (2017) call for more research on transgender diversity and Johnson's (2016) call for more research on how nonbinary transgender individuals experience instances of transnormativity in their everyday lives. Furthermore, this study challenges the scope of these calls to extend beyond those who identify as transgender. This article also illustrates the extent to which Garrison's (2018) finding (that nonbinary transgender respondents worry that they are somehow "not trans enough" to claim the transgender label) extends to non-transgender nonbinary people as well. Simultaneously, these interviews demonstrate the extended applicability of Sumerau and Mathers' (2019) finding that nonbinary transgender people experience resistance when they lay claim to the transgender label. All of these interactional phenomena are inextricably bound to the coexistence of two conflicting models of transgender legitimacy to which people variously hold themselves and others accountable. Crucially, *because* not all nonbinary people identify as transgender, it would seem that increased research on transgender diversity will not exhaustively address our need to better understand the experiences of non-cisgender people.

It is clear that binary gender schemas, including both man/woman and cis/trans frameworks, obscure the gender diversity that actually exists. When measuring and theorizing race, sociologists do not limit people to binary frameworks such as black/white because we know that this binary is overly simplistic and invalid, and it erases the existence of countless other racial minorities. Yet when sociologists study gender, we sort people into binary categories such as man/woman or cisgender/transgender, as though other gender minorities do not exist. Scholars' continued reliance on these flawed frameworks—three decades after the emergence of Transgender Studies and Queer Theory—illuminates the lingering hegemonic influence

of binary gender ideology on social science. Scholars must critically examine assumptions that undergird dominant analytical frameworks and survey instruments, allow participants to self-identify their gender (even though this decision requires more labor during data analysis), and pay heed to "best practices" authored by gender and transgender experts. To stay relevant in a rapidly diversifying gender landscape, sociologists of gender must learn to look at the world through a rainbow lens.

## ORCID iD

Helana Darwin  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2571-294X

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*Helana Darwin is a doctoral candidate (on the market) in the Department of Sociology at Stony Brook University. Her research on social inequalities has appeared in* Gender & Society, Sociology of Religion, Symbolic Interaction, Social Currents, Gender, Place, and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography, Feminist Media Studies, *and* Contemporary Jewry. *For more on Helana's research, visit her website HelanaDarwin.com or follow her on Twitter @HelanaDarwin.*